

Humouring Bruegel: humour and the art of Pieter Bruegel the
Elder considered through the 1557 print *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*

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Abstract

Recent scholarship on humour in Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* (1557) claims single interpretation of meaning yet this definitiveness is contradicted by some finding the work funny and others not. Seemingly in common in the interpretations is an acceptance of the superiority theory of humour most prevalent in Bruegel's day. By approaching with an alternate understanding of how visual humour is experienced, the humorous characteristics found through Bruegel's *oeuvre* are explored and alternate interpretations of *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* presented which embrace meaning through contradiction and paradox. These demonstrate how the works can be simultaneously humorous and meaningful without an expectation of singular interpretations.

Author's declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work, and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Dedication

To Keji, who always made me smile.

Humouring Bruegel: humour and the art of Pieter Bruegel the Elder considered through the 1557 print *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*

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Introduction

Big Fish Eat Little Fish (figure 1) is a print based on a drawing by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525/30-1569). Engraved by Pieter van der Heyden (1530-1572), it was first published by Hieronymus Cock (1518-1570) in Antwerp in 1557.¹ Although little is known of the commissioning of the work, an early record – a 1558 inventory sent from Christophe Plantin to Martin Le Jeune – describes it as a drollery,² an amusing image. Drolleries find their visual precedent in medieval marginalia and misericords and often involve “fables, world-turned upside-down situations, fools, and monsters”.³ Malcolm Jones describes how, historically, these are seen as funny but dismissed as without meaning, as “emptily humorous”.⁴ Christa Grössinger recognises possible meaning but identifies a “tension between the plain funny and the serious”,⁵ suggesting that true meaning lies separate from comedy’s diverting veneer. Michael Camille argues the images are meaningful as they represent the ‘other’ – those strange and alien creatures that sit outside of God’s laws – but rejects the idea that these are meant to be humorous as “nothing could be further from their purpose”.⁶ These interpretations of drollery imagery differ among themselves, but all

¹ Katrien Lichtert, “Big Fish Eat Little Fish,” in *Bruegel: The Complete Graphic Works*, ed. Maarten Bassens and Joris van Grieken (London: Thames & Hudson, 2019), 126.

² Jan Van der Stock, “Pieter Bruegel (1526/27-1569), Draughtsman and Painter in Antwerp: an Attempt at Reconstructing his Network,” in *Bruegel: The Complete Graphic Works*, ed. Maarten Bassens and Joris van Grieken (London: Thames & Hudson, 2019), 11.

³ Christa Grössinger, *Humour and Folly in Secular and Profane Prints of Northern Europe 1430-1540* (London: Harvey Miller, 2002), 196.

⁴ Malcolm Jones, *The Secret Middle Ages: Rediscovering the Real Medieval World* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2002), 62.

⁵ Christa Grössinger, *The World Turned Upside-Down: English Misericords* (London: Harvey Miller, 1997), 97.

⁶ Michael Camille, *The Image on the Edge: the Margins of Medieval Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 38.

seemingly agree that humour and meaning struggle to cohabit under the brush. I think there is another way to interpret humorous imagery as connotative paradox in which humour and meaning co-exist.

Bruegel, by contemporary accounts, was funny. Dominicus Lampsonius (1532-99), in the earliest writing on the artist (1572), wrote (in translation):

honor to you Pieter, as your work is honorable, since for the humorous inventions of your art, full of wit, in the manner of the old master [here he is referring to Hieronymus Bosch], you are no less worthy of fame and praise than any other artist.⁷

Similarly, Karel van Mander (1548-1606) in his 1604 *Schilder-boeck – The Book of Painters* – described Bruegel as *Piet den Drol*, Pieter the Joker, and related how he established his reputation by creating “weird and comical scenes”, concluding that (in translation):

Few pieces by his hand can be looked at earnestly without laughing; in fact, however serious or grim one might be, one cannot help laughing, or at least smiling.⁸

Some modern critics still see humour in Bruegel’s work. Joseph Koerner calls him a “source of laughter.”⁹ Manfred Sellink refers to his “characteristic tongue-in-cheek wit,”¹⁰ and

⁷ Translation by Fritz Grossman from Larry Silver, *Pieter Bruegel* (New York: Abbeville, 2011), 37.

⁸ Karel Van Mander, *Het Schilder-Boeck*, (Harlem, 1604). Translation in Philippe and Francoise Roberts-Jones, *Bruegel*, trans. Elaine M Stainton (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), 332.

⁹ Joseph Leo Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel: From Enemy Painting to Everyday Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 93.

¹⁰ Manfred Sellink, “Frans Huys after Pieter Bruegel the Elder *Skaters Before the Gate of St George*” in *Bruegel The Master* ed. Sabine Haag et al (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 117.

Elizabeth Honig sees in his “clever transformations” the depiction of “verbal play”.¹¹ However, Honig, paralleling Grössinger, warns against taking humour too seriously, and tells viewers not to be “foolishly joyful” but to aim for “pleasure in understanding the part of human nature in which children and peasants are absorbed.”¹²

Other scholars go further. Phillipe and Francoise Roberts-Jones state that “posterity has long been unjust in remembering chiefly the works that cast him in the role of the joker.”¹³ Jürgen Müller and Thomas Schauerte argue Bruegel works “makes one laugh” but, in truth, are “meant to make one sad.”¹⁴ Tine Luk Meganck extends to Bruegel Jose de Siguenza’s judgement on Bosch, that his paintings “are not at all comical.”¹⁵ Perhaps Wilfred Seipel best encapsulates this view when he describes the entire cycle of Bruegel’s works as “an epic poem of human existence in their helplessness both in nature and in the course of world history which seemingly cannot be influenced.”¹⁶

Focusing on Bruegel’s *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* as exemplar, I shall, in chapter one, examine previous scholarship on this work connected to humour, acknowledging that this is limited to works in English (either originally or via translation), and what I see as weaknesses in the methodologies, the key one being the expectation of definitive meanings. In chapter

¹¹ Elizabeth Alice Honig, *Pieter Bruegel and the Idea of Human Nature* (London: Reaktion Books, 2019), 172.

¹² Honig, *The Idea of Human Nature*, 208.

¹³ Roberts-Jones, *Bruegel*, 32.

¹⁴ Jürgen Müller and Thomas Schauerte, *Pieter Bruegel: The Complete Works* (London: Taschen, 2018), 174.

¹⁵ Tine Luk Meganck, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder Fall of the Rebel Angels: Art, Knowledge and Politics on the Eve of the Dutch Revolt* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2019), 21.

¹⁶ Wilfred Seipel, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna* (Milan: Skira, 1998), 13.

two I shall consider visual humour conceptually, including the superiority theory that dominated writing on humour in Bruegel's era and has heavily influenced modern scholarship. I shall then argue for an alternate phenomenological concept of visual humour that embraces the paradox of meaning and contextualises cultural and historic context. By examining, in chapter three, the various ways in which this humour can be found in Bruegel's works and, in chapter four, specifically examining how it can provide connotative meaning for *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, I shall argue that this alternate concept of humour provides a different yet effective way to combine meaning and humour in Bruegel's work.

Chapter 1

Review of interpretations of humour in Pieter Bruegel's *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*

The current interpretations of humour in *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* are helpfully contextualised via an earlier debate between Svetlana Alpers and Hessel Miedema. This took place in the 1970s, and while reflective of its age, nonetheless prepares the soil into which future debate is sown. In “Bruegel's Festive Peasants”, Svetlana Alpers describes how Bruegel scholarship previously aims only to attribute “high seriousness” to his works, treating them as moral sermons.¹⁷ The deep meaning is a message of sin, the surface content – the countryside and its peasant inhabitants – incidental.¹⁸ This interpretation, she argues, matches the experience of neither Bruegel's target audience, nor his own approach, which Alpers describes as “ethnographically aware”.¹⁹ For Alpers, Bruegel's peasants are not negative signifiers of moral rules, but subjects to be imagined through Alpers' “comic mode”.²⁰

Radically different, the comic mode “reject[s] the eschatological interpretation and the resulting moralistic summons to right behaviour” and “see[s] folly not as something to be scourged, but as the human condition”.²¹ Here, images become mirrors of reality, distancing and separating the urban onlookers to allow them to “masquerade” as peasants and play with the image.²² Alpers notes how both content (the rural setting) and design

¹⁷ Svetlana Alpers, “Bruegel's Festive Peasants,” *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 6, no. 3/4 (1972-1973): 164.

¹⁸ Alpers, “Bruegel's Festive Peasants,” 165.

¹⁹ Alpers, “Bruegel's Festive Peasants,” 167.

²⁰ Alpers, “Bruegel's Festive Peasants,” 169.

²¹ Alpers, “Bruegel's Festive Peasants,” 164.

²² Alpers, “Bruegel's Festive Peasants,” 174.

(the high viewpoint and the “awkward bodies of the careless peasants”²³) permits urban viewers to laugh while remaining located physically and morally on the high ground.

Alpers expands these ideas in “Realism as a Comic Mode: Low-Life Painting Seen through Bredero's Eyes”. Here, she reiterates Bruegel’s commitment stating that “ordinary life, realistically rendered, was specifically conceived of as the stuff of which comedy was made.”²⁴ Paralleling Early Modern comic literature, Alpers’s comic mode balances low entertainment (for instance the tales of Till Eulenspiegel) and comic pleasure with socially necessary moral instruction.²⁵ It encourages viewer engagement as the works do not contain a single meaning. Rather, a predetermined number of lines of enquiry exist, each conditioned by social decorum,²⁶ and each with a determined conclusion containing its own moral message. Viewers can approach Bruegel’s ‘low’ comic scenes to find humour and each message with detached attitude enjoying the comic journey but safe in the morally determined destination.

Opposing Alpers is Hessel Miedema. He sees the comic mode as misguided and based on an incorrect assumption that Early Modern Dutch works were “objects of entertainment.”²⁷ Works, he argues, were didactic compositions of determined symbols. Peasants were not real, they were exemplum of sin, “stupid, ostentatious, aggressive gluttons and

²³ Alpers, “Bruegel’s Festive Peasants,” 174.

²⁴ Alpers, “Realism as a Comic Mode: Low-Life Painting Seen through Bredero's Eyes,” *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 8, no. 3 (1975-1976): 117.

²⁵ Alpers, “Realism as a Comic Mode,” 118.

²⁶ Alpers, “Realism as a Comic Mode,” 131

²⁷ Hessel Miedema “Realism and Comic Mode: The Peasant,” *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 9, no. 4 (1977): 206.

drunkards.”²⁸ Paintings should not encourage laughter, for laughter in Bruegel’s day, argues Miedema, was either naïve – a thing “for children, young girls, nymphs, flowers and personifications of spring” – or, more commonly, uncivilised:

the dishonest laughter of harlots, the foolish laughter of people who were too old to laugh, the addle-pated laughter of idiots and fools, and the derisive, aggressive laughter of triumphant opponents.²⁹

For Miedema, laughter was synonymous with uncivilised and ignorant braying and incompatible with art. For Miedema there is a single meaning for each picture, validated objectively via iconography. Any other approach involves the “over-valuation of sensual observation, of everyday events, and of experiencing the object emotionally, [which] has led to a suppression of the decipherable content”, and is an “ahistorical, unhistorical and anti-historical approach to historical art.”³⁰

In Alpers and Miedema are represented the contradictory responses to humour in Bruegel’s works that has not abated. Two broadly defined methodologies have dominated Bruegel scholarship, audience reception (or reader response as it is called in literary studies)³¹ and historicism, and this contradiction continues to appear in both.

²⁸ Miedema, “Realism and Comic Mode,” 211.

²⁹ Miedema, “Realism and Comic Mode,” 213.

³⁰ Miedema, “Realism and Comic Mode,” 219.

³¹ For the avoidance of doubt, while having common points, this is not audience reception as associated with the theories and writings of Stuart Hall.

Audience reception, exemplified in Bruegel scholarship through the work of Margaret Sullivan, relies on Stanley Fish's 'interpretive community'.³² Fish holds that determining meaning in a work cannot be an object of the work itself but rather the consequence of the conventions and understandings of the culture surrounding it.³³ As Sullivan states, Fish's approach:

pursues a moderate course between the Scylla of the "intentional" fallacy – the presumption that access to an artist's innermost thoughts is possible – and the Charybdis of the "affective" fallacy – the notion that all interpretation is subjective and thus inherently suspect.³⁴

For Sullivan, the interpretive community is the sixteenth-century art market, especially the patrons, and she explores this specifically via Bruegel's illustration of proverbs. Sullivan challenges the established view that proverbs are "the voice of the Flemish people made visible".³⁵ This, she argues, is not objective determination, but ideological investment – 'Peasant Bruegel' as folk hero. She notes how as humour is not commonly heroic, *Piet den Drol* is dropped, or "laid to rest" as Mark Meadow describes it,³⁶ and humour in his art is minimised.³⁷ She further challenges Bruegel's folk status by relocating proverbs from folk

³² Margaret Sullivan, "Bruegel's Proverbs: Art and Audience in the Northern Renaissance," *The Art Bulletin*, 73, no. 3 (1991): 431.

³³ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 10.

³⁴ Sullivan, "Bruegel's Proverbs," 431.

³⁵ Sullivan, "Bruegel's Proverbs," 431.

³⁶ Mark A. Meadows, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder's Netherlandish Proverbs and the Practice of Rhetoric* (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 2002), 15.

³⁷ Sullivan, "Bruegel's Proverbs," 432.

culture to the intellectual traditions of humanism, Desiderius Erasmus (d.1536) and the classical antecedents of Greece and Rome. She states:

Proverbs confer "dignity" on style "by their antiquity alone," according to Erasmus, and the goal is to "interweave adages deftly and appropriately ... to make the language as a whole glitter with sparkles from Antiquity, please us with the colours of the art of rhetoric, gleam with jewel-like words of wisdom, and charm us with titbits of wit and humour."³⁸

Sullivan elevates Bruegel's work to the intellectual elite.

In specific relation to *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, Sullivan associates it with both Erasmus and Hieronymus Bosch (d. 1516). Via Erasmus she describes how Bruegel's audience would range from the "somewhat learned" to the "very learned".³⁹ And via Bosch, the first artist to feature proverbs significantly in his work,⁴⁰ Bruegel elevated his work from "mere amusement" to that worthy of "deep and close consideration".⁴¹ 'Peasant Bruegel' is swept aside, with urbane intellectual Bruegel then embraced by critics such as Katrien Lichtert, Elizabeth Alice Honig, Jürgen Müller and Thomas Schauerte, each, albeit using different variation on methodologies, emphasising the serious while diminishing or dismissing humour.⁴² Humour in *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* is limited to 'titbit' – an amuse bouche before the serious feast.

³⁸ Sullivan, "Bruegel's Proverbs," 435.

³⁹ Sullivan, "Bruegel's Proverbs," 433

⁴⁰ Sullivan, "Bruegel's Proverbs," 438.

⁴¹ Sullivan, "Bruegel's Proverbs," 443.

⁴² Lichtert, "Big Fish Eat Little Fish," 126; Honig, *The Idea of Human Nature*, 34-35; Müller and Schauerte, *Pieter Bruegel*, 419.

In *Bruegel and the Creative Process, 1559-1563*, Sullivan abandons humour altogether. She cites Victor Giselinus (1543-91), a contemporary of Bruegel, who describes the study of proverbs as “a rational and healthy activity free of the ‘ravages caused by the other passions’”.⁴³ Rational and non-emotive Giselinus, for Sullivan, embodies the interpretive community necessary for audience reception. She acknowledges that no specific patron can be identified as commissioner for Bruegel’s works such as *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559),⁴⁴ but nonetheless still sees (presumably) his commission as where meaning is determined. As Sullivan notes, as does Maarten Bassens,⁴⁵ the patron chooses the detailed content of the work (Sullivan suggests a big fish eating a little one is in *Netherlandish Proverbs* because the patron liked Bruegel’s earlier print⁴⁶), as well as the style and format – its “smaller figures and detailed execution” making it “ideal for a small domestic space”.⁴⁷ Bruegel, for all his talent, fulfils the expectations of others, including a lack of humour.

Peter and Marilyn Moyle also use an audience response method but reach a contradictory conclusion. For them, *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* is an entertainment driven by market preference.⁴⁸ As will be examined in more detail in chapter four, fishing is a key sixteenth-century industry and source of wealth for many would-be purchasers, and, for the Moyles, the association with fish would have piqued their amusement and is the key to

⁴³ Margaret Sullivan, *Bruegel and the Creative Process, 1559-1563* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 30.

⁴⁴ Sullivan, *The Creative Process*, 26. The same is true for *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*.

⁴⁵ Maarten Bassens, “Bruegel in All his States: How the Small Details in the Printing Plate Can Make a World of Difference,” in *Bruegel The Complete Graphic Works*, ed. Maarten Bassens and Joris van Grieken (London: Thames & Hudson, 2019), 35.

⁴⁶ Sullivan, *The Creative Process*, 31.

⁴⁷ Sullivan, *The Creative Process*, 27.

⁴⁸ Peter B. Moyle and Marilyn A. Moyle, “Introduction to Fish Imagery in Art,” *Environmental Biology of Fishes* 31, no 5, (1991): 9.

understanding the print's commission.⁴⁹ As Martin Royalton-Kisch notes, Bruegel was “playing the tunes his audience wanted to hear”,⁵⁰ his agency subjugated to the expectations of his audience. It is market demand humour designed to amuse.

Both uses of audience reception present a definitive position – the work is or is not funny – and this definitiveness highlights, to me, a significant weakness in audience reception, its reliance on audience knowability. To reach conclusion, a “statement of probabilities”,⁵¹ the expectations and values of the audience must be known and cultural materials become the interpretative tools to determine definitive meaning. Yet, when it comes to humour, there is unreconciled contradiction. *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, via this method, is presented alternately as a study in erudite humanist scholarship and as a shallow market-driven entertainment with each conclusion rejecting the other. There is, via the Moyles and Alpers (who also used this method), the expectation of an emotional response and, via Sullivan, its rejection. Each uses audience to justify definitive yet contradictory conclusions.

I would argue this is because audience reception as a methodology has a particular internal contradiction which humour highlights. It simultaneously insists on audience agency and biographical anonymity. The method must supply statements of probability which cannot be tempered by the subjectivity of any specific individual. Otherwise the intentional fallacy of the artist is simply replaced by that of another, for example the patron, whose ‘innermost thoughts’ are as equally inaccessible.⁵² Only a non-subjective audience can facilitate the

⁴⁹ Moyle and Moyle, “Introduction to Fish Imagery,” 10.

⁵⁰ Martin Royalton-Kisch, “Pieter Bruegel as a Draftsman: The Changing Image,” in *Pieter Bruegel the Elder Drawings and Prints*, ed. Nadine M. Orenstein (New York: Metropolitan Museum of New York, 2001), 28.

⁵¹ Sullivan, “Bruegel's Proverbs,” 431.

⁵² Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Methuen, 1984), 151.

assurance of definitiveness this method requires. Such cultural objectivity may be applicable to aspects of interpretation, but it does not work for humour. As I shall argue below, by its subjective propensity, humour slips this grasp. However, before exploring this in detail, more groundwork is needed via setting out how others have attempted to interpret humour through the second most common methodology, historicism.

Historicism, while acknowledging the cultural influence of the audience, empowers Bruegel as a determining agent with meaning stemming from the artist. This meaning, however, remains culturally conditioned, a product of time and place. Cultural conditions, including artist intention, are examined through critical perspectives (historical, sociological, anthropological, etc.) to inform interpretation of artist, work, and humour. As with audience reception the expectation for meaning remains definitiveness. For example, Kenneth Lindsay, as one proponent, considers Bruegel's proverbial works through the intellectual history of 1550s Antwerp. He reads the cultural signs in works, including *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, and determines that Bruegel is an intellectual as well as a member of a social group that opposes cultural norms. He definitively concludes that Bruegel "disliked reformers, held the Catholic Church at an uneasy arm's length, cherished the virtue of God's truth, and supposed that there was a way out of the traducements of his time".⁵³ For Lindsay, *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* is a humorous satire ridiculing a society worthy of critique and Bruegel was an outsider speaking truth to power.

⁵³ Kenneth C. Lindsay, "Mystery in Bruegel's Proverbs," *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen*, 38 (1996): 76.

David Kunzle also sees *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* as satire within its historical context. Examining the drollery trope of the world turned upside down, he argues that Bruegel uses its association with folly to complicate the scene by introducing contradiction.⁵⁴ This, however, “conceals and distorts” and hides an ulterior motive.⁵⁵ Kunzle posits that proverbs at this point in history indoctrinate the lower classes by an “insecure bourgeoisie in a period of continuous social conflict.”⁵⁶ By inverting proverbial works, Bruegel reinforced the lower classes as “the true source of irrational and foolish behaviour” and was, for Kunzle, “putting the poor in their place.”⁵⁷ Here comedy is social oppression and Bruegel is a mouthpiece of power.

Larry Silver considers a different historical connection, that between Bruegel and Hieronymus Bosch and specifically the use of Bosch’s name on *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* to enhance marketability.⁵⁸ Kerry Barrett similarly builds on a connection between Bosch and Bruegel and argues for a culturally conditioned shift from “horror to hilarity”.⁵⁹ Bosch, reflecting his age, demonstrates a pessimistic worldview in which “humanity is condemned to the tortures of hell”.⁶⁰ Bruegel, contrariwise, “comments on human folly” and presents

⁵⁴ David Kunzle, “Bruegel's Proverb Painting and the World Upside Down,” *The Art Bulletin* 59, no. 2 (1977): 197.

⁵⁵ Kunzle, “Bruegel's Proverb Painting,” 198.

⁵⁶ Kunzle, “Bruegel's Proverb Painting,” 199.

⁵⁷ Kunzle, “Bruegel's Proverb Painting,” 202.

⁵⁸ Larry Silver, *Pieter Bruegel*, 86.

⁵⁹ Kerry Barrett, “Boschian Bruegel, Bruegelian Bosch: Hieronymus Cock’s Production of “Bosch” Prints,” *Journal of Historian of Netherlandish Art* 5 no.2 (2013): 3, accessed on Jan 15, 2022, <https://jhna.org/articles/boschian-bruegel-brugelian-bosch-hieronymus-cocks-production-bosch-prints/>.

⁶⁰ Barrett, “Boschian Bruegel,” 3.

creatures as “playful rather than dangerous”.⁶¹ Both Silver and Barrett are confident that Bruegel was being intentionally humorous and was appreciated as such by his audience.

Walter Gibson also argues that Bruegel’s proverbial works, including *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, were seen as humorous and presented “as much for amusement as moral reflection.”⁶²

He describes how literal proverbial depiction, as in *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, was “a favourite source of laughter” in sixteenth-century Flanders.⁶³ For Gibson, didactic messages do not oppose humour but are conveyed through it,⁶⁴ an artist-intended dichotomy of form and meaning.⁶⁵ Gibson interpretation specifically of *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* is limited, but his position can be surmised through his interpretations of other works, most notably *Dulle Griet* (1563). Here, he cites Jan Grauls’ interpretation as the “most convincing”, i.e. the most likely to be true, because “he situates its subject matter firmly within the popular culture of Bruegel’s time.”⁶⁶ Gibson privileges historic context for meaning, defining it as a located cultural product. On *Dulle Griet*, Gibson states,

Out of old and slightly shopworn proverbs, jokes, and tales about nagging wives and rampaging old women did Bruegel thus forge one of his most comic creations.⁶⁷

⁶¹ Barrett, “Boschian Bruegel,” 3.

⁶² Walter S. Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 41.

⁶³ Gibson, *The Art of Laughter*, 124.

⁶⁴ Gibson, *The Art of Laughter*, 42.

⁶⁵ Walter S. Gibson *Figures of Speech: Picturing Proverbs in Renaissance Netherlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 20.

⁶⁶ Gibson, *The Art of Laughter*, 127. Gibson then goes on to provide even further cultural references to expand Grauls’ critique.

⁶⁷ Gibson, *The Art of Laughter*, 144.

For Gibson, Bruegel is a comic genius with his humour, like his art, of its time and designed equally to entertain and to inform.⁶⁸

Jürgen Müller and Thomas Schauerte concur with Bruegel's genius yet reach a contradictory conclusion on humour. They acknowledge the realism of *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* and even suggest that the print evokes associations to an actual event (a beached whale from the 1520s).⁶⁹ However, unlike Gibson, Müller and Schauerte historically contextualise the work not in proverbs, but in the works of Sebastian Franck (1499-c.1543) and satirical folly literature including Sebastian Brant's (1458-1521) *Ship of Fools* (1494). Brant, they state,

shows us fools whose faults and vices amuse us at first, only then to make us earnest. The moral becomes clear afterwards, without having to show us saints to emulate.⁷⁰

The print, for them, is not intended to amuse. Laughter is for the weak, a threshold temptation to sin and a manifestation of the inhumanity of the world. Humour should be abandoned as, for them, "human greed is the actual theme of this nightmare scene".⁷¹

I shall return to these interpretations in chapter four, having limited myself here to providing sufficient detail to highlight how Bruegel scholarship using an historicist methodology argues for definitiveness when it comes to humour. For me, as with audience

⁶⁸ Gibson, *The Art of Laughter*, 37.

⁶⁹ Müller and Schauerte, *Pieter Bruegel*, 341.

⁷⁰ Müller and Schauerte, *Pieter Bruegel*, 419.

⁷¹ Müller and Schauerte, *Pieter Bruegel*, 342.

reception, this represents an irresolvable tension. These writers want to be definitive about Bruegel and the humour of his works, going beyond what they see as subjective (or even solipsistic) opinion (notice how Müller and Schauerte refer to the “actual” theme), but base this definitiveness on culturally conditioned arguments. This is problematic as humour, I shall argue, goes beyond cultural conditioning. By necessity, an historicist methodology must locate its conclusion within an historic premise. Gibson, for example, sets Bruegel’s humour within a socio/anthropological study of laughter in sixteenth-century Flanders. His premise is that laughter is a social commodity set within the historical context of contemporary rhetoric as exemplified by the plays of the *rederijkers kamers* (chambers of rhetoric).⁷² Alternatively, Müller and Schauerte argue for Bruegel as dark and ultimately unfunny from the premise that the works are satirical set within the historical context of the writings of Franck and Brant. As with audience reception, these interpretations aim to present definitive positions yet contradict each other. For Gibson, Bruegel is a comic genius encouraging laughter as much for its own sake as for any moral instruction (while not denying its presence),⁷³ for Müller and Schauerte Bruegel is a Frankian preacher with both irenic and ironic agendas, with neither aiming for laughter. Both interpretations have the same access to the paintings, yet, as with audience reception, reach opposing conclusions in relation to humour. I would argue that the inability to even concur on the most basic question in relation to humour – are the works funny? – suggests a fundamental problem. I shall address what I think this issue is below, but three other methods have also been used

⁷² Gibson, *The Art of Laughter*, 24.

⁷³ Gibson, *The Art of Laughter*, 28.

in recent Bruegel scholarship in English, each of which adds to understanding, and needs reviewing before I move on to my own position.

The first of these can be found in Louise Milne's *Carnivals and Dreams: Pieter Bruegel and the History of the Imagination*. She uses a broadly historicist approach but introduces an ahistorical variable – psychology. She sets out how “Bruegel and his contemporaries” saw “masquerade, dreams and nightmares” within their cultural context;⁷⁴ however, Milne then subjects these to Freudian psychoanalysis, including condensation and displacement, to determine meaning. She acknowledges that this method would be unknown to Bruegel and his contemporaries but suggests that as they “effectively describe techniques of image production” they are applicable.⁷⁵ By combining an ahistorical framework alongside historicist context, Milne aims to provide interpretation that go beyond the historical.

For Milne, *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* is initially “remarkably comprehensible, but then quickly complicated”.⁷⁶ She argues that it is proverbial representation, but that Bruegel has gone far beyond what is necessary for illustration, his reiteration of fish gorging on other fish taking the image from proverbial mimesis to a “level of universal cannibalism”.⁷⁷ The reason, for Milne, is “evident” – it “gives a chilling social dimension to the proverb: chilling because it denatures a natural metaphor for human rapaciousness.”⁷⁸ Metaphor is critical for Freudian psychology, particularly for the interpretation of dreams as it provides the

⁷⁴ Louise S. Milne, *Carnivals and Dreams: Pieter Bruegel and the History of the Imagination* (London: Mutis Liber, 2011), 1.

⁷⁵ Milne, *Carnivals and Dreams*, 37.

⁷⁶ Milne, *Carnivals and Dreams*, 164.

⁷⁷ Milne, *Carnivals and Dreams*, 164.

⁷⁸ Milne, *Carnivals and Dreams*, 164.

“tacit mapping” by which the self draws understanding.⁷⁹ By employing Freudian metaphor to interpret Bruegel’s images, Milne steps through the work’s historical loci to an ahistorical metaphorical contemplation of human nature.

But is the print funny? Milne does not address this directly for *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, but Freudian analysis, Milne argues, supports “an interpretation of Bruegel’s metamorphic art as a redirection of transcendental nightmare towards comedy.”⁸⁰ The condensation of cannibalism in *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* causes anxiety, which is then displaced and released as humour. Having presented an ahistorical means to interpret humour in Bruegel’s works, Milne, with specific reference to *Dulle Griet*, then recontextualises it in history by stating that modern viewers “are unlikely to find it funny” for two reasons.⁸¹ First, quoting the psychologist Ernst Kris, she states “achievements in comic expression age very quickly.”⁸² Second, again quoting Kris, Milne argues that comedy is local and specific, designed to relieve the immediate anxieties of a group. As the conditions of this group inevitably change, the humour becomes groundless and ceases. Milne concludes, “laughter is a release of anxiety, and we no longer share many of the same anxieties as sixteenth-century people”.⁸³

I find Milne’s use of ahistorical methodology, chosen for its effectiveness in interpreting Bruegel’s works rather than its association with historical conditioning and/or

⁷⁹ J. Hopkins, “Psychoanalysis, Metaphor, and the Concept of Mind,” in *The Analytic Freud*, ed. Michael Levine (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 15.

⁸⁰ Milne, *Carnivals and Dreams*, 173.

⁸¹ Milne, *Carnivals and Dreams*, 173.

⁸² Milne, *Carnivals and Dreams*, 174.

⁸³ Milne, *Carnivals and Dreams*, 174.

demonstrable artistic intension, compelling. As the ideas she draws from Freud are imbued in our thinking in the twenty-first century, it is effective to consider how they will affect our interpretations, including works completed prior to Freud. So long as no specific correlation is made (for example, Bruegel draws the big fish eating the little fish in direct response to Freud's writings on cannibalism which is, of course, impossible), such an approach – one that could equally apply other ahistorical methodologies such as phenomenological philosophy as I shall use below – can enhance and enrich modern interpretation.

That said, I find Milne's conclusions on humour unsatisfactory for four reasons. First, it employs Freud's narrow definition of humour as wholly about subconscious anxiety release, a now largely rejected position. Palmer, for example, argues that it is, at best, only a partial aspect of humour,⁸⁴ while Oring identifies that most humour does not derive from the subconscious, i.e. people have consciousness both in humour and its intention.⁸⁵ Second, it suggests that humour exists in a single state and that an image's humour is defined via its original terms. I cannot accept this as it seems self-evident that people can find things from other cultures and moments of history funny even where they have no contextual connection to original terms and conditions. See, for example, Mieke Bal's finding unintended humour in the 7th-century bas-relief *Arjuna's penance*.⁸⁶ Third, I find the statement that people today do not share anxieties with those of the sixteenth-century

⁸⁴ Jerry Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), 89.

⁸⁵ Elliott Oring, *Joking Asides: The Theory, Analysis and Aesthetics of Humour* (Utah State University Press: Boulder, 2016), 15.

⁸⁶ Mieke Bal, *Looking In: The Art of Viewing* (Amsterdam: OPA, 2001), 44-45.

inconsistent with Milne's overall position. She is applying Freudian technique, and Freud identifies anxieties such as those between children and parents as universally applicable regardless of time or place.⁸⁷ I think her suggestion that the anxieties of Bruegel and his contemporaries are unrecognisable today misrepresents a key aspect of Freud's zeitgeist. Finally, like audience reception and historicist methods, Milne continues to offer her interpretations as either aiming for or achieving definitiveness.

In the second of the three additional methods to be considered here, Emily Blacker abandons the historic altogether. She presents an interpretation of *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* which denies historical contextualisation and interprets the print as a statement on humanity's rapaciousness wholly located within an immediate present. She states:

Bruegel's "Big Fish Eat Little Fish" speaks powerfully to the moment of ecological crisis that we inhabit, wherein "[i]njustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering."⁸⁸

She interprets without reference to proverbs, Bosch, attitudes of the sixteenth century, or any of the historic conditions that inform the other interpretations considered above. To her, *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* is an image of the exploitation of wildlife and a call to action – its positive message found in the boy in the boat who signifies an opportunity to break the circle of exploitation and violence.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ For example, the Oedipus and Electra complexes first detailed by Freud in his 1899 work *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

⁸⁸ Emily Blacker, "Why There is a Need to Ethically Reframe the Global Community's Relation to the Earth in the Current Ecological Crisis," *Consensus* 40, no. 2 (2019): 2, accessed Jan 14, 2022, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol40/iss2/6>.

⁸⁹ Emily Blacker, "Why There is a Need," 4.

In this case the image has been used by Blacker for her own utilitarian purpose; it is a tool. She is not claiming that her interpretation reflects any understanding of Bruegel or his contemporaries but equally sees no requirement that it should. She defines her hermeneutical horizon as the immediate present in which environmental concerns dominate both premise and context. So long as using this ahistoric context is accepted, as I do, it provides a coherent description of what the print means to her and has legitimacy as a genuinely held view. While I shall continue to employ historical context in my own interpretations below, this is not due to my concurrence with an argument that this is an essential component of correct interpretation.

While accepting the possibility of an ahistoric approach I, nonetheless, do not find Blacker's interpretation compelling for two other reasons. The first, as with all others, is that she presents the interpretation as singular and definitive. Second, she presents her interpretation of the work as a statement on nature, but appears, in doing so, to ignore large parts of the work. For example, she offers no interpretation of why in a picture that presses a natural agenda there are supernatural elements such as the fish with legs. As such, Blacker's interpretation feels to me, at best, incomplete.

The third and final alternate methodology to be considered finds Joseph Koerner embracing Bruegel as creator. Koerner, in *Bosch & Bruegel: From Enemy Painting to Everyday Life*, repeats much of what has been seen above; however, he strikes out from the others by presenting interpretations that embrace the phenomenological nature of the creative. Koerner's primary thesis concerns the link between Bruegel and Bosch. This, he argues, is not mimesis – Bruegel did not copy Bosch, and *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* is not a replica of a

lost original. Rather, Bruegel “recalls” Bosch.⁹⁰ Through emanation not imitation, Bosch is phenomenologically brought to being through Bruegel, inculcated such that Bruegel’s work does not exist without Bosch. *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* mirrors Bosch’s shape, his gestalt, consuming Bosch to be, as Karel Van Mander describes his consumption of nature, “spit out anew”.⁹¹ So successfully done, Barrett argues that Bruegel may begin as the “new Bosch” but through emanation Bosch transforms to become a “second Bruegel”.⁹²

For Koerner, Bruegel brings forth Bosch but does so with inversion, an inversion that includes the introduction of humour. Bosch “renders the unreal diabolically possible”,⁹³ while Bruegel, conversely, sees “[n]atural and social reality gobble up all fantasies as just bits of the surrealism of everyday life.”⁹⁴ Bosch brings forth God’s judgement and damnation whereas Bruegel’s God is absent, leaving uncertain humanity to its “comically local incarnation.”⁹⁵ Boschian scholasticism to Bruegelian humanism, the power of nightmares annulled by peals of laughter.

This stark dichotomy has been criticised. Gabriel Josipovici suggests Koerner’s presentation of the medieval world view is too narrow, more how the Renaissance described it than the reality of itself.⁹⁶ Similarly, Matthijs IJssink suggests that Koerner both ignores the humour

⁹⁰ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 81.

⁹¹ For more on this turn of phrase see Denis Ribouillault, “Regurgitating Nature: On a Celebrated Anecdote by Karel van Mander about Pieter Bruegel the Elder,” *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 8, no. 1 (2016), accessed Feb 19, 2022, <https://jhna.org/articles/regurgitating-nature-celebrated-anecdote-by-karel-van-lander-about-pieter-bruegel-the-elder/>

⁹² Barrett, “Boschian Bruegel,” 7.

⁹³ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 82.

⁹⁴ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 82.

⁹⁵ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 91.

⁹⁶ Gabriel Josipovici, “Traps for the Unwary,” *Times Literary Supplement* 31 (March 2017), accessed Feb 14, 2022, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/koerner-bosch-bruegel/>.

in Bosch's work, and over-modernises Bruegel, creating an over-simplified Burckhardtian dichotomy.⁹⁷ While overstating the differences, Koerner nonetheless focuses on what is for me a key concept for interpreting the potential humour in Bruegel's works, its creativity or, as Koerner references, its poiesis.⁹⁸

Poiesis, a term made popular through its connection to the ideas of existentialism, is the creative act of bringing into being that which previously did not exist. If what was a thing, or a series of things (parts), demonstrates and manifests poiesis it ceases to be an object describable via the sum of its parts and becomes a subjective being, a new is. Through poiesis the print is more than an object, its own creative subject emerges with being and presence. Such being remains historically located, in the sense that there is location and history in which it necessarily resides – it is the creation of work completed in Antwerp in 1557 – yet simultaneously it is not limited by the geographical or historical conditions from which it is thrust into being. This parallels the idea of emergence as found in complexity theory.⁹⁹ Poiesis is the emergence of the more, what Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) calls the “over and above”,¹⁰⁰ which enables a fundamental shift in nature for *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* from definable object to engageable subject. Such over and above, Koerner argues, exudes in the works of both Bruegel and Bosch with concomitant character to challenge the measure of meaning.

⁹⁷ Matthijs IJssink, “Review,” *College Art Association*, Sep 27, 2017, accessed Feb 14, 2022, http://caareviews.org/reviews/3346#.YgqagN_P02x.

⁹⁸ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 94.

⁹⁹ Oliver Human, “Complexity: E-Special Introduction,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 33, no. 7-8 (2016): 428.

¹⁰⁰ Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” in *Off the Beaten Track* ed. and trans. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3.

Such complex creative work is not limited as an object in time and meaning must be drawn through the work by engagement. The work, being more than the sum of its parts, more than a collection of signs or motifs, is open, informed in context with meaning reliant on connection. Not a silent object, the work's creative nature, it's over and above, "speaks back".¹⁰¹ As Koerner notes, both Bosch and Bruegel are "intensely aware of their powers of making", they both "create another nature, a parallel world".¹⁰²

Joseph Koerner celebrates the over and above of Bruegel's works yet does not follow it to what I think is a necessary logical step in relation to interpretation of meaning within contextual subjectivity. The works are creative, imbued above and beyond the reductionist nature of a determinable thing. Yet he still presents determinable and essentialist meanings for each work. He declares *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* comic, noting that humour is endemic in Bruegel's works.¹⁰³ Elsewhere, in considering *Magpie on the Gallows* (1568), he states that, "through the glint of pleasure which humour sparks, we affirm our right to life even in the face of inevitable all-powerful death".¹⁰⁴ In relation to humour he declares some works, including *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, comic, and others serious. *Christ Carrying the Cross* (1564), in Koerner's view, for example, is not comic but nihilistic.¹⁰⁵ The ground of the road to Calvary is not leading to salvation but is "wearing down the world to nothing".¹⁰⁶ I disagree with this interpretation and see *Christ Carrying the Cross* imbued with both

¹⁰¹ Human, "Complexity," 431.

¹⁰² Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 94.

¹⁰³ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 364.

¹⁰⁴ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 364.

¹⁰⁵ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 298.

¹⁰⁶ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 298.

humour and hope, but that it not my focus here. My point here is that despite recognising existential poiesis and its concomitant active emergence of meaning as explored above, Koerner continues to present definitive conclusions for each work and, with specific reference to humour, to label some works as comic or others not.

In summary, this chapter has thus far set out scholarship's current interpretations of humour or the lack thereof in the works of Pieter Bruegel and in particular *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, with each presenting either a definitive position, or at least an asymptote to definitiveness. Each appears to accept as premise that there can be, and most likely are, right answers – definitive determinations of what *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* means. There may be, as with Alpers, more than one meaning, but each one remains determinable, the product of disengaged reasoning based on “unmediated access to the object”.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, each scholar posits that it is possible to consider objectively whether Bruegel's print is funny or not.

While I have not found this with interpretations of *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, occasionally, for example in relation to iconography of the fish in Bruegel's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, scholars will argue that no meaning is immediately available.¹⁰⁸ However, the reason they give for this is the limitation of knowledge stemming from a lack of available contextual information (data) rather than anything inherent in either the work itself or their definitive sense of meaning. The assumption is that if more information became

¹⁰⁷ Human, “Complexity,” 423.

¹⁰⁸ Nadine Orenstein, “The Temptation of Saint Anthony, 1556,” in *Pieter Bruegel the Elder Drawings and Prints*, ed. Nadine M. Orenstein (New York: Metropolitan Museum of New York, 2001), 139; Maarten Bassens, “The Temptation of Saint Anthony,” in *Bruegel The Complete Graphic Works*, ed. Maarten Bassens and Joris van Grieken (London: Thames & Hudson, 2019), 124.

known, then objective determination of meaning (and humour) would be possible. This, it seems, accepts what Oliver Human calls “a quantitative approach to complexity”.¹⁰⁹

Like Oliver, I question this assumption and I want to argue that there is something specific about the consideration of visual humour in art interpretation that augers for an alternate approach, one that embraces the presence of multiple, and even contradictory interpretations in single works. I think that contradiction can be inherent in Bruegel’s work via its humour and paradox, and that understanding this requires a different approach to the reductionist objectivity sought in other scholarship. Such an approach, as shall be argued below, does not ignore historical context, it recognises the complexity it provokes, particularly in relation to both the emergent properties of the creative work, and the need for modesty as Paul Cilliers uses the term.¹¹⁰ This need for recognition of the multiplicity of meaning in creative works is, in my view, the case for all art interpretation (including the serious), but is particularly the case when considering art and the phenomenological nature of visual humour. To demonstrate this, however, I need to set out my understanding of visual humour. Only after this is established can I apply it to the interpretation of humour in the works of Bruegel in general and specifically to *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*.

¹⁰⁹ Human, “Complexity,” 424.

¹¹⁰ Paul Cilliers, “Complexity, Deconstruction and Relativism,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 22, no. 5 (2005), 256.

Chapter 2

Visual humour in art

What is humour? Intuitively, it is something “universal to humanity”,¹¹¹ what Simon Critchley calls “an anthropological constant”.¹¹² Yet attempts to define it remain elusive, even more so when focusing specifically on visual humour. Arthur Asa Berger, in *Blind Men and Elephants*, maps out ten intellectual approaches to defining humour objectively and compellingly concludes that none succeeds.¹¹³ This may suggest that humour is undefinable, a concept beyond containment, leaving only Wittgenstein’s aphorism: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”.¹¹⁴ However, to me, the lack of objective definition suggests not a call to abandon trying, but a reconfiguration of expectation. For humour I want to argue that its meaning is best grasped when the definition is considered within the subjective connotative.

Intent, as I am, on applying this to the works of Bruegel, I need to acknowledge that this is not the understanding of humour that informs the interpretations considered in chapter one and it behoves me to set out the common understanding of the term within Bruegel scholarship before turning to my arguments to challenge it. *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* has been found funny and not and in most cases these interpretations did not include detailed consideration of how humour was being defined. However, a common theory can be

¹¹¹ Terry Eagleton, *Humour* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 1.

¹¹² Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 28.

¹¹³ Arthur Asa Berger, *Blind Men and Elephants: Perspectives on Humour* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publications, 2010).

¹¹⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. K. C. Ogden (London: Pattern Press, 2021), 113.

inferred, the understanding of humour perceived as the one most prevalent in Bruegel's day – the superiority theory.

The superiority theory of humour dominates – but as we shall see does not monopolise – sixteenth-century writing on humour. It draws antecedents from antiquity where Aristotle identified laughter as humanity's "special attribute",¹¹⁵ divided into two types. Laurent Joubert's 1560 *Treatise on Laughter*, a key text of the period, identifies the first as purposeless laughter.¹¹⁶ This is innocent humour that has "no purpose but to make us laugh" and is desired for "the pleasure it brings".¹¹⁷ As Elizabeth Honig notes this is associated by the sixteenth-century Flemish with the laughter of children,¹¹⁸ something set aside in adulthood and replaced by the second type of laughter, ugly laughter. Plato articulates in *Philebus* how this is humour as the strong (the superior) ridiculing the weak,¹¹⁹ and Aristotle argues that laughter is aimed, by superior minds, at mistakes, the ugly and the deformed.¹²⁰ Gian Giorgio Trissino (1478-1550), in *Poetica* (1529), states that "comedy is in imitation of the wicked and the vicious"¹²¹ and what is found funny "always has some share of ugliness".¹²² Drawing from classic writers, such as Cicero and Quintilian,¹²³ Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) will define it in the generation after Bruegel as

¹¹⁵ Gibson, *The Art of Laughter*, 145.

¹¹⁶ Joubert, *Treatise of Laughter*, 16.

¹¹⁷ Joubert, *Treatise of Laughter*, 16.

¹¹⁸ Honig, *The Idea of Human Nature*, 188.

¹¹⁹ Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, 17.

¹²⁰ Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, 18.

¹²¹ Gian Giorgio Trissino, "Division VI: Comedy from *Poetica*," trans. Allan H. Gilbert in *Reader in Comedy: An Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Magda Romanaka and Alan Ackerman (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 67.

¹²² Trissino, "Division VI: Comedy," 69.

¹²³ Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 391.

a “sign of pusillanimity”.¹²⁴ Superiority humour is dehumanising and strips away compassion,¹²⁵ with conditions, according to Joubert, of “ugliness and the absence of pity”.¹²⁶ Even Christian laughter could be understood as ugly in Bruegel’s day. His contemporary John Calvin (1509-1564) preached that God “offers an occasion for laughter” but only at “the tears of our enemies”.¹²⁷ It is this cachinnation that we saw Miedema characterising as uncivilised in chapter one.¹²⁸

Such a view of the sixteenth-century understanding of humour can be overstated. Laughter was not considered inherently sinful, and it could be acceptable if handled with care and moderation. In Bruegel’s day, moderation was humour’s saving grace. Erasmus, for example, had a positive attitude to humour and used it throughout his works, but advised against excessive laughter,¹²⁹ because, as Honig notes, humour is redeemed when it does not veer “beyond the control of reason”.¹³⁰ “Extreme manifestations” of laughter are a sign of foolishness,¹³¹ and Neo-Stoicism, humanism’s philosophical underpinning, deems humour a vulgar part of the “unthinking side of human nature”¹³² when not practised within the “sovereignty of reason”.¹³³

¹²⁴ Thomas Hobbes, “Human Nature,” in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 19.

¹²⁵ Cathy Shrank, “Mocking the Mirthful? Laughter in Early Modern Dialogue,” in *The Power of Laughter and Satire in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Mark Knights and Adam Morton (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017), 49.

¹²⁶ Joubert, *Treatise of Laughter*, 20.

¹²⁷ M. A. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (London: Penguin, 1999), 45.

¹²⁸ Miedema, “Realism and Comic Mode,” 213.

¹²⁹ Screech, *Laughter*, 216.

¹³⁰ Honig, *The Idea of Human Nature*, 174.

¹³¹ Gibson, *The Art of Laughter*, 17.

¹³² Honig, *The Idea of Human Nature*, 179.

¹³³ Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 19.

This redemptive quality for superiority humour also finds its origins in antiquity, via Cicero, who argues that humour can serve a positive role through rhetoric.¹³⁴ It is still superior – the user is superior to the receiver – but it is well intentioned by intellectual rigour and is the right kind¹³⁵ and right opportunity¹³⁶ for humour. Key in this understanding of humour – and the element I shall most strongly contrast – is the expectation for singular intent ascribed to morality. Grössinger argues that the expectation to articulate morality was growing through later sixteenth-century thinking in Northern Europe,¹³⁷ and superiority humour was seen as an “ethically determined tool” for enforcing “social norms”.¹³⁸ Wit could be acceptable because it was moral.¹³⁹

This made humour a pedagogical tool.¹⁴⁰ Through contemporary conduct books, popular among the upper classes, humour demonstrated sophistication,¹⁴¹ to “foster and display sociability”.¹⁴² Correct moral humour fulfilled the superior purpose, to “ease social tensions, defuse conflict and expel melancholic humours”,¹⁴³ and Todd Richardson applies this approach to Bruegel. Describing *convivium* dining, Bruegel’s art supports a mixture of “pleasure and didacticism”¹⁴⁴ via expected “moralising explanation”.¹⁴⁵ Similar argument

¹³⁴ Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, 18.

¹³⁵ Shrank, “Mocking the Mirthful?,” 61.

¹³⁶ Gibson, *The Art of Laughter*, 22.

¹³⁷ Grössinger, *Humour and Folly*, 72.

¹³⁸ Stott, *Comedy*, 133.

¹³⁹ Silver, *Pieter Bruegel*, 229.

¹⁴⁰ Gibson, *The Art of Laughter*, 146.

¹⁴¹ Stott, *Comedy*, 56.

¹⁴² Shrank, “Mocking the Mirthful?,” 57.

¹⁴³ Shrank, “Mocking the Mirthful?,” 65.

¹⁴⁴ Todd M. Richardson, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Art Discourse in Sixteenth-Century Netherlands* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 75.

¹⁴⁵ Richardson, *Pieter Bruegel*, 74.

can be found in Claudia Goldstein's and Walter Gibson's studies which describe Bruegel's work as satisfying the minds of diners as food satisfies their bodies.¹⁴⁶ Three examples, among many, of Bruegel scholars accepting and applying the superiority theory of humour. While adopted by most modern scholarship on Bruegel, it is nonetheless recognised that the moralisation of humour in the sixteenth century can be overstated. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg note that while there were social expectations, as published, for example, by Erasmus in *De civilitate morum puerilium* (On Good Manners for Boys) and *Enchiridion* (a Handbook for the Christian Soldier),¹⁴⁷ individuals also enjoyed humour free of moralising overtones,¹⁴⁸ and that, in practice, there were other understandings of humour available. Nonetheless, the scholarship reviewed in chapter one follows what it perceives as the cultural expectation that in civilised contexts humour operated within a moral framework and that Bruegel (or patron/publisher) held humour's superior (and privileged)¹⁴⁹ position of identifying and correcting moral weakness, primarily through satire.

I shall have more to say on satire, particularly as it relates to *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, in chapter four, but within the context of understanding the superiority theory of humour, Honig notes that satire was weaponised in the sixteenth century as a rhetorical device,¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Claudia Goldstein, *Pieter Bruegel and the Culture of the Early Modern Dinner Party* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 138 and Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter*, 117.

¹⁴⁷ Honig, *The Idea of Human Nature*, 186 and 17.

¹⁴⁸ Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenberg, "Introduction: Humour and History," in *A Cultural History of Humour* ed. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenberg (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 5.

¹⁴⁹ Agnes Heller, *Immortal Comedy: The Comic Phenomenon in Art, Literature and Life* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), 132.

¹⁵⁰ Honig, *The Idea of Human Nature*, 173.

with humour “exposing wrong doing in a creative way,”¹⁵¹ via a “blend of moral vision with a spirit of merriment”.¹⁵² Erasmus’s satire, *The Praise of Folly* (published 1509), according to Peter Berger, inverted the world to reveal universal truths,¹⁵³ and Christa Grössinger records how Brant’s satirical work, *Ship of Fools*, presented morality to “achieve self-improvement” for the reader,¹⁵⁴ an argument echoed in Christine Gillis’s introduction to a translation of the text.¹⁵⁵

Inherent in this understanding of satire and the superiority theory is the requirement that humour be tied to determined morality. The superior minded person, acting from a privileged position, aims to use humour to improve the weak. Morality, by its nature, has a definable hierarchy of right and wrong based on an external scale of what constitutes the objectively superior, and the superiority theory of humour requires these ontologically determined elements – right and wrong, superior and inferior – to provide both its justification and meaning.

This theory informs Bruegel scholarship and scholars, despite otherwise wide variation in interpretation, appear to accept an essential connection between morality and humour. Whether education or entertainment dominates is debated, but the acceptance of an ontological and objective concept of morality as present, is accepted primarily as a reflection of the perceived cultural expectations of Bruegel’s day. General humour

¹⁵¹ Sullivan, *The Creative Process*, 6-7.

¹⁵² Walter M. Gordon, *Humanist Play and Belief: The Seriocomic Art of Desiderius Erasmus* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1990), 101.

¹⁵³ Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, 21.

¹⁵⁴ Christa Grössinger, *Humour and Folly*, 56.

¹⁵⁵ Christine Gillis, “Introduction” in Sebastian Brant, *Ship of Fools*, trans. William Gillis (London: Folio Society, 1971), xviii.

scholarship, however, sees the superiority theory as “reductionist”¹⁵⁶ for it does not take sufficient consideration of incongruity,¹⁵⁷ and contradiction.¹⁵⁸ Within humour scholarship there is common consent that seeing humour solely through a superiority theory lens is both unnecessary and insufficient.¹⁵⁹ I shall explore the consequences of this for interpreting Bruegel below, but having set out the position held by others, I now return to my own, beginning with the conundrum of presenting any definition of humour. To define something, traditionally, is to be definitive about meaning. Definitive, or denotative, meaning, what Umberto Eco calls “dictionary” definition, aims to grasp an item through a “finite number of semantic primitives”.¹⁶⁰ It captures essential qualities of an object through hierarchical categorisation of constitutive structures, starting from broad indicators and moving ever more specialised. For instance, from the broad ‘animal’ to the general ‘mammal’ to the specific ‘cow’. This hierarchical taxonomy allows definition without ambiguity and articulates facts such as all cows are animals while not all animals are cows.¹⁶¹

In the interpretations of *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* considered in the previous chapter, humour is presented denotatively. That the print is or is not funny appears an objectively definable concept capturable via disengaged hierarchical concepts both externally verifiable and

¹⁵⁶ Berger, *Blind Men and Elephants*, 48.

¹⁵⁷ Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, 23.

¹⁵⁸ Heller, *Immortal Comedy*, 98.

¹⁵⁹ John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humour* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 9.

¹⁶⁰ Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 49.

¹⁶¹ Eco, *Semiotics*, 54.

determined within Cartesian rationality “without passion”.¹⁶² The trouble, as seen, is that it appears both objectively funny and not funny, a contradiction with objectivity’s requirement that a thing cannot simultaneously be itself and its opposite. Either one set of scholars is wrong or there is an issue with the denotative means of defining humour.

Eco proposes a possible solution through contrasting the dictionary definition with that of the encyclopedia. Whereas a dictionary’s denotative approach aims to provide unconditional truth, the encyclopedia, for Eco, recognises the necessity of conditionality.¹⁶³ Things, as they are used, exist in non-hierarchical networks (Eco uses the metaphors of labyrinth, rhizome and net¹⁶⁴), and most statements about things, including cows as per the example above, reflect this: there is a cow in the field next to my house; that cow is brown as is that dog; cows feature in the Golden Age of Dutch art; the cow jumped over the moon. All of these can be accurate, but all are conditional. They are connotative within what Paul Ricœur calls an “open state”.¹⁶⁵

In an open state, non-hierarchical conditionality is emphasised over incontestable reductionist statements. The focus is not on unconditioned (or objective) truth, but on “what has been said about the truth or what has been believed to be true as well as what has been believed to be false or imaginary or legendary”.¹⁶⁶ Meaning is determined through

¹⁶² Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1989), 151.

¹⁶³ Eco, *Semiotics*, 82.

¹⁶⁴ Eco, *Semiotics*, 80-83.

¹⁶⁵ Paul Ricœur, *The Conflict of Interpretation* (London: Continuum, 2004), 64.

¹⁶⁶ Eco, *Semiotics*, 83.

frameworks where ideas are held in localised and transitory understandings whose primary aim is to pursue an end beyond knowledge for its own sake.¹⁶⁷

Neither Eco nor Ricœur explores how this encyclopedic or open state would relate to understanding visual humour, but, to me, it provides a way of seeing that recognises connotative conditions and shifts expectation from objectivity to effective contextual engagement. For me, visual humour, as it applies to art, is a phenomenon whereby a pleasurable perception of a produced creative image as simultaneously incongruous and benign resolves within a communicative process.

The rest of the chapter will unpack this statement but before that, a comment on humour terminology and spelling. Given its ubiquity, there is a plethora of terms associated with visual humour: amusing, comic, funny, witty, and many more. While recognising a spectrum of semantic variation between them, unless specifically needed for context, I shall use terms for humour interchangeably, with one exception. Comedy, when used in a literary or dramatic sense, does not necessarily mean humorous. Dante's *Divine Comedy*, for example, is rarely considered funny,¹⁶⁸ and when identifying a Shakespearian play as a comedy its propensity to make the audience laugh is not the foremost indicator.¹⁶⁹ Comedy, when I use the term, will be contextualised for clarity. On spelling, I use the British 'humour' throughout, but retain the American 'humor' as well as other American spellings in direct quotations.

¹⁶⁷ Eco, *Semiotics*, 84.

¹⁶⁸ Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously*, 120.

¹⁶⁹ Lee Jamieson, "How to Identify a Shakespeare Comedy". *ThoughtCo.* Aug 9 2019. Accessed May 15, 2022.

Visual humour, for me, begins with pleasure. Experiencing humour in a work of art is always, in the moment, a pleasurable experience. Take James Gillray's (1756-1815) *A Sphere, Projecting Against a Plane* (1792) (figure 2), which is described as a "prime example of exaggeration and contrast as sources of visual humour".¹⁷⁰ If a viewer sees the image and it elicits a smile or a laugh, that is pleasurable. As Tzachi Zamir notes, humour establishes, however fleetingly, a mood of "cheerfulness and a positive sense of life".¹⁷¹ Similarly, John Morreall states that humorous amusement "is by itself a positive state with no negative emotions".¹⁷² The pleasure may be dampened by expectation (for example, when viewed in a gallery with a perceived expectation of seriousness), or overridden by subjective intention (for example, viewing with critical detachment¹⁷³), but if a viewer experiences a visual image as humorous, then this experience invariably involves pleasure.

Everyone has an intuitive sense of what pleasure is and this sense, as a sincere personal judgement, is irrefutable.¹⁷⁴ However, beyond this inherent subjectivity, as Christopher Butler notes, for art "the extraordinary and enduring appeal of masterworks" suggests that pleasure also contains "something more generally significant than an essentially private sensation".¹⁷⁵ Pleasure, and humour, may be subjective, but, for Butler, it is possible to

¹⁷⁰ Constance C. McPhee and Nadine M. Orenstein, *Infinite Jest: Caricature and Satire from Leonardo to Levine* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), 46.

¹⁷¹ Tzachi Zamir, "Why Does Comedy Give Pleasure?" *British Journal of Aesthetics* 54 no. 2 (2014): 176.

¹⁷² Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 74.

¹⁷³ Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves, *The Naked Jape: Uncovering the Hidden World of Jokes* (London, Penguin, 2007), 129.

¹⁷⁴ Christopher Butler, *Pleasure and the Arts: Enjoying Literature, Painting and Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), xv.

¹⁷⁵ Butler, *Pleasure and the Arts*, xvi.

articulate how a work of art is consistently, if not definitively, recognised as at least potentially humorous.

Recognition is critical, as humour's pleasure is linked to perception. Perception separates humour from other sources of laughter (chemical inducement or tickling, for example) and grounds it in the phenomenal not the noumenal.¹⁷⁶ Perception requires visual humour to have a source, something specific to be funny, but perceivable here is not the same as denotatively knowable. Take René Magritte's (1898-1967) *The Treachery of Images* (figure 3). There is a perceivable visual source, an image of a pipe, but through the problematised co-location of resemblance and representation it becomes disjunctured by the text to a point where its state of pipe not-pipe means that it cannot be considered definitively knowable.¹⁷⁷

While the perceivable visual source may not be knowable, this does not restrict evaluation. As a viewer perceives the qualities of the work there is simultaneous evaluation of meaning, including possible humour. Humour is not an objective visual quality such as colour or texture, and it does not exist in a noumenal state independent of perception. Rather, it emerges through a process of evaluation, a process which John Morreall describes as "observing it or thinking about".¹⁷⁸ This cognitive evaluation is procedural and, by necessity, requires communicative interaction. As Jerry Palmer states, there is:

¹⁷⁶ Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 316

¹⁷⁷ Michel Foucault, *This is not a Pipe*, trans Allan Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 34.

¹⁷⁸ John Morreall, "Humor and Emotion," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 215.

sterility in seeking funniness either entirely in the mind of the laugher or entirely in the phenomenon which evokes mirth: it is in the interaction between the two that answers must be sought.¹⁷⁹

Understanding this in relation to visual humour can be illustrated by considering two contrasting images. When Chris Riddell drew his 2021 political cartoon *The Walrus and the Carpenter, Boris and Rishi style* (figure 4) it is reasonable to assume he intended it to be humorous, albeit equally we can assume not everyone found it funny. However, consider alongside this Cecilia Giménez's 2012 restoration of Elias Garcia Martinez's fresco *Ecce Homo* (figure 5, original on left, restoration on right). There is no evidence to suggest that Martinez intended his original image to be humorous nor Giménez's restoration, yet despite this the work has been evaluated by some, but not all, as comic, for example, via the BBC's programme *Mock the Week*.¹⁸⁰ Visual humour is a dynamic process in which intention, production, product, and evaluation all interact one with another.

So what, in general terms, is commonly evaluated as humorous? The dominant current theory in humour studies is that people are most likely to find a visual image funny when it contains aspects that are simultaneously incongruous and benign. Arthur Koestler describes incongruity as a creative property of bisociation, a "logic of laughter".¹⁸¹ Bisociation occurs when a perceiver considers a single source with "two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference."¹⁸² When a single image can be evaluated as

¹⁷⁹ Jerry Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously*, 93.

¹⁸⁰ "Mock the Week Series 11 Episode 7" *YouTube*, Sept 9 2012, accessed Feb 27 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_QvwzZw6tk.

¹⁸¹ Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Hutchinson, 1964), 32.

¹⁸² Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, 33.

containing two or more possibilities at odds with each other this facilitates humour. Take the visual pun “cupcake” (figure 6). Humour occurs in the process of resolving the bisociated logic, not in the sense that one aspect of the bifurcation is judged correct and the other false – figure 6 remains simultaneously a cup and a cake – but rather where there is recognition that both possibilities remain simultaneously and ongoingly plausible in an “impossible point of joint articulation”.¹⁸³

Most visual humour is more complex, the Riddell cartoon, for example, contains allusion, analogy, caricature, comparison, disappointment, eccentricity, exaggeration, grotesquery, imitation, irony, parody, ridicule, satire and stereotype – all identified as techniques of humour by Arthur Asa Berger.¹⁸⁴ However, the humour of each relies on bisociated incongruity. Take allusion, the picture alludes a similarity between leading politicians and characters from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and humour is perceived in relation to the effectiveness of this incongruity. Incongruity, however, is not sufficient.¹⁸⁵ Evaluations of incongruity can be neutral (puzzlement) or negative (fear). Humour is the perception of incongruity where there is no desire for change (as there is with puzzlement) and where there is no unpleasant loss of control (as there is with fear).¹⁸⁶ Admittedly, demarcation is not rigid – riddles are humorous puzzles and relief from fear is often

¹⁸³ Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 83.

¹⁸⁴ Berger, *Blind Men and Elephants*, 54-55.

¹⁸⁵ Eagleton, *Humour*, 72.

¹⁸⁶ John Morreall, “Funny Ha-Ha, Funny Strange, and Other Reactions to Incongruity,” in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (New York: SUNY, 1987), 188.

accompanied by amusement, but for perception of humour, it is incongruity that is “okay, acceptable or safe”, what Peter McGraw calls benign violation.¹⁸⁷

The process of the perception of incongruity is what Jerry Palmer calls a “logic of absurdity”.¹⁸⁸ Mostly a form of abductive logic, “the demands of common-sense rationality are suspended,”¹⁸⁹ there is a “change in expectation to the production of meaning,”¹⁹⁰ and meaning is conditioned by context and association rather than reference to objectifiable truth. It is this understanding of humour that will differentiate me and other Bruegel scholars. In the superiority theory of humour’s meaning is connected to truth, based on an objective or denotative approach. But in my understanding of visual humour, objective truth does not operate. The complex creative nature of art with its emergent poesis combines with an open state connotative approach to understanding humour which itself operates with a logic of absurdity and culminates in interpretation which calls “into question the principle of causality, bivalent logics, univocal relationships, and the principle of contradiction.”¹⁹¹ Here objectivity, with its deductive (and even reductive) parameters and categorical imperatives – its reliance on the noumenal – is suspended in favour of a complex play of phenomena with no requirements beyond the intrinsic context and syntagmatic restrictions of perception.

¹⁸⁷ Peter McGraw and Joel Warner, *The Humour Code* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 10.

¹⁸⁸ Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously*, 96.

¹⁸⁹ Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously*, 97.

¹⁹⁰ Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously*, 108.

¹⁹¹ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 87.

One way to see this is to consider how visual humour is not determined against external objectives but is “legitimated by the context”.¹⁹² Take, for example, Jacque-Louis David’s (1748-1825) 1793 work *La Mort de Marat*. As it hangs in the Musée Oldmasters Museum in Brussels it has an expected context of seriousness – viewers are expected to contemplate the work either as representation of a martyred hero of the people or as a personification of terror. What would not be expected, within this context, is laughter. However, transpose that same visual image to a bar of soap (figure 7) and the shift of perception to emphasise the bathing aspect of the work, as well as to juxtapose it against its previous seriousness, is likely to resolve in humour.

Andrew Stott argues “how or why things come to be funny is determined by culture”.¹⁹³ Humour, for Stott, Critchley and others is determined by those local conditions that establish both ground and fertility.¹⁹⁴ In semiotic terms, humour is creative “invention” that sits atop the “conventions” of both society and itself.¹⁹⁵ As cultures shift so does the perception of what can be evaluated as funny. From this understanding, Gino Boccasile’s wartime propaganda poster (figure 8) may have been funny in the culture of 1940s Fascist Italy but is not today. For me, cultural influences on humour cannot be contested and humour often relies on cultural markers. For example, much of the humour in both Gillray and Riddell (figures 2 and 4) relies on the cultural knowledge of recognising the British Prime Minister. However, I think humour extends beyond the cultural. If humour is

¹⁹² Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 30.

¹⁹³ Stott, *Comedy*, 8.

¹⁹⁴ Critchley, *On Humour*, 67.

¹⁹⁵ Marianna Keisalo, “A semiotics of comedy: Moving figures and shifting grounds of Chapayeka ritual clown performance,” *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6, no. 2 (2016): 102.

wholly determined by culture, then it should be possible to study it as a cultural phenomenon, albeit a complex one, and make culturally definitive, even if not objectively denotative, statements. Culture would determine permitted humour,¹⁹⁶ with the subjective tastes of individuals a consequence of identifiable reception and enhancement factors.¹⁹⁷ If this model is correct, contradictory conclusions, such as those seen in chapter one in relation to the works of Bruegel, are the consequence of an insufficiency of data as understood within Human's "quantitative approach to complexity".¹⁹⁸ However, I would argue that this is not the case, not least as the evidence does not support it. If it is the case that additional data acts to circumscribe interpretation, asymptotically leading it to denotative truth, then why do the current interpretations of Bruegel's work show as much contradiction as their predecessors? As cultural and historic data increase through scholarship there is no evidence of confluence towards a common position; Müller and Gibson remain as divided as Miedema and Alpers before them. To me, cultural determination is insufficient.

For me, the reason for this is that while humour may manifest in culture, its nature is phenomenological. Georg Hegel (1770-1831) first identifies this nature in his concept of Comic Spirit. Comic Spirit is "nothing other than the world;"¹⁹⁹ it is pure phenomena, existing wholly and solely in the here and now. Martin Heidegger, admittedly not talking about humour, extends the concept in his *Dasein*, being in the world. Humour here is not

¹⁹⁶ Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously*, 12.

¹⁹⁷ Dan O'Shannon, *What Are You Laughing At?: A Comprehensive Guide to the Comedic Event* (London: Continuum, 2012), 240.

¹⁹⁸ Human, "Complexity," 424.

¹⁹⁹ Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 13.

understood as a factual object that can be separated and held as independent and determinable but is the phenomenal manifestation of active engagement and commitment.²⁰⁰ Humour exists only in process and insists upon itself. Its presence is prompted by culture, but culture is no more humour than poems are love. To me it is not possible to say that any image is or is not funny, only that it contains the phenomenological potential to be perceived as such.

As noted above, visual humour requires something to be perceived and this, as this relates to works of art, is the work as a cultural object. However, meaning, in my approach, combines the work's creative and complex open state inherent in its cultural (and historic) nature with the phenomenological nature of humour, including the role of the viewer, in an epistemological process through which contextual meaning can be sought. Visual humour's meaning, its epistemology, does not follow a denotative norm and there is no expectation of external ontology.

In denotative evaluations, including with superiority theory, meaning relies on an externalised ontological object to provide reference, such as manifested in morality with its objective sense of Truth.²⁰¹ What is real is defined via external reference, the everyday often regarded as an imperfect manifestation.²⁰² We can see that in Bruegel's day this imperfection was understood as humanity as sinful and fallen, but more generally these ontologies are externalised ideals to which reality falls short: 'true love', 'ideal beauty', 'real

²⁰⁰ Shaun May, *A Philosophy of Comedy on Stage and Screen: You Have to Be There* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen, 2016), 14.

²⁰¹ Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 24.

²⁰² Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 25.

science' and – at its most denotative – 'the truth'. The definite article 'the' here takes on an adjectival expectation of uniqueness against which subjective manifestations can be judged and from which meaning can be determined. However, in my understanding of visual humour, there is no such adjectival expectation.

For me visual humour has no epistemological concept of 'the truth' or 'the real', or its binary opposite, 'the false' or 'the fake'. Humour's hermeneutic is neither truth statement nor lie. This is because humour is a bisociation of a singularity, a "duality of one", a "play with inner ambiguity".²⁰³ I refer again to René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (figure 3) where humour neither reveals nor conceals truth but bisociates the logic of "C'est" ("This") and creates a duality of one. "This" is both a pipe and not a pipe. "This" is an absurdist duality, not communicating a real objective truth but engaging viewers in a process, one that can resolve as both meaningful and amusing.

Humour is "ontologically unmoored"²⁰⁴ and does not rely on an external epistemology. Visual humour is "(re)presented to consciousness" with meaning located within the "individual consciousness in the certainty of itself",²⁰⁵ and resembles Michel de Montaigne's (1533-1592) idea on truth and individuality. Montaigne, a near contemporary to Bruegel about whom more will be considered in chapter four, states in his essay "On presumption", "all men gaze ahead at what is confronting them" but "I turn my gaze inwards",²⁰⁶ and,

²⁰³ Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 122.

²⁰⁴ Christopher P. Heuer, *Into the White: The Renaissance Art and the End of the Image* (New York: Zone Books, 2019), 16.

²⁰⁵ Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 27.

²⁰⁶ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (London, Penguin, 1993), 747.

I turn round and round in myself. I owe chiefly to myself the capacity – such as it is in me – for sifting the truth and my freeman’s humour for not enslaving my beliefs.²⁰⁷

Montaigne separates truth and individuality (note that Montaigne’s use of the term humour here is more in the sense of character than amusement). Truth is ontologically external, but this stands separate from the internal capacity of the “freeman’s humour”. For Montaigne subjectivity, separate from ontological certainty determines self-meaning. Charles Taylor argues that Montaigne’s aspiration

is always to loosen the hold of such general categories of “normal” operation and gradually prise our self-understanding free of the monumental weight of the universal interpretations, so that the shape of our originality can come to view.²⁰⁸

The sense of self-meaning located in this individuality shares its phenomenological nature with humour.

This is not a rejection of culture and history. In the next two chapters I shall continue to rely on both to locate and contextualise Bruegel’s work. It is, however, an argument that to understand meaning in relation to humour, interpretation steps beyond culture and history (even with recognition of the complexity of both) and considers the ahistorical and phenomenological nature of humour.

²⁰⁷ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, 747.

²⁰⁸ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 182.

However, before embarking on that, a logical consequence to my theory of humour needs explicit recognition. In the interpretations of humour in *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* from chapter one, my central criticism was that each interpretation presented a definitive position or at least one in which the definitive was accepted as possible. However, above I have shown humour operates with a lack of external ontological reference, and with no externalisable scale there is no means to determine and judge meaning definitively. Visual humour is grounded in its own “concrete universal”,²⁰⁹ with no access to external perfection and consequently no means to judge against an external “quality of necessity”,²¹⁰ those determinable manifestations of perfection that provide a means for comparative judgement. Thus, for me, there can never be a definitive statement on whether something is or is not visually funny – only that it contains the phenomenological possibility.

The lack of definitive meaning is not, however, the abandonment of meaning itself in visual humour, only that the understanding of what meaning constitutes must change. I have suggested that traditional interpretative meaning is associated with particularity and truth – the latter the ontologically external concept used to position the former. For phenomenological humour, as no such externality exists, I contend that meaning must now be sought in the connotative experience of the communication between works and viewers. Far from abandoning cultural context this approach recognises that cultural and historical context is the critical externality with which the free spirit of humour sifts to identify

²⁰⁹ Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 27.

²¹⁰ Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 22.

possible meaning, meaning that is located, connotative, and, to use Cilliers's term again, modest. As Edward Snow, whose methodology seems close to my own, states:

No sustained investigation of a painting can hope to reach summarizable conclusions. The painting's "aboutness" can be made manifest, but only as the tacit dimension of an inquiry that keeps producing what Blake calls "particular knowledge".²¹¹

Meaning in visual humour is not definitive, but this does not mean it is random or a product of an affective fallacy. Even with its creative spirit, it retains Eco's necessity of conditionality.²¹² Meaning is determined in context and as that context changes, as seen with *La Mort de Marat* above, so too can meaning. Moreover, while for many works it is possible that more than one meaning exists, that is not the focus of my study. My focus is visual humour, and I would argue that its nature means that multiple meaning must be the case. The bisociated logic that creates the incongruity necessary for humour requires at least two contradictory perspectives and in complex humour, such as that found in the work of Bruegel, the opportunity for multiplicity only increases. In the next chapter I turn to seeing how this theory operates in practice.

²¹¹ Edward Snow, *Inside Bruegel: The Play of Images in Children's Games* (New York: North Point Press, 1997), 6.

²¹² Eco, *Semiotics*, 82.

Chapter 3

Experiencing humour in the works of Pieter Bruegel the Elder

In the mid-1560s, already established as a leading artist, Pieter Bruegel produced a drawing of a painter (figure 9). While not considered a self-portrait,²¹³ an artist is seen, brush in hand, facing to the left. Behind him, peering through a pair of spectacles, another man watches attentively. The expression on the artist's face is not clear but suggests either he is engaged in his work and is unaware of the man behind him, or as seems more likely, he is both aware of and opposed to the company (his eyes face up but whether they are studying the work or rolling in irritation is not clear). The expression on the second man's face, tellingly, suggests he is unaware of either possibility, shortsighted,²¹⁴ he seems wholly caught up in admiring both work and creator.

Compare this to a similar work by the English artist Thomas Rowlandson (1757-1827). His print *Bookseller and Author* (1784) (figure 10) also presents a creative mind, albeit author rather than artist, and patron, although Rowlandson has introduced a third figure to the party, a bookseller. Rowlandson's patron resembles Bruegel's, including the spectacles coupling an ironic inability to see what is happening around him. The creator, however, is quite different. In Bruegel the artist seems assured, if irritated, in control and only suffering the patron as the source of income he represents – notice the hand reaching down

²¹³ Michiel C. Plomp, "The Painter and the Connoisseur, mid-1560s," in *Pieter Bruegel the Elder Drawings and Prints*, ed. Nadine M. Orenstein (New York: Metropolitan Museum of New York, 2001), 228

²¹⁴ Silver, *Pieter Bruegel*, 394.

into the purse. Such personal strength appears absent in Rowlandson. His author's hunched body and pleading expression mixed with the haughty look of dismissal on the bookseller's face leaves little doubt over who is in charge.

Rowlandson's work is satirical and was produced with the explicit purpose of being sold as a humorous print.²¹⁵ It is intuitive to see similar humour in Bruegel's work, even though there is no contemporary evidence to support this – there is evidence of copying,²¹⁶ but nothing to suggest Bruegel's drawing was engraved in his lifetime to be sold as a drollery such as *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*. Despite this, the resemblance between the two images is striking, particularly as it is highly unlikely that Rowlandson would have seen the Bruegel drawing. Also striking is how Bruegel's work supports humorous interpretations.²¹⁷

In the last chapter I articulated the connotative phenomenon of visual humour. This, taken to its natural conclusion, suggests that even traditionally serious works of art can be experienced as comic in context. Take, for example, Hippolyte Paul Delaroche's portrait, *Napoleon at Fontainebleau, 31 March 1814* (figure 11). This seemingly melodramatic work captures the moment when Napoleon's enemies capture Paris. The colours are sombre, the space oppressive, the expression on the once great man's face seething in the perception, if not acceptance, of his impending destruction. It is a contemplation of loss.²¹⁸ However,

²¹⁵ A.P. Oppé, *English Drawings in the Collection of His Majesty the King at Windsor Castle*, (London, Phaidon, 1950) 9.

²¹⁶ Plomp, "The Painter and the Connoisseur," 228.

²¹⁷ Müller and Schauerte, *Pieter Bruegel*, 153. See also Plomp, "The Painter and the Connoisseur," 228.

²¹⁸ Frédéric Lacaille, "Napoleon I at Fontainebleau, 31 March, 1814," *Napoleon.org*, Jan 2016, accessed Oct 8, 2023, <https://www.napoleon.org/en/history-of-the-two-empires/paintings/napoleon-i-at-fontainebleau-31-march-1814/>.

add the caption “When a girl texts you “Who dis?” and you sit there and think about who you really are” and in the shift in context humour emerges.

Adding a caption to high art is a popular internet practice called the art meme.²¹⁹ To meme, one sets an incongruous caption against an image, bisociating the logic and creating a condition for humour. There is no connection between the meme and any reasonable assumption about the artist’s intention or the original reception of the work, and in many cases the caption intentionally uses hypermodern language or ideas (such as the reference to texting in this example) to enhance incongruity and increase the possibility for humour.

Even without a meme, Delaroche’s painting’s provenance also offers humorous possibility. The painting was purchased by Queen Victoria in 1846, the year of its production, as a gift for her husband Albert.²²⁰ This can be interpreted ironically as Europe’s most powerful monarch chose a portrait of what was the greatest threat to her country captured at his point of failure.²²¹ Add a further humorous twist that the artist is French and was portraying his own country’s decline as a gift for the old enemy.

What differentiates the Delaroche from the Bruegel and the Rowlandson is that the potential for humour is facilitated primarily by external factors – historically disjunctive captioning and ironic provenance. While this does not demean the humour, it seems to me self-obvious, as well as in line with Butler’s argument from chapter two that there is

²¹⁹ “13 Hilarious Classical Art Memes You Need To See,” *Awesome Inventions*, no date, accessed Nov 19 2022, <https://www.awesomeinventions.com/classical-art-memes/>.

²²⁰ “Napoleon at Fontainebleau, 31 March 1814,” *Royal Collection Trust*, no date, accessed November 19 2022, <https://www.rct.uk/collection/405838/napoleon-at-fontainebleau-31-march-1814>.

²²¹ Lacaille, “Napoleon I at Fontainebleau, 31 March, 1814”.

more in the reception of art than the subjective view of individuals,²²² to recognise that some works are more likely to cause amusement for viewers via internal content. That is, there are perceivable characteristics in works of art that can be evaluated as more likely to support visual humour. In this chapter I shall identify some of these and argue that they can be experienced in Bruegel's works.

As a reminder, I define visual humour as a phenomenon whereby a pleasurable perception of a produced creative image as simultaneously incongruous and benign resolves within a communicative process. If Bruegel's works can enable this experience, they should manifest the contents of this definition, a definition that begins with the experience of pleasure. That people find pleasure in the works of Bruegel can be initially inferred from their popularity. Joseph Koerner refers to Bruegel as the "supremely popular artist, his compositions the stuff of calendars and jigsaw puzzles",²²³ and notes that to experience Bruegel in Vienna, where the largest collection is held, is to be "jostled by a crowd".²²⁴ Popularity is not equivalent to pleasure, but I would argue that there are sufficient common associations that the one is habitually co-located with the other.

This pleasure stems, in part, from the adroitness of the artist. Bruegel is regularly identified as among the finest, "the greatest Netherlandish master of the 16th century".²²⁵ For Bruegel a key aspect of this is the detail with which he infuses his works. His works such as *Battle of Carnival and Lent* (1559) and *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559) – both to be considered in

²²² Butler, *Pleasure and the Arts*, xvi.

²²³ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 2.

²²⁴ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 3.

²²⁵ Elke Oberthaler, et al., "Introduction to the Exhibition," in *Bruegel The Master*, ed. Sabine Haag et al (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 13.

detail below – are referred to as *Wimmelbild*, busy pictures.²²⁶ As Edward Snow notes, referring to *Children's Games* (1560) – another *Wimmelbild* painting – “whatever route you take through this painting, the incredible details are always there”,²²⁷ and while not an academic proof, it is telling (and hopefully appropriate in a thesis about humour) that the website *Bored Panda*, in an article entitled “A Silly But Accurate Guide On How To Recognize Famous Painters By Their Art”,²²⁸ states “If The Paintings Have Tons Of Little People In Them But Otherwise Seem Normal, It's Bruegel” and contrasts this with “If The Paintings Have Lots Of Little People In Them But Also Have A Ton Of Crazy Bulls#%ot, It's Bosch”.

I shall consider normalcy below, but for now I am focusing on Bruegel's use of details in how, by example, he used these in his 1563 *Tower of Babel* (figure 12) to enable a humorous experience for viewers. *Tower of Babel* teems with detail including the architectural marvel of the tower itself, the true to life representation of the building process, the bucolic landscape from which the tower erupts, as well as scores of figures representing all walks of life from peasant to king. The Biblical origin story of the painting is well known.²²⁹ It is one of hubris,²³⁰ humanity seeking to position itself literally as high as God.²³¹ To viewers well acquainted with the story, as Bruegel's patrons presumably were, it is a simple task to

²²⁶ Sabine Pénot and Elke Oberthaler, “The Battle Between Carnival and Lent,” in *Bruegel The Master*, ed. Sabine Haag (London: Thames and Hudson, 2018), 124.

²²⁷ Snow, *Inside Bruegel*, 6.

²²⁸ Jonas Grinevičius and Mindaugas Balčiauskas, “A Silly But Accurate Guide On How To Recognize Famous Painters By Their Art,” *Bored Panda*, no date, accessed Dec 5, 2022, https://www.boredpanda.com/famous-paintings-artists-how-to-recognize/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organic.

²²⁹ Genesis 11:1-9.

²³⁰ Müller and Schauerte, *Pieter Bruegel*, 75.

²³¹ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 298.

identify a key figure, King Nimrod (figure 13).²³² He is the commissioner of the tower, grandson of Noah and, according to the Book of Genesis, the first “mighty man”.²³³ Knowing this about him, viewers can appreciate how Bruegel skilfully details his egoism. The metonyms of power (crown and sceptre) are present, and the work also highlights Nimrod’s power through his manly beard, the only figure in the work to have one, as well as his size and overall bearing. The figure next to him, by comparison, to me, appears obsequious, his face pointing down and his hands, while gesticulating, held close into his body as though nervous in the presence of power. Before Nimrod four workers are on their knees, hands grasped in supplication,²³⁴ the man in blue furthest from him even seems to trip such is his perceived imperative for deference. Nimrod is dominant, acting, as Koerner argues, in “defiance of God”,²³⁵ with Silver suggesting that this is a presentation of ill-used power reflecting the rise of urban wealth.²³⁶ He cites various details from the painting to support this while Müller and Schauerte similarly focus on details to argue for the “impending catastrophe” stemming from “a mistaken understanding of God.”²³⁷

In each of these considerations of the painting’s details the interpretation is serious, albeit a satirical aspect is acknowledged.²³⁸ However, there is a detail that I think enables the experience of humour, to which (perhaps tellingly) I have found no reference in the literature. The four supplicants form a straight line emanating from Nimrod. Above them

²³² Sabine Pénot and Elke Oberthaler, “The Tower of Babel” in *Bruegel The Master*, ed. Sabine Haag (London: Thames and Hudson, 2018), 176.

²³³ Genesis 10:8, King James Bible.

²³⁴ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 300.

²³⁵ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 300.

²³⁶ Silver, *Pieter Bruegel*, 259.

²³⁷ Müller and Schauerte, *Pieter Bruegel*, 76.

²³⁸ Müller and Schauerte, *Pieter Bruegel*, 76.

a pile of stone lies ready for delivery to the tower – a figure carrying one such stone can be seen just to the right heading down the hill. The pile of stones forms an incomplete triangle, a shape corresponding to the unfinished triangle of the titular tower. The tower emerges from the land that forms its base and rises to incompleteness, an apex implied visually and narratively as heaven, i.e. God. The four workers, as they kneel before Nimrod, form the base of another triangle. Connecting to the pile of stones, the fruits of their labour, form a consonant shape with the tower which invites visual comparison.

The tower's triangular apex is God. The second triangle, when followed to its pinnacle, finds the tiny detail of a figure, a peasant in the field. Bruegel leaves no doubt as to what the man is doing. Bruegel captures him mid-bowel-movement and, in doing so, parallels and contrasts the two triangles. The large triangle stems from the land, through the tower, and pinnacles in God, the majesty of the Almighty where all hope of salvation resides. The smaller one stems from deference to the fleeting work of an earthly king destined, as the viewer knows, to fail, and pinnacles in dung.

Such detailing could offer a viewer opportunity for serious theological contemplation on humanity's relationship to itself, its world and the divine. However, it can also amuse by the incongruous pairing. The viewer can experience humour via the defecating man on a simple level – via the “ribald delight” of poo²³⁹ – but also more sardonically as just described. To experience this the viewer must be aware of the narrative of the Tower of Babel, but I would argue that this detail provides specifically visual humour more so than the satire

²³⁹ Jeff Persels and Russell Ganim, “Scatology: The Last Taboo,” in *Fecal Matters in Early Modern Literature and Art*, ed. Jeff Persels and Russell Ganim (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), xv.

identified by Müller and Schauerte et al. It is Bruegel's particular artistic skill that he can seamlessly combine adroitness of drafting detail with crassness of image (via the man and his bowel movement) in this Biblical work, creating visual as well as conceptual incongruity within this balanced picture. Viewers seeing how he subtly disrupts in a way that both runs counter to and reinforces the expectations of the picture and its commentary on hubris, while not necessarily seeing the whole work as comic, can experience humorous elements in the details.

Many of Bruegel's works offer viewers this opportunity to experience humour in the juxtaposition between the balance and harmony of the works and internal disruptions in the details. In *The Tower of Babel* it is via individual details within an overall singular scene. In *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* (figure 14) Bruegel adds an additional layer to compare – the excess of Carnival and the self-denial of Lent – and this can be seen as further opportunity for a viewer to experience disruption and humour. The image, another *Wimmelbild*, brims with action to a point of cacophony yet presents seeming harmonious completeness.²⁴⁰ It is, as Silver calls it, a big image with small figures.²⁴¹ When first viewing *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* it could be a typical town square full of residents, what Honig calls an “ethnographer's view”.²⁴² Only with a closer look does potentially humorous incongruity emerge from the details and never in a way to disturb the balance or to give an impression of contrivance.

²⁴⁰ Roberts-Jones, *Bruegel*, 118.

²⁴¹ Silver, *Pieter Bruegel*, 209.

²⁴² Honig, *The Idea of Human Nature*, 146.

The town square is bordered by buildings to each side – to the left a tavern for boisterous Carnival, and to the right a church for sombre Lent.²⁴³ Two foreground figures embody the titular combat while behind each are details of gauche festivity via Carnival players and performing cripples and adroit temperance via Lenten processions and alms giving.²⁴⁴ The visual harmony of the work can lull a viewer into a pleasurable state of equilibrium seeing the world and its inhabitants combining to unity,²⁴⁵ but Bruegel, while skilfully maintaining the visual whole, repeatedly disrupts and enables the experience of humour.

As with *Tower of Babel*, these disruptions can be subtle. For example, in the centre of the work stands the well, from which a young woman is drawing water (figure 15). She is to the right of the picture suggesting she should be part of the Lenten aspect and demonstrate an attitude of moral obedience, but such is not the case. As Van Dongen and Timmermans note, she is vainly admiring her own image – Bruegel depicts her reflection in the bucket with which, like Narcissus, she is enthralled.²⁴⁶ Such vanity of youth could raise a smile in many a viewer. Similarly, just to her right, a woman, arms outstretched, begs for herself and the child seen riding in the basket on her back. The image again, on first view, is in keeping with the expectations of Lenten charity.²⁴⁷ However, Bruegel disrupts again for the woman's hat is adorned with badges, which can be associated with pilgrimage (for example the cross keys to signify Rome),²⁴⁸ a detail to suggest that the woman can be seen

²⁴³ Pénot and Oberthaler, "The Battle Between Carnival and Lent," 125.

²⁴⁴ Silver, *Pieter Bruegel*, 209.

²⁴⁵ Silver, *Pieter Bruegel*, 212.

²⁴⁶ Alexandra van Dongen and Lucinda Timmermans, "Well Bucket," in *Conversation Pieces: The World of Pieter Bruegel* ed. Abdelkader Benali et al. (Vienna: Hannibal, 2018), 114.

²⁴⁷ Pénot and Oberthaler, "The Battle Between Carnival and Lent," 127.

²⁴⁸ Alexandra van Dongen and Lucinda Timmermans, "Pilgrim Badge," in *Conversation Pieces: The World of Pieter Bruegel* ed. Abdelkader Benali et al. (Vienna: Hannibal, 2018), 101.

as a false pilgrim,²⁴⁹ an undeserving beggar.²⁵⁰ This “malingering”²⁵¹ personality is further suggested by the detail of the child on her back who, on closer examination, strongly resembles a monkey, a symbol of deceit.²⁵² In her little corner of the picture is captured two sides of humanity’s nature – the desire to support those in need tempered by fear of exploitation by the wicked underserving.

As with *The Tower of Babel* it is possible for a viewer to contemplate this detail, as with the vain girl, as symbolic and, by extension, to reflect on serious moral matters. However, it is equally possible to experience them as visual representations of humanity’s foibles and for that experience to bring humour. The two women are examples where Bruegel’s works present an “overriding order”²⁵³ incongruously disrupted in the detail. The work, while visually harmonious, presents challenges of expectation for the viewer which bisociates logic (beggar not-beggar) and provide opportunities for humour. What the work does not do, for me, is insist that only one interpretation is right.

I have in both examples so far acknowledged that the visual humour can be interpreted as something requiring serious contemplation, moral or otherwise. This seriousness should not, however, stop the possibility of humour. Even within the superiority theory, humour is acceptable so long as it then transitions to serious consideration, a moral message merging from an initially humorous situation. However, as detailed in chapter one, this approach

²⁴⁹ Grössinger, *Humour and Folly*, 139.

²⁵⁰ Tom Nichols, *The Art of Poverty: Irony and Ideal in Sixteenth-Century Beggar Imagery* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2007), 6.

²⁵¹ Pénot and Oberthaler, “The Battle Between Carnival and Lent,” 126.

²⁵² Roberts-Jones, *Bruegel*, 118.

²⁵³ Roberts-Jones, *Bruegel*, 118.

provides contradiction via its insistence on definitiveness, and as explored in chapter two, there is an alternate understanding of humour that can avoid this. This, to me, can be experienced in Bruegel's works.

A viewer of Bruegel's work can experience non-moralising humour in part through his depiction of humanity because Bruegel's figures are people, constituent creative beings beyond symbol. Compare Bruegel's begging women just discussed with the main figure in Lucas van Leyden's 1520 print *The Beggars (Eulenspiegel)* (figure 16). Like the woman, Van Leyden's man is also a false pilgrim,²⁵⁴ and the work is full of iconic references. Christa Grössinger details many from the false pilgrim badges to the bagpipes (a symbol of both "lechery and gluttony" – notice his double chin, a sign of overeating) to the overabundance of children (with the assumption that many are kidnapped to provoke sympathy).²⁵⁵ Even his posture, curled in on itself, speaks to aberration. His body seemingly cannot stand the soul it is cursed to contain and curls upon itself to hide its shame. He is representation of a "trenchantly negative" false beggar.²⁵⁶

Bruegel's beggar shares common visual attributes with Van Leyden's. Both wear false pilgrim's badges, and both carry their children (a contested term in both images) in baskets on their backs – symbol of their itinerant nature as outsiders to the town.²⁵⁷ Yet as I look beyond these common visual reference points it is the differences between the two that strike me more than the similarities. It is not a denigration of Van Leyden's work, the skill

²⁵⁴ Larry Silver, *Peasant Scenes and Landscapes: The Rise of Pictorial Genres in the Antwerp Art Market* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 62.

²⁵⁵ Grössinger, *Humour and Folly*, 139.

²⁵⁶ Nichols, *The Art of Poverty*, 32.

²⁵⁷ Nichols, *The Art of Poverty*, 17.

is beyond reproach, but, for me, his man is primarily symbol – a representation of an externally determined moral position. Conversely, Bruegel’s woman, as with so many of Bruegel’s figures, has, to my eye, the creative complexity of humanity. As seen from Grössinger, there is an abundance of sign in the Van Leyden image and he is defined, as Silver notes, through a “roster of negative characteristics”, the “negative antitype” of the viewer.²⁵⁸ Bruegel is subtler and presents more rounded figures. While the beggar woman can be seen as a symbolic depiction of vice, she can also be more. While vice may be present within her, for me she has existential identity beyond her sins. Bruegel’s creativity, his over and above representation, enables a life lived to emerge. As Sabine Pénot notes, “like no other artist, Bruegel understands how to bring the viewer right into his compositions”.²⁵⁹ In part this is through the humanity of his figures, they seem more real those like Van Leyden’s and bring out a comfortable recognition in the viewer. We feel that we could be there in the picture, and while the beggar woman may not have lived well, through the skill of Bruegel’s depiction she, and all around her, have being beyond type. We can see the woman beyond the iconography as though she is not the end of a reference but the start of a conversation. What is more, this conversation can contain humour.

The purely symbolic can be funny and Van Leyden’s man can be laughed at as a representation of vice, but this is superiority humour, the viewer laughs at him. This may also available for experiencing in *The Battle of Carnival and Lent* but, for me, a further

²⁵⁸ Silver, *Peasant Scenes*, 62.

²⁵⁹ Sabine Pénot, “An original look at Pieter Bruegel’s *Battle of Carnival and Lent* (1559) from the perspective of the household objects depicted in it,” *Conversation Pieces: The World of Bruegel*, Abdelkader Benali, et al. eds. (Brussels: Hannibal, 2019), 8.

opportunity for phenomenological humour is enabled by Bruegel through the additionality of his figures. Bruegel's woman contains existential qualities of humanity I do not see in Van Leyden's beggar. These qualities can connect the viewers, give them pleasure, and enhance the possibility of laughter as the viewer is invited to join the woman in her story, to ask, for example, where did that monkey come from? Monkeys may be a sign of deceit, just as they are signs of folly,²⁶⁰ but the monkey's iconography does not explain why a begging woman has one in the middle of a town square in the Brabant. Bruegel plays with the sign, juxtaposing a common understanding of symbol with an uncommon reality of a woman with a monkey on her back (itself a pun, albeit one not known to Bruegel, but which can add to the humour for a modern English-speaking viewer such as myself). It is incongruity via which a viewer may experience visual humour either from itself or as part of a wider engagement in the complex image.

In *The Battle of Carnival and Lent* Bruegel's characters have human depth beyond iconography and present an opportunity for comedy beyond moralisation. This is enhanced by context. By context here I am not meaning the cultural context of 1550s Flanders, but specifically the context of how Bruegel's worlds are presented. The town square in which the battle takes place looks like a place where I, and I suspect many viewers would like to join in. The tavern is full of life and curiosity and enthusiasm exude from the work. Even in the context of a battle there is an enthusiasm of spirit in the Bruegel's art, it lacks animosity, and carries a positive disposition. This disposition is infectious on the

²⁶⁰ H. W. Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1952), 199.

viewer and through the pleasure it brings encourages the experience of humour in the viewer.

While some, such as Müller and Schauerte, see pessimism in his works,²⁶¹ I join Edward Snow in seeing Bruegel's world as positive if not outright playful.²⁶² *The Battle between Carnival and Lent* is good spirited and viewers imagining themselves into it could expect to enjoy its "playful liveliness".²⁶³ Even where there may be deceit, such as with the begging woman, this is not reflected in anger – those giving the alms appear to do so in a positive frame of charity and those receiving appear genuinely appreciative. There is nothing maudlin, pessimistic, or morose in the work – it seems to say that the world may not be perfect, but neither is it a cause for despair.

Such optimistically bucolic tones were, I would argue, identifiable in Bruegel's works from the outset. In his early 1550s landscapes he would include staffage – figures to provide viewing focal points. In Bruegel these figures are hardly ever alone, unless depicting a specific religious figure such as Mary Magdalene or St Jerome, and generally appear to be enjoying themselves as they go about daily business. There is a fraternity of staffage in Bruegel which invites association with the work – a sense of connection and belonging. This creates greater communicative connection which, in turn, enhances the opportunity to experience humour.

²⁶¹ Müller and Schauerte, *Pieter Bruegel*, 174.

²⁶² Snow, *Inside Bruegel*, 70.

²⁶³ Roberts-Jones, *Bruegel*, 119.

In my view, this positive demeanour is used in Bruegel's works for a subtler experience of humour than is seen in many other humorous works of his time. Consider the quintessential piece of comic writing of the day, François Rabelais's (c.1471-1553) *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, originally published c.1532-c.1564. The author begins:

Hail, O most valiant and illustrious drinkers! Your health, my precious pox-ridden comrades! To you alone, I dedicate my writings.²⁶⁴

Said writings then include such passages as:

smiling, he unfastened his noble codpiece and lugging out his great pleasure-rod, he so fiercely bepissed them that he drowned two hundred and sixty thousand four hundred and eighteen, exclusive of women and children.²⁶⁵

Comic certainly but in overstatement. Bruegel's visuals are less lurid, less over the top. Rather than yelling through his drawings, he provides comic conversation points, incongruous plays of images and scenarios suggesting witty disruptions of the norm. Without Rabelaisian hectoring Bruegel's work invites the viewer into humorous dialogue. To summarise what has been presented thus far, I argue that Bruegel's works show a disposition to enable humour through viewer engagement by depicting incongruous disruption within overall harmonious scenes which include the attributes of non-symbolic human representation (or perhaps super-symbolic as Bruegel goes beyond mere symbol), a contextually positive disposition, and a subtle but astute invitation to comic engagement.

²⁶⁴ François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. Jacques Le Clercq (New York: The Heritage Press, 1942), 3.

²⁶⁵ François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, 49.

These attributes seamlessly integrate into an overall balance in which the disruptions, once perceived, give these works greater propensity for resolution in the experience of humour. I am not arguing that the works are definitively funny, but that there is a higher likelihood of humour than in works of other artists.

This propensity is well exemplified in two of Bruegel's prints – *The Kermis of St. George* (c. 1559) and *Skating before the St. George's Gate, Antwerp* (c. 1558) and both also offer the opportunity for comparative analysis to further elucidate my position. In *The Kermis of St. George* (figure 17), Bruegel depicts a village festival in which people engage in distractions from the everyday. There is drinking and competitive sport, exhibition through a mock battle between St. George and his Dragon, dancing, and theatrical performance. As Honig notes, everyone appears wholly engaged in the spirit of the day and enjoying the festivities.²⁶⁶ While it is possible to perceive elements of strife – see the figures to the left above the rounded hut who appear to be having a fight (figure 18) – these are a small minority and are not necessarily negative, the fighting could be a performance. Overall, to me, it is an optimistic view of village life, “benign and enjoyable instead of threatening”.²⁶⁷ Even the two figures surveying the scene from the bottom right (figure 19) – figures who, to judge by their dress, represent urban visitors who might otherwise be expected to show disdain for the peasants and their common ways – appear conversely to

²⁶⁶ Honig, *The Idea of Human Nature*, 182.

²⁶⁷ Honig, *The Idea of Human Nature*, 180.

be enjoying the scene not as something to be laughed at but to be appreciated as a “provider of pleasure”.²⁶⁸

In *The Kermis of St. George* this opportunity is enhanced by the subject matter. As viewers see people enjoying a day out it can remind them of their own fun times at similar events. The tumblers, the dancers, the drinking, all could spark an association which, when combined with the skill of Bruegel’s depiction, can move a viewer to smile through “delight in the visual survey of festive tradition”.²⁶⁹ In *The Kermis of St. George*, the viewer joins the fun, metaphorically raising a glass and riding a hobby horse. Like the men at the wall, viewers can lean in to see and laugh at the spectacle (figure 20). This, to me, represents the enabling of the experience of visual humour as can be found in works by Bruegel through phenomenological humour. It also can be contrasted with the superiority humour found in Sebald Beham’s *Peasants Kermis* (c. 1580-1600) (figure 21).

Here, ostensibly, is a similar scene of a peasant festival. Yet where Bruegel depicts people and enjoyment to which a viewer is invited to join, Beham’s seems a dark place with a warning to stay away. While there are some similar activities, drinking sport, dancing, etc., Beham’s peasants are not existential, except as threat. They fight, drink to the point of vomiting, cloy obsequiously with an honoured guest, engage in lewd behaviour – a couple to the left (figure 22) are at an early stage of fondling while she points suggestively to a cock and hen clearly much further along the lascivious path – and succumb to a swindling

²⁶⁸ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 270.

²⁶⁹ Stephanie Porras, *Pieter Bruegel’s Historical Imagination* (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 103.

mountebank - note how as he pokes a man's mouth his assistant helps herself to the contents of his purse (figure 22). Even the building reflects pessimistic dysfunction. Unlike in Bruegel's work where buildings are well constructed and steadfast, in Beham the main building is cracked, dilapidated and inferior to the grand urban buildings in the background. As with Van Leyden, this comparison is not to belittle Beham or his skill. What I am suggesting is that, unlike Bruegel, he is symbolising vice, and that, as such, his figures lack humanity. The peasants are closer to how Miedema sees them and if we are to laugh it seems Beham wants us to laugh at them from a superior position before pondering on their non-subtle moral meaning. Unlike *The Kermis of Saint George* this print neither encourages enjoyment nor the experience of humour available via a simple act of living. The consideration of both Van Leyden and Beham shows the contrast between these works and those of Bruegel, and, to me, provides further argument as to why a superiority theory of humour cannot be the only interpretative tool for humour and that the phenomenological one I am using is a necessary addition. Another work will continue to make this point.

In *Skating before the St. George's Gate, Antwerp* (figure 23) Bruegel depicts people enjoying a frozen river. They cavort on skates with varying degrees of proficiency, take part in sports and generally seem to enjoy one of the few opportunities for fun offered by a harsh northern European winter. It is, again, a world presented positively and even the peril of the man who has fallen through the ice to the left is presented benignly and with the possibility of humour – he has already been grabbed by a fellow skater and appears well on his way to rescue. As with his other works, the image has balance and harmony, the

strong divider of the road leading from St. George's Gate framing both vertical and horizontal movement. The figures appear in lines, an arrangement which encourages viewers to comparisons suggesting a character study within what Roberts-Jones calls the print's "human gallery".²⁷⁰

It is easy to see some within the gallery as comic. One, centre bottom, struggles on skates and can be seen as a clown (figure 24). He delights via his physicality, verging on harm but never reaching it, thus remaining benignly comic. Others, in keeping with what has been presented thus far, are subtler in their potential humour, such as the man being pulled by the cloak (figure 24). His stance suggests he lacks skating prowess – the rigidity of his legs speak to a lack of confidence and fear of falling – and this can contrast humorously with his otherwise professional demeanour.²⁷¹ He appears a person of high standing, notice the expensive sleeves of this clothing, caught comically in a situation where standing of any kind is challenged. Ice, as Christopher Heuer notes, is the "social equalizer",²⁷² and is used here by Briegel for comic effect. Similarly, it is not clear what the trio, centre bottom, is up to (figure 24). The man in a large hat flanked by two women(?) wearing large beaked brims is reminiscent of the blue cloak in *Netherlandish Proverbs* so is not clear if these are three people enjoying a walk on the ice (the centre figure, at least, is clearly not wearing skates) or is there something more of skulduggery or assignation afoot.

²⁷⁰ Roberts-Jones, *Bruegel*, 255.

²⁷¹ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 337.

²⁷² Heuer, *Into the White*, 156.

Unlike in Van Leyden or Beham where figures appear presented primarily for moral instruction, those who want Bruegel's work to be determined against moral codes will, as Van Grieken suggests, struggle to connect this scene to any "underlying morality".²⁷³ Koerner, for one, still tries and argues that the skating teaches Hobbesian nihilism on the brutishness of life, "fortunes change, pleasure is fleeting, and life ends suddenly".²⁷⁴ While not denying this, I am more persuaded by Van Grieken's description of the print as an "entertaining image of winter games".²⁷⁵ Those on the ice and those observing appear, to me, to be enjoying themselves and invite the viewer to laugh with them. The print does not insist but enables viewers to experience the stories of the figures – comic or tragic as disposition wants – but, for me, more inclined to comic given the playfulness of the ethos. Regardless of specifics, my key point is that the work invites connection where the balance of suggestion and silence frees the viewer to play with narratives rich with comic opportunity. In doing so *Skating before the St. George's Gate, Antwerp* can be compared, as *The Artist and the Connoisseur* at the outset of this chapter, with a known humorous work by Thomas Rowlandson, *Skaters on the Serpentine* (1784) (figure 25). Like Bruegel, Rowlandson, with his "cheeky disposition",²⁷⁶ and known humorous intention, presents a character study which invites viewers to join the figures and seek comic conclusions.

²⁷³ Joris Van Grieken, "Ice Skating Before the Gate of St George, Antwerp," in *Bruegel: The Complete Graphic Works*, ed. Maarten Bassens and Joris van Grieken (London: Thames & Hudson, 2019), 200.

²⁷⁴ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 337.

²⁷⁵ Van Grieken, "Ice Skating," 200.

²⁷⁶ Alice Loxton, *Uproar: Satire, Scandal & Printmakers in Georgian London* (London: Icon, 2023), 50.

The work, framed by trees, has two groups of figures appearing on a diagonal axis culminating in a splayed figure (to the left of figure 26), arms and legs akimbo, reminiscent of the clown figure in *Skating before the St. George's Gate, Antwerp*. Other visual connections between the two works includes a man of means (centre, figure 26), but not skill, being pulled by another, various fallen figures, and others both preparing to join the fun or simply leaning on a wall and enjoying the spectacle (right, figure 26). Beyond points of visual commonality, other potential humorous stories also appear in both, such as those about courting.

In Bruegel's work there is the man and two women already mentioned. There is also a young couple, the man lovingly holding the woman from behind but otherwise seemingly very innocent. In Rowlandson two young men to the right of the image (figure 26), in red coat and beige coat respectively, can personify youthful ardour. The young man in red, his stick held aloft, and leg swung out behind, shows off his sporting confidence, while the young man in beige, young romance made flesh, eyes the object of their affection, the lady in the passing carriage. Both pursue youthful enthusiasm but, in doing so succeed only in tripping the old man in the blue coat. Rowlandson depicts further sexual innuendo to the left of the picture (figure 27) – a man tipping a lady into the waiting loins of another man while a third looks back in laughter.

Rowlandson, known for his amorous and indeed pornographic works,²⁷⁷ is not as innocent as Bruegel yet there is still commonality between them. Both invite the viewer to join in

²⁷⁷ Gert Schiff, *The Amorous Illustrations of Thomas Rowlandson* (New York: Cythera Press, 1969).

the fun, to see the men and women in the works as ones with whom the viewer can communicate and with whom they can share a laugh. The images are playful, joyful, full of the enthusiasm of life. While poking fun at the incongruities of society's foibles they do not admonish, and by avoiding the over moralising as seen in Beham, provide opportunity for the experience of phenomenological visual humour. Viewers can existentially recognise themselves in the figures in that we are all foolish at times and can take the mild ribbing in the works not as approbation but common laughter.

The perception, evaluation, and resolution of benign incongruity is how I argue a viewer experiences the phenomenon of visual humour. So far in this chapter I have explored how Bruegel enables this through his work via its detail, harmony, positivity, and character. For each of these I have given examples of how he can disrupt expectation and introduce visual incongruity. In doing so the superiority approach to humour can be used, but I would argue that it misses much of the richness available via the phenomenological approach of bisociated incongruity. In the final section of this chapter I want to focus on a different but key element of incongruity that is difficult to reconcile via the superiority theory of humour, but which is found in both *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* and his 1559 work *Netherlandish Proverbs* (figure 28), the incongruity between pictures and words.

I have seen no scholar expressly deny the possibility of humour in this work. Silver argues it is a folly and a comical absurdity,²⁷⁸ and Gibson celebrates it as “the universal extension of human folly”.²⁷⁹ Even Müller and Schauerte, who so often fail to see humour in Bruegel's

²⁷⁸ Silver, *Pieter Bruegel*, 220.

²⁷⁹ Gibson, *Figures of Speech*, 151.

work, see this as employing an ironic idiom.²⁸⁰ Koerner sees the world of *Netherlandish Proverbs* as an absurd unreality, a world turned upside down.²⁸¹ While humour is accepted it is done via folly and even if the moral aspect is not in the forefront, all, with the exception of Meadow to be noted below, still operate within the superiority theory of humour. Even Gibson, the most open to humour, notes now “to laugh at human folly also betrays a certain superiority on the part of the spectator”;²⁸² for all its humour, Bruegel’s work must contain moral lessons as the meaning of the work. However, I think there I more.

Like *The Battle of Carnival and Lent*, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, another *Wimmelbild*, begins by presenting a harmoniously balanced view of everyday village life.²⁸³ Framed by a large building to one side and a barn to the other, action runs on the diagonal from lower left to top right with the devil in one corner and death (via its iconic representation of the gallows) in the other. In between, Bruegel details the work with “teeming figures”,²⁸⁴ who go about their daily tasks. However, while remaining visually balanced, Bruegel nonetheless presents one of the most incongruous collections to appear in art, an “antic vision of a universal madhouse”.²⁸⁵ Each figure or small group is involved in its own activity, what Gibson calls their “eccentric but unproductive pastimes”.²⁸⁶ For example, a man throws roses before swine and another coins in the river (figure 29).

²⁸⁰ Müller and Schauerte, *Pieter Bruegel*, 35.

²⁸¹ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 38.

²⁸² Gibson, *Figures of Speech*, 155.

²⁸³ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 38.

²⁸⁴ Müller and Schauerte, *Pieter Bruegel*, 30.

²⁸⁵ Gibson, *The Art of Laughter*, 44.

²⁸⁶ Gibsson, *Figures of Speech*, 150.

The work is a representation of proverbs and much has been written on the details.²⁸⁷ My focus is on the potential for the experience of humour. First, there is incongruity between action and expectation. In all the examples given above the person's action disrupts normal social expectation. Roses are not cast before swine nor coins in a river as such action is wasteful. Doing the unexpected creates incongruity which, in turn, can generate humour as, for example, the viewer laughs at fools wasting time and money. The reason they act as they do, by the logic of the picture, is because they, with all their fellow participants, embody proverbial sayings. Bruegel presents proverbial metaphors pictorially, "verbal punning in visual format",²⁸⁸ and, in doing so, highlights their absurdity.²⁸⁹ In doing so, for me, the superiority theory struggles to describe the humour.

Gibson describes how Bruegel's contemporaries might view the work – first as a game – spot the disruptions and guess which proverbs they represent – and second as a source of humour seeing the comic in the incongruence.²⁹⁰ In doing so Gibson deploys superiority humour in which the viewer laughs at the folly of those represented and then turns the reflection upon themselves to consider their own foolishness.²⁹¹ It is interesting to note, however, that unlike Gibson and the scholarship on *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, with this work one scholar, Mark Meadow, rejects moralising,²⁹² and considers that meaning in the work must be sought connotatively in that it has "no single, stable, unifying message of its

²⁸⁷ See, for example, Meadow, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, Gibson, *Figures of Speech*, 149-156, and Honig, *The Idea of Human Nature*, 24-35.

²⁸⁸ Meadow, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, 32.

²⁸⁹ Honig, *The Idea of Human Nature*, 25.

²⁹⁰ Gibson, *Figures of Speech*, 153-4.

²⁹¹ Gibson, *Figures of Speech*, 156.

²⁹² Meadow, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, 153.

own”,²⁹³ albeit he does not note the humour in the work and goes on to provide definitive interpretations of elements, for example he described the figure defecating on the gallows (figure 30) definitively as “a criminal demonstrating his contempt for the punishment he has managed to escape”,²⁹⁴ an interpretation that does not align with, for example, Silver, who describes the image as a representation of foolishly defying danger.²⁹⁵ I do not think these incongruences of expectation require a superior approach and also that there is additional humour, not of a superiority nature, inherent in the process of visualisation of the proverbial.

The role of proverbs in Bruegel’s day was discussed in chapter one, with Erasmus collecting them into *The Adages*, first published 1500, where he states that a proverb “says one thing and means another” and, in doing so, “wraps up in obscurity an obvious truth”.²⁹⁶ With my focus on humour, I note that Erasmus accepts a place for humour in proverbs, but his understanding of how this works, to me, reflects a superiority theory position on humour. Humour, he argues, provides a means to grab attention without causing offence, owing to its ability both to lower defences and to cause delight.²⁹⁷ The role, however, is decorative. Laughter, through proverbial metaphor, can charm the listener but only to one end, the rational persuasion of truth,²⁹⁸ what Erasmus calls proverbs’ “right use”.²⁹⁹ Thus, for

²⁹³ Meadow, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, 154.

²⁹⁴ Meadow, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, 44.

²⁹⁵ Silver, *Pieter Bruegel*, 219.

²⁹⁶ William Barker, *The Adages of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 4.

²⁹⁷ Barker, *The Adages*, 16.

²⁹⁸ Barker, *The Adages*, 17.

²⁹⁹ Barker, *The Adages*, 9-10.

Erasmus, proper humour must have ontologically determined purpose and be presented from a superior position of privilege.

As noted above, Meadow does not consider that humour is Bruegel's intention for this work, rather it is to imitate nature as a rhetorical conversation piece.³⁰⁰ However, I think Meadow would agree that Bruegel fulfilled Erasmus's requirement for metaphorical duality by painting (rather than saying) one thing to mean another. However, by shifting medium from aural to visual Bruegel makes stark a disruption between the actual words and their metaphorical "right use", and highlights a dichotomy between form and meaning,³⁰¹ to "complicate our understanding"³⁰² in a way that I would argue does not align with the superiority approach. Meadow may not highlight humour, but Honig calls the work "profoundly comic",³⁰³ as seeing the proverb visually represented, for example, a man literally banging his head on a wall, humorously makes stark the metaphor's distance from reality. The disruptive space between form and meaning acts as an incongruous juxtaposition from which humour can be experienced but which requires no expectation of a superior position.

Bruegel does this on several levels. In some cases it is simple representation. Casting roses before swine, for example, is a literal representation of waste. Humour can be experienced in the disruption of social norms and here whether this is stated or depicted is not that significant. However, compare this with, for example, the figure, farthest right, with arms

³⁰⁰ Meadow, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, 153.

³⁰¹ Gibson, *Figures of Speech*, 20.

³⁰² Meadow, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, 13.

³⁰³ Honig, *The Idea of Human Nature*, 25.

stretched across a table (figure 31). His left-hand touches bread while his right falls short, proverbially not stretching from one loaf to the next, unable to live within his means.³⁰⁴ Here Bruegel's visualisation adds significantly to the disruptive incongruity as he takes a temporal idea and depicts it in physical space. By recasting the metaphor in distance not time he doubles the disruption, highlighting absurdity as the viewer must accept that the proverb contains wisdom – its socially accepted purpose – while also accepting as reasonable that the man is incapable of picking up one loaf and then leaning for the second. This is collusion in the visual presentation of nonsense as representation of typical human wisdom,³⁰⁵ and its disruptive properties a double source of visual humour. However, in playing on visualisation the image does not require a privileged position of origin. While on one level, the one used by Gibson, the viewer could laugh at the folly of the peasant unable to make it from one meal to the next, the appreciation of humour stemming from the disruption of physical and temporal meaning in visual form carries no figure at which to laugh. It is laughter at incongruous absurdity with no moral message.

The non-moralising incongruity of *Netherlandish Proverbs* is further compounded through volume and diversity. Gibson notes how expansion was one of two key differences between Bruegel's visualisation of proverbs compared to others of his day.³⁰⁶ While still balanced – harmonious universalisation being the other key difference³⁰⁷ – the overall picture is so crammed with details that this becomes an additional source of humour. With

³⁰⁴ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 38.

³⁰⁵ Honig, *The Idea of Human Nature*, 24.

³⁰⁶ Gibson, *Figures of Speech*, 150.

³⁰⁷ Gibson, *Figures of Speech*, 151.

Netherlandish Proverbs, the existence of so much (scholars still cannot agree on how many proverbs are shown³⁰⁸) creates additional humour both the pleasure of the hunt as well as in the absurdity of overabundance. Again, there is nothing inherently moral in depicting one or hundreds of proverbs. The potential humour in the overabundance does not stem from a privileged superior position but from a visually phenomenological one. It is not the objective noumenal aspects of each figure that solely provides the humour but the creativity, the poiesis, that Bruegel brought in placing them all together in the perfect balance of *Netherlandish Proverbs* – harmonious anarchy that bisociates expectation while maintaining “two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference.”³⁰⁹

In this chapter I have set out some key perceivable characteristics within the works of Pieter Bruegel that can resolve in the experience of humour, ones that do not require, and indeed go beyond, a superiority theory of humour. Nothing in my arguments requires that humour be experienced as aimed at someone or that it carries an expectation of social betterment and/or a connection to morality. It does not exclude these – and I am not arguing that humour derived this way cannot be funny – only that there is more that can be considered in relation the works of Bruegel.

I would draw attention to how nothing I present is done so as definitive. I have presented characteristics that suggest but not determine. For me, Bruegel’s work effectively encourages the experience of humour through its characteristics, but this is not the same as their being definitively funny. Humour, as discussed in chapter two, is

³⁰⁸ Honig, *The Idea of Human Nature*, 25.

³⁰⁹ Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, 33.

phenomenological, understood connotatively, culturally located but not limited, humour's phenomenological and bisociated nature disrupting any attempt to capture it as 'particular knowledge'.

In the final chapter I shift focus from humour for its own sake, finding pleasure in the works of Bruegel through their disruptive incongruities, to understanding how this humour can connect to meaning. With the superiority theory seen in the writings of most Bruegel scholarship on *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, meaning is associated with morality, an approach which requires setting humour aside, and which leads to the contradictions seen in chapter one. In the final chapter, by considering the experience of viewing *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* with my understanding of humour, I shall identify an alternate source for meaning and humour that can emerge from the work.

Chapter 4

Interpreting *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*

A key position of this thesis has been that no definitive or singular meaning is necessary when it comes to experiencing humour in the works of Pieter Bruegel, particularly one that insists on a moralising message to justify the laughter. A requirement of the superiority theory of humour, it is my contention that the works do not have to be seen through this lens and that the expectation of definitive meaning is something that scholarship has imposed on Bruegel's work rather than it being an inherent characteristic. While I do not argue that other interpretations are wrong and accept that they can align with certain cultural expectations of Bruegel's day, I also think the humour in Bruegel's works pushes against this cultural expectation, an expectation that was already beginning to shift,³¹⁰ and that looking for humour through my alternate model provides insights into both the works and how they were viewed then and now.

I am encouraged to take this approach by Elizabeth Honig's advice from her review of Ethan Kavalier's book, not to "over historicise Bruegel's attitudes until they become nothing but part of their historical context," as to do so robs "Bruegel of strength by making his images speak only within a larger discursive pattern" ignoring that his strength lies in "his ability to find a voice that removes his work to some distance from its immediate context".³¹¹ As

³¹⁰ Anna Tummers, "The Art of Laughter: Humour in Dutch Paintings of the Golden Age," in *The Art of Laughter: Humour in Dutch Paintings of the Golden Age*, ed. Anna Tummers, Elmer Kolfin and Jasper Hilleger (Harlem: Frans Hal Museum, 2017), 13.

³¹¹ Elizabeth Alice Honig, "Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise. By Ethan Matt Kavalier," *The Burlington Magazine* 142, no. 1172 (Nov 2000): 705.

she further notes, albeit in relation to *Peasant Kermis*, but I think equally applicable to *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, Bruegel's approach “is so quirky and personal that contextualisation cannot explain it but merely serves to accentuate its peculiarity”, advising that “attention needs to be paid to internal consistencies within Bruegel's oeuvre”.³¹² I think that this is applicable to the experience of humour in his work, which, as seen in chapter two, carries its own phenomenological uncertainty. In this final chapter I shall show how looking at *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* can be a humorous experience with meaning not as a moral message but, as the experience of incongruity manifested in peculiarity and paradox.

In *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* (figure 1) a big fish lies beached on the shore, sliced by a small man with a big knife. It has eaten many smaller fish which spill free from its mouth and the wound. Beneath, a man and boy sit in the prow of a boat while a third man sits in the stern. Between them a single Latin word is inscribed, ECCE, behold. Arcing around both fish and boat, further phenomena complete the scene that is the 1557 print *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*. The image is aesthetically balanced while simultaneously incongruous with scale varying wildly and with fish appearing both natural and supernatural – for example one has legs and another wings.

Beneath the image two captions invite consideration of literal versus illustrative as discussed in the last chapter. In upper case serified Latin the larger reads, GRANDIBVS EXIGVI SVNT PISCES PISCIBVS ESCA., to big fish, little fish are food,³¹³ more commonly

³¹² Honig, “Parables,” 705.

³¹³ My thanks to Professors Jeanne Nuechterlein and Brian Cummings for this translation.

translated as “little fish are the food of big fish”.³¹⁴ In smaller lower case italicised Dutch is a second text, “Siet sone dit hebbe ick zeer langhe gheweten dat die groote vissen decleÿne eten”, consistently translated as: “Look son, I have long known that the big fish eat the small”.³¹⁵ Maarten Baasens suggests these texts were added after the drawing was complete and considers it “highly doubtful” that they offer much by way of insight.³¹⁶ Joseph Koerner, similarly dismissive, refers to the texts as “pedantic gloss”,³¹⁷ but as shall be seen I disagree.

The engraved print is based on a specifically made (presumably commissioned) and still extant pen and brush drawing completed by Bruegel in 1556.³¹⁸ Now in the Albertina Museum, Vienna, it demonstrates Bruegel’s understanding of translating drawing to print.³¹⁹ “Fine long even pen lines”³²⁰ combine with stipple, dashing and hatching to enable “effective transposition” from drawing to engraving.³²¹ Bruegel is thought to have taken a significant involvement in the production of his prints,³²² and such is Bruegel’s prowess that Baasens describes him as providing a drawing not to be interpreted by Pieter van der Heyden but to be “executed almost verbatim”.³²³

³¹⁴ Katrien Lichtert, “Big Fish Eat Little Fish,” 126. See also Ron Spronk, “Big Fish Eat Little Fish,” in *Bruegel The Master* ed. Sabine Haag et al (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 69.

³¹⁵ Lichtert, “Big Fish Eat Little Fish,” 126.

³¹⁶ Maarten Bassens, “Bruegel in all His States,” 39.

³¹⁷ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 82.

³¹⁸ Spronk, “Big Fish Eat Little Fish,” 70.

³¹⁹ Roberts-Jones, *Bruegel*, 75.

³²⁰ Nadine M. Orenstein, “Big Fish Eat Little Fish, 1557,” in *Pieter Bruegel the Elder Drawings and Prints*, ed. Nadine M. Orenstein (New York: Metropolitan Museum of New York, 2001), 141.

³²¹ Spronk, “Big Fish Eat Little Fish” 70 and Müller and Schauerte, *Pieter Bruegel*, 341.

³²² Nadine M. Orenstein, “Images to Print: Pieter Bruegel’s Engagement with Printmaking,” in *Pieter Bruegel the Elder Drawings and Prints*, ed. Nadine M. Orenstein (New York: Metropolitan Museum of New York, 2001), 42

³²³ Bassens, “Bruegel in All His States,” 36.

The picture itself is structured as a triangle culminating, as noted by Müller and Schauerte, in the man with a trident.³²⁴ What they do not identify is what constitutes the base, and I think there are at least two options. The first is the Big Fish itself, a central image around which the rest can enhance a theme of consumption – the Big Fish has overconsumed and is now attacked by the two men seemingly as consequence for gluttony. This theme of consumption can continue through the print and includes, for example, on the right, the fishing man and the fish reaching for the bait, on the left, fish being hung to dry, and, above, a flying fish creature, its mouth gaping, and its body mostly stomach. The triangle is foregrounded by the boat where the motif continues. Frances Connelly has suggested it does this by extending consumption to a related concept of regeneration. The third man in the boat replicates an act of consumption with his two fish while the father and son represent the regeneration of one generation to the next.³²⁵ Larry Silver supports a similar intergenerational reading.³²⁶

A second option for the triangle is to extend it to include both fish and boat in a larger central image where the boat does not reflect a leitmotif but is part of it, an extension to the observation of consumption. Joseph Koerner states that the big fish “eyes us uncannily, but just as dead fish do”.³²⁷ I would challenge this as both print and drawing have the gaze off centre, however, the eye highlights how observation can play a fundamental role in the work. The father’s pointing gesticulation, the inclusion of the word ECCE, as well as the

³²⁴ Müller and Schauerte, *Pieter Bruegel*, 341.

³²⁵ Frances S. Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 90.

³²⁶ Silver, *Bruegel*, 86.

³²⁷ Koerner, *Bosch and Bruegel*, 82.

Dutch caption which begins “Siet sone”, “Look son”, all reference the father as an observing subject. This, as I noted above, suggests the importance of the caption, it reinforces the act of observation and suggests an active engagement between work and viewer. The print calls the viewer not just to look at the replication of an image, but to engage with it in a search for meaning, the active approach Catherine Levesque identifies with works by Bruegel.³²⁸ By seeing the boat as well as fish as the loci of meaning it reinforces observation and active viewing. Such viewing, I suggest, will soon observe incongruences which, in turn, can give rise to amusement.

Before that, however, another aspect of structure. Along with the triangle, the other notable construction in *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* is its pairing. Key aspects of the print can be described in visual and/or conceptual pairs. Visually there are: big fish and little fish, land and water, man with knife and man with trident, father and son, etc. Conceptually, there is observing and observed, interior and exterior (the interior contents of the big fish being made exterior once again), natural and supernatural, ordinary and extraordinary and, as Müller and Schauerte highlight, tranquillity and absurdity.³²⁹

Pairings often invite interpretation via binary opposition, in line with structuralist principles, and this has been done with *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*. Kenneth Lindsay, for example, presents *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* in an opposition of inversion (a world turned

³²⁸ Catherine Levesque, “Truth in Painting – Comedic Resolution in Bruegel’s *Landscape with Magpie on the Gallows*,” in *Parody and Festivity in Early Modern Art*, ed. David R Smith (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 74.

³²⁹ Müller and Schauerte, *Pieter Bruegel*, 341.

upside down),³³⁰ and Tine Luk Meganck more recently argues the same.³³¹ I, however, would argue that the pairings are more effective in informing meaning as points of comparison as well as antipodes, i.e. there can be oppositional aspects, but interpretation should not be limited to an either/or dichotomy – areas of overlap may be as insightful as those of opposition. I would further argue that the pairings can also represent bisociation, creating the incongruity that enables the experience of humour. Take, for example, a key conceptual pairing in *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* – big and small. If this is seen solely in opposition then there should be consistency in presentation, but this is not the case. Big and small reverse roles across the scene. The Big Fish has eaten the little fish, but the Big Fish is now caught and the little fish escape via both mouth and wound. The wound has been made by a big knife, but it is wielded by a small man, note how his helmet is too big and falls over his head. The soldier figure can be seen as both heroic for attacking the leviathan and caricatured by the play of scale – he is both big and not big. He is this bisociated and this can be humorous as it replaces the “fixed and the certain with ambivalence and relativity”.³³² More generally, I would suggest an effective way to view pairs is as points of ambiguity. By not clearly defining the relationship, for example, between big and small, the print can disrupt expectation, and whatever else this may mean, it can, via benign incongruity, lead to an experience of humour. While such a view follows

³³⁰ Lindsay, “Mystery in Bruegel's Proverbs,”76.

³³¹ Meganck, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder Fall of the Rebel Angels*, 48.

³³² David R. Smith, “Social Laughter, Deep Laughter,” in *Parody and Festivity in Early Modern Art*, ed. David R Smith (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 4.

a theory of humour that was only articulated after Bruegel, such disruption, I would suggest, can be in keeping with the print's original expectations.

Big Fish Eat Little Fish, as noted in the introduction, was published as a comic drollery,³³³ functioning in what Nadine Orenstein calls its “foolish world”.³³⁴ Not only foolish – an absurd event as Müller and Schauerte describe it³³⁵ – but grotesque. Bruegel would not have used the term ‘grotesque’, but Frances Connelly traces the term’s history and describes how drolleries were grotesque images and were well established in Bruegel’s day.³³⁶ Grotesques’ heuristic features include “incongruity and uncertainty”,³³⁷ with elements remaining “unresolved”,³³⁸ as they “play” or “flux” within a “state of change, breaking open what we know and merging it with the unknown”.³³⁹ Importantly, these images can carry humorous intention, a point echoed by Umberto Eco, who notes how grotesques take on comic properties, particularly as satire,³⁴⁰ and Müller and Schauerte who record the growing popularity of humorous grotesques, including *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*.³⁴¹ As a grotesque, in *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* “[e]stablished realities are put into play, pulled into a liminal space that both calls them into question and throws them open to possibility”.³⁴²

³³³ Jan Van der Stock, “Draughtsman,” 11.

³³⁴ Orenstein, “Big Fish Eat Little Fish, 1557,” 142.

³³⁵ Müller and Schauerte, *Pieter Bruegel*, 419.

³³⁶ Connelly, *The Grotesque*, 35.

³³⁷ Connelly, *The Grotesque*, 3.

³³⁸ Connelly, *The Grotesque*, 4.

³³⁹ Connelly, *The Grotesque*, 5.

³⁴⁰ Umberto Eco, *On Ugliness*, trans. Alistair McEwen (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), 142.

³⁴¹ Müller and Schauerte, *Pieter Bruegel*, 341.

³⁴² Connelly, *The Grotesque*, 16.

Rather than being either/or, Bruegel's pairings play and, critically, bisociate without resolution.

Current scholarship of *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* does not embrace this lack of resolution, leading, as I suggested in chapter one, to contradictions. However, to me these fall away when the image is interpreted under the expectations of a drollery and the understanding of humour, as detailed in chapter two. By considering the work as a drollery, with the emphasis on the absurd, it fits within my understanding of visual humour. It also aligns with ideas contemporary to Bruegel but best articulated in the generation after him by Michel de Montaigne. Before turning foursquare to the interpretation it is helpful briefly to explore this further.

Montaigne, as previously referenced in chapter two, and the school of thought which he articulates, finds its antecedents as far back as Augustine of Hippo (354-430),³⁴³ considers human reasoning insufficient,³⁴⁴ and finds a drive for ontological certainty within universal immutable laws ineffective in relation to the determination of the idea of the self. "Universal judgements" Montaigne states, "say nothing".³⁴⁵ The self is not a set of external laws but an "ever-changing" set of patterns in "flux" in which "self-knowledge is the indispensable key".³⁴⁶ Such a view leads to two key insights applicable to the interpretation of meaning through humour in drolleries: the need for self-exploration where identity is established and not given,³⁴⁷ and the "impermanence and uncertainty" of human life

³⁴³ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 134.

³⁴⁴ Peter Burke, *Renaissance Thinkers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 305.

³⁴⁵ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, 1061.

³⁴⁶ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 178.

³⁴⁷ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 178.

requiring “an acceptance of limits”.³⁴⁸ In other words, Montaigne sees meaning as paradox, something essential to seek yet in the contradictory certainty that no definitive answer will be found. The definitiveness of universal models, a human desire, is a “chimaeric goal”,³⁴⁹ and the approach accepts and parallels the same uncertainty as found in the incongruity of humour.

Montaigne’s idea of meaning as paradox requires unpacking as others have recognised paradox in Bruegel’s work but not as I have just used the term. Larry Silver, for example, describes how Bruegel introduces doubt in “the very process of seeing and knowing”,³⁵⁰ and Jürgen Müller talks of how he enables ironic and contradictory ways of interpretation.³⁵¹ Joseph Koerner, when contrasting Bruegel to Bosch, comments that the former “enigmatically withholds confirmation of a decisive end”,³⁵² and states, “Bruegel likes to show that human life is contradiction”.³⁵³ However, for Koerner, Bruegel is using paradox to “neutralise radical differences in attitude”,³⁵⁴ it is paradox as a pragmatic tool used to deflect criticism via obscurity.³⁵⁵ For Silver and Müller, Bruegel’s use of paradox reflected his view, as they see it, that the world was broken, the paradox being between what the world is and what it should be. For them the paradox points to this ontological truth.

³⁴⁸ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 178.

³⁴⁹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 180.

³⁵⁰ Silver, *Pieter Bruegel*, 59.

³⁵¹ Jürgen Müller, “Interpretations of Everyman” in *Pieter Bruegel the Elder Drawings and Prints*, ed. Nadine M. Orenstein (New York: Metropolitan Museum of New York, 2001), 169-70.

³⁵² Korner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 57.

³⁵³ Korner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 271.

³⁵⁴ Korner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 325.

³⁵⁵ Korner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 327.

My understanding of paradox is different and is closest, in Brugel scholarship, to Manfred Sellink. When writing on *Elck* (Everyman) (c. 1558-60) he notes the “astounding diversity of opinion” in interpreting this work,³⁵⁶ and says the work has been left open with no conclusion, calling this “typically Bruegelian”.³⁵⁷ This is paradox as openness and acceptance of a lack of definitiveness, and is how I use the term. Like the grotesque, paradox can provide “many routes into multiple readings”,³⁵⁸ in which none are definitive, and many are potentially humorous. *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, for me, can use paradox in this sense, as a lack of definitiveness and a means to highlight meaning through humorous absurdity.

As viewers engage with *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* they explore its visual presentation, its triangle and pairings. The aim here, however, is not to solve the image using universal symbolism, but to take pleasure in the complexity of the presentation and the abundance of contradiction and to see how a multitude of options are available – options that do not need to resolve and can remain incongruous. To put it another way, the image can invite reflection on visual paradox as a means of humorously expressing the contradiction between denotative expectation and connotative reality.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁶ Manfred Sellink, “Everyman, ca. 1558” in *Pieter Bruegel the Elder Drawings and Prints*, ed. Nadine M. Orenstein (New York: Metropolitan Museum of New York, 2001), 168.

³⁵⁷ Manfred Sellink, “Everyman (Elyk)” in *Bruegel The Master* ed. Sabine Haag et al (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 97.

³⁵⁸ Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, *Grotesque* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 3.

³⁵⁹ Demure, Catherine, “The Paradox of the Miracle: Structure and Meaning in “The Apology for Raymond Sebond” (*Essais* 2.12)” in *Michel de Montaigne*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 135.

Big Fish Eat Little Fish, as Milne reminds us, appears initially “remarkably comprehensible, but then quickly complicated”.³⁶⁰ The title of the print and a first inspection of its content would normally lead a viewer, particularly a contemporary to Bruegel, to see *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* as an illustration of the proverb, the big fish eat the small – the powerful dominate the powerless. It is a proverb “well known and frequently used in Bruegel’s time”,³⁶¹ and is seen again in *Netherlandish Proverbs* (Figure 29). However, a comparison between how it is used here and there shows one way in which the print disrupts expectation. In the painting a stream runs through the village where a single big fish eats a single small one. Masterfully captured, but a simple and singular representation of the proverb. This, I would suggest, fulfils a reasonable expectation of representation, a proverb with a simple message visually represented simply. But in *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* Bruegel disrupts the singular message of the proverb by echoing the act of consumption at least a dozen times with some fish being both eaten and eating. Unitary representation is abandoned to visual complexity, with a consequent opportunity to sow doubts about meaning, but also creating the possibility of humour. The significance of the replication remains unclear – is it to enhance the single message of big eat small or to contradict it? There is no clear correct answer, and the viewer is left in paradox, an ambiguity of bisociated logic – the logic of humour.

Such contradiction and concomitant lack of definitive resolution continues across the image. The Big Fish has eaten the little and, by the proverbial wisdom, is meant to be

³⁶⁰ Milne, *Carnivals and Dreams*, 164.

³⁶¹ Lichtert, “Big Fish Eat Little Fish,” 126.

powerful, but it lies beached and dying on the shore. Bruegel appears to foreground absurdity, drawing attention, as Honig comments, that “the literal visualization of any metaphor is an essentially nonsensical move”.³⁶² This is further emphasised by its presence within an otherwise tranquil scene. The figures in the boat acknowledge the Big Fish through pointing etc., but the other figures in the image, those involved in their mundane fishing pursuits, remain seemingly unconcerned by its presence. In a picture that can be about observation, their lack of it is disruptive and creates another paradox and possible source of humour. Even the title suggests a simple meaning – the visual representation of a proverb – but this only adds to disruption as its simplicity is then neither affirmed nor denied by the print, adding to the co-location of resemblance and representation seen by Foucault in Magritte where the text is disjunctured and cannot be considered definitively knowable.³⁶³

This visual paradox, and concomitant potential humour, is further enabled through Bruegel’s natural drafting of the figures. Almost everything in *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* is drawn to look like something. Unlike other Bosch-informed works by Bruegel, objects are clearly identifiable, and while there are nods to Bosch such as the boat-like object on top of the island back right, the scene is comparatively normal. While, as seen above, a work such as *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* can defy interpretation through the obscurity of its content,³⁶⁴ in *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* most resemblance is clear and could expect to carry

³⁶² Honig, *The Idea of Human Nature*, 25.

³⁶³ Foucault, *This is not a Pipe*, 34.

³⁶⁴ Nadine Orenstein, “The Temptation of Saint Anthony, 1556,” 139; Maarten Bassens, “The Temptation of Saint Anthony,” 124.

an expectation of culmination into simple meaning, that is because the picture looks like something there is an expectation that it should also mean something. The visual paradox is that despite this natural resemblance there is no simple determination of representation. That it looks like something makes the possible humour from its lack of clear meaning even more effective.

While the image is naturally represented it is clearly disrupted by scale. By making the big fish excessively big and the man attacking it small, at least in comparison to his own garb and the knife he wields, Bruegel's image disrupts expectation incongruously as a "viewer changes orientation in the face of disjunctive size".³⁶⁵ Such change through incongruity is a common technique of humour, as Arthur Asa Berger notes.³⁶⁶ Naturalism's disruption can also take place with the touches of supernaturalism found in the work. There is incongruity as an ordinary landscape with a typical Flemish cityscape in the background is disrupted by the extraordinary such as, to the left, the fish with legs and the winged fish above. In both cases there appears no definitive reason why these have been included, but both carry comic potential. The fish with legs is an optical surprise, at first glance it seems like the figures around it, a person getting on the business of hanging fish. Only with more active looking does the supernatural nature become clear, and this disruption in logical expectation can cause humour. Similarly, the flying fish is incongruous with the birds in the sky and both this and its comic demeanour, all mouth and stomach, can add further humour to a print titularly about consumption. Despite their supernatural elements the

³⁶⁵ Heuer, *Into the White*, 41.

³⁶⁶ Berger, *Blind Men and Elephants*, 55.

figures are still presented naturally when compared to the more Boschian images found, for example in *The Temptation of St Anthony*. They are, as Koerner calls it, the “surrealism of everyday life”,³⁶⁷ and this can add further incongruity and humour.

Further incongruity can take place on the other side where on an island a second big fish lies beached. This could be Bruegel echoing the main image, as with the man in the boat pulling a small fish from a big one, but could also be further disruption to expectation, and potential humour, this time through allusion. On the island the Boschian boat like object sits atop a mountain and could be a possible allusion to Noah’s ark atop Mount Ararat.³⁶⁸ On the same island the big fish is surrounded by people. It could be that they are attacking the fish like the two men in the central scene. However, it could also be a further Biblical allusion, this time to Christ’s (the Ichthys) preaching to disciplines as told in the twenty-first chapter of the Gospel of John, an interpretation further suggested by the wake of the water behind the boat just landing on the island which could represent the miraculous catch of fish from the same Gospel chapter.³⁶⁹ Such Biblical allusions can comically disrupt not just from their apparent randomness within the overall image, but also via their extraordinary appearance within this ordinary world.

To summarise, *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* can give an initial impression of normalcy and univocal interpretation as representation of a proverb, but, in keeping with drolleries and their comic and parodic potential which challenges individual meaning, disrupts this. As

³⁶⁷ Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 83.

³⁶⁸ Genesis 8:4.

³⁶⁹ John 21:6.

such I would argue that the tendency towards univocal interpretation that dominates modern interpretation of this print is not incorrect per se but is at least incomplete. David Francis Taylor, writing on visual parody in the eighteenth century, comments on what he describes as a modern fallacy, drawn from an understanding of modern political cartoons, to expect historic parodic images to “yield their meaning directly and instantaneously”.³⁷⁰ Taylor may not argue for multiple meanings in Gillray’s prints, but he does think the viewer must engage and explore before any significant meaning emerges.³⁷¹ Having shown the possible means by which a viewer can experience humour in *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* I now further explore and engage to seek significant meanings, starting with the central character, the Big Fish.

The fish in *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, as Koerner notes, are “emphatically natural specimens”,³⁷² and the Big Fish is most readily identifiable as a cod by its jaw line, side fins, wattle-like appendage beneath the mouth, etc. (see for comparison figure 32). This is appropriate as cod fish are carnivorous, i.e. they eat smaller fish, and while a natural adult cod weighs approximately 11.5 kg, they can weigh more than 90 kg and be nearly two metres in length, i.e. they can be quite big.³⁷³ *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* can thus be grounded in a reality of cod, albeit with artistic licence and comic exaggeration, and in 1550 the reality of cod was being disrupted and was ripe for parody.

³⁷⁰ David Francis Taylor, *The Politics of Parody: A Literary History of Caricature 1760-1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 3.

³⁷¹ Taylor, *The Politics of Parody*, 3.

³⁷² Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel*, 82.

³⁷³ “Cod,” *Britannica*, Oct. 31, 2022, accessed Aug 27, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/animal/cod-fish-Gadus-species>.

The start of the sixteenth century saw the start of what is called the North Atlantic Fish Revolution. In 1497 John Cabot brought back to Europe knowledge of the Grand Banks, a body of water off the coast of Newfoundland and Nova Scotia teeming with cod.³⁷⁴ This was exploited by various European countries and between 1500 and 1550 cod production in Europe increased over fivefold from 25,000 tonnes per year to 130,000 tonnes (by 1600 the increase is fifteen fold).³⁷⁵ The Low Countries were central to this, exporting more fish than the rest of the North Sea countries combined,³⁷⁶ and the combination of cod with the other key fish industry, herring, saw fishing, for which a major economic centre was Bruges, as the “cornerstone” of the economy.³⁷⁷ Antwerp, Bruegel’s home, as a “centre of trade for Northern Europe”,³⁷⁸ also played a key role through banking as well as more directly, and followed the market for both cod and herring as they shifted. In 1500 the ratio of cod to herring in consumption per capita was 1:5, by 1600 this had flipped to 4:1.³⁷⁹ By 1550, however, in Amsterdam (the nearest city for which records are available), the price per unit for cod nearly halved from its 1500 value.³⁸⁰

To Bruegel and his contemporaries the place of cod in society was fast changing. This created an historical condition in which several paradoxes can play in parody in *Big Fish*

³⁷⁴ Poul Holm, et al. “The North Atlantic Fish Revolution (ca. AD 1500),” *Quaternary Research* 108, (July 2022): 92.

³⁷⁵ Holm, et al. “The North Atlantic Fish Revolution,” 94.

³⁷⁶ Ian Angus, “The Fishing Revolution and the Origins of Capitalism,” *Monthly Review* 74 no. 10 (March 2023), accessed Aug 23, 2023, <https://monthlyreview.org/2023/03/01/the-fishing-revolution-and-the-origins-of-capitalism/>.

³⁷⁷ “The Fishy History of Dutch Herring,” *The Low Countries*, May 6, 2022, accessed Aug 23, 2023, <https://www.the-low-countries.com/article/the-fishy-history-of-dutch-herring>.

³⁷⁸ Ethan Kavalier, *Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press), 30.

³⁷⁹ Holm, et al. “The North Atlantic Fish Revolution,” 94.

³⁸⁰ Holm, et al. “The North Atlantic Fish Revolution,” 99.

Eat Little Fish. Cod, for older viewers in Bruegel's day, could have still held, as a product of childhood memory, a sense of scarcity and concomitant luxury. The consumption of luxury products is a common artistic trope to denote gluttony, and its close bedfellow greed, so by exaggerating its size, viewers could see a manifestation of gluttony, the sinful desire to have luxury more than is necessary, reasonable, or wise.

But this is its own paradoxical disruption as the print can also be a material comment on the fact that cod, once relatively rare and expensive, was now commonly available via the abundance of the Grand Banks. Viewers could see this and even extend the Big Fish to become a metonym for growth of all goods in mercantile Antwerp. Ethan Kavalier describes the growth of business and the concomitant availability of goods of all kinds,³⁸¹ and the exaggerated fish could be a parodic comment on those worldly goods and their temptation growing out of scale with society's ability to manage them effectively.

Multiple meanings are already emerging, and any attempt at singular determination is further complicated with further reference to cod. Through the external influx from North America scarcity has been replaced by ubiquity and luxury was no longer in play. Cod was now part of the staple diet and, as such, could now be an ironic symbol of temptation (that which was desired is now commonplace). Yet, as a cornerstone of the overall mercantile edifice, it could be metonymic for the rise of commodification and concomitant concern about temptation and greed. Larry Silver, for example, notes how greed was the most "immediate and frightening" temptation in prosperous Antwerp.³⁸² Staple/luxury,

³⁸¹ Kavalier, *Pieter Bruegel*, 31.

³⁸² Silver, *Pieter Bruegel*, 147.

temptation/ubiquity, cod was, in the minds of Bruegel's contemporaries, a complex moving symbol with multiple disrupted meanings. This makes it ripe of exploitation as paradox as well as, via the incongruity of changing expectation and mundane reality, a ready source for humour. Critically for my argument, from the image no single intention is determinable, but nor, I suggest, is one needed. The multifaced sense of what cod could represent was known to those producing the print and the choice of cod for the Big Fish was likely taken knowingly to exploit uncertainty with humour. Indeed, several further ironies are available that would likely not be lost on leading creators and purveyors of drolleries, particularly as other parts of the image are brought into consideration.

As noted above, cod consumption was rising steeply, particularly in comparison to the other staple fish, herring, but its per unit value was steadily declining. The big fish market (cod) was swallowing up the little fish market (herring), but the profit margin for greedy merchants (possibly including the father in the boat) was cut away, possibly by too many trying to exploit the same lucrative market. It is notable that Silver, Müller and Schauerte all interpreted the orb on the knife being wielded by the soldier as representing a broken world (eat or be eaten),³⁸³ with the knife as "human entanglement with guilt".³⁸⁴ However, in a humorous alternative, the print could also be suggesting, via the orb on the knife, that the way of the world was positive and would not let greed succeed. The world, and particularly its expanding geography via a globalising Europe, no matter how strange this may seem to us today, could be seen as a correcting power that curbed greed, cutting it off

³⁸³ Silver, *Pieter Bruegel*, 148.

³⁸⁴ Müller and Schauerte, *Bruegel*, 451.

via economic levelling provided by the newfound abundance of the Grand Banks. An optimistic view, certainly, but one available as an alternate and parodic interpretation of *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*.

As Kavalier notes, the rising mercantile class in the low countries fostered “an increasing integration of the merchant’s practical wisdom into a general social code”,³⁸⁵ including regarding labour as a virtue – an “accommodation between business practice and religious values”.³⁸⁶ This suggests a further possible irony in *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* in relation to piety. Herring, the other main fish, is commonly associated with piety. Bruegel shows this in *The Battle of Carnival and Lent* (figure 33), where Lady Lent holds forth two herring on the bread peel as symbols of Lenten poverty and temperance.³⁸⁷ Pius herring however is being replaced by worldly cod, as noted with the above ratios of consumption shifting from 1:5 to 4:1. The social representation of fish has been disrupted, a sign of poverty could now be one of prosperity from Lenten abstinence to economic cornerstone. As social meaning was challenged the metonymic fish was at the heart of the uncertainty, its new abundance shifting meaning between poverty, piety, mercantilism, and expansion. This could lead viewers to see *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* as a moralising commentary if that was their choice, but equally it could be a playful and humorous depiction of a shifting reality, its incongruities parodying society’s own debates and contradictions.

³⁸⁵ Kavalier, *Pieter Bruegel*, 32.

³⁸⁶ Kavalier, *Pieter Bruegel*, 35.

³⁸⁷ Abdelkader Benali et al. ed, *Conversation Pieces. The World of Pieter Bruegel* (Vienna: Hannibal, 2018), 106.

Fish imagery is multivocal. In Bruegel scholarship it represents foolishness,³⁸⁸ piety,³⁸⁹ and economic prosperity,³⁹⁰ and all of these can play in the paradoxes of *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*. All associations are present, seen by those who choose to see them. It is visual humour grounded in this most material commodity, but it nonetheless resists ontological insistence for a single denotative meaning as any final truth is imposition not requirement. Visually and epistemologically, the print opens meaning through paradox, encouraging engagement while disrupting possibility in equal measure.

Such parodic interpretations of *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* offer multiple means by which a contemporary of Bruegel's could approach the work to experience both meaning and humour. This could include elements of morality, and the superiority theory of humour, but these are not essential. However, what has been presented thus far as possible meaning does require, as essential, is knowledge of the contemporary position of cod in Bruegel's day. Such knowledge is not known by many today and, as Milne has done in relation to *Dulle Griet*,³⁹¹ some might suggest that this means the work has now lost its more general ability to enable a humorous experience. In other words, its comedy was wholly a product of its culture and can either only, or perhaps less stridently, be best understood in that context. It may be that there are other ways to see it as funny, but they are not as genuine

³⁸⁸ Meganck, *Fall of the Rebel Angels*, 48.

³⁸⁹ Benali, *Conversation Pieces*, 106.

³⁹⁰ Angus "The Fishing Revolution and the Origins of Capitalism."

³⁹¹ Milne, *Carnivals and Dreams*, 173.

and do not, as Gibson argues, situate “firmly within the popular culture of Bruegel’s time”.³⁹² As a final argument I shall state why I do not think this is the case.

Paradox, for me, is in the openness of ambiguity. It is not paradox to protectively obfuscate (Koerner) or paradox as recognition of a fallen world (Müller and Schauerte), but paradox of absurdity. Paradox, as articulated by Michel de Montaigne, in the desire to know the answers while realising that the complexity of reality means no such answers will be forthcoming, seeing the humour in this, and nonetheless dedicating oneself even more to the search. This is the paradox that encourages a focus on self-knowledge,³⁹³ and subjective reflection,³⁹⁴ and, as Demure argues, is propaedeutic to faith.³⁹⁵ Paralleling Søren Kierkegaard’s understanding of humour,³⁹⁶ this paradox takes the viewer on a process of self-reflection, in which meaningful consideration moves away from objective rationalism and into the subjective and phenomenological where humour and meaning can equally reside.

This phenomenological context enables the viewer to experience humour as part of a personal path.³⁹⁷ Not distraction or mere titbit, the visually comic enhances subjective response as its connotative nature pushes against any univocal visions of reality.³⁹⁸ It

³⁹² Gibson, *The Art of Laughter*, 127. Gibson then goes on to provide even further cultural references to expand Grauls’ critique.

³⁹³ Alison Calhoun, “Montaigne and the Comic: Exposing Private Life,” *Philosophy and Literature* 35, no. 2 (October 2011): 313.

³⁹⁴ Demure, “The Paradox of the Miracle,” 151.

³⁹⁵ Demure, “The Paradox of the Miracle,” 148.

³⁹⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard* trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 233.

³⁹⁷ Demure, “The Paradox of the Miracle,” 144.

³⁹⁸ Lance Olsen, *Circus of the Mind in Motion: Postmodernism and the Comic Vision* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 24.

subverts centres of authority,³⁹⁹ and exposes the “ungrounded nature of our sense-making”.⁴⁰⁰ It resists externally-defined ontological grounds for meaning, relying instead on a paradoxical condition where, as Alenka Zupančič notes, “the subject is (or becomes) the universal, the essential, the absolute”,⁴⁰¹ and where as Lance Olsen comments, the focus is the process and not the conclusion.⁴⁰²

To see how this can operate in *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* the viewer seeks to find a way to see a subjective connection. There are multiple ways in which this can be done, with both historic and non-historic connections based on subjective experience allowing insight. Take for example, one enabled by the broader triangular structure discussed at the outset of this chapter. My discussion so far has focused on the Big Fish and the multiple parodic interpretations this enables. However, by extending the theme to include the observation of consumption the viewer is, de facto, observing the image and “activating” it as Honig describes it.⁴⁰³ Yet this is observation of an image about observation, and this creates commonality, and indeed pairing, between the observing viewer, any viewer historic or otherwise, and the observing subject of the image, the father in the boat.

The father and son, as noted above in Silver’s interpretation among others, can be observers, there to see and impart a message.⁴⁰⁴ Their pointing, the *ECCE* and the Dutch caption all suggest a role as lesson bearer on the ways of the world.⁴⁰⁵ As Orenstein suggests, the father

³⁹⁹ Olsen, *Circus of the Mind in Motion*, 31.

⁴⁰⁰ Eagleton, *Humour*, 28.

⁴⁰¹ Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 28.

⁴⁰² Olsen, *Circus of the Mind in Motion*, 32.

⁴⁰³ Honig, *The Idea of Human Nature*, 29.

⁴⁰⁴ Silver, *Pieter Bruegel*, 314.

⁴⁰⁵ Silver, *Pieter Bruegel*, 415.

points to the big fish to demonstrate his message, big fish eat the small, while the son points to the parallel action of the third man to show he understands.⁴⁰⁶ However, for many modern scholars, operating through the superiority theory of humour, the image's comedy seems to require the viewer to laugh at the father. Peter Burke, for example, interprets the father as a man failing to gain redress for some undefined slight. His lesson is a whinge, and he represents an emerging middle class in early modern Europe deemed, at that time, ripe for satire.⁴⁰⁷ It is satirical bathos, the "too-sudden tumble from the exalted to the everyday".⁴⁰⁸ Katrien Lichtert supports this view as she argues that the father's wisdom is not a big fish speaking of other big fish but, inversely, a little man, who has "always been a small fish".⁴⁰⁹ For Lichtert, the father is a bathetic fool.

This is superiority satire in which the father claims he "knows" that the big fish eats the little fish – that consumption by the powerful is without consequence – but where the actual meaning is the opposite, "everything you accumulate through greed will one day be lost".⁴¹⁰ The fate of both father and fish is a "just punishment" for greed,⁴¹¹ and a moral teaching on "the way of the world".⁴¹² Here the structure is the binary pairing of observers, the viewing father and the father's viewer, i.e. the audience. Viewers make a subjective connection as one side of the binary pair of observers and set themselves in opposition – the foolish father and their wise selves. Viewers, thus rendered superior, can laugh both

⁴⁰⁶ Orenstein, "Big Fish Eat Little Fish, 1557," 142.

⁴⁰⁷ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1994), 174.

⁴⁰⁸ Eagleton, *Humour*, 21.

⁴⁰⁹ Lichtert, "Big Fish Eat Little Fish," 126.

⁴¹⁰ Lichtert, "Big Fish Eat Little Fish," 126.

⁴¹¹ Müller and Schauerte, *Pieter Bruegel*, 341.

⁴¹² Silver, *Pieter Bruegel*, 86.

at the fish for suffering its fate and at the father for his misunderstanding. It is satire in line with the superiority theory of humour in which the person laughing feels superior to that which is laughed at and justifies it by pointing to a serious moral lesson available on the admonition of the sin of gluttony.

There is variation on how much the moral aspect is foregrounded. Gibson, for example, argues that works of this time “seem less concerned to warn us of the punishments awaiting sinners in the hereafter than to entertain us in the here and now”,⁴¹³ and describes how patrons would buy Bruegel’s deadly sin prints (but equally applicable to *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*) “to admire and laugh at his ingenuity in transforming the old moral lessons into magnificently comic images”.⁴¹⁴ However, Gibson still comes back to the superiority theory of humour, identifying that works having an “ultimately serious message”,⁴¹⁵ and referring to the characters in the works as Bruegel’s “victims”.⁴¹⁶

Alternatively, through pairing in *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, the father can create a pairing with the viewer around observation (seeing/not seeing). This, as discussed at the outset of the chapter, is not a pair in opposition but as a point of contrast where comparison can take place not in binaries but in both spectrums and bisociation. A spectrum of viewers is appropriate for, as Orenstein notes, when *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* was produced in Antwerp that city was “the most important centre for print production in Northern Europe”,⁴¹⁷ and, as Van der Stock states, the print was distributed “internationally through well-developed

⁴¹³ Gibson, *The Art of Laughter*, 28.

⁴¹⁴ Gibson, *The Art of Laughter*, 37.

⁴¹⁵ Gibson, *The Art of Laughter*, 148.

⁴¹⁶ Gibson, *The Art of Laughter*, 43.

⁴¹⁷ Orenstein, “Image to Print,” 43.

networks of dealers and trade fairs”.⁴¹⁸ Consequently, it had all types of viewers. Add to this the viewers in the nearly five hundred years that have passed since 1557 and the observing viewer is basically each individual as well as everyone. This, to me, calls reflection back to the pairing for if everyone is viewing the father, can the father not bisociate this idea and be both individual and everyone – can the father be everyman?

Everyman was a popular cultural figure in Bruegel’s day. He originates from a fifteenth century Dutch play *Elckerlijc*⁴¹⁹ that tells of a figure near the end of his days who is required to reflect on life lived, not as justification but engagement. As Davidson et al comment, Everyman is:

not a straightforward sermon about the necessity for reformation of one’s life, but rather is designed to present an existential experience of imaginative participation in facing the inevitable.⁴²⁰

Everyman faces the paradox that confronts us all, what is the point of life when everything must die?

Bruegel produced a print, *Elck (Everyman)*, (figure 34) and scholars have called it one of the “most intriguing prints in Bruegel’s graphic oeuvre”.⁴²¹ However, their interpretations, as with *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, often seem moralistically negative. Manfred Sellink

⁴¹⁸ Van der Stock, “Draughtman and Painter in Antwerp,” 10.

⁴¹⁹ Clifford Davidson, Martin W. Walsh and Ton J. Broos, “Introduction,” in *Everyman and Its Dutch Original, Elckerlijc* ed. Clifford Davidson, Martin W. Walsh and Ton J. Broos (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 1.

⁴²⁰ Davidson, Walsh and Broos, “Introduction,” 5.

⁴²¹ Maarten Bassens, “Everyman,” in *Bruegel The Complete Graphic Works*, ed. Maarten Bassens and Joris van Grieken (London: Thames & Hudson, 2019), 177.

interprets *Elck* as a soul in search of truth but who, owing to a lack of “insight and self-knowledge”, is “doomed to wander around, to search, but not to find”.⁴²² For Sellink, Everyman is led by greed in a “dual but vain search” for “worldly goods and self-knowledge”.⁴²³ Maarten Bassens agrees, and further labels Everyman a fool, blinded by greed and materialism, where “the tragedy of folly ultimately lies in the endlessly recurring selfishness of the seeker.”⁴²⁴ Elizabeth Honig condemns Everyman through his hope to “define himself through the visible material things of the world”,⁴²⁵ and Müller and Schauerte highlight Everyman’s cupidity labelling him “a false seeker of God.”⁴²⁶

Larry Silver, equally scathing of Everyman, calls his search “fruitless”,⁴²⁷ but notes a paradox via the representation of the pictured fool as No Man and accompanying caption which translates as “no man knows himself”. Everyman seeks to know, but only no man does. This paradox, for Silver, “casts doubt on the very process of seeing and knowing”,⁴²⁸ and Jürgen Müller reflects on a similar paradox, albeit articulated in theological terms. In seeking truth, Everyman is seeking God, a paradox because “finding God is always tantamount to being found by God”. Everyman, still negative however, fails to do this as he “commits the error of trusting that he can find God on his own”.⁴²⁹

⁴²² Sellink, “Everyman (Elyk),” 96-97.

⁴²³ Sellink, “Everyman, ca. 1558,” 168.

⁴²⁴ Bassens, “Everyman,” 177.

⁴²⁵ Honig, *The Idea of Human Nature*, 15.

⁴²⁶ Müller and Schauerte, *Pieter Bruegel*, 69.

⁴²⁷ Silver, *Pieter Bruegel*, 59.

⁴²⁸ Silver, *Pieter Bruegel*, 59.

⁴²⁹ Müller, “Interpretations of Everyman,” 170.

The common position in modern scholarship thus appears negative in that Everyman is doomed to failure. I find this ironic as in the source material, the play *Elckerlijc*, Everyman finds and is found by God, an outcome which only Sellink seems to countenance as possible in the Brugel print and then only as one of multiple options.⁴³⁰ For most *Elck*, like *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, is viewed through a superiority lens as an admonition of human weakness, where if there is humour it is the satiric laughing at a fool who would erroneously believe either himself or his world capable.

I see an alternative and not one that relies on historic context such as was the case for cod. For me there can be humour in the paradox of recognising that the complexity of the world renders any attempt at self-identity through objective rationalism (Everyman's multiple attempts across the image) as inevitably ineffective, but that this does not lead to abandoned hope or admission of failure. Rather Everyman persists in seeking meaning through his creative and connotative engagement with a world embraced as part of the flux. For me, Everyman is the manifestation of ironic certainty. In his search, Everyman fulfils Montaigne's ultimate paradox – the quest to know in full cognition of the impossibility of ultimate success through reason (as represented through Diogenes's lamp) alone. That the search will ultimately fail is not the same as suggesting it is selfish, or greedy, or foolish, on the contrary, it is a positive response to the paradox of what it is to be human, an optimism in not knowing how life works but a refusal to equate that to its being broken. It involves seeing the world's lack of clarity, laughing at the absurdity, but never giving up hope. For

⁴³⁰ Sellink, "Everyman (Elyk)," 97.

Montaigne and Kierkegaard it is propaedeutic. For me it can be, but it can also be equally meaningful in seeing the world for the paradox that it is and enjoying the experience of the pleasurable moment of humour as a good (and meaningful) thing in itself.

Everyman's humour and meaning is not found in disengaged logic, but is contained in the search itself, a process which both provides and supports self-agency. Everyman seeks connotative meaning "free of the monumental weight of the universal interpretations, so that the shape of our originality can come to view".⁴³¹ This, as Montaigne reminds us, comes via "sifting the truth and my freeman's humour".⁴³² Thus, Everyman can be comic not because we stand back and mock him from the superior position, but because he can embody all the incongruities, absurdities and bisociated logic inherent in his being (and, through the pairing, ours). He is the ordinary and extraordinary and, as such, he is bisociated, the "two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference."⁴³³ He can draw laughter not as a tragic hero nor a condemned fool. His search is not epic, it is local, personal, just as all ours are, and yet, paradoxically, it remains universal. Like humour, he is subjective while also being "universal to humanity".⁴³⁴ Meaning here is active, moving, to be engaged rather than denotatively labelled, and also ripe for humour. Humour is not abandoned to find meaning, it acts to highlight the incongruities in

⁴³¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 182.

⁴³² Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, 747.

⁴³³ Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, 33.

⁴³⁴ Eagleton, *Humour*, 1.

the paradox, it bisociates the logic and provides an alternate sense of connotative understanding.

In most interpretations, as considered above, the father is either an objective provider of truth (for those who consider the print a literal representation of the proverb) or is condemned as a fool (for those who see it through the superiority theory of humour). Alternatively an approach can be brought to an interpretation of *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* where the father is Everyman, seeking meaning by engaging the ordinary and the extraordinary around him. As already noted by Orenstein, *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* is its own world,⁴³⁵ captured through its pairing of natural and supernatural, sea and land, the extraordinary and the mundane, etc. In a picture which represents and disrupts the whole world the figure in whom there can be a pairing with each viewer can be equally universal. Unlike in *Elyk* where there is multiple representation, in *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* it is as narrator, the freeman who, like the viewer, sifts the objects in the image to form meaning. In keeping with the proverbial nature so often ascribed to the print, it is the pointer of wisdom who can embody a universal form.

Here is one way on which such an interpretation could work. A father and son have been fishing. Upon returning to the shore an extraordinary scene of the Big Fish and its attackers plays out before them while ordinary (and extraordinary) life continues around. This, the father sees, is the paradox of the world, its amazing complexity, full of the big and the small, the mundane and the wonderful. All engages with all in ways, bisociated and more

⁴³⁵ Orenstein, "Big Fish Eat Little Fish, 1557," 142.

complicated than ever he thought. He suggests to his son how things were explained in the past, that the big eat the small and acknowledges that this still happens, as manifest in the third man's two fish. But he also cries *ECCE*, behold, this cannot be all there is. Before him his logic is disrupted and challenged, incongruities of everything, including scale, drive home the comic absurdity of his explanation previously accepted as a rule. The father may have "long known", but this is humorously disrupted with reflection and reconsideration is needed as his previous view "contradicts and condemns itself".⁴³⁶ He does not have a new explanation, a new rule to take over from the big eating the small, and nor is he likely to discover one, but, ironically, that is as much the point for the father who, with the idiot from Dostoyevsky, discovers, "the important thing is life – life and nothing else! What is any 'discovery' whatever compared with the incessant, eternal discovery of life?"⁴³⁷

In this interpretation, the father, as Everyman, is optimistic. Even though he cannot, and never will be able to, answer the question of why the Big Fish eats the small this does not stop him trying, stumbling as he goes. He might be laughed at, and indeed he might laugh at himself, but not as a negative fool, neither a bathetic not pathetic figure to be mocked. Rather, through his recognition of the absurdity of the paradox, he is happy. Like Sisyphus, he "concludes that all is well", that the "struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart".⁴³⁸ As viewers we too can be happy and laugh with the father at the

⁴³⁶ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, 1047.

⁴³⁷ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Eva Martin (Project Gutenberg, 2021), part III, accessed Sep 6, 2023, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2638/pg2638-images.html>.

⁴³⁸ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1991), 24.

contradictions and the incongruities, the absurdities in the image and the wider uncertainties it teases.

Such an interpretation for *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* is available through the connection to *Everyman*. It highlights absurdity, plays with meaning, and can make us laugh as a response to the “chancy, ungrounded nature of our sense-making”.⁴³⁹ This is not a definitive interpretation and I make less claim to truth than any of my fellow scholars. However, in its connotative contextualisation it provides an effective way to understand how the work can support both humour and meaning.

By stepping away from the superiority theory of humour, Bruegel’s *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* can be both meaningful and funny. Within each engagement – subjective, experiential and phenomenological – it

emphasizes our essential humanity, its joys and limitations. It invites – or even forces – us to recognize and accept the fact that we are *finite* beings. It teaches us that we are *only human* with all our faults, imperfections and weaknesses, and it helps us to deal affirmatively and joyfully with the burden of human finitude.⁴⁴⁰

Bruegel’s work, to me, humorously plays with expectation, connections are made, associations established and, through humour’s pleasure, the experience and understanding of life is made a little better. *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* does not have answers but engages in

⁴³⁹ Eagleton, *Humour*, 28.

⁴⁴⁰ Zupančič, *Odd One In*, 47.

conversations. It talks of its time and all times. He can be Peasant Bruegel, intellectual Bruegel as well as *Piet den Drol* – engaging with each and all viewers as they want to look. For each viewer the experience of humour remains individual, while also being part of an anthropological phenomenological constant, offering pleasure and meaning equally.

Illustrations



Figure 1 Pieter Van Heyden after Pieter Bruegel *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, 1557, engraving first state of four, 22.9 x 29.6 cm The Metropolitan Museum, New York. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/338694>



Figure 2 James Gillray *A Sphere, Projecting Against a Plane*, January 3, 1792, hand-coloured etching, 27.5 x 22 cm The Metropolitan Museum, New York.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/391758#:~:text=A%20Sphere%2C%20Projecting%20Against%20a%20Plane%20January%203%2C%201792&text=Gillray%20cast%20two%20well%2Dknown,as%20sources%20of%20visual%20humor>.



Figure 3 Rene Magritte, *The Treachery of Images*, 1929, oil on canvas, 60.3 x 81.1 cm Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles. <https://www.renemagritte.org/the-treachery-of-images.jsp>



Figure 4 Chris Riddell, *The Walrus and the Carpenter, Boris and Rishi style*, 17 July 2021, newspaper print, 22 x 14 cm, The Guardian Newspaper, London. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/picture/2021/jul/17/the-walrus-and-the-carpenter-boris-and-rishi-style-cartoon>



Figure 5 Elias Garcia Martinez *Ecce Homo*, c. 1930, fresco, 50 x 40 cm , Sanctuary of Mercy church, Borja, Zaragoza, Spain <https://www.epdlp.com/cuadro.php?id=4316> and Cecilia Giménez (restorer) *Ecce Homo*, 2012, fresco, 50 x 40 cm, Sanctuary of Mercy church, Borja, Zaragoza, Spain https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/6/61/Attempted_restoration_of_Ecce_Homo.jpg



Figure 6 *Cupcake* <https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/uk/food/recipes/a559461/cup-of-tea-cake/>

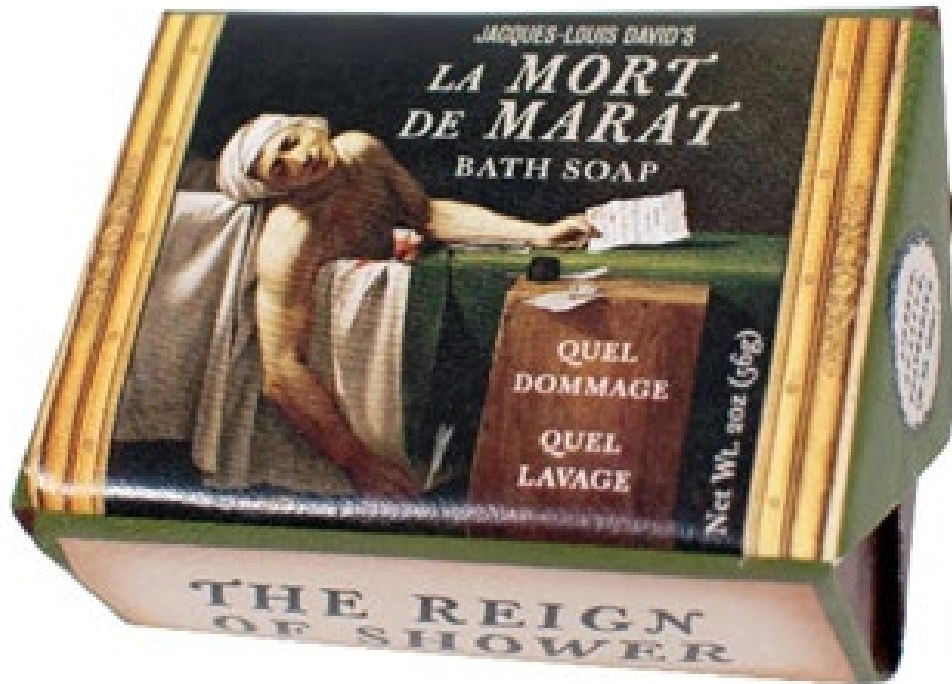


Figure 7 Jacques-Louis David, *La Mort de Marat*, 1793, oil on canvas, 162 x 128 cm, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels, replicated on a bar of soap by The Unemployed Philosopher's Guild
<https://philosophersguild.com/collections/art-gifts/products/jacques-louis-davids-la-mort-de-marat-bath-soap>



Figure 8 Gino Boccasile *Propaganda Anti-Americana*, c. 1943, offset poster, 140 x 100 cm, no location, <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/PROPAGANDA-ANTI-AMERICANA/C2858F5E3D817F8C>



Figure 9 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Artist and the Connoisseur*, mid1560s, pen and ink on paper, 25.5 x 21.1 cm, Albertina, Vienna, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Painter_and_The_Buyer#/media/File:Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_-_The_Painter_and_the_Buyer,_ca._1566_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg



Figure 10 Thomas Rowlandson, *Bookseller & Author*, September 25, 1784, reissued July 1, 1808, hand-coloured etching and aquatint, 32.7 x 38.8 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/392867>



Figure 11 Hippolyte Paul Delaroche, *Napoleon at Fontainebleau, 31 March 1814*, 1846, oil on canvas, 69.2 x 53.2 cm, The Royal Collection, Osborne House, Isle of Wight. <https://www.rct.uk/collection/405838/napoleon-at-fontainebleau-31-march-1814>



Figure 12 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Tower of Babel*, 1563, oil on panel, 114 x 155 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_-_The_Tower_of_Babel_%28Vienna%29_-_Google_Art_Project_-_edited.jpg



Figure 13 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Tower of Babel* (detail), 1563, oil on panel, 114 x 155 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_-_The_Tower_of_Babel_%28Vienna%29_-_Google_Art_Project_-_edited.jpg



Figure 14 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Battle of Carnival and Lent*, 1559, oil on panel, 118 x 164 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Fight_Between_Carnival_and_Lent#/media/File:Pieter_Bruegel_d._%C3%84.066.jp

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Figure 15 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Battle of Carnival and Lent* (detail), 1559, oil on panel, 118 x 164 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Fight_Between_Carnival_and_Lent#/media/File:Pieter_Bruegel_d._%C3%84.066.jp

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Figure 16 Lucas Van Leyden, *The Beggars (Eulenspiegel)*, 1520, print on paper, 17.5 x 14.1 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/364654>



Figure 17 Johannes van Doetecum I (after Peter Bruegel the Elder), *The Kermis of St. George*, c. 1559, print on paper, 32.7 x 51.6 cm, The British Museum, London. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1870-0625-650



Figure 18 Johannes van Doetecum I (after Peter Bruegel the Elder), *The Kermis of St. George* (detail), c. 1559, print on paper, 32.7 x 51.6 cm, The British Museum, London. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1870-0625-650



Figure 19 Johannes van Doetecum I (after Peter Bruegel the Elder), *The Kermis of St. George* (detail), c. 1559, print on paper, 32.7 x 51.6 cm, The British Museum, London. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1870-0625-650



Figure 20 Johannes van Doetecum I (after Peter Bruegel the Elder), *The Kermis of St. George* (detail), c. 1559, print on paper, 32.7 x 51.6 cm, The British Museum, London. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1870-0625-650



Figure 21 Sebald Beham, *Peasant's Kermis*, 1535, woodcut on paper, 35.5 x 114.2 cm, The British Museum, London.
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1895-0122-303



Figure 22 Sebald Beham, *Peasant's Kermis* (detail), 1535, woodcut on paper, 35.5 x 114.2 cm, The British Museum, London. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1895-0122-303



Figure 23 Frans Huys (after Peter Bruegel the Elder), *Skating Before the St. George's Gate, Antwerp*, c. 1558, print on paper, 23.2 x 29.9 cm, The Metropolitan Museum, New York of Art, New York.
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/338697>



Figure 24 Frans Huys (after Peter Bruegel the Elder), *Skating Before the St. George's Gate, Antwerp* (detail), c. 1558, print on paper, 23.2 x 29.9 cm, The Metropolitan Museum, New York of Art, New York.
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/338697>



Figure 25 Thomas Rowlandson, *Skaters on the Serpentine* 1784, watercolour and ink over pencil on paper, 42.6 x 73.3 cm, National Museum Wales, Cardiff. <https://museum.wales/collections/online/object/70fd5a5a-a1ae-32c6-a38c-bde4c730698b/Skaters-on-the-Serpentine/>



Figure 26 Thomas Rowlandson, *Skaters on the Serpentine* (detail), 1784, watercolour and ink over pencil on paper, 42.6 x 73.3 cm, National Museum Wales, Cardiff. <https://museum.wales/collections/online/object/70fd5a5a-a1ae-32c6-a38c-bde4c730698b/Skaters-on-the-Serpentine/>



Figure 27 Thomas Rowlandson, *Skaters on the Serpentine* (detail), 1784, watercolour and ink over pencil on paper, 42.6 x 73.3 cm, National Museum Wales, Cardiff. <https://museum.wales/collections/online/object/70fd5a5a-a1ae-32c6-a38c-bde4c730698b/Skaters-on-the-Serpentine/>



Figure 28 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, 1559, oil on panel, 117 x 163 cm, K Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netherlandish_Proverbs#/media/File:Pieter_Brueghel_the_Elder_-_The_Dutch_Proverbs_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg



Figure 29 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Netherlandish Proverbs* (details), 1559, oil on panel, 117 x 163 cm, K Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netherlandish_Proverbs#/media/File:Pieter_Brueghel_the_Elder_-_The_Dutch_Proverbs_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg



Figure 30 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Netherlandish Proverbs* (details), 1559, oil on panel, 117 x 163 cm, K Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netherlandish_Proverbs#/media/File:Pieter_Brueghel_the_Elder_-_The_Dutch_Proverbs_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg



Figure 31 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Netherlandish Proverbs* (detail), 1559, oil on panel, 117 x 163 cm, K Gemäldegalerie, Berlin. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netherlandish_Proverbs#/media/File:Pieter_Brueghel_the_Elder_-_The_Dutch_Proverbs_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

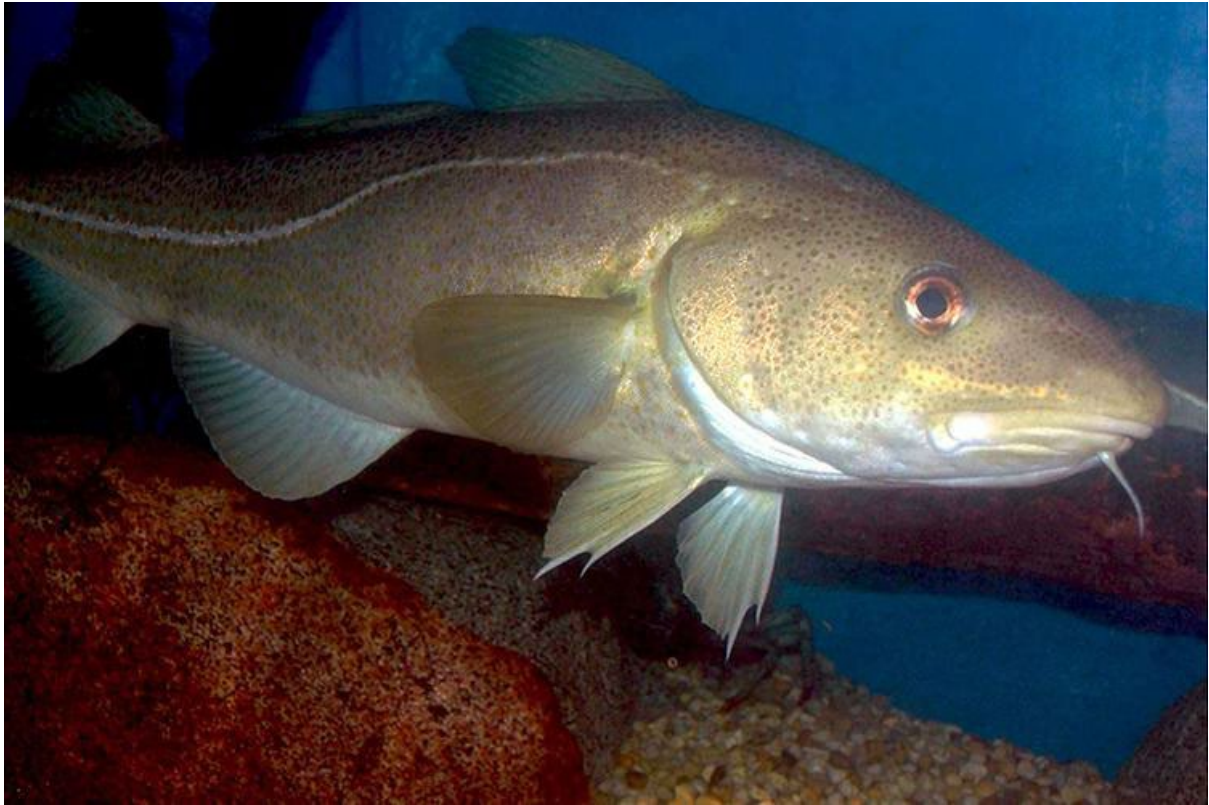


Figure 32 NOAA Fisheries *Atlantic Cod Fish*. <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/species/atlantic-cod>



Figure 23 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Battle of Carnival and Lent* (detail), 1559, oil on panel, 118 x 164 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Fight_Between_Carnival_and_Lent#/media/File:Pieter_Bruegel_d._%C3%84.066.jp](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Fight_Between_Carnival_and_Lent#/media/File:Pieter_Bruegel_d._%C3%84.066.jpg)

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Figure 34 Pieter Van Heyden after Pieter Bruegel *Elck (Everyman)*, 1558-60, engraving, 24.7 x 29.2 cm The British Museum, London. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1866-0407-16.

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