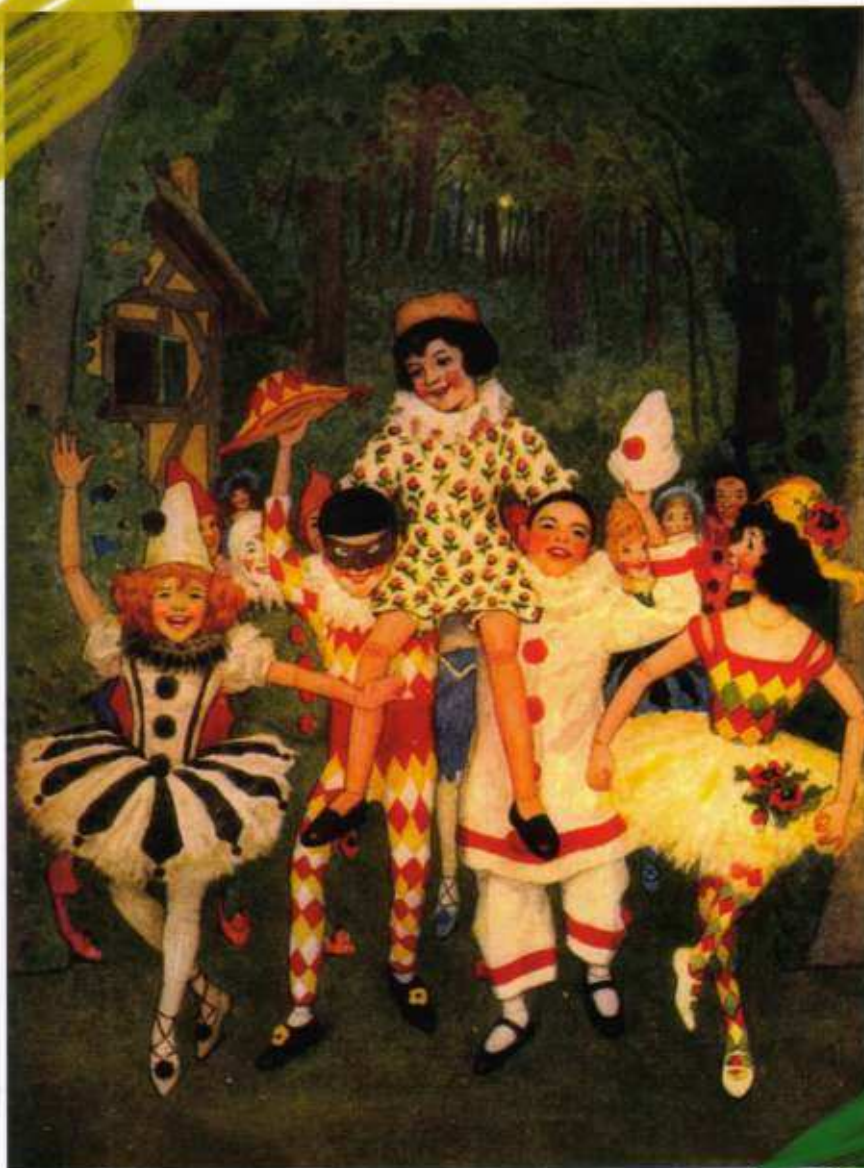


New Approches to the Linguistics of Humour

Edited by **Diana Popa** and **Salvatore Attardo**



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Ancient Greek visual puns: a case study in visual humor¹

Alexandre Mitchell

Recent events in Denmark, in September 2005, and on a global scale since February 2006, have demonstrated the potency of cartoons, and how visual humor can sometimes be deadly serious.² We have witnessed countries that have been brought to their knees for having played with images, with the 'wrong' images and with the wrong crowd. We have also seen how most western 'democratic' countries have censored themselves to ensure a momentaneous peace.³ It is timely to bring to the forefront ancient visual humor in the first western 'direct' democracy, Athens. An immense body of painted evidence, Greek vase-paintings, has been studied by scholars for over two centuries. Although the subject has been approached from a variety of angles, humor has been neglected.

Most scholars in humor studies, ancient Greek history, literature and philosophy are aware of Greek Comedy, ancient philosophical theories on humor and of the immense bibliography in both these fields of study. There has been, however, no focused research on visual humor in ancient Greece, whether from a literary or an archaeological viewpoint. My research on visual humor (Mitchell 2000, Mitchell 2004, Mitchell forthcoming), is aimed at redressing this situation and providing various disciplines with access to a new, however ancient, body of comic evidence. My forthcoming book identifies visual humor (parody, visual puns, caricature, situation comedy) in Greek vase-paintings from the 6th to the 4th centuries B.C.E., whether in daily life or mythology. More importantly it brings to bear the importance of studying ancient visual humor to gain an insight into the Greek psyche and society at large.

The first part of this paper deals with a specific type of humor, namely visual puns. The choice of visual puns is deliberate: to address primarily visual specificities of ancient Greek visual humor without getting waylaid by storylines. Visual puns offer a type of narrativeless humor. The second part of the paper discusses what I have termed, for the want of a better expression, *visual immediacy* (Mitchell, forthcoming, ch.7) and visual memory which seem to underlie most comic scenes discussed in this paper.

1. Visual puns

1.1. Greek vase-painting

Until recently, the traditional view in archaeology, borne from an art-market industry, imbedded in connoisseurship, was that Greek vases were produced for the elite and were

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Julia Shaw, University College, London, for having kindly read through this article. All the drawings in this paper are my own – except for fig.15 (Sir John D. Beazley, www.beazley.ox.ac.uk). Photographs are mine, except for fig.2, scanned from A. Rumpf (1927) which is out-of-copyright. All museum inventory references are given at the end of the paper, in the list of illustrations.

² Anjana Shrivastava, 'Denmark's Cartoon Jihad,' *Spiegel online*, February 1, 2006: <http://service.spiegel.de/cache/international/0,1518,398533,00.html>. See also, Jim VandeHei, 'Bush Shifts on Muslim Protests. Violence Is Criticized, Not the Cartoons,' *Washington Post*, February 9, 2006. On the Media and the controversy: read Peter Johnson, 'Media draw the line on running cartoons,' *USA TODAY*, February 7, 2006: http://www.usatoday.com/life/columnist/mediamix/2006-02-07-media-mix_x.htm. On the key events, see http://www.boston.com/news/world/europe/articles/2006/02/15/key_events_in_the_cartoon_controversy And, Q&A from the Human Rights Watch: <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/02/15/denmar12676.htm>

³ A politically-correct initiative by the British government, *The offence of incitement to religious hatred*, fuelled by a need for more Muslim votes in the context of the war on Iraq, did not make the headlines as it was dwarfed by the *Row over the Prophet cartoons*, but was almost made a legal act. A group of writers, comedians and artists rose in protest (Appignanesi 2006).

costly items. However the accepted view today is that the majority of Greek clay vases were quite cheap to produce and to buy. There was an extensive range of products, from the very small to the very large, from the coarsely-painted to the exquisitely designed, and prices varied accordingly. The more expensive vases were the very large well decorated craters – large mixing bowls to blend wine and water and specific proportions – and really expensive vases were made in silver or in gold. B. Sparkes (1996: 140-151) summarizes these issues under the heading, “Where archaeology begins, art ceases.”

Greek iconography occurs in many mediums, from coins to terracotta, gems to wall-paintings, relief sculpture to great architectural sculpture in the round. The only material discussed here is comic representations on Greek painted pottery produced during the so-called Archaic and Classical periods (6th - 4th centuries B.C.E.). Although some of the larger and better decorated vases obtain high prices at art auctions today, the pots were originally cheap to produce and buy. They also were one of the only commodities to follow market-driven production rather than patronage, as every household, rich or poor, needed pottery vessels for a variety of uses. If we add to the cheapness of this product, the market-driven production and the fact that democracy offered an ‘exclusive’ freedom of expression to many Greeks in comparison to other contemporary nations, this pottery, found today in the hundreds of thousands, with its extraordinary variety in representations from daily life to mythology, is our best ‘popular’ means of understanding ancient Greece, and some very early visual humor.

There were two main techniques of decoration of pottery vessels in Greece in the 6th and 5th century B.C., the black-figure (fig.1) followed by the red-figure technique (fig.14). Both techniques involve a complex chemical process and firing technique that is best described by Hoffman (1962) and Noble (1988). On a more simple level, the first technique was used by painters throughout the 6th century and consisted in the figures on the pot being painted in black on red background. All anatomical details, objects, etc. were incised through the black slip, down to the base color, so that the red then shone through the black. The second technique was invented around the 525 B.C. and rapidly supplanted the former in the next decades: it lasted until the 4th century B.C. Instead of painting the figures black, the painters left the figures red but painted the background black. Instead of incising details, a brush was used to add black or white. The painting possibilities of the new technique were infinitely superior, as all the subtleties of the brush had supplanted incising tools.

1.2. Methodology

The most common mistake in identifying visual humor is to laugh out of ignorance. According to our literary sources, laughing at an image that is not intended to be comical was already happening in antiquity. Ignorance of another’s culture can lead to some rather amusing (ancient) misconceptions. According to Semos of Delos, cited by Athenaeus (*The Banqueters*, 14.614 a-b), a man called Parmeniskos of Metapontum stood laughing at the sight of an old wooden cult statue of the goddess Leto on the island of Delos (Bruneau 1970: 209, fn. 4.). Centuries had passed since it had first been sculpted and, although it was still revered at the time of Parmeniskos, it must have been well-worn through the passage of time. Parmeniskos laughed because in his eyes the statue was grotesque. He felt superior to the former inhabitants of Delos who ridiculously worshipped an absurd representation of a god. Ignorance of another’s culture can be the starting point of laughter. There are other references to such stories in Herodotus (*Histories*, 3.37; Mitchell, forthcoming: Introduction).

In this investigation of humor in vase-painting there is a genuine risk of over-interpreting objects. Over two thousand years have passed since the vases were made; Greek culture has faded with time, and we possess only its vestiges. But, we have some context and references

in the remarkable plays of Aristophanes which amount to an ancient Greek humour bible, and the gigantic literature on Aristophanes which offers innumerable insights into ancient Greek humour. The famous *Philogelos*, a book of ancient jokes is also useful in that it gives us similar jokes to those one can buy from any kiosk or that the reveller finds in crackers at Christmas dinners. With his plays, Aristophanes won many competitions. To be able to win, these plays had to satisfy the spectators. Thus they tell us what most people laughed at. The social and religious taboos have changed since then. The reference points were different. The rules of behaviour were set in a *shame-culture* where the division between public and private life seems to us practically inflexible. Nevertheless, the genres, the techniques and the mechanisms of humour appear to have changed very little.

There are so many vases which have survived the ages (in the hundreds of thousands) that, through careful comparison, it is possible to differentiate an image intended to be comical from a 'serious' one. Vase-paintings are not 'read' as texts, yet the codes of imagery were obvious to people living in Athens in the 5th century B.C.E. Do we need to run to an encyclopedia when confronted with a picture of a strong man dressed in a blue and red outfit, flying in the air with a huge 'S' on his chest? We do not, nor did the Greeks when seeing a thousandth image of Heracles, their ultimate Greek superhero. By redrawing hundreds of paintings and examining thousands more, patterns and codes of imagery emerge, and the pictures 'speak' to us. They become, to a certain extent, as 'decipherable' as texts. Vase-painters who produced visual puns had to be certain that the viewers would recognize a traditional scene, or a canonical motif, by giving sufficient details; at the same time, they needed to include other well-chosen details to transform the canonical picture into something comical.

1.3. *Visual puns*

Two studies on visual humor in the European Middle-Ages are worth mentioning: M. Camille's book on humor in medieval manuscripts and especially the section on *marginalia* (Camille 1992: 11-55), humorous cartoons in the margins of medieval manuscripts which I would call medieval *visual puns*. The second book is by J. Benton (2004) and concerns wit and humor in Medieval art and specifically visual humor in architectural sculpture. The main difference between these materials and clay pottery is that stone carving was an expensive art form and in the world devoid of the printing press, manuscripts were extremely costly to produce. This implies the need for patronage rather than market-driven production. This is why most medieval visual humor is a fringe activity, found in sculptural details or in the margins of manuscripts rather in full view.

A pun is a word used in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different associations, or the use of two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound but with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effect, a *play on words*. I will refer to some pictures as visual puns because their maker played, in the same benign and reductive way as the conceiver of a play on words, on the combination of different images to provoke laughter. The techniques of visual puns and parody are quite similar. Visual puns are based on the transgression of visual conventions. The painters subvert the stylistic conventions of iconography: e.g. they comically blur the distinction between the actual decorative frame of a scene and the content which is framed. As described in part 2 this type of humor is based on visual memory and *immediacy*. Painters change small details in well-known series of images to produce a comical effect. This kind of humor is strictly visual. Pictures may refer incidentally to mythology or cultural phenomena, but they usually avoid narration.

1.4. Visual puns: corrupted decoration

Eyes are a window into the soul. In many traditions, from Greece to India, since antiquity, eyes are painted on sculptures of gods, to bring them to life. Painted eyes on objects are often apotropaic (Aristophanes, *Knights* 1307, *Birds* 61, *Ploutos* 359): they avert evil, they counter the evil-eye. In ancient Greece, when eyes were painted on the prow of ships, the intent was to bring the boat to life, to see where it was going. Ultimately, this was to protect the sailors.

Eyes were also painted on drinking vessels, and this at least from the 7th century B.C.⁴ The vessels that interest us are especially the so-called 'eye-cups' (fig.1): the term is used to designate cups decorated with large eyes on their exterior, produced in the last forty years or so of the 6th century B.C.⁵ After this date, this type of decoration simply disappears. What was the function of these eyes on cups? If these eyes were apotropaic, were they supposed to protect the drinker against the toxic effects of wine, against drunkenness? From the numerous texts describing the behavior of drunken banqueters, and from the iconography of coarse banqueters in vase-painting, it seems that the eyes were not very effective. If they were supposed to protect the wine itself, against poison for example, it is also very unlikely: banqueters did not have to be protected against sharing the wine with friends at the same banquet. The fact that the eyes as a decoration on drinking vessels disappears at the end of the 6th century means that they had become a decorative fad with no magical intent. The viewers who were buying the vases were probably tired of seeing 'eye-cups.' Had the eyes lost their 'magical power' or did buyers suddenly not feel the need to be protected anymore? 'Eye-cups' had simply lost the power to please the viewer.



Fig. 1 Cup. Large decorative eyes

An Athenian cup (fig.1), currently stored in the museum of Hamburg, signed by a potter called Nikosthenes and dating to the mid-6th century B.C.E., shows two large so-called

⁴ See a Naxian amphora, Mykonos Museum, Bal; Dugas, C. (1935). *Les vases orientalisants de style non mélien* Paris: pl. I.

⁵ Ferrari, G. (1986). "Eye-cup." *Revue Archéologique*; Steinhart, M. (1995). *Das Motiv des Auges in der griechischen Bildkunst*. Mainz.

masculine eyes. The contour of the eyes is gently curved, with a sharply pointed outer corner and pronounced tear gland. 'Feminine eyes' are almond-shaped eyes, and are sometimes found on cups. The eyes on this cup have brows and grape vine on either side. Between the eyes stands the hero Heracles holding a wine drinking vessel.

Towards the end of the eye-cup production, vase-painters made the cup look like a face by adding a nose and ears to the large eyes. When a drinker brought the cup to his mouth, it must have covered his entire face and have looked like a mask, especially to the (drunk) viewers facing him.



Fig. 2 Cup. Large decorative eyes added nose and ears

The first corrupted scenes show a logical visual follow-up to the large eyes motif: the painters add noses and ears. On a black-figure cup (fig.2), currently held in Munich, a rounded nose with flared nostrils and ears have been added to the pre-existing motif, the large eyes. The eyes are a *pars pro toto*, 'a part for the whole [of the face]' but some painters make sure we can see it. One should imagine a drunken party where one paused drinker observes an active drinker whose entire face is covered by the mask-like cup. The effect must have been quite surprising, but not comical. It is only when painters made fun of the eyes and faces through visual puns, that the representations became truly comical. This is based on the assumption that everyone knew what the 'normal' motif was meant to look like: many images are part of a 'national/regional/local' psyche from childhood. This is why it is possible to play with the images and be sure most viewers will 'get it.'



Fig. 3a Cup. Siren-eye



Fig. 3b Same cup (under the handle). Crouching dog, defecating

Another Athenian cup (fig.3) shows on one side⁶ two satyrs, the half-human half-goat, lascivious, lazy, cowardly and drunken followers of Dionysus, masturbating while talking to each other. On the other side is displayed an amazing visual pun (fig.3a): the body of a siren, a half-bird half-woman creature, is actually a large decorative eye. We have here a visual pun that blurs the fine balance between the frame and what is framed. What is more, the eye-siren seems to be gesturing towards something under the handles. Under each handle of this cup (fig.3b) a dog is crouching, and defecating.



Fig. 4 Cup. Dog-nose between two large decorative eyes

On a black-figure Athenian cup, currently held in Copenhagen (fig.4) a dog is shown in full-face between two large eyes. Martens (Martens 1992: 316) describes it as a *calembour visuel*, i.e., a visual pun. The dog is made to look like a nose: it is sitting upright with its front legs straight and it is looking upwards, recalling the nostrils of noses painted between eyes. But it is not a nose, and there is the essence of a visual pun: it is a harmless game the painter plays with well-known images.

⁶ Not illustrated here, but can be found in *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum*, United-States of America 19, Boston 2, pl. 101.1-2, 4.

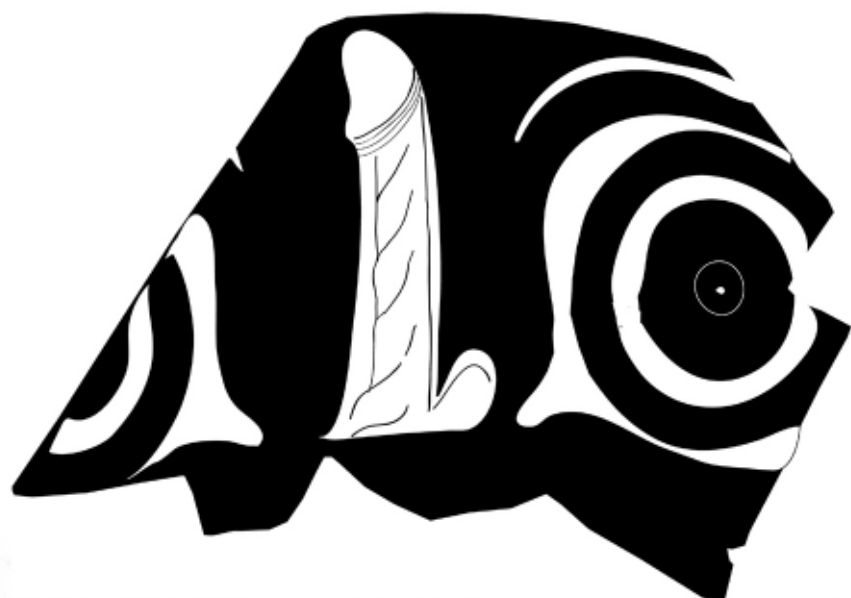


Fig. 5 Cup. Erect phallus between eyes

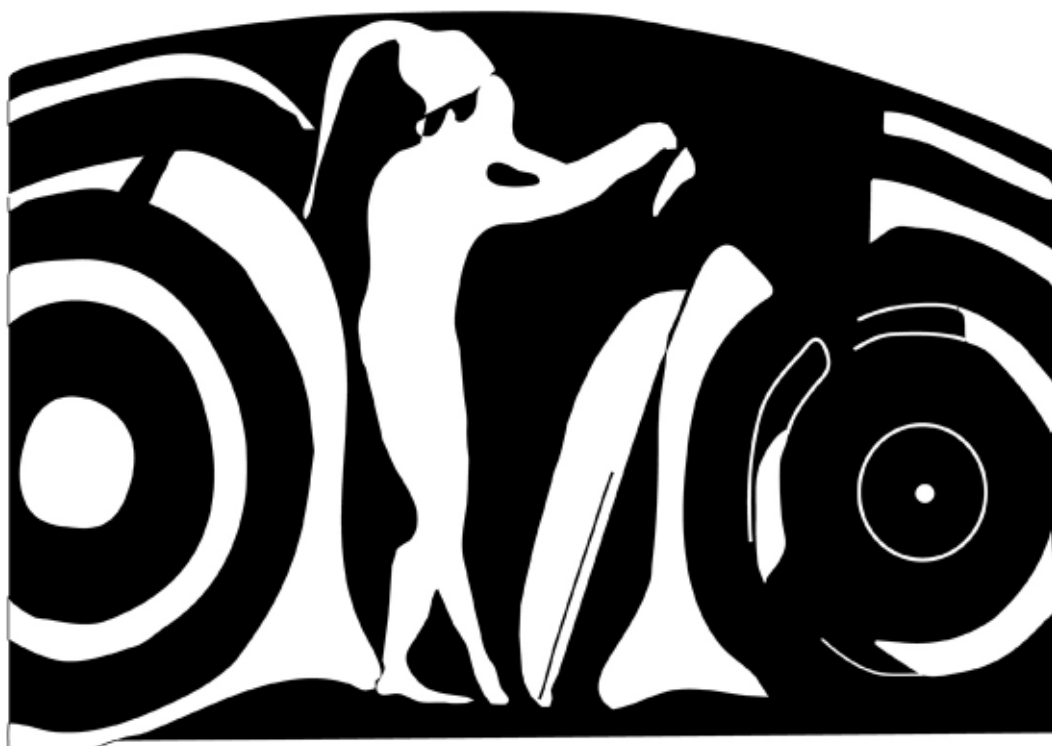


Fig. 6 Cup. Soldier leaning his shield against a decorative eye

On another cup in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (fig.5), the nose is a huge erect phallus. The comical nature of this image resides in the impossibility of choosing one way or the other to look at the picture. There is no solution: the erect penis is a nose, and the nose is an erect penis. Similarly, on the previous cup (fig.4), the dog is a nose, and the nose is wagging its tail.

On a different level still, another Athenian cup in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (fig.6) painted in the red-figure technique shows a naked warrior wearing a helmet, and standing between two large eyes. Beside him is a shield. Warrior figures are often found between decorative eyes on 'eye-cups,' carrying the same large shield, called *hoplon* in Greek. The particular curve of the *hoplon* is such that it could not stand vertically on its edge. The warrior on our cup has found a solution, by leaning it against the decorative eye. But, this is a structural impossibility. The eyes cannot be simultaneously the frame and the content of a scene. When looking at a visual pun, the viewer is disorientated because it is impossible to choose an exclusive way to see the picture.



Fig. 7 Neck-amphora. Satyr grabbing the eyebrows off the vase's decorative eyes

In an amazing scene on a vessel, on display in the Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire in Brussels (fig.7), a satyr, a comic character *per se*, is shown running between two large decorative eyes. In a startling visual pun, he is holding on tightly to the eyebrows of the 'eyes.' The satyr is being used as a comical agent so as to despoil the usual iconography, and become a translation agent between different categories of representations.



Fig. 8 Olpe. Dionysos and satyrs carrying 'heavy' decorative eyes

The final example to be discussed here of a corrupted eye decoration (fig. 8) is the most astonishing of all (Mitchell 2000: 119, Mitchell 2004: 8-9). Dionysos, the god of wine, ecstasy and carnival, walks to the right, between two eyes supported by satyrs. Two satyrs carry large decorative eyes exactly like other satyrs usually carry wineskins on their backs: they hold the wineskins from one of the tied openings which on this vase, is the eye's tear duct. It is an exquisite visual pun, because both the eyes and a full wineskin are similar in shape. The satyrs have traded the decorative function and meaning of the eyes for two wineskins: they are playing with the decorative motifs of the vase. Only satyrs, because of their deep-seated gluttony for wine, could perform such a comical transformation.

1.5. *Visual puns: to misuse objects*

The vases to be described below are best understood within the context of what E. Keuls (1993) termed *The Reign of the phallus*.

On a small wine jug stored in the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu (fig.9), a bearded banqueter gesticulates widely with his arms, as if he were singing or talking loud to someone. In fact, his arm waving is probably due to his drunkenness. A youth, possibly his slave, stands unmoved at his side. He is holding his master's staff and a satchel in his left hand and in his right he holds a wine jug, an *oinochoe*, directly beneath his master's penis so that he may relieve himself. The word *oinochoe* contains the word for wine, *oinos*. He is evidently a banqueter, misusing the vessel's customary function.



Fig. 9 Chous. Drunk man relieving himself in a wine jug



Fig. 10 Cup. Satyr playing the pipes

Another series of vases show satyrs playing the *aulos* (double-pipes) with aulos-cases hanging from their erect penises (Mitchell, *forthcoming*, chapter 4). A red-figure cup stored in the Cabinet des Médailles Museum in Paris (fig.10) shows a satyr holding pipes in both hands, and an aulos-case on his erect penis. The painter could have made the aulos-case hang off the satyr's arm as is often the case of 'normal' figures playing the aulos on most vases showing aulos-players. The satyr's hands are full, thus he uses his erect member as an 'aulos-case hanger.' The object is obviously misplaced: 'the analogy between the two instruments so difficult to control is inescapable' (Wilson 1999: 72).

But satyrs can go further still. In the tondo of a red-figure cup on display in the Hessisches Landesmuseum in Kassel, Germany (fig.11) a satyr uses an amphora as a sexual partner, penetrating it. The satyr hugs his amphora, holding it with both hands and arms wrapped around it, his head leaning against the amphora's belly and his face turned towards the

viewer. The scene blends the two passions of the satyr: sex and wine. A similar image is rendered in one of many mystical and wine-loving poems by Omar Khayyam:⁷



Fig. 11. Cup. A satyr's best friend

*I think the Vessel, that with fugitive
Articulation answer'd, once did live,
And drink; and Ah. the passive Lip I kiss'd,
How many Kisses might it take--and give.*

1.6. Visual puns: inscription and space

Tosto (1999) devoted a whole book to vases signed *Nikosthenes epoiesen*, literally, 'Nikosthenes (the artisan's name) has made.' As we find other signatures with the word *egraphsen*, 'to paint,' as in *Epiktetos egraphsen* (fig.10), 'Epiktetos has painted,' *epoiesen* must mean to produce, and is accompanied by the name of the potter. The position of an inscription on a vase is usually not random, as its specific position may bear a specific meaning. For instance, an inscription under the foot of a vase has usually to do with trademarks (Johnston 1979). When a potter or a painter signed a vase, the signature could be placed anywhere but coming from a figure. Only two types of inscriptions could come from a figure: an inscription that gave a figure's name or an inscription that indicated to the viewer that a figure was saying something which was clear from the inscription itself.

⁷ *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, The Astronomer-Poet of Persia*, Edward Fitzgerald Editor, Bernard Quaritch, London 1859: poem 36.



Fig. 12. Neck-amphora. Figure saying 'Nikosthenes made it'

Although the Nikosthenes inscription is found on a number of vases in a 'normal' area of the vase (fig.1) – i.e. anywhere but coming from a figure – on a few the inscription is clearly part of the painted narrative. For example, a black-figure amphora (fig.12) shows two naked men arguing with much gesturing. The inscription coming from the gesturing man on the left reads: 'Nikosthenes epoiesen,' ('Nikosthenes made [it]'). It seems that they are arguing over the identity of the artisan who made the vase on the surface of which they themselves have been painted. This then is an excellent example of a visual pun based on the use of an inscription's spatial position. Some scholars argue that painters or potters signed the vases because of the genuine pride they felt towards their work: this inscription looks much more like humorous advertising.

Most pictures discussed in this paper are incongruous: they contain disparate or discordant elements. Incongruity, in a representation, consists of different elements being incompatible with each other. In the case of visual puns, there is often no explanation for an incongruous element except the whim of the painter. Sometimes, figures depicted in a scene interact with the decorative parts of the vase. In other cases, the vase itself appears to come to life (e.g. anthropomorphic cups with eyes, eyebrows, nose, ears, and so on). The incongruous is often accompanied by a displacement in position or in attitude. In other words, humor can be motivated by the transposition from one level of comprehension to another. The sudden shift arouses laughter. In a visual pun or in a parody, it is the subtle shift between the picture we expect and the one which is actually depicted that is amusing. The feeling of incongruity is also generated by misapplication or inadequacy (e.g. in some vase-paintings aulos-cases are shown hanging from satyrs' erect penises).

2. Visual immediacy and memory

There are at least two more underlying principles to visual puns in addition to those discussed in Part 1: 'visual immediacy' and 'visual memory' (Mitchell, *forthcoming*, chapter 7). Interestingly these principles are also at work in more complex comic scenes than visual puns. By visual memory I do not mean 'eidetic memory' – the urban myth on photographic memory – I am referring to the memory of images at a more subconscious level. I do not mean either Jung's deep-rooted archetypes (Jung 1934-54). But I do believe in a visual collective unconscious. We take for granted that painters had at their disposal a huge collection of stock representations for their vases. What about their viewers? As I wrote earlier, they have been confronted to these images since their childhood. The viewers do not produce images; they do not need to have specific visual examples at hand. They received images and somehow remembered the most common representations. Education works in many ways, but something never changes: to learn something thoroughly we learn it through repetition. The more often viewers saw certain motifs, figures, scenes, the better they remembered them. As I pointed out earlier, the more something is well-known, the more it is easy to play with it. A tight-knitted society such as the Greek City-State shared many more things than the obvious rules and regulations (Polignac 1995). Everyone used pottery vessels, which very often were decorated with images. In a society without newspapers, radio and television, the main access to imagery, the more popular access, was the so-called black-figure vases in the 6th century and the red-figure vases in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C.E. These shared a huge repertoire of stock representations, mythical and from daily life, sacred and profane, that everyone knew.



Fig. 13 Hydria. Infant Hermes pretending to sleep after stealing Apollo's sacred cattle

The following example will demonstrate how the humor of a well-known story can be enhanced in its visual form. This vase, as well the next two will be very helpful in understanding 'visual immediacy.' It is surprising to see what certain divine children can achieve: they should not be capable of performing adult tasks at such an early age. Hermes the thief acts as a divine child but in an ungodly manner. The story of Apollo's cattle stolen by Hermes is found in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* (v. 227-292): Hermes as a toddler decides to steal his brother Apollo's sacred cattle which he hides in a cave. When Apollo comes to Hermes' mother, Maia, to complain about the theft, she shows the infant in his cot,

which in her view demonstrates sufficiently that Hermes could not possibly be the author of the crime. Zeus asks all-seeing Sun (Phoibos) to reveal the truth, Hermes farts, Zeus laughs, and all ends well. A black-figure hydria (water container) found in Cervetri in Italy (Fig. 13), shows, on the left, the oxen gathered in a cave. They are partly visible and a rabbit is dashing above the cave. Hermes has already hidden the oxen in a cave. On the right the child pretends to sleep in his cradle on wheels, whilst Maia on the left, and Apollo and Zeus on the right, suspicious about the child, are making great gestures, wondering where the oxen are. The picture is comic because of the juxtaposition of the two scenes that can only be understood together. The young age of the child god is ostensibly incompatible with such a deed, and with his hypocrisy, at such an early age, in pretending to sleep swaddled in his cot, while the oxen are right there in a cave.



Fig. 14 Bell-crater. Heracles holding the world while satyrs steal his weapons

A comical depiction of helplessness is shown on an Apulian bell-crater (fig. 14). Heracles, the greatest Panhellenic hero throughout the Greek and Roman periods is holding-up the skies, waiting for the giant Atlas to return from the Garden of the Hesperides with some golden apples. Heracles needed the apples to fulfill the last of his twelve labors. The painter has changed the story: while Heracles is standing thus, a satyr grabs his quiver and another satyr is holding Heracles' famous club. The satyrs know he cannot prevent them from stealing his weapons as he cannot let the skies collapse. Because they recognize this predicament not only do they pilfer his weapons, but they taunt him as well. The satyr on the right is waving

goodbye to Heracles while sauntering away with the hero's club in stark contrast to the 'usual' depictions shown on many vases since the Attic black-figure technique times.



Fig. 15 Hydria. Two women gossiping at a fountain, with an overflowing water container

A red-figure *hydria*, or water container (fig.15), displays two women standing at a fountain house, which consists of a Doric column erected on a one-stepped base with a lion's head spout shown in profile. From their gestures and their poses they seem to be conversing. The woman on the left is drawn smaller than the other to fit into the composition, because she is carrying a hydria on her head. The 'taller' woman has left hers beneath the fountain's spout. Both women wear a tiara which indicates that they are neither slaves nor servants, but most probably citizens. On the far right, a hydria is overflowing with water which is pouring out of the lion's-head spout. The woman on the left is carrying her hydria upright, rather than on its side, which implies it is full, and that she is about to leave. Her feet are pointing towards the left, away from the fountain place. Her head, however, is turned towards the other woman. With these simple elements, the overflowing hydria, the gestures of discussion, the indications of departure of the woman on the left and her gesture of lingering (head turned right) the painter has shown two women gossiping (*lalein, phluarein* in Greek). Because they are lost in conversation, the woman on the right has forgotten her own hydria under the fountain head. This is a typical scene of situation comedy. Aristophanes would surely have agreed. In *Thesmophoriazusae* (v. 393) (and *Lysistrata*, v.627), Woman 'A' complains about Euripides who describes them as 'gossips' (*tas lalous*).

The interest of this hydria and the previous two, as well as a number of many other comic or serious paintings, is that everything in the picture is happening at the same time and consequently painted in such a way that the viewer must 'read' the picture in an all-

encompassing fashion: this is what I term 'visual immediacy.' To describe the situation is to describe the protagonists, the place and the actions which are all happening at the same time. On this hydria there is an immediate impression, as if everything is being seen at the same time. If one did not notice the detail of the overflowing hydria, the scene would appear to be quite commonplace. It would remain an odd detail of no particular consequence to the general meaning of the picture. Details in comic pictures are as important as the reading of a vase in its totality. Vase-paintings often share similar compositions, and it is often easy to take some explanations for granted and yet to dismiss other more unusual or subtle details because the general meaning is considered to be the 'usual one.' Even after viewing more than eighty vase-paintings of fountain houses, a detail such as our overflowing hydria should not be overlooked or discarded as insignificant. Pictures are structured, and work within a strict framework of visual codes. Sometimes, an unusual element, which does not seem at first to fit in the picture, is not the result of a mistake made by the painter or a detail that can be left aside. It may change the eventual interpretation in the most unexpected ways. The importance of unusual details in some pictures, compared to their usual iconography, is crucial for the understanding of parody.

Why did painters make visual puns? One of the principles of humor is to mock rules and conventions. Painters amused themselves from time to time maybe without thinking too much about the eventual purchaser or end-user. Painters were flesh and blood human beings, who laughed and joked as any man would. Does it stretch the imagination too far to imagine in the late 6th century B.C. Athens, a vase-painter in his workshop in the Potters quarter, sketching his tenth 'eye-cup' and abruptly deciding to transform facetiously what was intended to be a serious image into a comic one? On the other hand these vases were the main source of imagery for ancient Athens, Corinth, Thebes and many other great cities of ancient Greece. In such a politicized context as the Athenian (direct) democracy, such representations are highly political. Mocking heroes, gods and dutiful women in public is rude and arguably dangerous, even within a 'free' political system. 'How free was democratic Athens?' is a question one should also ask about the slaves, foreigners and Athens' 'allies' at the height of its power; the situation has not changed that much (Rhodes 2003). Since antiquity, Democracy has been intertwined with imperialist needs. Athens, at the height of its power in the mid-5th century B.C., a self-proclaimed champion of Democracy after its single-handed victory against the Persians at the beginning of that very century, had naturally become an imperialist state. With the help of its allies and trade-partners, it started invading a number of Aegean city-states under the pretext of eradicating tyranny and replacing it with democracy. It often acted with extreme brutality, as we know from Thucydides when in 416, Athens decided to execute all the men of the island of Melos, and eventually sold off the women and children because they refused to be democratized, to become subjects of Athens, for 'their own good.' The Athenians said, "we will now proceed to show you that we are come here in the interest of our empire, and (...) for the preservation of your country" (Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.85). In a similar way, the United States and Britain, self-proclaimed beacons of democracy, try desperately to promote values of democracy and 'freedom' in the Middle-East. The Athenian limits of freedom of expression have to be translated in today's terms: the need for security, the politics of liberal economic expansion and political correctness. Although all laudable pursuits and principles, they have come to govern our lives and curtail our freedom of expression.

On a lighter note, these Greek vases display 'representations.' And, just like the theatre's stage is once removed from reality, these vases were sold at the market, where men, women and children of all classes, all ranks, shapes and sizes, went about their daily activities.

Institute of Archaeology, Oxford

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