

Theoretical Analysis of the Humor in Korean Traditional Space

Han, Sung-Mi* · Ahn, Gye-Bog**

*Culture & Tourism Policy Institute, Korea Ministry of Culture & Tourism

**Dept. of Landscape Architecture, Catholic University of Daegu

한국 전통공간에 표출된 해학에 관한 연구

한성미* · 안계복**

*문화관광부 문화관광정책연구원 · **대구가톨릭대학교 조경학과

ABSTRACT

안계복과 한성미(2003)는 한국 전통공간 가운데 비교적 잘 보존되어 있는 곳을 중심으로, 해학적 요소와 의미에 대해 사례 중심으로 분석하였다. 본 논문에서는 한국 해학에 관한 기존 연구들을 검토하는 문헌고찰과 한국전통 유머의 특성에 대하여 고찰하였으며, 또한 전편의 사례연구에서 조사된 사례들을 유형화하여 그 특성을 파악하고자 하였다. 해학은 우리 민족이 지닌, 여유를 바탕으로 한 독특한 정서이며 이러한 해학성은 전통 예술이나 문학에서 쉽게 찾아볼 수 있다. 그러나 조경 분야에서의 한국의 해학성에 대한 연구는 아직까지 없었으며, 해학이 반영된 현대전통조경 설계사례도 찾아보기 어렵다. 한국 전통 공간에 나타난 해학은 서양의 그것과는 달리 간접적, 은유적이다. 이러한 해학은 삶의 지혜요 웃음이요 화해이다. 한편, 디자인으로서의 해학은 공간에 친근감을 부여함으로써 특정 공간의 경직성을 완화하고, 독특한 공간감을 조성하며, 보는 이들을 끌어들이는 매력을 지닌다. 이러한 공간적 특성을 현대에도 계승해 나아가는 것이 중요할 것이다. 이번 논문에서 분석하지 못한 공간구조적 특징, 설계원칙 등은 추후 과제로 돌린다.

Key Words : Humor, Satire, Sarcasm, Metaphor, Resistance, Culture, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Ideology, Tradition, History, Korea

I. INTRODUCTION

Among the plenty of heritage our ancestors bequeathed us, a sense of humor can be considered one

of the most valuable spiritual properties. On the one hand, it provided a power to endure harsh life in consequence of frequent foreign invasions and social absurdity; and on the other, it became an essential motif of literary and artistic works. Traditional land-

Corresponding author : Sung-Mi Han, Culture & Tourism Policy Institute, Korea Ministry of Culture & Tourism, Seoul 157-850, Korea. Tel. : +82-2-2666-1609, E-mail : sungmihan@kctpi.or.kr

scape works are not an exception. Even though it is not displayed splendidly, humor shines in Korean outdoor space as hidden gems.

In prior research, I analyzed how humor was applied as a significant design concept in Korean traditional space through case studies of design analysis. Those examples of humor strongly contain Korean culture, and are expressed in a Korean style. In fact, humor does not bring the same laughter to every people. It is perceived as having different color, weight, and quality according to the race, history, custom, and way of thinking. Doubtlessly, Korean humor is different from that of other nations, and has its own unique features and basis.

In the following, a literature review was conducted in order to grasp how it has been studied in various fields from diverse viewpoint. Also, through this, I made an effort to understand the characteristics and background of humor which are in Korea only and would help us renovate or revive tradition in modern spaces. And then, to understand the Korean traditional characteristics of humor, I worked on categorization on the base of casestudies which has released in previous article. But there has been no space-structural characteristics of humor or design principles dealt in this article. I'd like to deal with these matters in next article.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Through all ages and countries, humor has been a significant subject in various fields of art and literature. It has been born and developed of a particular culture in our lives. However, it is not easy to find records that governed how humor has been applied and interpreted in various fields of art. Moreover, since the understanding and interpretation of humor are very subjective and diverse based on culture, race, and country, it is exceedingly difficult to define and

explain the theory behind. In this chapter, I review significant concepts about Korean traditional humor found especially in Korean literature and art.

The term humor has not been defined clearly and still is a thorny subject in the academic world. Even though England is known as a country with a well developed notion of humor, Louis Kazamian, an English scholar who spent his whole life in the study of humor, wrote a book on the subject of why humor cannot be defined, and gave up defining humor(Kang, 1985). There are more than a hundred theories, including Plato and Aristotles understanding of humor as unexpected harmless disharmony(Mayer, 1970). The definition of humor has been asserted differently according to psychological, philosophical, and literary points of view. Aristotle classified the aesthetic category of beauty into the sublime, tragic, grace, and the comic, which was subdivided into humor and satire. Meanwhile, Dilthey, Dessoir and Volkelt prescribed humor as a category of aesthetics, but Lipps and Croce raised an objection to this classification.

In Korea, studies have examined what humor is and how humor has been used as a subject of art or literature. Most of them have dealt with the difference between humor and satire. Kang(1985) classifies humor in the field of literature as humor, satire, irony, and wit. He describes that humor is not a laughter which refutes the other party but derives positiveness based on concern for warm-heartedness and understanding of others. In contrast, satire is defined as strong denial of the other party. He says that since satire makes an exception of the speakers themselves from their target of criticism, the property of satire is very scathing. According to Pollard(1980), satire inspires readers emotions such as laughter, ridicule, disdain, anger, and hatred using wit, ridicule, sarcasm, cynicism, and the sardonic. And through this process, the writer attains his or her goal, which is to correct social phenomenon. These concepts of humor

and satire mentioned above have become the main-stream in scholarly writing.

Humor has been especially examined in much of Korean classical literature. Oh(1980) stresses the characteristic of humor in *Baebijang-Jeon*, one of Koreans comic classics. He points out that humor expressed in *Baebijang-Jeon* is different from satire. That is, comedy evokes laughter as an end in the work itself, while satire derides: namely, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt existing outside the work itself (Abrams, 1993). Kim(1979) observes that humor is a part of human life and it grows and develops with culture. Interestingly, Kim(1979) finds that the characteristics of the Korean ancient novel are more similar to the western concept of satire, while poems and songs represent typical oriental humor. Kim(1982) also explores the characteristics of Korean humor in Korean classical literature. He describes Korean humor as having its peculiar characteristics based on natural features, climate, racial traits, history, and convention. Kim(1982) asserts that the more the Korean people overcame difficulties, the deeper the ideologies they could have. Kim(1982) also points out that Korean humor neutralizes sadness to laughter. According to him, Korean classic literary works are a democratic literature that uses humor as a means to rid of the pain and sadness of life.

Chang(1974) defines the characteristic of humor as goodwill, not to ridicule or insult the other party. She explains that most of the Korean folly tales are constructed based upon human relationships and also anecdotes of the distinguished scholars should have spectators as media to make it a humorous story. Chang also argues that Korean tales and ancient novels are so strongly linked with Korean custom, colloquial language, and religion that we can appreciate what Korean humor is all about.

Hong(1986) mentioned the importance of humor in Pansori. She analyzes two representative Pansoris,

Choon-Hyang Ga, and Ta-Ryung Pak, and points out that the humor in two Pansori is satirical and focused on characterization, exaggeration, and metaphor.

There are some studies of Korean humor in connection with animal fables. Kim(1986) researched a change of consciousness of the humble class through the humor and satire in Korean animal fables. She also finds that animal fables represent the state and change of consciousness in a specific time. From this point of view, humor becomes a refresher for the Korean people who have undergone all sorts of hardships through history.

Wi(1988) views a masque as a form of festivity which is a product of public culture, in her research *Humor in Korean masque*. She points out a special quality of public humor in Korean masques. She insists Korean *Tal-Nori* not only criticizes society but also offers laughter through forgiveness and reconciliation, and humor of masque changes in accordance with regional characteristics and historical growth. Namely, she views the laughter of *Tal-nori* as a humor, which is carnival laughter, not satire.

In the meantime, Kister(1985) tries to examine comic propensities which act on exorcism(short dramatic performance) through his study "Humor in Korean shamanic dramas." Kister's analysis is that those comic propensities are on active power of psychologically cathartic emission.

Cho(1982) sought humor in Korean folk songs. He asserts that religious or supernatural factors do not exist in folk songs, and moral standards are not valued in them. He describes that humor in Korean folksongs is based on the emotion of the commoners. Especially under strict Confucian moral rules, they might try to be free from restriction through humorous songs. From this point of view, Cho asserts that this attribute of the humor was appeared remarkably during the period when Korea was a colony of Japan.

Recently, more scholars are conducting studies

about humor in Korean traditional art. Shim(2000) writes about humor as an important Korean traditional beauty. Lee(1998) insists that we can create a term Humor art as a genre, like "humor literature" or "comedy." He also writes about humor as an important element of the beauty of Korean formative arts, such as sculpture of wood or stone.

Moving to Korean modern art, Park(1998) studies the modernized application of Korean humor in Korean modern art. Park says the humor of Korean modern art shows more satirical, critical, and intellectual tendencies compared to the characteristics of traditional humor, which is artless and frank. Consequently, even though the techniques of works are diverse in accordance with artists, the humor in the modern arts is more complicated and metaphorical. Lee(1998) concludes that young artists are trying to express a modern aspect of humor in diverse ways, and they are continuously dealing with symbolism, sarcasm, and current issues of humor. According to Yun(1998), artists of modernism at the end of the twentieth century treat artists themselves as objects of satire. He explains that these cultural phenomena are called post-modernism. He insists that there exists only critique, not satire, in modernism and finally artists regard themselves as the target of humor.

Meanwhile, there is a study about the relationship with humor and music. Han(1998) points out the significance of music as a means of enhancing humor. He said when those humorous words jump on the music, the quality of humor is increased double and becomes true to nature.

So far, I have reviewed significant research and concepts of Korean humor. Even though there are several studies about humor in Korean literature and art, the interpretation of humor as a traditional landscape design concept is rare. Therefore, this research focused on the factor of humor in landscape design works in Korean traditional space would be valuable

as a basis for the following study in relation to both design and preservation.

III. CHARACTERISTICS AND BACKGROUND OF KOREAN TRADITIONAL HUMOR

1. Humor as a Nature of the Korean temperament-Optimism

Just as Plessner(1970) described laughing and crying as the "theory of human nature", which is not controlled by matters of aesthetics or psychology, we can see the characteristics of Korean humor in the Korean people's nature.

In fact, environment, including geographical features and climate, is one of the essential factors influencing human nature. Korea is a mountainous peninsula, beset by the extremes of four different seasons. Clearly changing nature was reflected on rounded mountains. Those mountains have such a ripe old age, that the shapes are dull and curved. Such a soft topography might influence the Korean people's mentality to be less sharp, merry, and optimistic. Also, they might learn that pain would be gone and hope will come as the seasons change. This theory, which is based on Korean geographical characteristics, is strongly insisted by Shim(2000).

Religious background also affects people's temperaments. Three main religions, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, have influenced the spirit of the Korean people. Buddhism emphasizes the mysterious harmony of the mundane and spiritual worlds, the concept of indifference, and freedom from material and emotional attachment. It plants optimism in the Korean mentality with the concept of a future life that consoles for the harshness of this world(Korean Buddhist Newspaper, 2003). Taoism might promote the Koreans

that adapts to and leans on nature unlike western notions of nature, which becomes an object for analysis and challenge. That is to say, Taoists take in and enjoy nature itself, not confronting it. Generally, the Korean people regard harmony, moderation, and equilibrium of nature as the most important virtue which they trained themselves through their religions.

This harmony with the whole and being full of life are well expressed in Korean literature, music, architecture, sculpture, craftworks, and ceramics. Although life was arduous and destitute, the Korean people always tried to promote delight, and an optimistic way of thinking(Park, 1998). Based on optimism for life even in the fate of challenging circumstances, Korean humor rests upon optimism, not pessimism.

2. Humor as will to overcome sadness

Historically, Korea has suffered from frequent invasions by foreign countries. Because of the geopolitical characteristics, Korea was threatened by China, and Japanese pirate raiders pillaged incessantly. Given this situation, the Korean people have almost always had to be ready for war until modern times, and sadness naturally followed due to the wounds of wars(Ko, 1963).

Yanagi(1889~1961), a Japanese folklorist and folk-art critic, describes Korean beauty as a "beauty of sadness." As the first foreign writer to address Korean art in earnest, Yanagi has published works about Korean ceramic wares and industrial art. He describes Korean beauty as thin lines which are rooted in the sadness. According to him, "Chinese art is an art of strong will, and Japanese is an art of charm. However, Korean art bears a heavy burden of sadness"(Yanagi, 1922).

Today, we can only partially endorse Yanagi's opinion about the characteristics of Korean art because the "beauty of sadness" is one of the representative

errors promoted by misunderstandings of Korean art. Yanagi only focuses totally on the lamentation originating from frequent foreign invasion and its pain. It is a fact that Koreans have been harassed by wars. Yet they have not lingered in sadness. Remarkably, they have used humor as a means of surviving the deep sadness. Contrary to Yanagi's theory, there are many traces of joyfulness and humor in Korean traditional music and literature, as well. For an example of Korean traditional music, Pansori(a lengthy opera) contains not only social protest and beautiful love, but also comic stories. For a literary example, Shijo, brief lyric verses, and folk songs represent the mentality of humor in Koreans' lives as well. The sad history of Korea made the Koreans strong, and humor became their energy in difficult situations.

3. Humor as resistance

Korean humor also represents resistance against a social system. Korea was a country which had social strata dividing the nobility and the common people. Moreover, man and woman, old and young generations were completely classified under the rules of Confucianism¹⁾. However, despite its strength and centrality to the Korean people, sometimes the rule of Confucianism smothered the spirit of society and suppressed the mentality of the people. Further, aristocratic culture provoked feuds between the nobility and the people of lower classes while extended family compelled women to sacrifice for men and family. Under these situations, humor might give "catharsis," resistance against these entrenched social structures. The "Hahoe mask dance drama" is a representative example that has satirized the feud between the nobility and the common people as an art form, since AD 1200.

The drama shows the peak of the governmental class's absurdity. Since the actors all wear smiling

masks, and do not designate specific characters, people can laugh with ease. To the common people who eked out a scanty livelihood and endured mistreatment, the masquerade helped rid them of their stress through humor.

On the other hand, Yun-Bok Shin(1758 - ?), one of the most famous Korean folk painters of the eighteenth century, jeered not only at the Confucian views on sex but also at Confucianism's moral system, displaying anti-establishment humor, and resisting authority and falsehood to the best of his ability.

After all, the Korean people could laugh even under an oppressive system of social and religious ideology. It was the wisdom of breaking through stifling reality. As Yun(1998) said, Korean humor's root is resistance, its branch is acumen, and its flowers are laughter and reconciliation.

4. Humor as Metaphor - Softness, Warmth, and Humanity

Korean Art Philosopher Yo-han Cho(1926~) said that even if humor joins the rank of ethics, it does not arm like satire or sarcasm. Humor has therefore, flexibility and open-minded grace compared to satire and sarcasm(Ryu, 1998). Instead of attacking or analyzing, humor embraces its target warmly and generously. Korean humor especially is not direct and tough.

Rutt, an American reporter who worked during the



Figure 1. Villa d' Este.

1970s in Korea, is famous for his articles on Sa-Gat Kim, and the folksong, Arirang. According to him, humor exists as a strong undercurrent of Korean culture. He says the poems of Sa-Gat Kim and the love song Arirang describe humor deeply and especially points out that Korean humor is not represented directly but in a roundabout way. Actually, the Korean people have high regard for the beauty of metaphor. They have followed the circuitous way as an ideal in every form of expression, and the concept is well represented in their lifestyle and art.

Let us compare Korean sculptures with that of the European late Renaissance. The fountains of the Villa d' Este(Fig. 1) and "Manneken Pis"(Fig. 2) show the direct style of western humor that makes us laugh loudly. Those are exaggerated descriptions of a part of the human body or ridiculous gesture that induce laughing instantly. Then, let us look at the sculpture of Korean HaeTae in front of the Kyungbok-Palace. His generally rounded shape is intimate and his big, plump paws look rather cute(Fig. 3). It is distinctly different from the dreadful Chinese stone lion that stands in front of the palace(Fig. 4).

Moreover, Korean humor is human. Let us take a look at the Rock-Cut Buddha Triad from the Baekje period(Fig. 5). What makes the image of the Buddha truly unique is the smile that graces its round pleasant face. That expression, often labeled the "smile of Baekje" is one-of-a-kind. Dressed in the simple robes of commoners, the Buddha's face itself recalls those of the common people, his smile the same one of a child. This kind of smile is called the "Archaic Smile." (<http://www.kculture.co.kr/content03-6-005.htm>)

In addition, Korean Buddhist statues are placed for ease of approach, so they seem more familiar. Sometimes they hold lost men's hands on a path up a mountain. Sometimes they smile on the corner of a path through the forest. They are more human than a god that we cannot approach. Furthermore, the meta-



Figure 2. Manneken Pis.

Figure 3. Haetae : Kyungbok-Palace.

Figure 4. Stone Lion-Jakum

Figure 5. Rock-Cut Buddha Triad. Palace (China).

phor in Korean humor, one of the techniques of Korean art and literature, is symbolic and romantic. Let us look at the flower wall of JaKyung-jeon, a palace of the queen mother. The king wished the queen mother's longevity and the patterns of the wall show it. The patterns depict ten longevity symbols such as the crane, turtle, deer, pine tree, clouds, sun, which symbolize long life. For all that, there are a couple of butterflies. Butterflies symbolize the love of man and woman. What was the King's intent? The butterfly makes us curious, think again, and finally smile instead of just passing by²⁾. Scruton pointed out that pleasure of beauty is not perceived instantly like pleasure through sensory organ, but refers to the process of thought and is influenced by it (Scruton, 1980). The philosophy of Korean humor also would be included the theory.

Meanwhile, a fourteen-face-die, on which fourteen punishments are written, such as "making a ridiculous face", "hitting others' noses", "dancing silently", "imitating a hunchback", "swallowing three cups of liquor at a gulp" provides recreation for a funny king and his ministers (Fig. 6). All of these examples tell us that there is naive, unvarnished, roundabout, elegant, and human art in Korean humor. It is warm and soft enough. It approaches us tenderly and makes us smile silently.

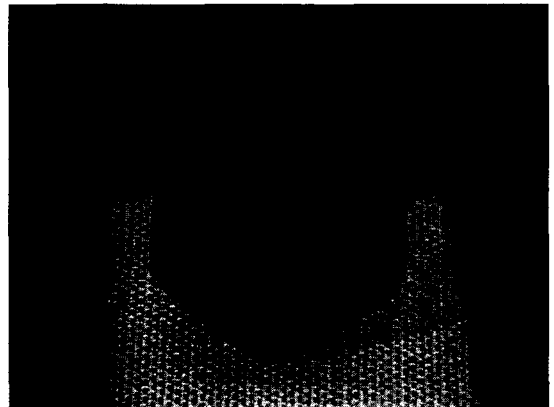


Figure 6. Fourteen-face-die.

IV. TYPES OF HUMOR³⁾

Many people don't know how humor is soaked into traditional places. So I categorized them as urban versus rural, public versus private, and as upper class versus lower class in order to grasp whether this is the matter of only specific class. As stated above, in the literature review, in view of the importance of ideological situation in humor, I categorized them as situational, archetypal, and buddhistic.

As in every artistic activity, the Korean way of thinking, way of expressing their emotions, and the ideologies which ruled them are well reflected in the forms of humor in the examples that I have reviewed

in previous case study design analysis.

In many cases, smiling faces induce humor. Except for the big laughing of the stone lions in Guerung, most of the smiles are soft and calm, which also make viewers quietly smile. Some cases stimulate our imagination through the use of symbolic objects or patterns, and finally make us realize the humor. These are so metaphorical that the humor in them needs our careful attention. Occasionally, more direct ways of expression using exaggerated and ridiculous figures, like in stone Jangseong and mythical animals on stone pots, are also used.

In opposition to the strict main ideologies of the time, such as Confucianism and Buddhism, an approach to ordinary human emotion was carefully expressed. On the other hand, a certain ideology is stressed humorously through design such as the frogs surrounding a stone pot in Yeonkyung-Dang representing a Taoist virtue. More over, the personification of animals, which is a traditional way of representing humor in Korea, and reappearing characters from ancient novel, also become unique forms of humor.

The types of humor represented in the case studies are : breaking fixed ideas, values, and rules; emphasizing unexpectedness and imagination; exaggerating figures artlessly; intimating certain meanings; expressing humanity. According to its use, location, meaning, and form, case study examples can also be categorized as into the following categories of humor : public versus private, situational versus archetypal⁴⁾, Buddhist versus Taoist, upper class versus lower class, urban versus rural(Table 1).

Humor also functions variously upon surroundings and viewers. Most of all, humor creates intimacy between the design and viewers. If design is a matter of communication between the designers and the viewers, humor becomes a catalyst between the two. It makes us feel humanity, give full play to our imagination, think again, and finally gives us a warm-heart

Table 1. Categories of humor

Public	vs	Private
HaeTae (Kyungbok-Palace) Seosu (Kyungbok-Palace) Woldae (Kyungbok-Palace)		Flower wall (Kyungbok-Palace) Chuigyu Jeong (Changduck-Palace)
Situational	vs	Archetypal
Westerner in Guerung Nungji Tap Pagoda Jabsang (Changkyung-Palace) Chuigyu Jeong Frogs on stone pot in Yeonkyung-Dang (Changduck-Palace)		Seosu Stone Jangseong Stone lions in Guerung Mythical animals on Stone Pot in Naksun-Jae
Buddhist	vs	Taoist
Nungji Tap Pagoda Sunam-Temple Temple Site of Jang Hang Ri Dang Gan Ji Ju (Whangryong-Temple)		Stone pot in Yeonkyung-Dang (Changduck-Palace)
Upper Class	vs	Lower Class
Flower wall Guerung (Royal tomb) Stone pots		Stone Jangseong
Urban	vs	Rural
Flower wall Stone pots		Stone Jangseong

and tranquil smile.

As a design technique, humor creates a sense of place. Sometimes it gives an accent to the place and describes its character of the place. In addition, humor softens rigid spaces, such as palaces, temples, and graves. It makes people relax from such seriousness so that they can approach and feel the space easier. Ultimately, humor is an important factor to attract people.

In most cases, the way of representing humor is subtle and indirect, as Koreans admire not extremes but moderation. However, once it is recognized, humor might act deeper and longer in viewers mind.

V. CONCLUSION

1. Since humor is one of the distinctive cultural factors, Korean humor runs through Korean culture, which includes religions, ideologies, and customs. The fact that Korean people are optimistic has been discussed based on the geographical and religious characteristics of Korea. Softly curved lines of landscape and major religions such as Buddhism and Taoism that set a high value on the future life and adaptation to nature might influence the Korean people's mentality to be optimistic. A more noteworthy fact is that the Korean people did not lose their optimism in spite of their harsh life. Rather, their sense of humor has been used to overcome sadness from frequent invasions of foreign countries, and to resist the social absurdity and stifling ideology of Confucianism.
2. Abundant works of art, literature, and material and immaterial cultural properties demonstrate that humor was a significant motif of those works and definitely a part of their life. According to many scholars who studied about humor in Korean art and literature, humor is different from satire or sarcasm that attacks the other party cynically. Humor has tolerance, and Korean humor in art and literature fully shows this characteristic. Korean humor, however, is expressed not in a very direct way but metaphorically and subtly. Those elegant and delicate characteristics of humor are also well reflected in the examples of landscape works that I have reviewed in previous case studies of design analysis.
3. Making soft smiling; applying symbolic objects; exaggerating and changing the figure; stressing ordinary human emotions and specific ideologies; and personifying animals were mainly used to express humor. These features of humor can

also be categorized as public versus private, situational versus archetypal, Buddhist versus Taoist, upper class versus lower class, urban versus rural according to the location, meaning, and forms of the humor.

4. Ultimately, humor provides a significant design concept which attracts viewers by intimacy and humanity breaking fixed ideas and creating latitude of mind. However, in spite of its worth and importance, humor has rarely been analyzed as a design element in theoretical and practical fields of landscape architecture. This study, which reviews preceding researches and traces characteristics and the background of Korean humor, will be a key to understand and interpret humor in Korean traditional space. Also, it will provide a chance to review the concept of Korean humor systematically.

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- 주 1. "Confucianism was the affirmation of accepted values and norms of behavior in primary social institutions and basic human relationships. All human relationships involved a set of defined roles and mutual obligations" (Berling, 1996).
- 주 2. This example was discussed in previous case study in detail.
- 주 3. The examples discussed here were analyzed in previous case study(Ahn and Han, 2003).
- 주 4. The term "Archetypal" is used by a psychoanalyst Carl Jung, initially. Archetypal includes congenital, unconscious and intuitional apprehension. I applied this term to explain humor that is perceived as unconsciously and intuitionally, which makes contrast with situationally enacted humor.

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