In this paper I will interpret Martin Heidegger’s concept of aletheia, designating ‘truth’ in ancient Greek, both in the light of the pre-socratic Gorgias of Leontinoi’s Encomium of Helen as well as Roland Barthes’ 20th century striptease theory. By outlining a rudimentary ‘theory of wilful reading’, I argue that it is both possible and legitimate to elicit comic readings even from stern texts by supplementing them with suitable contexts and thus rendering them comic.

At times, serious, statesman-like German philosophers are hilarious. Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, for instance, writes in his preface to the Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts (Elements of the Philosophy of Right) on the philosopher’s business, “Wenn man nun betrachtet, wie solches Geschäft wirklich betrieben zu werden pflegt, so sieht man [. . .] denselben alten Kohl immer wieder aufkochen und nach allen Seiten hin ausgeben” (21) (“When one considers how this business tends to be carried out, one sees [. . .] the same old cabbage being boiled again and again and handed out in all directions”).¹ Even his Phänomenologie des Geistes (Phenomenology of Spirit), predominantly written in a sublime style, abounds with jovial metaphors. Once in a while, Immanuel Kant becomes witty, too. His Kritik der reinen Vernunft (Critique of Pure Reason) supplies a couple of linguistically wilful punch lines. Friedrich Nietzsche, of course, offers plenty of corny puns; it is no exaggeration to say that they form one of the main pillars supporting his philosophical œuvre. There seems to be only one exception to this tradition of German philosophers inclining towards the comic: Martin Heidegger. Not only in private does he seem to be totally bereft of humour, as, for example, his correspondence with Hannah Arendt illustrates (cf. Arendt and Heidegger). His philosophical writings also lack any comic elements whatsoever. They are pervaded by an apparently pretentious, as it were, chthonic gravity. Furthermore, this earnestness is accompanied by an unrivalled propositional obscurity. In his lecture Was heißt Denken? (What Calls for Thinking?), Heidegger writes, “Everything thought-provoking gives us to think. But it always gives that gift just so far as the thought-provoking matter already is intrinsically what must be thought about. [. . .] What is most thought-provoking? [. . .] Most thought-provoking is that we are still not thinking” (370). It is precisely this philosophical murmuring which upsets

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own and emphases according to the original.
Jürgen Habermas. In his lectures Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne (The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity), he claims, “[d]ie Rhetorik des späten Heidegger entschädigt für die propositionalen Gehalte, die der Text selbst verweigert: sie stimmt die Adressaten in den Umgang mit pseudo-sakralen Mächten ein” (168) (“[t]he rhetoric of the later Heidegger compensates for the propositional content that the text itself refuses: It attunes and trains its addressees in their dealings with pseudo-sacral powers”) (The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity 140). What Habermas disqualifies as merely rhetorical “pseudo-sacral powers”, Heidegger himself calls “the force of the most elemental words in which Dasein expresses itself” (Heidegger, Being and Time 262). It is well-known that Heidegger’s inclination towards an allegedly powerful and original, soil-bound language and thought discredited him, both politically and intellectually. However, opinions diverge on this matter. With regard to “the general question of the relation between Heidegger’s thought and his Nazism”, Richard Rorty claims, “that there is [not] much to be said except that one of the century’s most original thinkers happened to be a pretty nasty character” (111). Henri Meschonnic, author of Le langage Heidegger – probably the most important book on Heidegger’s language and rhetoric –, states:

Il me semble que ce renouvellement [un renouvellement dans l’approche de bien des questions philosophiques importantes, particulièrement en herméneutique] est une fable. […] Or il s’agit de mettre en évidence que seule l’ignorance de la théorie du langage a pu prendre l’herméneutique de Heidegger pour un renouvellement et une démarche originale (17f.).

It seems to me that Heidegger’s renewal within the approach of many important philosophical questions, particularly in hermeneutics, is a myth. […] It is important to show that only ignorance of the theory of language could lead to the idea of Heidegger’s hermeneutics being a renewal and an original operation.

In his book Mithridates im Paradies (Mithridates in Paradise), Jürgen Trabant calls “Heideggers volksetymologisch willkürliches Gleiten von Wort zu Wort […] eine Art philosophisches Sprach-Surfen” (318) (“Heidegger’s pseudo-etymological random sliding from word to word a kind of philosophical language-surfing”). Luckily, the question of Heidegger’s value as a philosopher can be left open here. The issue of his relation towards the comic, however, must be clarified. In the following passage I will outline, or rather sketch out, a ‘very brief theory of the comic’.²

Still today, the assessment of the political role of Heidegger’s thought is controversial. In his study Heidegger: L’introduction du nazisme dans la philosophie,

² For classical theoretical references in the German speaking tradition cf. Allemann, Preisendanz, Japp, and Schnell.