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p.o.v.

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The principal purpose of p.o.v. is to provide a framework for collaborative publication for those of us who study and teach film at the Department of Information and Media Studies at Aarhus University. We will also invite contributions from colleagues in other departments and at other universities. Our emphasis is on collaborative projects, enabling us to combine our efforts, each bringing his or her own point of view to bear on a given film or genre or theoretical problem. Consequently, the reader will find in each issue a variety of approaches to the film or question at hand – approaches which complete rather than compete with one another.

March issues of p.o.v. are devoted to the short film. And as December 2007, all issues of p.o.v. are anonymously peer-reviewed.

p.o.v.

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Hybrid humour, for short
The magical neo-realism of Roberto Benigni's *Tu Mi Turbi*

Daniel Alegi

People who make us laugh
Maybe it's a science.
Maybe it's humanity...
(Tata ta ra tac)
Maybe it's just... Balzac.

These are lines from Paolo Conte's final soundtrack song of *Tu Mi Turbi*, Roberto Benigni's 1983 debut as a director. In the closing scene, a military guard (Claudio Bisagli) "proves" to his cynical, anti-authoritarian fellow soldier (Benigni) that God exists. How? By asking for snow to fall by the count of nine. The song's nonsensical meditation is an ode to slur words from the bottom of a glass, and to getting lost on the way home at night. It is also the unifying element in a fragmented, hybrid, ironic film. As the final credits roll over a low-budget snow-effect shot of the Eternal City smothered by the silent marvel, a spectator may wonder: was that comedy?

Tu Mi Turbi – translated as both *You Disturb Me* (USA) and *You Upset Me* (UK) – is actually a little-known composite of four separate short films, each with its own title. The first, called "Durante Cristo" (*During Christ*), and the second called "Angelo" (*Angel*), both extract humor from religion, one employing Jesus (a boy to baby-sit) and God (an antagonist in love) as characters in absurdist story designs. The third and fourth short segments are entitled "In Banca" (*At the Bank*) and "Milite Ignoto" (*The Unknown Soldier*), and focus on money and army-regulations as premises for nonsensical humor scenarios. All four shorts share one actor, one director, one final credit roll, and a

consistent soundtrack. All were produced during the same period and none were screened individually. Early edit assemblies placed the second and third shorts in inverse order.

My p.o.v. – as a filmmaker raised in Italy – is that *Tu Mi Turbi* may be seen as a *hybrid* film, crossing lines *and conventions* in form and genre.

The film must be seen as a feature in chapters. Yet at the same time it is a summation of separate shorts. Secondly, *Tu Mi Turbi*'s core is existential humor, a non-genre in conventional cinema, a creative compass that re-presents – from one short to another – imaginary links to the likes of Beckett, Ionesco, Chaplin and the Italian improv actor Toto.

Benigni's social and artistic inspirations and alter-ego identities – rather than fostering a feeling of fragmentation in viewing the films – project one persona and one authorial without-a-net exploration of the human condition. The *Tu Mi Turbi* characters are fragile, lost, illogical, off balance, lonely, desperate. And (therefore?) funny. They exude a hopeful naiveté that resonates as believable and real despite their *magical neo-realism* (my term), extraordinary circumstances, self-irony and collective make-believe.

All four shorts share a core focus on sadly hilarious nobodies entangled in scenes of work, religion, love and verbal non-sequiturs so lightly sketched as to feel familiar and un-staged, at least at the outset. They were developed with Giuseppe Bertolucci. At the time Benigni had mostly a background as a stage and TV performer. In one of his earliest black-and-white skits on RAI TV in the late 70s, he appeared interrupting regular evening programming with a home-made bootleg of political satire, literally squeezed on the air *while* milking cows on a farm. These "interruptions" were first-person TV sketches, monologues without dramatic structure, 10-12 minutes long. As a first-time

director of *Tu Mi Turbi*, story design presented a challenge for the Tuscan actor: he had never been responsible for extended dramatic storytelling, let alone three-act coherence and development. The burden of a proper dramatic structure posed itself a formal dilemma.

Benigni's choice to composite short films rewards the audience with the added challenge of an open-ended story-puzzle – to re-assemble hybrid splinters of meaning that lack comforting, genre divides. As digital film experimentation and craft grow, animated characters share the screen with live action actors and the doc *Surplus* by Erik Gandini uses the visual language of music videos and advertising. Benigni's *Tu Mi Turbi*, made in the early 80s, may be considered a precursor, with its humor *tout-court* – of 21st century cinema's impulses to mix fact and fiction into hybrid-media forms.

"Durante Cristo" (*During Christ*) is set in the year 5 A.D. The hero is Benigno, a shepherd with a problem: he needs a miracle, as all his sheep have gone astray. As destiny has it, Benigno is friends with a couple from out of town, Joseph and Maria, They dream of a rare night out. Joseph begs Benigno to baby-sit for their five year old son, Jesus. The Italian public targeted by the author had never seen a comedian venture into this holy home, especially not an irreverent comic with a TV reputation for blasphemy. How can an impious shepherd-director armed only with con-games and make-believe stories entertain a sleepless little Messiah?

Surprise. Benigno plays in this short an indeed benign alter-ego, with a tact in handling the holy family that the actor Benigni had not been previously famous for. Benigno/i opens with a script miracle: no villain in this short film, just a room, a bathtub, a fireplace and a few pieces of fish and bread to "multiply." The set is simply a one-room theater for this magician and his special witness. In one hilarious

sequence, Benigno tries to bathe the child, but the boy just stands *on* the bathtub water.

In *Tu Mi Turbi* believing is the starting point of illusion, of magic, of accepting the inexplicable, even beyond the (now well-metabolized) cinematic illusion of cinema itself. In "Durante Cristo" the audience sees Jesus believe a stranger who distracts him and slips more and more of the same bread and fish on the table. Seeing others believe is a passe-partout to Benigni's humor. It makes the audience a witness, not a passive spectator.

Short 2, "Angelo" (*Angel*) is set in a world where people are shadowed by visible winged mentors. A man wanders the streets of Rome in a Tuxedo, looking for his lost guardian angel, a gorgeous female. He finds her in a brothel, where she confesses her infidelity. What makes it a real nightmare is that she is now having an affair with the Almighty himself.

In one of Woody Allen's literary short stories, a man married to a beautiful but simple-minded blonde woman regularly pays by the hour for a heavy-set woman in a brothel to discuss Dostoevsky with

him. In "Angelo" Benigni's character is so boring that the human condition of loneliness offers no terrestrial escape. The man cannot believe his destiny, nor that such profound betrayal could come from so high up.

Benigni's character: "Him?" "You mean... Him? How do you... You don't mean... HIM?"

In "Angel," the ending reveals the man as he awakens from a nightmare. The Angel is by his side. What? When Napoleon and the Devil enter the bedroom and the costume party is declared over, sadness returns. Rejoice, humor made happiness lasted a few beats. The real angel waits for the next party to appear...

Benigni is no Buster Keaton, words drive his humour more than physical events. The tipping point in the *Tu Mi Turbi* shorts is a key turning point beat exploiting a moment of surprise and contradicting a previously established pattern.

In "Durante Cristo" the pattern is the disappearance of Benigno's sheep. In **"In Banca" (*At the Bank*, Short 3)**, the protagonist is a man looking to buy an apartment. The pattern is that every agency

showing of apartments is so crowded and moves so quickly that he never even gets a chance to bid. On the third try he finally manages a solution: he physically locks 20 other buyers inside the apartment. In the heat of the exploit, he signs for a price above his means. He now needs a loan he cannot afford and in the extended central scene, faces a bank director. Benigni has no collateral to guarantee the loan. Improv dialogue of this sort follows:

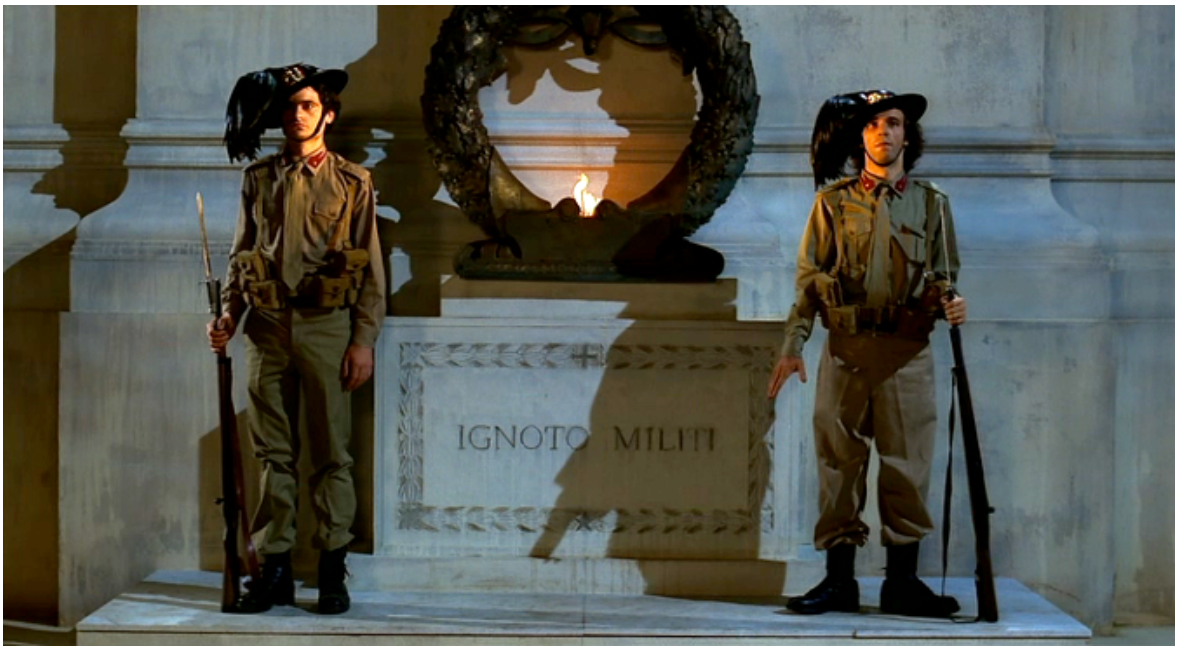
> Benigni: Dear Director, if had money, would I be here asking for a loan?
>
> *The Director is on the phone talking business.*
>
> Benigni: If I had money, I would be lending *you* money, Mr. Director, not the other way around! Just tell me how much money you need, Mr. Director and I can lend it to you. Is that what you need, money? How much do you need? That's what I would do."
>
> *The Director is now off the phone.*
>
> Director: Excuse me. What were we talking about?

The filmmaker Benigni does not allow the bank director to break out of the Ionesco ping-pong pattern with logic, and fuels verbal mis-understandings with nonsense, random phonetic associations,

reversals and plays on words that only the Italian language version renders to the fullest. Short cinema is not normally forgiving of abstract verbiage and repetition and has a low tolerance for predictability. Yet in *Tu Mi Turbi*'s shorts , as Richard Raskin might put it, the presence of both consistency and surprise is an asset. Benigni will engage the audience to witness and believe the absurd, until the police intervenes to remove the man and slam him in jail. The unhappy ending is lined with humorous silver: the comfortable jail cell looks and feels a lot like the empty 40 square meter apartment the protagonist had tried to buy in the first place. And not only that! The man can have it all to himself. Our absurd world keeps spinning and making sense.

The fourth and final short is **"Milite Ignoto" (*The Unknown Soldier*)** which begins with a voice-over introducing the situation and the plight of two guards, a beginning typical of lesser neo-realist films as a way of placing a story within the realm of fiction despite obvious historical and political references. Two soldiers stand guard at the Italian national monument. By duty they are sworn to silence and immobility. Benigni's character changes position often and talks all the time, engaging his counterpart – against his will – in dialogue.

In all four shorts Benigni's character sits or stands still next to another character who listens to his monologues as a witness, a sparring partner, or as just a visual cutaway shot, providing ad lib opportunities. Benigni the director shoots and edits extended cutaway shots (in Italian called a "listening plane") of everything possible (faces, animals, open windows) so he can use more of his improv material from separate takes.



For Benigni, the live audience itself had played the role of witness to his standup comic "shows." In *Tu Mi Turbi* the audience is this wit–ness character who not only listens to Benigni's verbal weaving but becomes its accomplice, thus inhabiting contradictions and misunder-standings in a humorous and hopeless pursuit of solutions and answers.

In the final episode Benigni plays a villain. His escalating verbal nonsense and rule-breaking drive the second soldier to a near break–down. One line in particular, introduced after an exchange concerning which of the two is more deserving to have a girlfriend, is repeated like a mantra.

> – Siamo di famiglia contadina, Tu mi turbi, signorina. (*We come from a peasant family. You trouble me miss.*)
> – Tu mi turbi, Tu mi turbi signorina. (*You trouble me. You trouble me miss.*)

The "Unknown Soldier" pits two human victims in direct conflict. One believes in duty and army rules, and is devoted to respecting the country's highest military altar and the flame that burns within it. The other (the villain) lights his cigarette in the holy fire and is busy

answering his bayonet-phone which his imaginary girlfriends call with increasing frequency. Neither has a way out. Like Toto, the Neapolitan cabaret star who became a fixture in hundreds of films in the post-war period, Benigni here creates a center stage and removes all the rest (sounds of distant traffic are mixed in) to isolate the human condition of two drafted soldiers guarding a flame in peacetime. Loneliness and sadness become a platform for their imagination. As characters, they must amuse themselves with humor, to survive.

> Benigni Soldier: You know what I can do about these phone calls?
> Other Soldier: What?
> Benigni Soldier: I am not going to answer it anymore.
> Other Soldier: Oh really?
> Benigni Soldier: Yes. I am just going to let it ring. That will serve them right.

The "Unknown Soldier" invokes Beckett's hobos in waiting, but clads them in uniform, as if to show the institutionalization and regulation of a permanent state of waiting for mankind. How can a solution arrive? Fellini-ex-machina !

The two soldiers debate whether God exists.

> Other Soldier: I know God exists.
> Benigni Soldier: How do you know that?
> Other Soldier: A friend of mine heard it from someone who knows for sure.
> Benigni Soldier: What's his name. This guy who knows?
> Other Soldier: I can't tell you.
> Benigni Soldier: Just tell me the initial. Of his name.
> Other Soldier: I can't.
> Benigni Soldier: Come on, tell me!
> Other Soldier: B.
> Benigni Soldier: B?
> Other Soldier: Yes, it starts with B.
> Benigni Soldier: Tell me the second letter.

Benigni's alter egos are always asking. Asking for help, asking for directions, asking for a revelation, for pardon, for a second chance with a woman or a bank. The failure to find answers is not blamed on anyone. Benigni's shorts are forgiving in nature. We are all human, he

seems to say, we are all familiar with God, Love, Money, and War, the narrative shorthand map of all cinema short or long is about *trying* to put together the pieces, to understand, to resolve a personal matter, to get out of a jam, to do (what?) to ask (why?) to wonder (how?).

Challenged to prove God's existence – in a refrain of the happy ending that all other individual shorts share – the common man's struggles are rewarded. Not as an American-hero is rewarded (through a strong-willed effort) but by nature, by coincidence, by the random unifying, humorous, nonsensical "IT" of existence.

A silent burst of silent random beauty quells the voices. Snow falls. Paolo Conte's piano wails will help us wander further.

People who make us laugh
Maybe it's a science.
Maybe it's humanity...
(Tata ta ra tac)
Maybe it's just... Balzac.

The blue hippo in lifestyle television – On pastiche in television satire

Hanne Bruun

> *Nikolaj Kirk: Dolph, the Germans did NOT win the War (WW II).*
> *Dolph: That issue can be discussed for a VERY long time, but it is a given fact that they won!*
> *Michael Wulff: No Dolph, I would like to interject that everything suggests that the Germans lost the War*
> *Dolph: Yes, but only at the end, Wulff, only at the end!! And that is an inconsequential detail not important in a war, not in a war, Wulff!!*

The small segment of verbal interaction above is from 'Dolph and Wulff', a satirical sketch-comedy show on Danish public service television. The series was aired in 2005 on the second channel of DR (Denmark's Radio), and features the young, smug and rather incompetent television host, Michael Wulff, and his co-host: a gigantic, light-blue hippopotamus called Dolph. The hippo talks a lot, but in the form of long, opinionated monologues, perhaps more suitable to a political discussion programme, and delivered in a very loud staccato voice. Dolph always carries a baseball bat, and smashes things up whenever he gets angry; Dolph is constantly angry. In many ways, Dolph is the essence of all the politically incorrect opinions and attitudes associated with an absurd notion of masculinity: He is fascinated by war, soldiers, weapons and violence, and calls himself a Ninja warrior. But Dolph is also the essence of infantile behaviour: He is absurdly ignorant, but opinionated, and he is physically and socially very clumsy, but proud, resulting in an endless series of face-losing situations. Wulff is a young urban semi-intellectual, and he is very eager to become a famous television personality. However, his chances of actually becoming successful are constantly destroyed by Dolph's

verbal raids and behaviour. Consequently, every segment of every episode ends in disaster.

I will elaborate on 'Dolph and Wulff' later in the article, because it is a typical example of recent developments in television satire in Denmark. The series is in many ways a part of a long tradition of satirical sketch comedy on Danish public service television, going back to 1968 (Bruun, 2006). Satire has been an important part of the entertainment profile of public service television, and it still is (Bruun, 2007). The genre strives in various ways to give the viewers a critical, comprehensible and, most importantly, *funny* diagnosis of a presumably shared socio-political and cultural reality. However, during the last 10 years the tradition has gone through profound changes is terms of quantity as well as quality. Quantitatively, there has been an explosion of programmes being produced. To illustrate this change, public service television in Denmark – DR and TV 2 – scheduled 68 first-run programmes in the period from 1991-95, but 340 first-run programmes in the period from 2001-05. DR's second channel, DR2, is the channel on which the majority of the programmes produced are shown. DR2 was established in 1996, but 38% of domestic satirical sketch comedy broadcast on public service television from 1968 to 2005 was aired by DR2.[1]

DR2 is aimed at the better-educated segments of the audience, and the genre plays a strategic role in the entertainment profile of DR, in its competition for the politically and economically important young audiences.

Qualitatively, the programmes produced have also changed a lot. First of all, the satirical sketch comedy tradition has developed into

[1] These figures are based on a catalogue of satirical sketch comedy produced by DR1, DR2, TV 2 and TV2/Zulu from 1968-2005. The catalogue was created by the author of this article with the help of two research assistants: Stine Lomborg and Signe Kromann.

two branches: political and social satire. *Political satire* is the older satirical form, and reflects the current news stories in the media; it is oriented towards specific political issues, social problems and/or people on the national agenda; essentially, issues traditionally addressed by the daily news flow. The second branch, *social satire*, has cultivated an interest in the lives of ordinary Danes. The focus of social satire is on diverse lifestyles and mentalities, and the way cultural and political trends, and new social demands affect the individual in terms of behaviour, norms and self-image. In particular, the gap between the demands on, and the actual abilities of the individual is exposed, and the programmes cultivate losing face as the comic engine. In this manner, the development has broadened the reach of areas that could be the objects of television satire, and is no longer restricted to current political issues. In terms of form, the development of the satirical sketch comedy involves experiments. In political as well as social satire, many different media genres and the aesthetic conventions of different media discourses are put to use as aesthetic vehicles of the satire, as well as being the objects of satire in themselves. Parody and, especially, pastiche are increasingly important, and *media satire* is therefore a prominent element, and even the aim of much current television satire (Bruun, 2007). This article will argue that pastiche is perhaps the more important of the two in creating satirical humour, and perhaps this is because of the perception of the viewers involved.

To support this argument, I will start off with a short theoretical presentation of the differences between satire, parody and pastiche as communicative modes. Using a small segment from an episode of the series 'Dolph and Wulff' as the analytical example, I will move on to discuss the role of pastiche in satire, focusing in detail on the kind of media cultural knowledge the viewers of the program are presumed to have, in order to meet the satirical intention of this kind of

television entertainment. Finally, I will discuss satirical humour and the entertainment qualities of this kind of media output.

Satire, parody and pastiche

In the theoretical literature on satire, an important dimension mentioned is satire's contextual dependency: To carry out the satirical intention, satire must have a strong reference to a social, political and cultural reality outside of the discursive universe of the text itself (see Hutcheon, 1985; Schwindt, 1988; Larsen, 2001). It is safe to say that its social dimension defines satire. But if the satirical intentions of the text are to be understood by the audience, and perhaps applauded, the viewers and the producers must share larger parts of the contextualising social, political and cultural reality. Furthermore, satire has a normative aim, with regard to reality. Schwindt (1988) argues that in satire the referential function of language is essential, even when dealing with (a kind of) fiction. Because of its contextual dependency, satire presupposes and establishes *socio-political knowledge*. The ridicule generated by satire is a social act with consequences. The ridicule contains a critique of the present state of things, and satire has an intent to change the way things are. In this way, satire has a moral sting and a normative perspective. But according to Larsen (2001), there is no inherent political progressiveness in satire, and it can be politically conservative as well as politically progressive.

The referentiality of satire and its manifest contextual dependency on socio-political knowledge are what I think makes satire different from comic fiction, for example the situation comedy. Compared to comedy's more implicit textual strategies, satire *explicitly* thematises and facilitates value discussions. The generic status of satire is somewhere between the fictional and factual genres of television, and,

adding to its tricky generic status, television satire is deeply dependent on parody and pastiche. In order to mock and make viewers laugh, television satire uses established discourse practises. The formal definition of parody describes it as always directed at another text or discursive practice. It repeats it, but with irony, exaggeration and distortion. (Hutcheon, 1985) Pastiche borders on parody, and is another of satire's stylistic tools. The formal definition of pastiche is that it is a repetition of the stylistic features of the original, but with no intention of evaluating it (Dyer, 2007). To put it briefly, parody is transformative, whereas pastiche is imitative (ibid: 47) In television satire, the genres of television, specific programmes and more general media features and tendencies play an important part as an aesthetic engine. And often the satire is, in fact, directed at these programmes, genres or features. Thus, television satire is again dependent on the contextual knowledge of the audience. The audience has to have a *media cultural knowledge* to understand the satire. The viewers have to be familiar with genre conventions, aesthetic features and characteristics of media, and the viewers have to be familiar with trends in media content. By using the presupposed socio-political and media cultural knowledge, satire can include as well as exclude individuals and groups. The most obvious sign of successful satire and inclusion is, of course, laughter. Herein lies the ability of the genre to segment the audience, as well as its ability to become a cult phenomenon.

Even if theoretical definitions are possible, it is not easy to argue these distinctions in specific texts. This 'problem' is caused by the crucial role played by the communicative context. For example, a seemingly friendly parody can become strongly satirical, if its object is contextually surrounded by controversy. And a pastiche can be seen as a parody or a satire because of the combination of stylistic imitation and content. Like humour in general, satire is relational and situa-

tional, and not absolute (Kjus & Hertzberg Kaare, 2006:15). Hence, what is produced and understood as satire changes over time and space.

Media satire

As mentioned previously, pastiche seems to play an important role in current television satire, and the 'Dolph and Wulff' series (DR2 2005) is an example of this trend turning much current television satire into media satire. In one of the episodes, the show presents itself as a stylistic imitation of much of lifestyle television on cooking, gardening, healthy living and interior decoration. The theme of the episode is healthy food, especially organic vegetables, demonstrating ways to cook these, and how they are produced. Wulff and Dolph visit Nikolaj Kirk, a chef well-known from Danish breakfast-television, in his trendy Copenhagen flat, while he is preparing, comparing and serving an old-fashioned dish – Wiener schnitzel – and a more modern one – a spicy, Cajun-inspired dish with pork and lots of vegetables. Later in the episode, Dolph and Wulff visit a farmer at his (not- so-) organic farm in northern Jutland.

In terms of stylistic imitation, the episode imitates the host-driven reportage and fundamental didactic dimension of lifestyle programmes: Something is to be learned, typically through demonstration by an expert. The experts in these shows are treated with the utmost respect, and the viewers are supposed to learn from these people. The host takes on the role of the extremely interested representative of the (ignorant) viewers, guiding them through the learning process, and bridging the gap between the programme and the viewers, in his mode of address. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these lifestyle programmes border on infomercials and the TV-shop phenomenon, in terms of intentionality and atmosphere: The programmes are

purged of conflicts of any kind – journalistic, political or interpersonal – and have an ambiance of smooth, innocuous professsionalism. All these well-known, basic genre features are faithfully reproduced in the episode. The stylistic imitation of the genre establishes a kind of subtext to what happens: What happens is Dolph! The co-host of the show sabotages the basic genre feature, and by so doing, highlights them. And now, I will return to the small segment from the episode, presented at the beginning of this article, to illustrate this approach.

Instead of accepting the didactic premise – vegetables are healthy, and we should all learn to cook healthy food – Dolph shouts at the expert and the host that eating vegetables is only for 'fairies', and he violently waves his baseball bat. Because the Germans did not eat that sort of food, but Wiener schnitzel-like food, they won the War, he continues. The expert and the host try to correct him, and to re-establish the trustworthy didactic style and conflict-free ambience of the programme, and to move on. Kirk introduces the (normative) differences between the two dishes, and Dolph is persuaded to try a blind taste-test. Wulff leaves the flat to interview a (fake) dietician, leaving Dolph and Kirk alone. When confronted with his own preference for the Cajun dish over the Wiener schnitzel, Dolph attacks Kirk, and the camera is switched off. In the following clip, the viewers find Nikolaj Kirk tied to a chair, about to be beaten to a pulp by Dolph. Again, the camera cuts away in a hurry. In the following segment of the episode, Dolph and Wulff leave the flat, and the supposedly-off-camera interaction between Wulff and Dolph indicates that something bad has happened to Kirk. Under his breath, Wulff warns Dolph to never do things like that again on the programme!

If the viewer finds this funny, the reason is, as I see it, not so much the extremely politically incorrect, infantile and violent light-blue hippo in itself. The humour is very much based on *the clash* between

the pastiche and the hippo as the essence of everything incompatible with the lifestyle genre. For example:

> To seek out physical confrontation and political discussions, but in an infantile way, with no sense of propriety;
>
> To be anti-authoritarian, but in such a way that a fascination with extreme authoritarian values and systems of any kind is demonstrated;
>
> To lecture everybody, while being unable or unwilling to learn anything yourself, least of all from your own mistakes, consequently producing embarrassment and constant loss of face.

As the Norwegian comedian and writer Harald Eia argues, the trick is to make the viewers believe in the *emotions* connected to the genre by obeying – but not transforming – its stylistic rules and conventions (Eia, 2006: 195-196). Then, an insane, exaggerated or absurd element can be added, and the clash makes the conventions stand out. The sketch can be perceived as media satire as well as social satire, *if* the viewers have the presupposed media cultural knowledge demanded by the programme. The viewers are presumed to be experienced media users and media cultural literates, so to speak, who are able to detect genre clues and mistakes intuitively and quickly, in order to access the entertaining qualities of the satirical treatment. Pastiche used in media satire produces perhaps more humour than parody is able to, because it puts an interpretive challenge to the viewers. But by doing so, it also segments the audience through its exclusive mechanisms: If the viewers are not media literate, this dimension of the satire is lost, leaving perhaps only the social satire, imbedded in the provocative absurdity of the hippo and the obnoxious host.

But how can we understand the entertaining qualities of these new forms of television satire? Why is this entertaining? Based on an analysis of recent developments in Norwegian television satire very similar to the Danish development described in this article, Kjus (2005)

suggests that satirical programmes with a strong media satirical dimension have a mental-recreational function for the viewers. Using Bakhtin's theoretical view on the carnival, Kjus argues that the programmes are probably neither conservative nor subversive of social norms, conventions, or power structures. Instead, they create a sort of breathing space for the viewers, in which it is possible to experience a *reflective distance* from specific social phenomena, or the media forms that guide us (Kjus, 2005: 230-231). This understanding of the consequences of satirical humour as reflective makes this kind of humour very compatible with the general understanding of humour, as argued by Michael Billing (2005). On the one hand, humour rebels against the norms and rules of society that prevent the individual from living a good life. These destructive norms and rules are subject to ridicule. But on the other hand and at the same time, humour polices the norms and rules of society, making fools of people who break them. According to Billing, all kinds of humour have this ambiguity, and in satire it is very obvious. The entertaining qualities of satire have precisely to do with the dialectics of humour: the disciplinary and rebellious aspects, but *in combination* with the forms of knowledge that satire presupposes. Only in the combination of the two do the entertaining qualities of the genre exist.

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In the light of darkness – a note on Roy Andersson's influences

Per Fikse

Displaying the absurdity of modern existence with a subtle humour that has been compared to that of Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka and Buster Keaton, Swedish film director Roy Andersson finally made a name for himself internationally with the feature *Sånger från andra våningen* (*Songs from the Second Floor*, 2000). More recently he has followed this up with *You the Living* (2007).

Although he made use of humour throughout his work, to label the films of Andersson *comedy* would be horribly misleading. Still, they provoke more laughter than many films unmistakably belonging to the comedy genre. What is this kind of humour that he makes use of, and where can we find the origins of this specific mode of the absurd?

Roy Andersson

After two brilliant features in the early 70's (*En kärlekshistoria*/*A Swedish Love Story*, 1970 and *Giliap*, 1975), but lacking financial support, Andersson had to resort to making advertising films. In 1985, with the commercial *Spjälsängen* (which can be translated as *The Bed with Rails*) for HSB, he found the visual and narrative style that from then on would be his trademark.

But it was through two magnificent shorts that he fully developed the striking qualities of his artistic expression.

Någonting har hänt (*Something Happened*, 1987, 24 min.) was initially commissioned by the Swedish health authorities as an information film on AIDS, but the support was withdrawn when they became

aware of the direction the film had taken. Luckily, Andersson was able to finish it, though in a somewhat shorter form than planned and with some delays.

The next short, *Härlig är jorden* (*World of Glory*, 1991, 14 min.) was commissioned by the Gothenburg Film Festival.

In these two shorts, everything we have come to identify as the 'Anderssonesque' is fully in place. Visually – the static scenes, the long takes with stationary camera in deep focus and wide angle lens. And also the mood – the bleak, cold depiction of the all too well-regulated Scandinavian society, so rigid that it is on the verge of falling apart. These are two superb portrayals of the absurdity of modern human existence.

But these depictions would have been unbearable without the resonances of humour throughout. It is in the sublime balance between the life-shattering seriousness (the Holocaust opening of *Härlig är jorden*) and the deadpan caricature (the lecture on the origins of AIDS in *Någonting har hänt*) that Andersson's real genius is displayed. To be able to see and acknowledge this form of humour demands empathy and a humane attitude on the part of the spectator, and it is the humour that makes the films humane.

Some sources

Andersson himself refers to the Czech New Wave of the 60's as source of inspiration (films like *Spalovac mrtvol*/*The Cremator*, Juraj Herz, 1969). Trademarks of the Czech movement are dark and absurd humour and the casting of inexperienced actors. Andersson also uses non-professional performers he has discovered. "I want actors who are believable, who have a body language that is absolutely true. I call them characters instead of actors."[1]

[1] *New York Times*, July 5, 2002.

As for the origins of the subtlety of Andersson's humour, the European literary canon may provide some clues.

In the chapter *Humor* in *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts*, Milan Kundera writes about *Don Quixote* (Cervantes, 1605):

> In Don Quixote, we hear a kind of laughter that comes from medieval farces: we laugh at the knight wearing a barber's basin for a helmet, we laugh at his valet when he gets smacked. But alongside that humour, often stereotyped, often cruel, Cervantes gives us the flavour of a very different, more subtle sort of comedy: a good-natured country squire invites Don Quixote to his home, where he lives with his poet son. The son, more lucid than his father, instantly recognises the guest as a madman, and makes an ostentatious point of keeping his distance. Then Don Quixote asks the young man to recite his poetry; eagerly, the fellow acquiesces, and Don Quixote praises his talent to the skies; pleased and flattered, the son is dazzled by the guest's intelligence and promptly forgets his madness. So who is madder, the madman praising the lucid one, or the lucid man who believes the madman's praise? We have moved into another sort of comedy, more delicate and infinitely precious. We are laughing not because someone is being ridiculed, mocked, or humiliated, but because a reality is abruptly revealed as ambiguous, things lose their apparent meaning, people turn out to be different from what they themselves thought they were.
>
> That is humour; the humour that Octavio Paz saw as modernity's great invention, due to Cervantes and the birth of the novel. […][2]

Later authors writing in a similar vein include Franz Kafka and Luigi Pirandello. Although Kafka is considered the incarnation of bleakness, biographer Roy Pascal points out: "Yet there is much humour, even if it is humour of a curious and rather black type." The humour brings out the absurdity of the situations depicted and heightens the tension. "It was also used to create even greater contrasts both in scene and story line, to further emphasize the darkness felt in so many of his stories."[3]

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[2] Milan Kundera, *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), pp. 106-107. Translated from French by Linda Asher.

[3] Roy Pascal, *Kafka's Narrators: A Study of His Stories and Sketches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 40.

Pirandello, on the other hand, even wrote a long and informative essay on the various aspects of humour in *L'umorismo* (*On Humor*, 1908). He later became a highly regarded theatrical experimentalist especially through the play *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, 1921) – which can be roughly characterized as satirical tragicomedy, and is an obvious precursor to the type humour that Roy Andersson utilizes. Pirandello is regarded as a precursor for the Theatre of the Absurd.[4]

Sorrow is fun

Now let us look for more direct sources for this balancing on the edge of destruction and chaos with a grin on one's face.

In an interview on *Songs from the Second Floor* (*Aftenposten*, Oslo, 7 March 2004), Roy Andersson claimed:

> Samuel Beckett said that 'Sorrow is fun'. Brutally put, but there is something there. The scenes are meant to create recognition. And therein lies the source of empathy. And empathy can disarm even the most hateful and aggressive.

In Samuel Beckett's seminal play *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*, 1952), we follow the two tramps Vladimir and Estragon as they pass their time while waiting for the arrival of Godot - an increasingly mysterious figure who never turns up. In the words of Martin J. Esslin:

> [Beckett] dealt with human beings in such extreme situations not because he was interested in the sordid and diseased aspects of life but because he concentrated on the essential aspects of human experience. [...] The basic questions for Beckett seemed to be these: How can we come to terms with the fact that, without ever having asked for it, we have been thrown into the world, into being? And who are we; what is the true nature of our self? What does a human being mean when he says 'I'? [5]

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[4] "Luigi Pirandello," John Humphreys Whitfield. *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2007), vol. 9, pp. 464-465.

[5] "Samuel Beckett," Martin J. Esslin. *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2007), vol. 2, pp. 32-33.

Samuel Beckett articulated the sorrow, brutality and despair that was the essence of being human in post-war Europe. But in contrast to many of the full-blown existentialists of his time (such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus), he articulates a feeling as opposed to an idea. And more important here, the humour is present as a backdrop even at the darkest hour. Esslin continues (page 33):

> In spite of Beckett's courageous tackling of the ultimate mystery and despair of human existence, he was essentially a comic writer. In a French farce, laughter will arise from seeing the frantic and usually unsuccessful pursuit of trivial sexual gratifications. In Beckett's work, as well, a recognition of the triviality and ultimate pointlessness of most human strivings, by freeing the viewer from his concern with senseless and futile objectives, should also have a liberating effect. The laughter will arise from a view of pompous and self-important preoccupation with illusory ambitions and futile desires. Far from being gloomy and depressing, the ultimate effect of seeing or reading Beckett is one of cathartic release, an objective as old as theatre itself.

Deadpan: The Buster Keaton-Samuel Beckett link

His biographers describe Beckett as a devoted follower of the movie comedians in the 20's and 30's, and of Buster Keaton in particular.[6] Keaton was "the 'Great Stone Face' of the silent screen, known for his deadpan expression and his imaginative and often elaborate visual comedy".[7] Deadpan is a form of non-comedic delivery in which humour is presented without a change in emotion or facial expression.

Along with being an obvious source of inspiration for the acting style in Beckett's plays, Keaton also was the choice for lead role in the only movie that Beckett made, *Film* (1965, 20 minutes, officially

[6] James R. Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 71.

[7] "Buster Keaton", Ed. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online.* Retrieved July 20, 2008, from: http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/314015/Buster-Keaton

directed by Alan Schneider, but co-directed by Beckett according to Schneider).

And as a curiosity, let us mention the feature *The Lovable Cheat* (1949, directed by Richard Oswald, based on a play by Balzac), in which Buster Keaton plays a small part and the plot involves endlessly waiting for the return of the patron's financial partner by the name of …Godot.

Chaos: The Theatre of the Absurd

The "original" absurdist was Alfred Jarry, whose wild, irreverent and lecherous play *Ubu Roi* (*Ubu the King*, 1896) scandalized Paris.

The term "Theatre of the Absurd" was coined by Martin J. Esslin (*Theatre of the Absurd*, 1961). Esslin called Beckett, Jean Genet and Eugène Ionesco "absurd," claiming that they better captured the meaninglessness of existence in their plays than did Jean-Paul Sartre or Albert Camus in their respective writings. Esslin also mentions early film comedians such as The Marx Brothers and Buster Keaton as direct influences.[8]

A conclusion

Above I have mentioned some of the sources of Roy Andersson's humour on the edge of chaos. The subtle, humane humour from Cervantes via Kafka and Pirandello. The deadpan comedy through Buster Keaton via Samuel Beckett, adding a fair amount of existentialism along the way. And finally I have looked briefly at the origins of this mode of the absurd, again involving Pirandello and Beckett.

Within the medium of film, though, Andersson's reference to The Czech New Wave of the 60's might be the closest we get to a genuine source.

[8] Martin J. Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), pp. 327-398.

Laughter and revelation: A *Sideways* look at humour in film

Brian Dunnigan

> I live in constant endeavour to fence against the infirmities of ill health, and other evils of life, by mirth; being firmly persuaded that every time a man smiles, – but much more so, when he laughs, that it adds something to this Fragment of Life.
>
> Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*

> Cheerfulness cannot be excessive but is always good… laughter and joking are pure joy.
>
> Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*

Humour in film, as in life delights in revealing the ludicrous and often contradictory aspects of the human drama. As a dramatic technique humour is used to characterise, create empathy, release tension, provide contrast and conflict, conceal exposition, and of course make us laugh. As one of the varieties of the comic it provides pleasure and distracts us from painful feelings. (Sigmund Freud 2002, p. 222). To see the humorous side is to rise above calamity, disaster or the merely quotidian disappointments of life that might otherwise overwhelm the childish self. As such, it exalts the adult ego, and a sense of humour can be seen as an essential element of true adulthood, making us feel good about ourselves even at the expense of others. As a response to terrible events and threats, a humorous indifference can reveal a greatness of spirit even as it defends against a painful reality. The early Greek medical philosophers encouraged humour as a defence against illness and depression, a defence that of course can also deflect. The use of humour can be a strategy of avoidance, a way of not dealing with real pain and anger, a resistance to some particular

change by laughing at everything. The aim of humour is always to make (some) people smile but better still, laugh.

Laughter, it is claimed, is exclusive to human beings as it defines something essential about being human and points to the serious importance of play in our lives and the complex interlocking needs that are social, psychological and physiological. The need to mock authority or those whose behaviour we despise or find risible, the need for release. Laughter can flow from a sense of superiority or the comedic viewpoint can liberate, open up new possibilities, new ways of being and thinking and communality. Humour as technique has a place in most kinds of stories but where it is most centrally important is in comedy. Film has its own specific comedy genres: slapstick, screwball, romantic. But they all draw upon the comedic tradition with its origins in Greek drama. The seasonal cycle of ritual and fertility, the Dionysian celebration of life, where reason and authority are overthrown and in their place travesty, sexual licence and the inversion of ideal human qualities are played out in intoxication and phallic procession. These are the vital origins of the drama with its archetypal themes of sin and redemption, death and rebirth.

Sideways (2004) is a contemporary film that places itself firmly within this comedic tradition, playing on our experience of the classic comedy built around stock characters, a problem to be solved, a communal celebration and a happy ending. Two middle-aged men, Miles and Jack, take to the road to have a week's holiday from responsibility and convention sampling fine wines in a trip through California's central coast. Jack is a rich, dumb, good-looking actor, about to be married at the end of the week and determined to have a wild sexual time, while Miles is a poor, uptight, depressive wine connoisseur still suffering from a recent divorce and failed ambitions to be a writer, who must soon return to his boring teaching job. There

are traces of comic archetypes here: the swaggering soldier, the impractical young man, the Fool and the Trickster. Both are moving *sideways* through life, unable to deal with problems directly. Jack faced with marriage and commitment wants to return to his time as a freedom loving rake and Miles caught in an endless re-run of his life's failures just wants to drink fine wines and eat good food: one seeks oblivion in sex the other in the intoxication of wine. But Miles is also tempted by the possibility of moving *forward* when Jack arranges a date with Maya, and Jack, while driven by his lustful self, is conflicted by the reminders from Miles that this might not be the best way to begin married life. The humour arises from the conflict between the two contrasting characters with their differing desires but also the internal conflict generated by the fact that what they want they also *don't* want at the same time. This double act (ego/id) both external and internal provides the trigger for laughter: the audience recognizes the dissembling and are reminded of their own conflicted selves (Stott, 2005, p.9).

The source of the comedy lies not only in the classic Dionysian setting of liberation and festivity but in this conflict and contrast between reason and vulgarity, sobriety and joviality. Miles wants to sample the best wines and have interesting conversation while Jack just wants to party and get laid. In this situation we have the original comedic impulse to laugh at the rigid and inflexible, to mock the myopic intellectual who'd rather talk than act. Even when Miles finds a possible new love he is unable to respond instinctively or sensually. In another comedy the balance of empathy would be with Jack, the lover of life, impulsively falling in love and grabbing the moment against the miserable depressive who steals from his mother and lies to his best friend. In a narcissistic culture of consumption where hedonism is the norm, Jack is surely the more natural man and Miles

the repressed party pooper. But this is a more nuanced drama, where humour and laughter conceal barely repressed anger and hurt as well as a lack of knowledge of each other and themselves. Jack is kind but superficial completely selfish and lacking in responsibility. As well as being stupid and reckless he lacks any empathy for how others may be affected by his actions. This is what draws the audience in and tempers the laughter and the incompleteness of both characters reminds us of our own lack, our impulsiveness, our lies, our fear of failure, our lack of self-awareness. It is both funny and touching to watch our subtle and ambiguous selves reduced to the one dimension of monstrous activity as they often are when overwhelmed, intoxicated, obsessed. Comic humans are incomplete but there is something almost sacred in the idea that in comedy and through humour there is always a more serious impulse at play, whether it is the revelation of psychological darkness or spiritual imperfection.

The humour in *Sideways* becomes harder to sustain as the suffering humans are placed under increasing pressure: the consequences of their own bad behaviour and the humiliation of rejection. Humour can no longer defend the characters or the audience from essential truths but it can help reveal who they might be and suggest where redemption or release might lie. For all their narcissism they help each other. Jack supports Miles in his ambitions to be a published writer and initiates the relationship with Maya who may ultimately reanimate Miles's life while Miles saves Jack's wedding by risking himself in recovering the ring and allowing Jack to crash his car as an excuse for Jack's broken nose. There is serious intent in the humorous unfolding of events, having fun is complicated and not always funny for everyone, irresponsible licentiousness comes at a cost to others and while the ending follows the festive closure of conventional comedy there is no real sense of celebration. As Jack slips on the ring to his beloved

and Miles climbs the stairs to meet with Maya they are both hopeful, but have either of them really changed? Maya is the one character who has dealt with her difficulties and disappointments in a temperate and thoughtful way and her example may yet draw Miles into a more creative and less foolish future. Comedy can reveal our vices and foibles, and with good humour we can learn to live with them, maybe even change our obsessions or recalibrate our focus of attention. But we are who we are: confused, ambiguous creatures whose rational plans and projects are constantly confounded by unconscious desire and life's contingencies. Comedy is as much at the ontological centre of our lives as tragedy: opening up our understanding. Films that make us laugh at ourselves remind us that we need a sense of humour to survive and that used creatively in the tragic-comic mix of life and drama the ensuing laughter will not be at the expense of others, but in the revelation and celebration of our shared humanity.

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Basic formats of humour in Danish TV-commercials

Jørgen Stigel

Many Danish TV-commercials are humorous or playful (cf. Stigel 2006 and Andersen 2004). They set out to entertain the audience while communicating a message. Some of the basic ways in which Danish TV-commercials exploit humour will be charted in this article, in terms of methods of humorous performance. Due to limitations of space, it will not be possible to consider questions regarding the effectiveness of humour as a communicative means, or whether the humour in Danish commercials might result from a specifically Danish mentality or cultural background. The general effects and advantages of humour in TV advertising have been accounted for elsewhere (for example, Weinberger & Gulas 1992; see also Stigel 2008a). The question as to whether humorous performance in commercials is rooted in a special kind of Danish humour is unanswerable because it presupposes the existence of a particular national mentality which has not yet been mapped or accounted for (see Stigel 2008b).

Humour directs attention to the *way* the message is performed and to the prerequisites of communication. It transforms the performance of the message into something to be experienced in itself, an event in which meaning emerges. Accordingly, humour also *distracts* attention from the fact that advertising is an uninvited address intended to direct and persuade. Instead, the audience is invited to take part in an experience that relies on its willingness and ability to make inferences and perform cognitive acts. Humour is an aesthetics that stimulates the meaning-generating ability of the human mind. Questions concerning *relevance* (cf. Sperber & Wilson 1986) also become

questions of the *aesthetic* or *experiential* value, the enjoyment of the communicative situation.

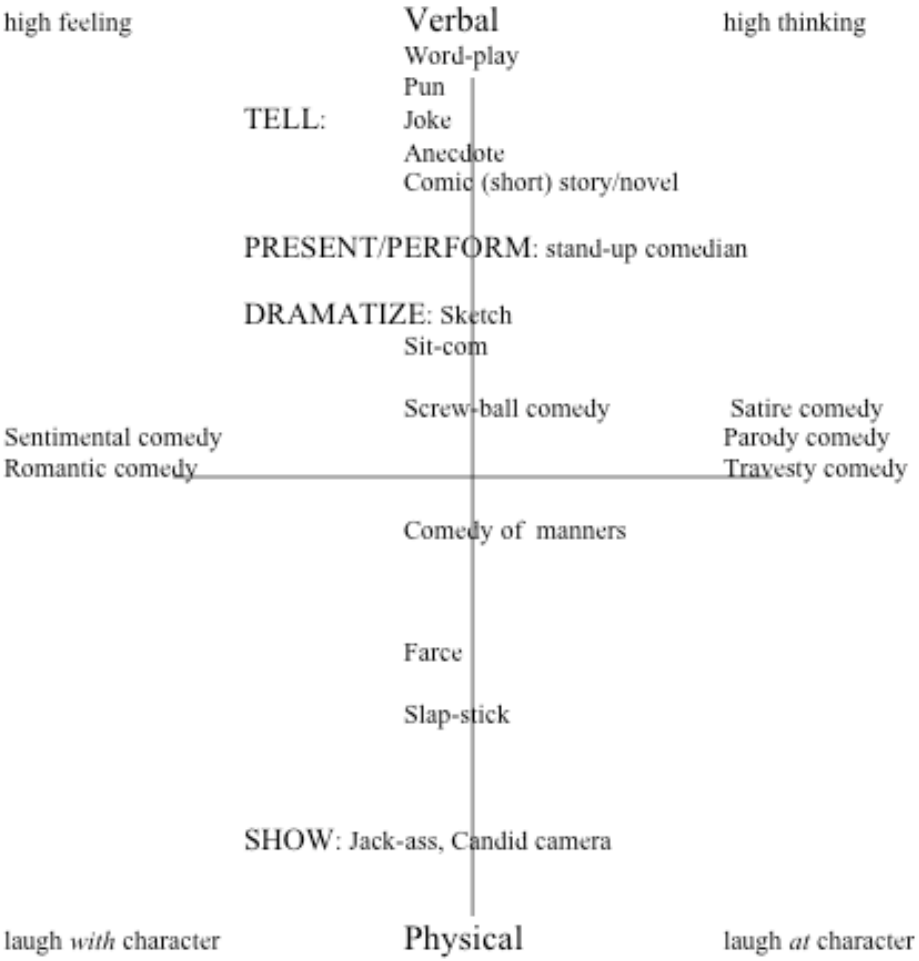
Between 1989 and 1999, the aesthetic dimension of Danish TV-advertising grew in importance (cf. Stigel 2001a and 2006). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the early days of Danish commercial TV, 65-70% of the spots were executed as factual lectures performed in presenter, voiceover or testimonial format. By the end of the decennium, this percentage had decreased to approximately 50%. In other words, there had been at least a 15% increase in fictional formats primarily performed as small-scale dramas or epic narratives. This is a clear indicator that the aesthetic dimension was becoming an important factor in commercial communication. On average, 40% of the spots had some humorous content (cf. Stigel 2006). Humour is mostly attached to fictional formats, but factual formats also make use of humorous *ingredients* such as subtlety, word-play, and gimmicks that challenge the presenter's role.

Both small and large scale humour play an important role in Danish TV-ads. Aesthetic considerations in general obviously influence the way in which these ads operate. This investigation will therefore primarily be guided by the question: how is humour typically performed in Danish TV-ads? In other words, is it possible to identify certain basic or persistent formats and is it possible to find developments and elaborations in advertising's attempts to charm the audience by means of humour?

Playfulness and a sense of play are central notions in any discussion of humour, but humour has many faces and many bodily expressions. Humour is often dealt with in terms of laughter, the reaction or response it causes. Accordingly, the wide variety of facial and bodily displays of humour is often neglected. These displays range from a smile, a giggle, a twinkle in the eyes, a belly-laugh, a roar of laughter

or a guffaw to teasing, sarcastic, malicious, dry, mocking facial expressions and to more covert poker-face and tongue-in-cheek manifestations. Reactions to humour are to be read as bodily displays.

Accordingly, in one dimension the field in which humour operates extends from local, small-scale expressions such as subtleness, word-plays, puns and jokes, on the one hand, to large-scale performances such as comedy, drama and narratives on the other (see model below, which is partly inspired by Stern 1996). The second dimension extends from solely verbal expressions to solely physical performance controlled by the law of gravity. In a third dimension, styles can vary from sentimental romantic comedy and the unconscious or innocent funniness of small children's storytelling, on the one hand, to the satirical, ironical and mocking performance of caricature, satire, paraphrasing, parody and travesty on the other. Finally, in a fourth respect, all this can be delivered in different ways. It can be *told* in speech or writing. It can be *presented* (and performed) from a stage or a screen, as in the one-man show directly addressing the audience (e.g. the stand-up comedian). It can be *dramatized* and *performed* in small drama formats on the stage or the screen with no direct address to the audience, as in two-person sketches, or in regular plot drama with a full cast of characters (comedy). Finally, it may be simply *shown* or displayed, as is the case in a chain reaction or with the Elephant Man and other characters who become victims of nature's laws, of fate's strange ways or of their own stubbornness.



The repertoire of humour and comedy thus extends from subtle verbal expressions to physical performance controlled by the laws of gravity, from the sentimentality of sentimental comedy in which we laugh *with* the characters to the harsh mockery of irony, satire, parody and travesty in which we laugh *at* the characters. And humour covers a multitude of different expressions, emotions and genres. Although a smile is said to be the shortest distance between people and although shared laughter might unite us, humour also includes ways of acting and reacting of a more malicious kind.

What is generally experienced in humour is *incongruity*; phenomena, concepts or ideas that are normally incommensurable are

brought together and, both in spite of and due to the incongruity, *surprisingly* produce good sense. The resulting collision of 'in spite of and due to' establishes the cognitive space of imagination, the sudden experience of "the presence of two partially or fully contradictory scripts" (Raskin 1985). In this way humour builds on or activates a problem solving mechanism: incongruity-resolution.

As incongruity involves experiencing the unexpected, humour can also involve arousal or emotional alertness. At the same time, cues are normally provided to reassure the audience that the experience of the unexpected will be confined within the safe limits of playful behaviour: "It is just for the fun of it." The creation of connections between seemingly incompatible elements and across what are normally incompatible levels of understanding, expression and imagination is pleasurable. The collisions involved in such juxtapositions might also manifest themselves in a more physical way, just as the body generally serves to degrade spiritual matters. A commercial for the Danish brand Stryhn's Leverpostej (liver paste) in April 2003 features a rather irritating, officious and slim workout instructor training her team while yelling an endless tirade of instructions. Suddenly an enormous box of Stryhn's liver paste falls from the sky and knocks her out of the scene while the text reads: "Wouldn't you be better off eating a piece of bread with Stryhn's?" Of course, this act of substitution does not literally advocate killing or wiping out fitness instructors; rather, it positions Stryhn's as an expression of a relaxed lifestyle in contrast to the obsession with mechanically disciplining the body. In cases like these, exaggerated performance, degradation and disparagement are manifest ingredients of humour.

Within the 'secure zone' of humour, it is possible to perform in ways which might be embarrassing or painful in another context. The circumvention of taboos, political correctness and other kinds of social

conventions is an integral part of humour, as Sigmund Freud (1905) points out. Freud also notes that humour involves a sense of playful ease in transcending mental barriers and in moving in unexpected ways from one domain of imagery or meaning to another. Accordingly, humour challenges our tendency to manage the contradictions, collisions or ambiguities of life by compartmentalising them. It is part of a more general aesthetics of conflict and collision calculated to activate dormant mechanisms of the human mind (cf. Stigel 2008a p.59-64).

Whereas Freud theorised humour from an individual or psychological perspective, Henri Bergson (Le rire, 1900) emphasised the notion of the comic as a social phenomenon. Bergson's main point is that laughter and the ridiculous are closely connected with social sanctions, and thus with painful and embarrassing emotions such as shame. *Automatism* is a central category for Bergson, as inflexibility of mind, body or character is sure to provoke laughter. Society is suspicious of mechanical or eccentric behaviour since it seems unconscious and because it isolates itself from societal norms. Accordingly, in the Stryhn's example, the surprisingly brutal execution derives its 'legitimacy' from the mechanical fitness instructor, whose tyrannical automatism 'deserves' correction.

Incongruence leading to resolution, arousal within safe limits, and degradation for fun or for edification are the catalysts activating the collisions of humour. In the following we examine Danish TV-commercials more closely to investigate how they use humour both to engage and to entertain. The sample of TV spot commercials is partly the same as in Stigel (2006) i.e. the month of April 1989-1999, partly a sample from spring 2003 (January-May) in order to identify developments and elaborations.

Incongruence of the shown and the told: playing with ideas, words and expressions.

A Citroën commercial (Citroen 2003) set on a sunny day shows a sweaty man stumble out from the roof of a tall building and glide down rapidly to land safely on top of a Citroën C5. The voice-over announces: "Rush down to your local Citroën dealer and feel the whiz of our super air-conditioning offer. You will definitely fall over when you realise the thousands of crowns you can save right now before prices rise in April. We are open for the rush this weekend." The words "rush down", "feel the whiz" and "fall" are carefully coordinated with the course of events on the screen. The example illustrates one basic type of humour: exploitation of the difference between verbal and visual expressions, mixing metaphorical and literal meaning. The mechanism parallels the play on words but goes further; two different systems of meaning are at stake at the same time. Whereas the verbal system tends to express concepts in abstract or general terms, the visual system displays concrete action, unique exemplars/characters, and specific situations or courses of events. The quantitative distribution of the format (the voiceover+ format) has been accounted for in Stigel (2006).

This difference between shown and told can be applied in more sophisticated ways to achieve a humorous effect by using incongruence to open up new levels of meaning. A Samsonite commercial (April 1992) provides a good example:

> Man in safari gear and with suitcase in his arms in a jungle environment (voice-over): "When you travel a lot –." It turns out that the man is actually sitting on top of a floating crocodile (voice-over): " – you need to take precautions". The traveller is thrown off, but lying in the water, he neutralises the attacking crocodile using his suitcase. The suitcase is shown between the reptile's enormous open jaws in the last picture, accompanied by the voice-over "See what I mean?"

The message is obvious: Samsonite makes damage-proof suitcases. This is hardly news, however, as this has been the brand's claim for many years. Moreover, the exhortation "When you travel, you need to take precautions" in the voice-over is a platitude. The meaning of 'travel' and 'precautions' is transformed, however, by the incongruence in the jungle scenario and by the unusual traveller, who is wearing an explorer outfit but is hugging a suitcase in his arms. This incongruity is reinforced by his unusual and perilous situation, riding on top of a crocodile like an innocent child. The result is a surprisingly new and humorous twist to the trivial and worn out message. As in the Citroën commercial, the course of events, the character and the character's behaviour are far-fetched. Nonetheless, they open our eyes because, as they make a new type of sense at a playful level, they become likely and meaningful. Of course, 'the far-fetched' is always a threat to humour. On the other hand, it is the opening up of a new space of meaning and of unexpected ways of seeing that creates attention, common ground and sympathy. More elaborate examples are accounted for in Stigel (2001b).

Humour in TV commercials is often based on exploitation of the doubleness or ambiguity of well-known terms and expressions. Twisting meaning and concepts 'revives' familiar phrases and commonplaces so the message is communicated in spectacular and twisted or exaggerated ways. This playful distortion, displaying the difference between verbal and visual meaning, is a typical formula. The basic form exploits the incongruence between two levels of address and meaning, typically between what is said in a voice-over and what is presented visually in action on the screen. In doing so, it points at the metacommunicative level of communication.

The comic or comedian presenter: incongruence by lack of role fulfilment.

Whereas the elementary form exploits incongruence between what is shown and the verbal address in a voice-over, the comic presenter addresses the audience directly as a flesh and blood character, as is typical in stand-up. The incongruence emerges because the comic presenter does not live up to expectations to the presenter role on TV. A TV presenter (or a person presented in a testimonial) normally signals serious, eloquent authority and trustworthiness, and is in control of the situation. In contrast, the comic presenter is either an incompetent addresser or an exaggerated presenter type with a loud and larger-than-life personality. He is a clown; a victim either of his own displayed 'incompetence' or of circumstances in the scene. This parodies advertising's own modes of discourse. As a result, the communication situation is 'loosened up' and there is an unstated reciprocal acknowledgement: "We know that you typically do not take statements or spokespersons in advertising very seriously and regard them as pompous, non-authentic characters who have been directed and rehearsed in a perfect setting - so we might as well perform our message accordingly." Significantly, the rehearsal of such spokes-persons or presenters in scenarios is also used as a theme or plot in some spots (e.g. Cloetta Chocolate 1992 in Stigel 1996). A recent TV-commercial for Alm.Brand Bank (August 2008) features comedian Søren Østergaard rehearsing presentation skills with what appear to be ordinary employees of the bank. In this case, the main point is to make fun of the employees' imperfect performance and of advertising's own methods. However, in this case we have left the direct address mode of the presenter format and have entered the world of dramatic (re)presentation in comedy (see below). Here we see two of the core ingredients of the comic. The first is the inability to

fulfil a role due to incompetence or because of random circumstances. A main element in the comic experience is the perceived distance or imbalance between a character's ambitions, goals and intentions, his actual performance, and the affordances inherent in a role and its context. The second core ingredient is the parody and paraphrase of established modes of address. In the process, the genre and the format are also parodied.

Comedy

In comedy the main interaction is not between a presenter character and a presumed screen audience but between characters whose (inter)-actions occur solely amongst themselves in their own 'world'. The audience merely witnesses these interactions and infers what is actually going on.

In one dimension, it is possible to view the genre of comedy (Stern 1996) on a continuum stretching from the purely verbal inter-actions of verbal comedy to the purely bodily interactions of physical comedy**.** In the second dimension, the continuum stretches from the sentimental mode of romantic comedy to the satirical mode of satirical comedy, parody and travesty. Within and between these levels and continuums**,** several types of combination or comic mixture occur.

In the Stryhn's example**,** elements of physical comedy and of its exaggerated types of punishment were presented, but the example also includes a display of the manifest didactic guidance, of verbal comedy, in which the humour is often at the expense of the principal character and his or her mania, as typically seen in 'comedy of character'. In 2003 a Schulstad bread commercial featured a short domestic comedy, in which the head of the family, a self-satisfied fool, attempts to entertain the family with a series of weak puns upon the Danish word for bake and other words related to bread and

sandwiches. Although the other members of the family react to each pun with a show of disgust, he happily and childishly continues his mania. So even far-fetched punning and silly performance leading everything astray might be subject to comedy (of character).

The deliberate display of weak punning can also be combined with more manifest elements from the repertoire of comedy. A 2003 commercial for Toms chocolate dresses a cast of actors as large scale versions of the various packaging of Toms' brands. The personified brands perform a sit-com ("The Tomsens of the 4th floor") with a dialogue consisting mainly of weak puns. The costumes make the performers look absurd, as their movements are restricted by the square form of the packaging from which heads and arms appear to pop out. In this case, both physical and verbal comedy are at work as the characters move around in their stiff costumes, living exemplars and manifestations of the elementary fun in the collision between the mechanical and the human (cf. Bergson).

Comic sit-com is rooted in a collective milieu, in which different characters are more or less equal in importance. This presents other opportunities than comedy revolving around a single character. A sketch or short verbal comedy with just a few characters is ideal. A typical exemplar is the mortgage company Totalkredit's (2003) ongoing sketches. Set in a village graveyard, they feature a gravedigger and a bellringer as the central characters. The main point is the gravedigger's gentle teasing guidance of the bellringer, who lacks local knowledge. Significantly, it is local knowledge that Totalkredit claims as its own central merit. The bellringer is a newcomer who obviously has a white-collar background in a big city. Although the bellringer does his best to conform to the community's standards and norms, he is constantly floored and embarrassed in his verbal exchanges with the (literally) earth-bound gravedigger.

In 'popular comedy', the arrival of a stranger or an intruder in a well-established milieu or community is a central theme and technique. It automatically opens the way for incongruence, embarrassing situations, collisions, misunderstandings and contrasts etc. Such a character is called a disturber of the peace (cf. Klotz 1980). In the Totalkredit spots, a range of familiar and almost stereotypical contrasts are immediately at work due to what the two characters represent on a larger scale: big city vs. small town mentality, manual labour vs. white-collar labour, local knowledge and sense vs. ignorance and nonsense, and cocksureness vs. embarrassment.

In other cases, however, it seems necessary to establish the intruding character in a far more elaborate way. This is particularly pertinent if an ongoing series of commercials has built up its own special or unique universe. A good example is the Toyota series broadcast in 2003.

Toyota (2003) uses a whole episode to establish a character who will later become the new asocial 'catalyst' intruding upon a small Jutlandic working-group called The Toyota Workshop. His name is Søren and the introductory episode takes place in a social security centre in Copenhagen. A social adviser interviews Søren regarding his needs. His attitude reveals a rather foolish, dull and uncommitted person whose primary needs are more money, a holiday in the Canaries and a new car. The social adviser carefully notes this in his file, repeating his demands and stressing verbally what she is doing. As she reaches out for some papers, she tells Søren that his needs will be met, and, for the first time, Søren comes alive. The new papers turn out to be a brochure offering jobs at the Toyota Workshop in Jutland. Presenting the brochure with its pictures of the smiling and neat staff, the social adviser carefully reminds Søren that cars, money and travelling were his priorities, while Søren with great difficulty and obvious

disappointment slowly reads the text, stressing each syllable: "To-yo-ta work-shop ap-pren-ti-ce!" The social adviser wishes him well with a hint of triumph, and, in her final gesture of fait accompli, adds: "No Jutland – no social assistance!"

The following episodes in the series accordingly portray Søren as an intrusive and asocial element. His laziness and impoliteness repeatedly cause shocking and embarrassing situations among the prim and proper staff in the Jutlandic workshop. The workshop foreman, Bruce, is innocent and dutiful to the point of naïvety, and accordingly represents the antithesis of Søren's antisocial behaviour. So the Toyota serial uses the old intruder device from popular comedy as well as the contrast between metropolis and province. However, while the device is mainly used in traditional popular comedy to show the qualities of a small community, and how social order can be re-established after uproar and entanglement, the Toyota series makes prolonged use of the asocial behaviour of the intruder character and of the anarchy he introduces as a contrast to the overly polite and well-polished milieu. Moreover, the characters and their relationships develop from episode to episode, and the comedy deepens in a later spot as the female social adviser reappears in the shop to test Søren's merits. The Toyota serial is an elaborate example of how humour and comedy are used in TV-commercials. This is primarily due to the creation of a special universe with characters who do not remind the audience of normal stereotypes.

Together with other serials (as e.g. the telephone company Sonofon's serial: *Polle fra Snave* (2001-03) including it's spin-off as movie) the Toyota serial represents an important elaboration of humour in Danish TV advertising. In the 1990's the actors in commercial comedy (serials) were typically characters or a comic couple already established on the scene of public entertainment. And only a

very few from that scene were not in use. Also they were put into action in the style in which they normally performed and typically in a fixed setting and/or prototypical situation (cf. Stigel 2001a). But at the turn of the century commercial comedy begins to invent it's own characters in far more unique 'universes' or social settings and with storylines transcending the single episode (cf. Stigel 2003 and 2006).

Conclusion

In Denmark, humour and comedy have been used for didactic purposes since Ludvig Holberg staged his comedies in the early 18th century. Similarly, advertising also intends to inform, guide, teach and persuade. Holberg knew that he had to create common ground with his audience in order to make it attentive and receptive to new ideas. Humour gives access to common ground by turning the communicative situation or the delivery of the message into an experience in itself. It offers the addressee a space of pleasurable imagination. Although advertising often explicitly tells us to "imagine", much advertising actually constructs the communicative situation in ways that make imagining impossible. It directs us and leaves no space open for imagination.

In non-symmetrical communication, humour downplays both the sense of being directed by the addresser and the sense of intrusion. Endowing the persuasive action and intent with a redeeming feature, it loosens the notion of authority. Although humour *distracts* attention from the intention as well as from the subject at hand, it only does so in order to gain far more attention by appealing to its audiences' imagination and sense of playfulness. In other words, it also *attracts* attention and cognitive action to the communicative situation.

Humour opens a space of imagination and playfulness. The space can be constructed by simple puns, jokes or rather obvious and

blunt gimmicks. Another fixed format involves exploiting the incongruence between what is shown on the screen and what is stated verbally, typically in a voice-over or as printed text on the screen. A third standard approach makes fun of the presenter (or related formats like the testimonial) either by turning him into a clown or a stand-up comedian, or by undermining his authority in a variety of other ways. A fourth format is the verbal sketch or dialogical exchange in a fixed, joke-like setting and with two characters who are either stereotypes or estranged caricatures. The fifth format is the sit-com performed in a fixed setting, in which an ensemble of comic characters, each fixed in their special profile, interact while punning, joking and colliding. The sixth and final format constructs a unique and 'full' comic universe, in which the characters and their relationships gradually deepen and develop in a serial form and in which all elements of humour and comedy are present.

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Funny pictures
– Visual humour in film

Edvin Vestergaard Kau

The screen too suggests from the start
the complete unreality of the events.
Münsterberg, 1916

In this article I am going to discuss a small selection of humorous scenes from different kinds of films, ranging from silent comedies by Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton to the fantastic world of Tim Burton. Focusing on the visual humour of cinema, the question is how specific elements in the examples work, and which mechanisms can be said to enable viewers to have fun when watching scenes or sequences. In other words, what qualities and potentials of cinema are used to articulate and cause effects that the audience can experience as amusing and funny?

Playing with camera sight and viewer's view

As early as 1933 Rudolf Arnheim was one of the first to discuss the way specific aspects of the film medium could be used to bring about certain experiences on the part of the audience. In "The Making of a Film" one of his examples is a visual gag in Charlie Chaplin's *The Immigrant* (1917). Charlie is on board a ship together with a number of other immigrants. The weather is terrible, the ship is rolling badly, and most passengers are seasick. Charlie is shown from behind leaning over the railing, his legs kicking in the air. Under the circumstances the impression is that he, too, is seasick, vomiting into the ocean. But then he stands up, and as he turns around it becomes clear that he was fishing and trying to land a fish (fig.1-2).

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

The surprise and the amusing effect are not just caused by what is going on or that the man is seasick or fishing. Arnheim points out that the key is not the character and his actions, but the fact that the camera is positioned at a special angle in relation to him. "The element of surprise exists only when the scene is watched from one particular position" (Arnheim, 1957, p. 36-37). If the scene had been shot from another angle, for instance directly from the seaside, the idea of Charlie being seasick would not have surfaced at all. Instead the viewers would immediately realize that he was fishing. As Arnheim concludes, Chaplin's staging is not merely aimed at the subject matter, or the event in itself, it is focused on the actual cinematic practice because the effect is realized through the use of a specific film technique (ibid, p. 37).[1]

In the work of another artist of film comedy we can find further examples that may help illustrate how cinematic staging can articulate the meeting between film and audience in literally funny ways. In *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) Keaton plays a young man who is a "moving picture operator" in a movie theatre, but who also dreams of becoming a great detective. One day, while projecting a film, he falls asleep and dreams

[1] The scene has also been discussed as a variation of the so-called sight gag by Noël Carroll in "Notes on the Sight Gag" (Carroll, 1996).

himself, his girlfriend, her family and his rival into the film. Keaton shows us how the hero's better self enters the screen and, as a real Sherlock, is able to solve the mystery and in the end win his sweetheart. In one of the dream scenes the very elegant young Sherlock is checking his attire in front of a large mirror (fig. 3). Wearing a white tie and top hat he buttons his gloves, his assistant hands him his walking stick, and – he leaves the room through the mirror (fig. 4)! To underline the visual joke the assistant ends up standing in the opening with one leg in each room (fig. 5).

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

Actually, there was no mirror at all; just an opening onto the next room, and what we saw as a reflection of the room and the things behind our hero are exact replica props instead. The key to this visual joke is the staging: in this case the combination of set design and camera position. The result of this is a framing of the shot that leaves a clear view of the wall and "mirror" on the left side of the screen, which

makes it possible for Keaton to play the magic trick on the viewers. The ingredients he uses are a combination of camera angle, visibility, and framing. Besides presenting a most enjoyable comedy, Keaton's film is an experiment with and a cinematic essay on the potentials of the film medium.

Fig. 6

Fig. 7

Moreover, when a cut takes us to the room Sherlock Jr. enters, he goes to a large safe, turns the combination lock, opens its door, and leaves the house, crossing a street between cars and trams (fig. 6-7). Once again, the viewer is led to believe and expect things, which turn out to be quite different from the first impressions. Of course, the fact that we are watching a dream means that anything is possible, and in retrospect it makes Keaton's "cine-magic" experiments plausible.[2] But, that said, the surprise and the humour are not less effective. The amusing transformations take place in front of our eyes, and they are the result of Keaton's inventive explorations of the medium of the moving pictures. The effect results from what we can see as viewers, plus what

[2] These ways to utilise the possibilities of manipulating or shaping the cinematic material in order to make impossible things possible could inspire explorations into the fantasy and fantastic elements of animation films, in both traditional cartoons and computer generated animation. The kind of humour we meet in those films probably is (among other things) connected to both the animation artist's and the audience's understanding of how comic results depend on the manipulation of the raw material. I've previously analysed an example of this in the 1969 Road Runner cartoon *Fast and Furry-ous* by Chuck Jones (Kau, 1990).

is disclosed or added next. That is, an interplay between a presentation on a carefully defined basis and what this allows to be visible, and the new and surprising element, which has been present all the time, but only shown or made clear the second time around.

The amusing surprise results not just from the event or what the characters do or don't do, but from the way the event is sculpted cinematically. Both Arnheim and Münsterberg have made the pivotal argument that the way film pictures are constructed, as well as the way we comprehend them, rely on the fact that the moving images must not be mistaken for reality. Arnheim concludes that in general the potential of cinema to put plausible illusions on the screen is due to "the unreality of the film picture altogether" (Arnheim, 1957, p.14). When Münsterberg investigates the aesthetics of film, he too underlines that the recorded material, which has to be shaped artistically before it is projected on the screen, in the process is separated from reality: "The screen too suggests from the start the complete unreality of the events" (Münsterberg, 1916, p. 75). Film is an artificial material, complete with manipulative techniques and distortions on the two-dimensional screen, and our perception and understanding of it depend on how each film articulates its raw material. As seen in the examples above, this may be part of the reason why it is funny when a film suddenly makes it clear to the viewers that it is teasing them.

The Fun of Dimensions

Other examples of how Buster Keaton humours his audience with delightful use of purely cinematic means can be found in *The General* (1926). The film has been thoroughly analysed by Noël Carroll, and he has published results of this work in various articles and a book (see especially Carroll 1990 and 2007). One of the most interesting points is Carroll's analysis of Keaton's use of long shots and their composition

in depth. These features tell important parts of the story, namely how the main character often does not pay attention to what is going on around him, and most importantly: the long shots give this information to the viewer. The humour is born out of this as a result of Keaton's effort to present this in a certain way. It is important not just to show that this or that happens, but also to draw the viewer's attention to how it happens. So, the visual style provides vital possibilities for the director and vital information for the spectator. The viewer recognizes the style features as a way of presenting knowledge of the funny mixture of elements in the scenes, and the director knows that the viewer will know. It turns into a play between narrator and spectator, and the mechanism elicits smile and laughter.

Apart from this playing with staging in depth, I will add another visual gag that Keaton makes use of in both *The General* and *Sherlock Jr.* While shadowing his rival in the latter he tries at one point to hide behind the corner of a box car on a railroad track (fig. 8-10).

Fig. 8

Fig. 9

Fig. 10

The box car fills the left third of the frame, and as soon as the rival has resumed his walk and disappeared out of the picture, another wagon enters the frame from the right. Because of the camera's right angle to the track and its focal length, it is difficult for the viewer to judge the depth in relation to our hero and the buffer on his box car. As a result it looks very dangerous when box car number two rolls in from the right, and not only the Keaton character, but also the audience gets a good scare, when the buffers collide. Because of Keaton's virtuoso timing, his character survives and the reassured viewer can get his laugh. This "flat picture gag" is also used in other scenes.

In *The General*, Johnny Gray (played by Keaton), who is fighting for the South during the American Civil War, at some point tries to free his sweetheart from the troops from the North. At night the house where she is kept prisoner is shown from the outside, a soldier keeping guard. As in the above-mentioned example, it is hard for the audience to detect any real depth in the frame. More so because it is dark and the rain is pouring down. Because of this flatness in the picture it comes as a surprise, when suddenly the guard is hit on the head with a long wooden stick from a chink of the door. Johnny has taken the stick in the house and barely noticeably opened the door a little in order to knock out the soldier. The viewer's amusement is not caused merely by the fact that Johnny neutralizes the enemy, but by the recognition that the surprise comes out of nowhere and, especially, that it is the result of Keaton's "flatness trick."

Consequently, we can conclude that the laughs we get from both Chaplin's and Keaton's ways of using the motion pictures draw upon the fact that we as viewers respond to the way the cinematic presentation plays with our attention. In this kind of visual humour a meta-level of communication is at work when narrator and audience meet.

Burton's Chocolate Factory

My last example to illustrate the potential of visual humour in the medium of cinema and its range of possible manipulations of the motion pictures is taken from Tim Burton's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005). In this article I have focused on visual humour and in a number of cases found that the effect occurs when the viewers can recognize how the director reaches out to them. This is due to the fact that part of the fun is precisely the experience or discovery of the stylistic features the director makes use of in his "tricks" in order to make the viewer laugh. Consequently a mutual understanding between director and viewer has developed on a kind of meta-level. It may sound terribly technical, and perhaps even boring, to talk about meta-consciousness in humour and good laughs, but I think that my examples have shown that it is in fact part of the fun.

In Burton's film the owner of the chocolate factory, Willy Wonka, has launched a campaign in order to win back market shares. Children who find a Golden Ticket when they buy one of his Wonka Bars are invited to come and spend a whole day in his mysterious factory. Five children get the chance, and he shows them his secrets and inventions. When they enter the Television Room (fig. 11-16), Willy Wonka says that it is his testing room for his "very latest and greatest invention: Television chocolate". The question is that if television can "break up a photograph into tiny little pieces", send them through the air, and reassemble it at the other end, why can't he send a real chocolate bar through the television all ready to be eaten? Of course the others tell him that it is impossible. But while they talk, they pass a television set showing the scene with the anthropoid apes and the giant monolith from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968; fig. 11); and actually it comes into use a little later. He calls for his workers to bring

in a bar of chocolate, which he will send from one end of the room to the other "via television".

Fig. 11. Kubrick's apes behind Willie Wonka.

Fig. 12. The Wonka bar ready to be teleported.

Fig. 13. The apes and the monolith in the television world.

Fig. 14. The Wonka Bar is turned into the monolith.

Fig. 15. Charlie reaches into Kubrick's world in the television set.

Fig. 16. The apes see Charlie's hand take their Wonka Bar.

Precisely at this moment the music Kubrick used fades up: Richard Strauss' "Also Sprach Zarathustra" fills the room – and Burton edits his pictures to match the music, the same way as Kubrick did four decades ago. The chocolate bar is gigantic, because as Wonka explains, "on TV you can take a regular size man, and he comes out this tall", showing a height like fifteen centimetres with his fingers. The

chocolate is placed in a large transparent cube (fig. 12), and to the sound of the Strauss hymn Burton practises a kind of "space camera work" and an editing much like Kubrick's. In the "2001-white" room a white television camera is operated to move almost like a space ship, and suddenly it makes the chocolate bar disappear. Wonka shows them that it materialises in the television set on the opposite side of the room. We see it replace the monolith in front of Kubrick's apes, and the child hero, Charlie, is able to reach into the television and take out the perfect piece of chocolate (fig. 13-18). It has precisely the right size, and it even tastes great.

With very simple means, but also very elegantly Burton shows how Charlie reaches into the television cube, and from a tiny version of the "2001 world" takes the bar back into the material world. The fun goes on for a while with a discussion of teleportation and a boy who jumps into the "tele cube" and is transported into the television set, but is also downsized accordingly! Wonka assures his father that they can just lift him out too; but because he is so small, they have to stretch him the same way they can stretch the candy at the factory. Unfortunately this leaves him in a rather bad shape, and very thin.

As in the other films discussed above the humour lies in the way Burton draws attention to a series of tricks and their artificiality, as well as in the joking references to Kubrick's science fiction film. First impressions and well-known phenomena are redefined – in fact much the same way as in Keaton and Chaplin. The directors display their trickery through staging and camera work, and they contact their audience by mobilizing meta-levels of understanding. The very unreality of the film picture that Münsterberg and Arnheim emphasize is the basis of the directors' manipulation as well as the prerequisite of the visual humour. Burton's very recent film makes use of the same kind of "visual magic" as the old masters, and the possibilities of

computer animation and CGI are used to connect dream worlds and reality the same way as Keaton did in for instance Sherlock Jr. The surprise and the amusement in his film are of the same family as the fish Chaplin produces in *The Immigrant*. They articulate their visual humour in order for us, their audience, to have fun. They know this strategy; they also know that we know that they know. They blink their eye, and together we laugh.

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Who laughs?
A moment of laughter in *Shortbus*

Bevin Yeatman

"Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo."
Henri Bergson

In his essay *On Laughter*, first published in France in 1900, Henri Bergson suggested that "our laughter is always the laughter of the group" (2003:5). With this observation in mind, I have to ask: who laughs when we watch a movie? Who is it that we hear when laughter fills the theatre even if momentarily?

An early experience that comes to mind occurred some twenty or more years ago when a group of four thirty-something males, myself included, attended a film society feature in a small provincial town Motueka in the South Island of New Zealand to watch *La Grande Bouffe* (Ferreri:1973). While many of the film patrons walked out in protest after scenes became too much for their conservative taste, the four of us had a wonderful time laughing loudly and together as the film traced the antics of four men attempting to kill themselves through over-eating. We laughed together within the group while no-one else, it seems, thought that the film had much comedic merit. At least this film did not cause them to laugh in any manner that could be heard by the rest of the audience.

Having recently revisited this film, now as a man in his fifties, I find myself still laughing, but now my sense of identification with the middle-aged characters is stronger and my reading of the film in allegorical terms, focusing on excess, consumption and the profound emptiness of capitalist life, adds to my engagement and has also changed the moments when I laugh. Current friends, however, do not

necessarily share in my pleasures of this film and often their laughter is, at best, muted.

Recently I attended a viewing of *Shortbus* at the local cinema, this time in the provincial city of Hamilton, New Zealand. The expectations of viewing pleasures for the audience were probably a little more clearly communicated by the promotional material as being based on transgressive content, but again, a number of the attending viewers walked out before the film ended, and I was the only one who laughed loudly enough to be heard, and this was at only one moment – a scene that I will consider in greater depth in this essay. There was a level of sometimes muted, maybe embarrassed, laughter during this scene but at no time did I hear anyone else laugh loudly. Further when discussing this with a female colleague, who had seen the film at home with her husband, she reported that she did laugh at the scene in question but that she probably would not have laughed as enthusiastically in the context of a public cinema viewing.

These experiences, and I am sure with most of us there have been many others, signal an aspect of humor that often escapes much of the theorizing about film and the experiences of laughing that we all share.

Paton, Powell and Wagg (1996) offer a wide-ranging categorization of humor that might be useful as an initial framework for my own questioning about the nature of humour and why we laugh in films. They cite Schopenhauer, Pirandello and Koestler as exemplars of the incongruity theory of humor, when "two or more ideas do not fit together" (1996:273). Hobbes becomes their exemplar for a theory of elitism which suggests that "the essence of humor resides in feelings of superiority over some person, event or thing" (1996:273); and Freud is an important reference for a relief theory of humor that 'sees release

from restraint or control (be it social, psychological, or physiological) as integral to humor' (1996:273).

Also their understanding of laughter 'as embodied action, a physiological response of the human body [that] … is more flexible and more versatile than groaning or sobbing, affording greater specificity in its range of communicative effects' (1996:274) emphasizes the social nature of laughter. For them, there is 'safe laughter' (1996:327) which entails a positive acceptance within the social context and there is 'transgressive laughter' (1996:327) disturbing this acceptance. It is this latter idea that seems to offer a useful catalyst for my own awareness of my laughter.

But let us return to the film *Shortbus.* This film directed by John Mitchell is described on the back cover of the DVD as 'an engagingly funny, emotionally honest, joyfully romantic drama exploring the relationships of a group of New Yorkers'. Marketing hype aside, for those viewers able to engage with the sexually explicit content and accept the film as dealing with the contemporary sexual mores of at least some representative twenty and thirty year olds living in the heterogeneous sexual environment of New York, then an acceptance of the worth of this film as exploring "relationships" is a possibility. It is rated for a mature audience and deals openly and directly with a variety of sexual twosome and threesome couplings. It transgresses any normative heterosexual expectations of usually conservative provincial audiences and suggests the varieties of sexual combinations that it establishes have their own place within contemporary society.

The particular scene I wish to focus on involves the sexual coupling of three men as they engage in oral sex and with one singing the American national anthem directly into the anus of another while this second partner uses yet another's penis as a microphone in simulated accompaniment. This scene can obviously be positioned as a trans-

gressive moment for conservative taste and this on at least four fronts: an overt homosexual coupling; a focus on a sexual threesome; an illegal act in some juridical contexts and also the singing of a national anthem in an inappropriate context. Why then did I laugh so loudly and it seems so many others thought that this particular scene not quite as funny?

The previous scene in the film helps to contextualize this sexual acrobatics and its accompanying soundtrack. The motivation is that two of the men Jamie and James are seeking to "open" their relation to allow for another partner. This motivation is constructed around the different agendas of the two characters that are explored more comprehensively during the film. This preliminary scene establishes the moment of awkwardness before the actual sexual encounter that triggered my laughter. It is edited to portray the difficulties of conversation, the awkwardness that results in almost abandonment of the potential connection by the third man and then slowly the scene develops to suggest a more relaxed relationship arising from listening to one of the men singing, conversation about each other and the occasional shared laughter. This scene does generate a level of humour both through the awkwardness that many of us can identify with in the initial meeting of any relationship of desire, heterosexual or homosexual, and through the dialogue.

The hard cut from this more subdued "domestic" scene to the absurdist acrobatics of the sexual encounter I am interested in discussing is disorientating and this is immediately enhanced by the accompanying dialogue where different partners instruct each other on what to do and where to do it. The editing decisions revolve around a limited number of similar camera positions framing explicit mid-shots that seem to push the viewer into disconcertingly exposed views of the sexual and singing performance. A further layer to this

latter scene is the fact that there is a "stalker" who is busy documenting the action through a window some distance away. The window itself is utilized as a framing device that appears during the course of the scene and it both focuses the actions of the three men as well as distancing these actions to situate the viewer as part of the voyeurism identified by this fourth character. The audience also is positioned so that they can, at one particular time, view this fourth character and identify with him as they witness his incredulity, expressed through his facial expressions, in what he is seeing and, therefore, place themselves through identification, presumably uncomfortably, as voyeur.

In other words this scene is not straightforward but works on multiple levels adding to the thematic structures of the film in numerous ways. It enhances the process of exploration of the relationship for the two homosexual men, it reinforces the theme of documentation by numerous characters that runs through the film, it positions the audience to both laugh with the characters (it is the only time when the characters seem to laugh without control) but also establishes a point of view from a fourth party who possibly reinforces the position of many viewers shocked by the antics of the sexual encounter and sexual content of the film itself.

Loud laughing from the audience at this point would be a laughing that could be identified, using Paton et als' term, as transgressive in the sense that what is viewed has a multiplicity of transgressive representations such as those I have suggested above. This also might be a reflective laughter with the identification of viewer as voyeur and the witnessing of a look that possibly mirrors their own. It becomes laughter of embarrassment as much as laughter of pleasure. It certainly would not, given the context of my viewing experience, situated as it was in a Hamilton theatre, be considered a "safe" laughter.

Certainly then the laughter could be symptomatic of the incredulities within the scene with its unusual "fit" of elements such as the arrangement of the men, the singing of the national anthem as a sexual ploy, the use of the penis as a microphone as well as the look of the stalker that mirrors the situation of many viewers. The idea of relief might also be useful in an understanding of the scene. This could develop from the previous scene of awkward anticipation to burst from hard cut into a sexual ménage that seems absurdist and totally different from the previous more subdued or "domestic" sequence. Relief could also occur because of the actual challenge of the transgressions themselves and the need to respond to these through the mechanism of laughter, a mechanism that does not necessarily have a cognitive edge, just simply a valve to let go and release the awkwardness and disorientation induced by the confrontation of such an unexpected sexual scenario of three men. One could also lay a moral reading on this scene and suggest that the humour comes from a sense of superiority of the viewer, a sense that was suggested by general statements such as "these people are too caught in perverted practices and not able to behave in normal ways" or similar that were the type of responses I overheard later from critical audience members.

If all of these possibilities to trigger humour exist why then does it seem to me, with my experience of a particular viewing, that they do not convincingly articulate reasons, at least reasons not entirely satisfying for myself, for the vigorous laughter that I experienced momentarily? What is the mechanism that holds this release back from so many of the viewing public and if I am not laughing with these folk who am I laughing with? Where does the echo of my laughter come from?

Palmer (1994) in his work *Taking Humour Seriously* suggests that humour arises from a relationship between both the nature of the feature being laughed at as well as the 'mind of the perceiver' (1994:93). He introduces the idea of arousal and suggests that this is an important aspect to consider when exploring humour in any situation and in fact believes that 'incongruity operates cognitively whereas arousal operates affectively' (1994:99). Palmer states 'for someone in a sufficiently aroused state an incongruity is capable of appearing funny, but if the arousal is excessive some other reaction is more likely' (1994:99).

This is a useful conceptual mechanism, although I would prefer to use "intensity" as replacement for arousal because of the latter's distracting connotations, to discuss the dynamics of this scene and possibly why there was so little open and loud laughter. There were many opportunities, as outlined above, to trigger intensity. These moments of intensity possibly invoke laughter as one response for some viewers but these moments, for others, could have a different affect when the intensity is too demanding and other avenues of expression are invoked, more inhibiting, that have no conscious control. The possibility is that laughter as an affective response to the moment of intensity could occur in this scene but just as likely, and maybe even at the same time, a sense of confusion, embarrassment, anger, shock or shame could be possible avenues for expression. This intensity might arise through a response to the use of the national anthem in this particular lewd sexual context, or the reaction of a repressive heterosexuality in a context where this is challenged, or a multiplicity of other possibilities. Against this might be the safety in sharing laughter because the context is one of entertainment and the representations understood as being funny because of the nature of the viewing experience.

The point of this diversion into a small sequence of what I would consider not a particularly significant or canonical film is that the categorization of humour as it has been imposed and utilized is like so many other taxonomies, useful if seen as categories with boundaries blurred certainly not separated as distinct arenas. Further there is a need to recognise that there are multiple avenues for a trigger to laughter just as there are multiple triggers to constrain that laughter and these together act as a shaping force for the "laughing communities" that reflect the make-up of the audience. The possibility also, to recognize that the intensities of experience that might invoke a reaction of laughter can also offer multiple other expressive trajectories and that all of these might not necessarily be controlled by a conscious response nor be repeated in future viewing of the same scene.

How then might I articulate this multiplicity of intensities that might or might not trigger laughter in the scene? And again who is it that I laugh with when I do actually laugh? I believe that Manuel DeLanda's concept of assemblage seems to be a useful approach for these dilemmas. The conception of assemblage is one that incorporates the establishing of a sense of coherence through repetition and predictability; codes and conventions; performance and expectations; and a sense of change through disturbance and mutation; misinterpretation; and through contradiction. The appeal that DeLanda's concept has for me is that it accommodates both processes of stabilization, concurrently with processes of destabilization, within any system that has both material and signifying components. These are working with and against each other in a system that is identified as coherent (for instance the viewing of the scene from *Shortbus*), but this system is open to outside forces both material and expressive (the expectations of the audiences and the context of the viewing for instance) and

dynamic (again the expectation of what might occur is not predictable from one viewing to the next).

This idea of assemblage offers a remarkable flexibility for accepting that the possible triggers for humour, as they were articulated by Paton et al and Palmer and discussed above, cohere in the scene I have been discussing but affect different viewers in different ways and at different times as they experience the combined process of the reinforcing of their expectations, as well as the destabilizing of these same expectations. This weaving of forces both cognitive and affective allows me to understand my own response to the intensities of the scene dispersed as they are in multiple combinations established through my own histories, the construction of the film and the audiences I share these experiences with in particular situations.

The echo of laughter that Bergson requires is shaped, I believe, by the complex intensities of the viewing experience just as sound and its own echo are shaped through the resonances of the landscape in which it is heard. Cavernous landscapes offer a suitable chamber for clear and multiple echoes while a flat and open plain is more likely to repress any recurring sounds. The topologies of the laughing moment are more confidently understood by me through the idea of assemblage where this idea itself suggests a range of textures (enhancing or inhibiting) that shape the echo of the laughter we hear. Again there is no one answer or solution to the nature of the community I would laugh with, the textures of the assemblage are too complicated, but there must be a space for my own echo as I agree with Bergson, that there is a need for an echo. An echo is required to know one is laughing even if that echo itself is a conspicuous laughter resounding alone in the theatre, a laughter that stems from my own interactions with the intensities of the film and a laughter I hear despite the silence of others. The echo is a reassurance and a challenge to myself, as viewer,

and also to myself, as human being, an echo more than I might imagine, but an echo, as Bergson also suggests, that is certainly also human.

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There's something about comedy theory

Jakob Isak Nielsen

The following article has a dual purpose. The primary purpose is to help us better understand the comic strategies and organizational principles of a canonic scene in the gross-out romantic comedy *There's Something About Mary* (1998). In order to do this the article introduces some key theoretical perspectives circulating within the literature on film comedy. The secondary purpose is to test whether the empirical evidence can actually teach us something about these theoretical perspectives. Do the theories have explanatory power? Does the scene suggest we introduce nuances and distinctions?

Comedy is supposed to make us respond in a certain way, e.g. smile, giggle, laugh. Arguably, this is the chief defining characteristic of comedy films. However, we do not have definite answers as to why we smile and why we laugh. Of course, one could argue, as does Dirk Eitzen, that we laugh and smile because evolution perpetuates "behaviors that result in social bonding in humans" (1999, p. 96). Indeed, many researchers have argued that laughter and amusement have more to do with social interaction than with the structure of jokes or private physiological responses (e.g. Provine 2000, p. 3).

These are fascinating aspects about comedy but they are also vexing problems for anyone writing about the genre. There are a number of valid explanations of why we laugh or smile or giggle that do not necessarily have much to do with the film that we are watching. We may laugh at a scene because our date is laughing or find ourselves chuckling at an un-funny scene because the rest of the audience

breaks out into a roar of laughter. Or we may laugh because our girlfriend tickles us.

Nevertheless, none of these explanations provides analytical tools that enable us to understand more fully the organizational and compositional principles of comic scenes in fiction films. Given that a taxonomy of causal explanations does not exist at the moment, we will have to look elsewhere for such analytical tools. Very generally one can boil down the theories of comedy to three types:

1. Superiority theory
2. Relief theory
3. Incongruity theory

Eitzen refers to these as "second-order explanations" (the evolutionary explanation being the primary one) but given their position within the literature it is worth testing their potential as analytical tools.[1]

The scene

About eight minutes into *There's Something About Mary* nerdy, insecure, vulnerable and awkward Ted Stroehmann (Ben Stiller) drives up to a big house in Rhode Island suburbia to pick up his date for the 1985 prom: the beautiful and confident Mary (Cameron Diaz). About ten minutes later (screen time) he is driven away in an ambulance with his private parts torn to pieces – and the entire neighborhood standing by as witnesses.

Ten minutes is a long time to dedicate to one single scene. Clearly the position of the scene within the film can be explained and justified by its ability to sustain our interest by generating amusement and laughter. But what comic strategies does the scene subscribe to?

[1] Dirk Eitzen (1999) summarizes these three theories as incongruity-resolution, superiority and tension-relief theory: p. 94-96.

At one point Sheila says that her husband is a "laugh a minute." This is a meta-commentary on the scene itself because it too attempts to trigger a "laugh a minute". Nevertheless, the comedy is not chaotically dispersed throughout the scene but follows a fairly clear spatial structure. I propose that we take that spatial structure as a basis for discussing the comic aspects of the scene:

a) **The front lawn**: Ted drives up to the house, walks up to the front door and Mary's stepfather Charlie (Keith David) answers the door. Charlie pulls a stunt on Ted and tricks him into believing that Mary has already gone to the Prom twenty minutes ago with her boyfriend Woogie (Chris Elliott). Mary's mother Sheila (Markie Post) laughingly punctures the joke, saying "Charlie, you're so mean" and the three of them walk into the house.

Fig. 1. The tan-and-taupe colors of his suit match those of his car.

Fig. 2. "What the hell do you want?"

b) **The living room**. Mary comes down from the staircase to meet the others. Ted attempts to give Mary's brother Warren (W. Earl Brown) a surprise present (a baseball), but unwittingly places it right behind his ear (Warren has a "thing about his ears", fig. 4). Warren lashes out at Ted so that he falls on his head and breaks the sofa table, then tosses him across the floor, punches him in the stomach, picks him up, spins him around the room before tossing him down hard on the ground (fig. 5). The girls comfort Warren whereas Ted faces an angry step dad and verbal abuse (fig. 6).

Fig. 3. Mary comes down to meet the others.

Fig. 4. "Then I think I saw it right behind your ear."

Fig. 5. Warren tosses Ted around the room.

Fig. 6. "Are you yelling at me in my own house?"

c) **The bathroom.** Mary and Sheila go up to fix Mary's dress whereas Ted goes to the bathroom with a bleeding lip. Ted takes a pee and experiences a moment of tranquility as he spots two cackling doves outside the window. Suddenly the doves take off. The camera racks focus to reveal the off-screen space behind the birds: Mary undressed in a top window and Sheila aiding her. The girls spot Ted spotting them. Sheila covers Mary up and hurries her away from the window. Ted realizes how the situation can be misconstrued when viewed from *their* perspective**.** To them he appears to be masturbating to the sight of a half-dressed Mary. His protestations fail ("Oh no, I wasn't...") and he zips up his pants in a hurry. We see him give out a high-pitched scream. Half an hour later Ted is still in the bathroom. First Charlie, then Sheila walk into the bathroom and come to see that Ted's genitalia are stuck in his zipper. Suddenly a cop appears in the window: "The neighbor said she heard a lady scream." Then a fireman walks in: "Somebody's got to move that station wagon so I can get the truck in here." The two of them think they find a solution to the problem:

"You've already laid the tracks [...] Now we're just gonna back it up." The policeman counts: "And-a-one, and-a-two, and-a..."

Fig. 7. Silly grin or tranquil moment?

Fig. 8. Ted's p.o.v. of the doves.

Fig. 9. Record scratching terminates the Carpenters' song, the birds take off revealing Mary and Sheila. They see Ted seeing them.

Fig. 10. Ted as seen from Mary and Sheila's perspective. He looks down realizing how the situation could be misconstrued.

Fig. 11. Sheila and Mary seem to think that Ted is spying on Mary.

Fig. 12. "Oh no, I wasn't..."

Fig. 13. Ted says "shit!" and zips up his pants in a hurry – with dire consequences.

Fig. 14. "Don't worry, she's a dental hygienist, she'll know exactly what to do."

Fig. 15. The policeman and fireman come up with a "solution."

Fig. 16. A paramedic screams "We've got a bleeder" and Ted is rushed to the ambulance.

d) **The front lawn**: There follows a direct cut to a paramedic shouting: "We've got a bleeder!" The front yard is crowded with people as Ted is being rushed to an ambulance. In the background we hear Warren repeatedly shouting: "He was masturbating." The paramedics drop the stretcher that Ted's tied to but ultimately manage to take him away in the ambulance.

Much comic action in the scene is not apparent from this brief outline but I will try to mention as many as possible when discussing the comic strategies at play in the scene.

The palette of devices

While the spatial structure of the scene gives us a rough outline of the *sequenced arrangement* of comic action, it does not wholly explain how the scene utilizes a whole palette of devices to elicit comic reactions:

1) Make-up and costume design. E.g. Ted's suit, hairstyle and braces.
2) Production design. E.g. a wedding photo on the wall outside the bathroom shows us Sheila in a white wedding dress and Charlie with a huge afro. Most of the time production design does not in itself elicit laughs but it facilitates a number of misunderstandings and gags. E.g. the surprisingly low-sitting window in the bathroom makes for a comic moment as the policeman suddenly pops up in the window.
3) Blocking and compositional design. The careful orchestration of the characters' positions and movements within the frame set up a number of misunderstandings that the scene plays for laughs (see fig. 4 and 8-12)
4) Editing. In particular, there is one crucial instance where a punch line is relayed by means of a cut rather than by means of comic performance. The policeman's "and-a-one, and-a-two..." raises suspense about the dreaded

event on the count of three. Instead of including the painful event there is an elliptical cut to a paramedic shouting "we've got a bleeder!" The cut to this line jumps over a link in the chain of cause and effect and thus manages to give more punch to the punch line.

5) Performance. A lot of the comedy is based on performance – particularly that of Ben Stiller:
   - Dialogue. Comedy is sometimes delivered verbally as when Charlie brings Sheila into the bathroom arguing "She's a dental hygienist, she'll know exactly what to do."
   - Pratfalls/physical comedy. The way Ted falls face first on the sofa table and on the floor, his desperate rattling on top of Warren (as a turtle on its back).
   - Small gestures such as Ted brushing away the fringe of his hair (fig. 2)
   - Mimicry. E.g. Charlie's grin as he tells Sheila "You gotta see this."
   - The sounds that characters give out, particularly Ted's high-pitched sounds: the "ouhh" as Warren drops him on the floor, the screams after he has zipped up his pants, the "auw" as the paramedics drop him on the ground.
6) Diegetic sound, particularly off-screen sound. E.g. the "squash sound" as Ted zips up his pants.
7) Non-diegetic music. The Carpenters' "Why do birds suddenly appear every time, you are near..." is played for comic effect because of its disjunctive relationship to the shot of geeky Ted taking a pee (fig. 6).

All of these devices are in play and each of them can be discussed in relation to some of the large-scale explanations (superiority, relief, incongruity). In other words one can understand the devices as the means of orchestration and the large-scale explanations as dominants that determine the overall comic strategy.

Superiority theory: "Take a look at what this numb nuts did"

If you look at the scene as a whole, the chief impression is that the scene elicits comic reactions by means of ultimate humiliation. From the perspective of superiority theory you might say that we laugh because we experience "some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the inferiority of others" (Thomas Hobbes). Or you might say that the scene is funny because we enjoy what Nietzsche calls "the

guiltless pleasure of another person's misfortune" (*Schadenfreude*).[2] The film uses a string of devices to make the viewer feel superior to Ted: Ted's appearance, his lady-ish sounds when in pain, the awkwardness displayed in his interaction with other characters and of course, the humiliating experiences that he must endure.

Superiority theory emphasizes an important aspect of comedy: the status and position of the viewer in relation to the characters. Invariably, this has to do with how we engage with characters. In the case of Ted, the set-up (the social situation) is familiar enough for us to understand exactly how embarrassing and unfair the turn of events really is. Ted has good intentions and we recognize his vulnerability. He certainly earns our sympathy but precisely because of our superior perspective we do not *feel* his embarrassment and anger. In Richard Raskin's terminology[3] one could argue that there is appeal (Ted has our sympathy), projective participation (the set-up is familiar enough for us to *imagine* ourselves in Ted's shoes) and volitional participation (we want Ted to succeed) but not empathic participation (we do not feel what Ted is presumed to be feeling) and internalization (we do not wish to be like Ted). This perspective is the reason why our pleasure is guiltless.

Relief theory: "He was masturbating!"

We may find it mildly amusing when Ted faces Charlie's verbal abuse at the front door, but it is only when it is revealed to be a joke on

[2] These condensed summaries of Thomas Hobbes' and Friedrich Nietzsche's explanations of laughter are taken from Richard Raskin's book on Jewish jokes: *Life is Like a Glass of Tea* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1992): p. 8.

[3] These categories are presented in an unpublished working paper from 1983 that suggests a four-phase model of identification. My distinction between projective and empathic participation is not as clear-cut in Raskin's model. Murray Smith's categories *recognition*, *alignment* and *allegiance* partially overlap with Raskin's categories. See Murray Smith. *Engaging Characters* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1995)

Charlie's part that our laughter kicks in. This may be explained by superiority theory, i.e. only when Charlie's joke is revealed can our enjoyment in Ted's misfortune be *guiltless*. However, another explanation is offered by relief theory or tension-relief theory. The Freudian explanation of comedy would go something like this: Through laughter we gain an otherwise prohibited pleasure, combined with the release of build up psychic energy.[4] What can be said to trigger our laughter is "the amelioration of a socially stressful situation" (Eitzen 1999, p. 94) – in this case not experienced first hand but triggered because we engage with Ted.

From the perspective of superiority theory, Warren's line "He was masturbating" is funny because our sense of social worth is reaffirmed. From the perspective of relief theory Warren's line is not – or not only – funny because it provides a guiltless pleasure of Ted's misfortune but also because it belongs to a long line of utterances that we normally prohibit and suppress.

In other words, tension-relief theory can explain why we find the transgressive humor in the scene funny (taboo comedy). The basic assumption is – in a Freudian perspective – that we use psychic energy to suppress those thoughts and actions that our primal drives urge us to harbor and perform. By this account a comedy such as *There's Something About Mary* is a culturally and socially sanctioned "safe place" where this psychic tension can find an outlet.

Incongruity theory: "She's a dental hygienist, she'll know exactly what to do"

All of the three theories offer very general explanations of what triggers laughter but incongruity theory offers the opportunity of introducing more nuances to explain the comic strategies at play. I would

[4] This is a slightly modified version of Richard Raskin's summary in *Life is Like a Glass of Tea* (1992): p. 8.

argue that one can locate *many* forms of incongruity that elicit amusement and laughter – some of these are not mutually exclusive but can co-exist.[5]

1. Physical incongruity. The most well-known manifestation of physical incongruity is revealed by various constellations of comic teams - short and fat versus tall and skinny (Laurel and Hardy, Fy og Bi for instance) – but we also see physical incongruity at play when a 135 pound Jesus "el Savior" Christ is put in a boxing bout with 320 pound Beelzebub in *Southpark* (episode 108). In *There's Something About Mary* amusement is elicited by the incongruous pairing of short and nerdy Ted with tall and beautiful Mary (compare fig. 3 and 7). Another instance of physical incongruity occurs at the front door. Since Mary is a blonde from Minnesota and is likely to have Scandinavian ancestors (we later learn that her surname is Jensen) we are surprised to see a black man opening the door (fig. 2).

2. Social incongruity. Through cultural learning we know that to particular situations there follows a manuscript of proper conduct. Clearly, stepfather Charlie does not respond in the way expected of him: "What the hell do *you* want?" (fig. 2).

3. Characterological incongruity. Laughter is also triggered by a mismatch of a character's psychological disposition and his actions. Throughout a film we can come to understand a character's thoughts, emotions, beliefs and so forth. This provides the filmmaker with ample opportunity to stage actions that are incongruous with these

[5] Arthur Schopenhauer is generally held to be the father of incongruity theory. He argued that "laughter always arises from nothing other than the suddenly perceived lack of congruence between a concept and the real objects" (2008 [1819], p. 93). Like the two other major theories incongruity theory now comes in many guises and Schopenhauer's particular brand of incongruity (between a concept and the real object) can be seen as merely one variant.

very properties. There are two slightly different ways of staging characterological incongruity. The first is when a character is performing a task that we know is foreign to his or her persona as when Alvy Singer (Woody Allen) is forced to drive a car in Los Angeles to try to win back Annie Hall in the movie of the same name.[6] There is a very subtle example of this in *There's Something About Mary* when Ted fails to put the car to a smooth stop but must re-brake when he drives up to the house. Clearly, we understand Ted to be the kind of insecure and nervous character who is *not* a regular and experienced driver.

Another type of characterological incongruity occurs when a character acts in a way that is surprisingly different to the way we – given our previous knowledge - expect him to behave. The first big laugh of the scene in fact combines physical incongruity and this latter variant of characterological incongruity. In the first scenes of the film Ted is keen to ingratiate himself with Warren and Warren is surprisingly fond of him. Therefore we are both surprised to see Warren go amuck on Ted and similarly surprised to see Ted's suddenly – though oddly - hitting Warren on the head during the "fight."

4. Perspectival incongruity does not rely as much on *surprise* (sequential action) as it does on perceived or intelligible *misunderstanding* (simultaneous action). In the case of *There's Something About Mary* we see both Ted's correct understanding of the situation and other characters' incorrect or imprecise understanding of the situation. This is a well-known sight gag that has its origins in slapstick comedy and before that in the theater.[7] Carroll describes the essence of the gag in the following way:

[6] Allen stages this action as a kind of mock *grand gesture* before it was even a probably established narrative figure in romantic comedy.

[7] Noël Carroll has an incredibly long term for it: "The mutual interference or interpenetration of two (or more) series of events (or scenarios)" (1991, p. 28). I prefer the

> [I]t is staged in such a way that an event, under one description, can be seen as two or more distinct, and perhaps in some sense mutually exclusive, series of events that interpenetrate each other [...] we can see that both [interpretations] could be plausible, often plausible relative to different points of view. (1991, p. 28)

By this definition there are two instances of perspectival incongruity. We see that Ted puts a baseball in his pocket and we see that he really does place it behind Warren's ear. Through careful blocking we also see that Charlie, Sheila and Mary *cannot* see the baseball because Ted unwittingly blocks their visual access (fig. 4). The perspectival incongruity established through the staging of the shot sets up the misunderstandings at play in the response to the fight (Charlie: "What baseball?" "Are you yelling at me in my own house? Don't let me open up a can of whup-ass on you").[8] The culmination of this forking off of perspectives on the action is Charlie's apparent acceptance of Warren's hilariously unfair accusation: "He broke the table. I didn't do it."

The most effective example of perspectival incongruity is of course the scene in the bathroom (fig. 7-12). The brilliance of this particular case of perspectival incongruity is that Ted *also* realizes that the situation can be misconstrued when viewed from Sheila and Mary's perspective. In fact, Ted's realization (he looks down at his penis) only seems to *affirm* Sheila and Mary's incorrect suspicion (fig. 10-11).

5. When Dirk Eitzen describes the jest of incongruity-*resolution* theory he argues that from this perspective "the chief pleasure of humor arises from the satisfaction of anticipating and discovering solutions to

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term perspectival incongruity. Carroll argues that Henri Bergson identified it with respect to theater in *Laughter* (1900).

[8] Granted, the incongruity not only issues from sight lines on the action. Charlie is a little brash and does not have an eye for nuances or other points of view. For instance, he misconstrues Warren's actions: He is actually not into "the MTV thing" on the TV in front of him but is busy with a Rubik's cube. Only a few seconds later, Warren puts it away – solved!

problems (albeit incongruous or surprising solutions, in the case of comedy)." (1999, p. 94). In my experience one is more likely to find these solutions in *comedian comedy*.[9] Silent comedian comedy in particular is rife with examples because they often showcase the ingenuity of comics finding surprising and incongruous solutions to the various predicaments that they find themselves in.[10]

Ted is not blessed with such ingenuity. On the contrary. Ted *attempts to find* incongruous solutions to some of his predicaments but it is exactly the ludicrous and desperate impossibility of those attempts that elicit comic reactions. For instance Ted tries to argue that he wear his shirt over the front so that it covers up his genitalia: "Look, I can go to the prom and we can deal with it later!" (fig. 15). This comic strategy here is the same as when stepfather Charlie calls in his wife to help solve Ted's problem: "Don't worry. She's a dental hygienist, she'll know exactly what to do" (fig. 14). These lines *flaunt* incongruity and it is precisely because they are *not* solutions that they are funny.[11]

6. The five forms of incongruity mentioned above are the primary ones in this particular scene but there are other less prominent examples: certain objects have an incongruous placement in the scene – most notably, the axe that the fireman carries around with him (fig. 15). One

[9] See Steve Seidman's seminal book on the subgenre: *Comedian Comedy – A Tradition in Hollywood Film* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981) and Frank Krutnik (ed.). *Hollywood Comedians, The Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[10] As when Buster Keaton is balancing on the front of a locomotive in *The General* (1927) burdened by a railroad tie that he has just removed from the tracks and comes up with the solution of using that tie to bounce off another on the tracks that is threatening to derail the train.

[11] There is of course one classic scene in the film that offers an incongruous and surprising solution to a problem. Unlike the Buster Keaton example the solution is not found by the comedian but arises out of a misunderstanding: When Ted finally *does* masturbate before the "big date" with Mary, she takes the sperm hanging from his ear to be hair gel, which is certainly a surprisingly incongruous solution to Ted's predicament!

could also argue that the contradistinction of Ted's blissful face and The Carpenters-song *Close to You* represents a case of incongruity.

Conclusion

Certainly there are limits to the explanatory power of superiority, relief and incongruity theory. For instance it is easy to imagine incongruous situations that are not comic, and scenes stirring feelings of superiority without eliciting laughter and alternate forms of relief that do not involve laughter. Furthermore, they do not enable us to assess why some scenes are funnier than others.

Nevertheless, I think it is fair to lower the stakes and use them to better understand certain *compositional principles* of film comedy. In other words, I think it is possible to unshackle these theories from absolutist claims: one can recognize them as strategies without arguing that they automatically elicit laughter.

From my perspective the scene in *There's Something About Mary* is fascinating because it forces one to explore a whole range of analytical procedures. I have mainly focused on comedy as an independent form of expression but of course, one could also consider another contested aspect of comedy theory: the interrelationship of comedy to narrative. Is the comedy of the scene generated by narrative structure or inversely, does it distract or impede the viewer's engagement in narrative? (i.e. the viewer's engagement in fabula construction). On the face of it the comedy of the scene takes on a life of its own devoid of obligations to narrative structure but, in fact, the culmination of the scene is also the culmination of the first act (the set-up) and in terms of the film's narrative arc, this is actually a clever "boy loses girl-scene" where the implications raised by the scene are carried on into the remainder of the film.

The intersection of narratology and genre criticism becomes particularly interesting in this respect and there is much at stake, not only questions of film form but also notions of spectatorship.[12] What is the chief pleasure of watching movies? How many levels of engagement are operative when we watch a film like *There's Something About Mary*? This ability of raising significant critical and theoretical questions often characterizes canonic scenes. In a number of ways – including a remarkably literal one - this scene fully displays what V. F. Perkins referred to as the "embarrassing richness of the cinema's aptitudes" (1972, p. 60). (fig. 17).

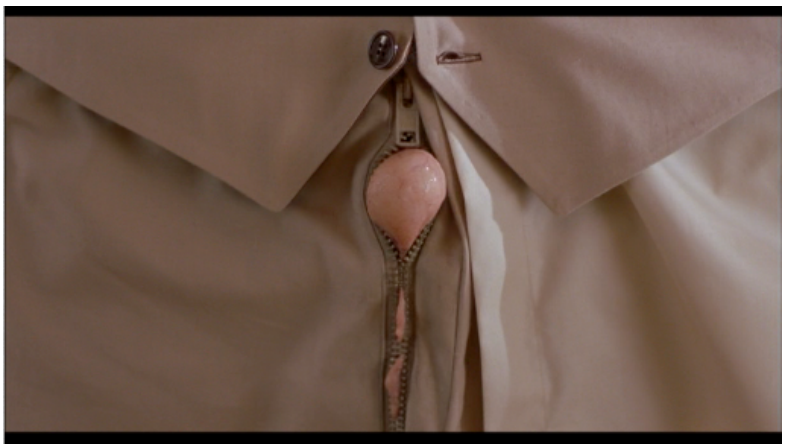

Fig. 17. "The embarrassing richness of the cinema's aptitudes."

[12] Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's accounts of classical narration (both 1985) as an intergeneric phenomenon have provoked some interesting arguments on this point. See Eitzen (1997, 1999), Crafton (1995) and Gunning's response to Crafton (1995). See also Neale & Krutnik (1990, particularly pp. 26-42).

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Hello, my name is Frank Hvam - Autofictional humor in the Danish TV series *Klovn*

Louise Brix Jacobsen

They are perverted, embarrassing, and partial to toilet humor. No taboo is spared when they drag the disabled, the gay, and the overweight through the mud. We join them in the toilet, in the double bed, and at the doctor's. And they are famous. In the past three years, stand-up comedian Casper Christensen has been unfaithful with the badminton celebrity Camilla Martin, the famous actress Sofie Lassen-Kahlke, a student, a Swedish girl, and his secretary Claire. His number one stand-up buddy, Frank Hvam, has defecated in a litter box, on the Danish flag, and behind the film director Bille August's car. Their friend and colleague Lars Hjortshøj has molested a transsexual au pair, Sten Jørgensen from the Danish rock band Sort Sol has obtained heroin for them, and along with the ballet dancer Alexander Kølpin and the rock star Jimmy Jørgensen, Casper Christensen and Frank Hvam take celebrity karate with the sleek and dictatorial sensei Peter Gantzler.

This article will illustrate the clashes between humor and the phenomenon exemplified by *Klovn* (Clown). In this famous TV series, the two popular stand-up comedians Frank Hvam and Casper Christensen play the roles of Frank Hvam and Casper Christensen. They have the same job, the same friends, and often the same family relations as they do in real life. In *Klovn,* however, things happen that definitely do not happen in real life as we know it.

Never before have the famous played themselves as much as they do now; and we are inundated by films and TV series that, despite a seeming fictitiousness, contain a surplus of biographical, geographical, and bibliographical references that make them difficult to decode. The

works are biographical and yet not biographies, both fiction and non-fiction. To aid in describing these biographical-fictional works, I suggest broadening the literary term of 'autofiction'.[1] In this article autofiction is to be understood in the context of Gérard Genette's development of Serge Doubrovsky's original term (Genette, 1991). In Genette's version, the term refers to fictional narratives in which the author shares the name of one of the characters. In this article, however, autofiction refers to any kind of 'self-acting,' which means that it does not necessarily need to be the creator of the work who plays him or herself. The cast playing themselves in any form can trigger the term autofiction. In addition, the expanded use of the term includes an emphasis on the juxtaposition of the two tendencies that have given rise to the term. This means that the fictional basis of Genette's term should—in this context—be considered seeming fictionality, because the most essential characteristic of these kinds of productions is their ambiguous ontological status.

The assumption is not that autofiction as such is funny in film and TV series. In *Klovn,* many things are humorous without at the same time being autofictional, just as a number of productions offer examples of autofiction of a more serious nature (e.g., Morten Hartz Kapler's *AFR* (2007) and Christoffer Boe's *Offscreen* (2006)). There nevertheless seems to be a special attraction between the autofictional mode and humor because the phenomenon mostly occurs in TV comedy series like, in the Danish context, *Klovn* (directed by Mikkel Nørgaard 2005-), *Drengene fra Angora* (The boys from Angora) (Rune Bjerkø et. al. 2004), *Den 11. time* (The 11th hour) (Bertelsen and Brügger 2007-), *Wulffs Magasin* (Wulff's magazine) (Nicolaj Monberg 2008), and *Deroute* (Søren Fauli 2008).

[1] In Danish I use the term 'fiktiobiografisme'. Cf. Louise Brix Jacobsen: "Klovnen og rygtet". In: *16:9*. 6, 28, September 2008.

After a short introduction to the autofictional phenomenon in this audiovisual context, I will offer some examples of how autofiction in *Klovn* creates self-irony and rumors with validity outside the context of the work. Finally, I will outline a special potential for humor which seems to be reserved for autofiction in film and TV series.

The autofictional mode

Autofiction in film and TV series is mainly based on biographical undecidability. When the famous play themselves, their names match and typically there are other significant points of resemblance regarding such aspects as career, family, and acquaintances. Biographical undecidability refers to the fact that this biographical appearance is part of a context where the role is not unambiguously separated from the personal life of the character. It both is and is not the same person at the same time.

The phenomenon that autofiction covers is neither new nor exclusive to the film media. It has, as mentioned, existed in literature for centuries, and the debate about the phenomenon has been highly topical on several occasions (the Lejeune/Doubrovsky-debate (1970s), Genette's additions to this (1991), and, in Denmark, Stefan Kjerkegaard et. al.: *Selvskreven* (Self-apparent) and Poul Behrendt: *Dobbeltkontrakten* (The double contract) (both 2006)). In film history, as early as in 1950 Buster Keaton played himself in *Sunset Blvd*, and Lars von Trier made *Epidemic* in 1987. It is, however, within recent years that the use of autofiction in this expanded sense has become a general movement across media, art forms, and continents.

The autofictional mode is also found in the context of film and TV in other countries as well, mainly linked to the humorous genres. *The Daily show with John Stewart* (Smithberg and Winstead 1996-) and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (Larry David 2000-), the inspiration for *Klovn*, are

popular American counterparts. So the question is whether there is a special potential for hilarity in the autofictional mode itself. Is humor especially capable of exploiting the duality of autofiction? Below we will examine some examples from *Klovn* where the coexistence of fiction and biography supposedly create what could be called added humor. Added humor does not only mean that the inclusion of self-acting is capable of making a funny TV series even funnier. It also refers to the fact that the coexistence can create a space for self-creating humor that produces a humor value (cf. added value) greater than the different perspectives put together.

Self-irony

Klovn plays to a large extent on the knowledge about the characters' personal lives that viewers have been able to generate from various media sources. When Casper Christensen is unfaithful in *Klovn* we are reminded of divorce rumors in the tabloids, and when Frank Hvam has to play second fiddle to Casper's popularity and arrogance this corresponds with our already established impression of the partnership between them. Casper is the visible cash cow who churns out one entertainment programme after another and always outdoes the more reticent Hvam.

When similarities with real life are established so massively it becomes even more toe-curlingly funny, forbidden, and pleasurable to witness the intimate lives of the famous and watch them make fools of themselves—like when Mia reprimandingly pumps Frank about whether or not he has been telling people about her yeast infections. Guiltily, he admits to this, but says it has gone no further than Casper Christensen. And of course also Alexander Kølpin, Jimmy Jørgensen, and the dwarf Christian (episode 39).

The references to real life with the constant of playing oneself as the pivotal point simultaneously become the platform for the most prevailing (and in my opinion the most successfully funny) aspect of *Klovn*: self-irony. Casper Christensen and Frank Hvam are funny at their own expense, with themselves as a very high stake. When they play themselves they take 'themselves' very seriously. Actually, they take themselves so seriously that it becomes hilarious—and self-ironic. Sometimes the self-irony is direct, an integral part of the world of the series involving the actors making ironic remarks about their very roles, but the most predominant and fundamental self-irony is created along the obscure line between work and reality. By playing themselves in a putting-on-airs manner, they construct a self-ironic attitude towards their real-life personas. The self-irony is thus prompted by the autofictional clash between work and reality, and it is given life and apparently also validity in real life.

Klovn often balances between friendly mocking and defiling – both when it comes to Hvam and Christensen, but also in relation to other famous people. Participating in *Klovn* means putting oneself at stake, but on the other hand it is possible to win the sympathy that self-irony awakens in the viewer. This may be one of the reasons why so many prominent figures among the Danish jet set have been lured into self-exhibition and self-staging.

The formula for self-irony involves tackling the fixed, but not necessarily desirable, perceptions of the celebrities created by the media in real life. Even though Peter Gantzler has played a number of characters since appearing on the Danish TV series *Taxa* (1997-99,) he is indisputably best known for his role as the cream puff Mike in this series. When Frank gets mad at the large, tough karate coach played by Gantzler, he naturally has to say, "Move that foot, Taxa-Mike". And later when he brings him cream puffs to apologize, Gantzler

thunders: "Are you calling me a cream puff?" (episode 39, *Klovn*). The football coach Michael Laudrup plays a successful wine expert despite the fact that he failed in setting up a wine business (Ibid). The business icon Don Ø's unavoidable thinking in terms of consequences is heavily underlined when he forces Frank to eat several rotten no-bake oatmeal cookies as punishment for not eating his grandchild's fresh ones (episode 13). In episode 28, the Mayor of Copenhagen, Klaus Bondam, makes ironic remarks both about his job and his sexuality: "I'm the Kennedy of the gay in this city." Every politician probably fears being accused of abuse of power, and here he both avoids a fine and gets away with visiting young male prostitutes.

Naturally, it is not necessary to be part of *Klovn* to be able to create self-irony. But the unique referential structure of autofiction creates a sphere of possibility that real-life performance, the gossip magazines, or pure fiction cannot provide. Things can happen in *Klovn* that can usually only happen in fiction (e.g., Jarl Friis Mikkelsen and Nelson Mandela die and Frank Hvam lives with Mia Lyhne), but at the same time the references to real life are so pronounced that *Klovn* cannot simply be explained as a parallel world detached from reality.

The complexities that autofiction generates in *Klovn* are rooted in a comprehensive and ongoing fact-fiction debate taking place in both literature and film theory. In his article *Fiction, Non-fiction, and the Film of Presumptive Assertion: A Conceptual Analysis,* Professor of Philosophy of Art and film scholar Noël Carroll summarizes the discussion critically in preparation for introducing his important notions of fictive vs. assertoric stance and intention. The viewer is supposed to adopt one of these stances—a distinction that hinges on the filmmaker's ability to communicate her intentions clearly. This means that the viewer assumes that she will be able to recognize an either fictive or assertoric intention in the production in question.

Not surprisingly, trying to apply these distinctions to *Klovn* gives rise to a number of problems. First of all, it seems impossible for the viewer to choose a final overall stance. Some aspects of the TV series will clearly lead to a fictive stance while other aspects entail the assertoric stance. Yet other aspects can be characterized in accordance with what I would call a 'referentiality in suspense.' Examples here could be claims of homosexuality or infidelity (*Klovn*, *AFR*). Rumors of this kind can be verified in the real world but they can never be falsified. When the same artwork contains three different kinds of referential positions, the viewer is forced to continuously switch between stances. However, the viewer's confusion does not seem to be an indication of unclear communication. The severe questioning of the ontology of the artwork illuminates an intentional play on fact-fiction relations that unavoidably and seemingly very deliberately plays a crucial and visible role in the reception process.

Thus, it appears that both biographical (cf. Carroll's assertoric stance and intention) and fictional conventions are concurrent and equally valid within the same production. When the ontological status of the work is not unambiguously definable, a special strong channel between work and reality is created, and we find it difficult to determine unequivocally what belongs where.

Ethics and rumor making

Autofictional TV series are able to do what the gossip magazines can only dream about. They can exploit the possibilities of fiction in order to bend the rules and frameworks of reality, but the generic conventions for facts that are also evident in the work make the claims in *Klovn* transgressive and risqué. This means that *Klovn* can simultaneously maintain and disregard the moral parameters of real life. Exaggerations and lies abound, and doubts can be raised whether the real-

life celebrities are equally as deceitful, but there will never be serious ethical consequences. In the essay *Imaginary Gardens and Real Toads: On the Ethics of Basing Fiction on Actual People,* Felicia Ackerman outlines the ethical considerations to be addressed when using people from the real world in literary narrative fiction. She focuses on whether or not identity should be revealed, as well as on the kind of information that is morally justifiable to share about a person under different circumstances. Ackerman's essay illuminates the displacement of the traditional moral and ethical parameters in *Klovn*. Thus, while watching the TV series we are supposed to be acutely aware of both the person's identity and his or her unsympathetic behavior.

Ackerman also stresses the issue of whether or not the person in question has consented to appearing in the work and considers the ways in which this appearance can harm the person in different ways. In *Klovn,* the characters play themselves, voluntarily, or maybe also insistently, promoting themselves as unsympathetic. As mentioned above, this is a risky maneuver but is surprisingly often considered sympathetic by the viewers. In conclusion, this means that *Klovn* does the opposite of what is normally ethically justifiable. However, the effect of this is likewise the opposite of what could be expected.

Regardless of whether *Klovn* creates a positive or a negative image of its characters, it should be stressed that self-acting can, however, lead to rather serious consequences for the actors' real-life reputations, because the special referential structure can also lead to another distinctive quality of autofiction: the creation of rumors that have the potential to become rooted in reality.

We know that in reality Casper Christensen has been divorced, that he is popular and likes the ladies, and that he really is involved with Iben Hjejle, who also plays his girlfriend in *Klovn*. Inside the *Klovn* world, he is unfaithful several times, and considering the many

references to reality, it is not far from infidelity in *Klovn* to infidelity in real life in the viewer's mind. *Klovn* introduces an already established perspective from reality created by the media and fans it (and the viewer's knowledge) so that it exerts an influence back on the 'reality' from which it was taken. Here it can grow and help shape the 'reality' which, in turn, is to shape *Klovn*. So reality helps shape *Klovn* and *Klovn* helps shape reality, not only the TV series *Klovn* but also circumstances not inherent to *Klovn,* the extreme consequence of this being that the clowns can help shape their future self-image in the media. Casper starts going seriously downhill already in season four, becoming more and more alcoholic and less popular. If this becomes a self-ironic anticipation of a career change, it might make him more popular. *Klovn* mimics the tabloid emphasis on scandals, but these might very well have the opposite effect by leading to sympathy instead of outrage.

The hilarity potential of undecidability

A potential problem when referring to autofictional humor is that it can be difficult to identify precisely when something is self-inherently funny and when the special referential structure of autofiction creates added humor. The above examples demonstrate that a potential for humor can be created by playing on our knowledge about reality, but this does not mean that similar episodes would not have a humorous value if they were made without the characters playing themselves. There are, however, examples where the autofictional complexity not only creates the comical effect but also becomes the butt of it. This situation brings about a potential unique to autofiction in film and TV series.

In episode 10, Frank Hvam tries to swap for a better cemetery plot for his mother. A couple is willing to give him their plot in exchange

for meeting Casper Christensen. But something is wrong. The couple takes pictures from the meeting and they do not think that the man in the picture looks like Casper Christensen, because he has blond hair and contact lenses. They are supported in this view by the grave-digger, who also has a different impression of him through the media (as the guy from the quiz show *Husk Lige Tandbørsten* (Don't forget your toothbrush)(1995-96), who had black hair and wore large glasses). In an earlier scene, we saw the picture in question being taken and therefore the viewer is in no doubt that it is Casper Christensen, i.e. Casper Christensen from *Klovn*. It could actually seem as though the couple is right. Considering the definition of autofiction, it is not straightforward that this is Casper Christensen. The couple does not think that it can be Casper Christensen because it does not look like him. To us, he looks so much like Casper Christensen that we think it could be him, as he is in real life. It is both him and not him.

It is funny that Casper Christensen himself is in the room and looks just as stupid as the regular people sitting on either side of him. And it is funny because it *is* him even though the others think that he is not the Casper Christensen they know from the media. The most hilarious thing is, however, that it turns out not to be him after all. Here, we are laughing at the complex connection between work and reality, because it appears that neither characters nor viewers are able to determine who the 'real' Casper Christensen is. The undecidability becomes the direct cause of our laughter (with the proviso that "humor is a difficult thing" and "you had to be there yourself").

A clown is supposed to be funny and make the audience laugh. A clown is clumsy and a little bit stupid, but often he is also very serious. The TV series *Klovn* combines the circus clown's serious/ melancholic and comic/fun traits in a game in which the central theme is reality and the make-up and mask have been removed. It is tough

and therefore enforced humor where a lot is at stake because it looks like a complicated juggling act involving real people. It is funny because we know it is not real. But it is even funnier because we also know that it could be real. Or that it might be real. Or that it might become real.

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Three critiques of the Borat number, "Throw the Jew down the well"

Richard Raskin

….''Borat'' is not a guilt-free pleasure. We can laugh at Cohen's unwitting marks, because they're not us. But really, we're just lucky that we weren't in his line of fire.

Stephanie Zacharek

Introduction

Undoubtedly one of the most outrageous of all of Sacha Baron Cohen's appearances in the guise of Borat Sagdiyev, the outspoken anti-Semite, Gypsy-basher and misogynist from Kazakhstan, the "Throw the Jew down the well" performance was first aired on HBO on August 1, 2004. It was the final segment of a *Da Ali G Show* broadcast entitled *Peace* – the ninth program in Season 2 (episode 203),[1] and not included in the 2006 "moviefilm," *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*.[2]

This segment begins with establishing shots of an illuminated outdoor sign identifying the "Country West Dancing and Lounge" as its nighttime location, which we soon learn is in Tucson, Arizona

[1] http://www.hbo.com/alig/episode/index.html

[2] Shots of Borat and five young children singing the chorus of "Throw the Jew down the well" are however included in the "musics infomercial" found in the bonus material on the DVD of *Borat*.

when the mistress of ceremonies announces Borat and his Cowboy-Astana Band and calls upon the guests to give a nice hoot-'n-holler welcome to the performers who have come all the way from Kazakhstan. Borat is then seen climbing onto the stage amidst applause and cheers, and after several shots of patrons – one expectantly looking up at him, the other looking rather grim and unfriendly – Borat again appears in frame and says:

> Thiisa song is called a *Nemobozorbicha Domovan*. It mean "In my country there is a problem.

After hoots and cheers, he then proceeds to sing, with a number of people in the audience eventually beginning to clap and finally joining gleefully in the singing of the repeated verses marked here in italics.

In my country there is problem,
And that problem is transport.
It take very very long,
Because Kazakhstan is big.

Throw transport down the well
So my country can be free
So my country can be free
We must make travel easy
Then we'll have a big party.

In my country there is problem
And that problem is the Jew
They take everybody's money
They never give it back

Throw the Jew down the well
So my country can be free
So my country can be free
You must grab him by his horns
Then we have a big party

If you see the Jew coming
You must be careful of his teeth
You must grab him by his money
And I tell you what to do

Throw the Jew down the well
Throw the Jew down the well
So my country can be free
So my country can be free
You must grab him by his horns
You must grab him by his horns
Then we have a big party
Then we have a big party

Throw the Jew down the well
Throw the Jew down the well
So my country can be free
So my country can be free
You must grab him by his horns
You must grab him by his horns
Then we have a big party.

Shots of the audience happily clapping and singing along make it clear that the participation of many of the patrons is wholehearted, and at one point even smilingly accompanied by a gesture illustrating

the verse "You must grab him by his horns." And the number ends with a total shot of the grinning public cheering and applauding.

What this segment appears to show is that instead of recoiling in horror and indignation from an encouragement to "throw the Jew down the well," the patrons of this Arizona lounge are only too happy to join in the refrain, their applause and cheerful participation apparently signifying an unqualified approval of the violently anti-Semitic sentiment expressed in the song. In this way, the Borat performance is presumed to be as troubling as it is funny, in that it seems to show that virtually all the patrons in an Arizona lounge are not only potentially anti-Semitic but also unashamed to embrace that outlook openly in response to even a most ridiculous form of encouragement.

This segment of *Da Ali G Show* might be criticized in at least three different ways, which will now be considered one at a time along with possible counter-arguments.

1. MALICIOUS DECEPTION

In an op-ed column of *The New York Times*, David Brooks attacked what he saw as offensive manifestations of snobbery in contemporary culture, the crowning glory of which was Sacha Baron Cohen's *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006), described in this piece as "an explosively funny rube-baiting session orchestrated by a hilarious bully." According to Brooks, Cohen panders to his own audience – the educated bourgeoisie – and safely ridicules groups that audience enjoys looking down upon as morally and intellectually inferior. Furthermore:

> Cohen also knows how to rig an unfair fight, and to then ring maximum humiliation and humor out of each situation. The core of his movie is that he and his audience know he is playing a role, and this gives him, and them, power over the less sophisticated stooges who don't. The world becomes divided between the club of those who are

> in on the joke, and the excluded rubes who aren't. The more tolerant the simpletons try to be toward Borat, the more he drags them into the realm of anti-Semitism and vileness. The more hospitable they try to be, the dumber they appear for not understanding the situation.[3]

Though Brooks doesn't mention the "Throw the Jew down the well" segment from *Da Ali G Show*, his comments are eminently applicable to the staging and purposes of that performance.

However, if in fact that segment shows what it implicitly claims to show – an audience eagerly responsive to what Jody Rosen has called an "incitement to pogrom"[4] – then it could be argued that the deception and snobbery involved were justified by what the performance alarmingly revealed, which according to Rosen is:

> …that the Jews never did assimilate after all, that the lynch mob is waiting just over the hill—or downing brews beneath Stetsons at the local watering hole—waiting to "grab him by his horns" and hurl him down. […]You want to dismiss it out of hand, but Borat's song isn't just a comedy number—it's an exposé. Watch those bar patrons singing along and you can't help but wonder: In my country is there problem?

Or in Sacha Baron Cohen's own words

> Borat essentially works as a tool […] By himself being anti-Semitic, he lets people lower their guard and expose their own prejudice, whether it's anti-Semitism or an acceptance of anti-Semitism. 'Throw the Jew Down the Well' was a very controversial sketch, and some members of the Jewish community thought that it was actually going to encourage anti-Semitism. But to me it revealed something about that bar in Tucson. And the question is: Did it reveal that they were anti-Semitic? Perhaps. But maybe it just revealed that they were indifferent to anti-Semitism.[5]

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[3] David Brooks, "The Heyday of Snobbery," *The New York Times*, 16 November 2006. http://select.nytimes.com/2006/11/16/opinion/16brooks.html?_r=1&hp&oref=slogin

[4] Jody Rosen, "Borat Owes Me 97 Dollars." *Slate*, 3 November 2006. http://www.slate.com/id/2152773/

[5] Strauss, Neil. "The Man Behind The Mustache. Sacha Baron Cohen – The Real Borat – Finally Speaks." *Rolling Stone*. 14 November 2006. http://www.rollingstone.com/news/coverstory/sacha_baron_cohen_the_real_borat_finally_speaks

And as Cohen subsequently explains, he considers an indifference to anti-Semitism to be as much a cause for alarm as anti-Semitism itself.

But precisely because assertions regarding an overriding revelatory function of this performance rest in turn on assumptions as to what actually happened in that Tucson lounge, and more specifically as to why the patrons cheerfully sang along, we will have to reserve judgment on the issue at hand until a later point in this discussion when those assumptions will be examined in some detail.

2. UNINTENTIONAL PERPETUATION OF STEREOTYPES

One week after the *Ali G* episode containing "Throw the Jew down the well" was first aired, Abraham Foxman – the national director of the Anti-Defamation League – sent a letter to Sacha Baron Cohen, informing him that the ADL had received numerous complaints about the segment, and mentioning this central concern:

> While we understand this scene was an attempt to show how easily a group of ordinary people can be encouraged to join in an anti-Semitic chorus, we are concerned that the irony may have been lost on some of your audience – or worse, that some of your viewers may have simply accepted Borat's statements about Jews at face value.[5]

The same worry, that Cohen's Borat may actually serve to *promote* anti-Semitism for some members of the viewing public, was echoed in a subsequent ADL press release about the Borat film of 2006:

> …We hope that everyone who chooses to see the film understands Mr. Cohen's comedic technique, which is to use humor to unmask the absurd and irrational side of anti-Semitism and other phobias born of ignorance and fear.
>
> We are concerned, however, that one serious pitfall is that the audience may not always be sophisticated enough to get the joke, and that some

[5] The entire letter, dated 9 August 2004, can be found at this link: http://www.adl.org/media_watch/tv/20040809-hbo.htm

> may even find it reinforcing their bigotry.[6]

Commenting on this press release, Jim Hoberman accurately pinpointed the essentials when he wrote of the ADL: "Their real anxiety is that by satirizing anti-Semitism, Borat will legitimize it."[7] In other words, it would be ironic if the ease with which the Borat persona openly and comfortably espouses anti-Semitic views enabled a susceptible segment of the viewing public to feel unashamed about doing the same.

Commentators arguing in Cohen's defense were quick to point out that Borat is in the same respected tradition as the bigoted Archie Bunker figure played by Carroll O'Connor in *All in the Family* (1971-1979); and that figure was named by Bravo in 2005 as the number one all-time greatest TV character.[8] On the other hand, much of the vitality of that TV series resulted from the interplay of Archie Bunker with his left-wing son-in-law, Michael "Meathead" Stivic (Rob Reiner), while the Borat figure is not – and could not be – counter-balanced in Cohen's performances by an appealing character who criticizes Borat's racist views.

There are always risks involved when a comic brings to life a persona whose statements are intended to be understood by the viewing public as unacceptable. In other words, there is a danger that the comic's own person be confused with a persona played for laughs, particularly when a deadpan delivery is used and there are no obvious

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[6] "Statement On The Comedy Of Sacha Baron Cohen, A.K.A. 'Borat.'" 28 September 2006. http://www.adl.org/PresRele/Mise_00/4898_00.htm

[7] Fallow Traveler." *Village Voice*, 24 Oct 2006. http://www.villagevoice.com/film/0644,hoberman,74897,20.html

[8] http://www.bravotv.com/The_100_Greatest_TV_Characters/index.shtml *All in the Family* had been inspired by the highly successful British sitcom, *Till Death Do Us Part* (1966-1975) in which the racist star of the show was Alf Garnett (played by Warren Mitchell) who vented his wrath on his socialist-leaning son-in-law, Mike Rawlins (Anthony Booth).

visual or vocal cues to set the persona apart from the person playing the role. This was the case when during a 2001 appearance on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, Sarah Silverman pretended to explain how she once got out of jury duty. She later retold the story on ABC *Nightline* in this way:

> I got one of those like… things for jury duty in the mail, you've gotta fill it out. So I'm like, "Oh my God, I don't want to do jury duty." And my friend tells me, "Why don't you just write something really racist on the form, like 'I hate Chinks.'" And I was like, "Yeah, but you know I don't want people to think I'm racist. You know, I just want to get out of jury duty." So I filled out the form and I wrote: "I *love* Chinks."[9]

Though Silverman only pretended not to realize that she was uttering a racist slur, and though the joke was intended to be at the expense of the mindless persona she was playing for comic effect, The Media Action Network of Asian Americans demanded an apology, and one was issued both by NBC and Conan O'Brien, but not by Silverman who maintained that what she told was not a racist joke but rather a joke about racism.

With Borat singing "Throw the Jew down the well," in contrast to the Sarah Silverman story cited above and her deadpan delivery, numerous cues – including a fake mustache, over-the-top accent, crude lyrics that neither rhymed nor fit the music, a patently unprofessional singing voice – should have lowered the risks of not realizing that a persona was in play, at least for some percentage of the patrons at Country West.

And this leads us to the final and in some ways most serious of the three critiques.

3. MISREPRESENTATION

Important factual questions were raised in two articles that appeared shortly after the segment was aired on HBO: Nathaniel Popper's "Comic Pushes Limits in Anti-Semitic Sing Along" (*Jewish Daily Forward*, 13 August 2004)[10] and Curtis McCrary's "In My Country West There Is Problem. Do Tucsonans really want to throw Jews down wells, as 'Da Ali G Show' suggests?" (*Tucson Weekly*, 26 August 2004).[11]

One issue concerns exactly what transpired between the time "Borat and his Cowboy-Astana Band" were introduced, and the singing of the explicitly anti-Semitic verses and choruses. The impression given in the 2 min. 46 sec. segment is that the only intervening action was the singing of a verse and chorus about "transport." But statements made by people who were there at the Country West that night and which are cited in the two articles make it clear that "Borat" also sang verses about throwing his wife and family and his wife's cooking down the well, and that the entire performance lasted several hours.

This of course is significant if these other portions of the song were sung *before* the explicitly anti-Semitic section, for the simple reason that they would have served to tip off at least some of the patrons that the entire performance was a joke.

For example, Nathaniel Popper quotes Carol Pierce, described as "the treasurer of the company that owns the bar," and who "could be seen during the segment on HBO, laughing heartily behind her goateed husband, " as pointing out

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[9] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PW33qppZjCA

[10] "Comic Pushes Limits in Anti-Semitic Sing Along." *Jewish Daily Forward*, 13 Aug 2004. http://www.forward.com/articles/comic-pushes-limits-in-antisemitic-sing-along/

[11] "In My Country West There Is Problem. Do Tucsonans really want to throw Jews down wells, as 'Da Ali G Show' suggests?" *Tucson Weekly*, 26 Aug 2004. http://www.tucsonweekly.com/gbase/currents/Content?oid=oid:59856

> that what television viewers saw was only a few minutes of the two-and-a-half-hour performance that Borat gave when he came to Tucson, Ariz., in April. The rest of Borat's performance, in which he sang about throwing his wife and family down the well, made it perfectly clear to Pierce that the man performing was a comedian in disguise — who was very funny.
>
> […] "You could tell right away it was a wig he was wearing, and a fake mustache. I would say 99% of the people in here saw that, too."

And Curtis McCrary quotes a Carole Irizarry "who supervises the bar, along with her husband, Robert," as stating that "everyone was in on the joke." McCrary adds:

> At the time of filming, the Country West featured a mechanical bull on which Borat took a turn; he continued to regale the assembled with other things he'd like to throw down the well (his wife, his wife's cooking), which would suggest that Irizarry's characterization is, at least in part, accurate.

That not absolutely everyone was in on the joke seems clear. For example, even after watching the segment on HBO, Bill Sandy, the manager of Country West, "still did not appear to grasp that Borat was simply a character, created and portrayed by a comedian from Britain" (Popper). And Sacha Baron Cohen reportedly said that one of the patrons told him after the show: "You know, Borat, I'm from Texas; you better see how we treat the Jews down there" (McCrary, citing a statement made by Cohen on a Howard Stern broadcast).

But it seems equally clear that a significant number of the patrons *were* in on the joke, and even if we have no way of assessing whether they constituted 25 or 50 or 75 percent of the people who cheerfully sang along, the impression given in the edited segment that the very act of joining in the singing revealed latent anti-Semitism, is almost certainly misleading.

And although in the general pattern of deceptions carried out in the guise of Borat, the television viewer and Sacha Baron Cohen are

knowing confederates enjoying the discomfiture or naïveté of an unsuspecting stooge, in the case of "Throw the Jew down the well" it would appear in retrospect that a different configuration was in play, with a number of the apparent stooges playing along with the joke, and the TV viewer – for being led to think otherwise – the real victim of a deception.

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Born 1960. Ph.D. EHESS, Paris. Professor and Programme director, Visual Studies, Lingnan University. Areas of research and teaching: transnational cinema, small national cinemas, cultural policy. Monographs: Stanley Kwan's *Center Stage* (2006), *Small Nation, Global Cinema* (2005), *The Strategy of Letters* (1993). Edited and co-edited volumes: *The Cinema of Small Nations* (2007), *Purity and Provocation* (2003), *The Postnational Self* (2002), *Cinema and Nation* (2000), *Emotion and the Arts* (1997), *Rules and Conventions* (1992), and *The Danish Directors* (2000). Forthcoming books include *The New Nordic Cinemas*, with Andy Nestingen, a study of film and risk, and a film classics book on *Italian for Beginners*.

Henrik Juel
Born 1951. Mag. art and cand. mag in Philosophy and Nordic Philology, Ph.D. in Communication Studies. Associate Professor at the Department of Communication, Business and Information Technologies (CBIT), Roskilde University, where he teaches video production and film theory, aesthetics, communication theory and rhetoric. Research in film phenomenology, rhetoric and didactics. Long standing interest in the aesthetics of nature and creative and philosophical video production. More information and articles in English can be accessed at: http://akira.ruc.dk/~hjuel/

Mark Le Fanu
Born 1950, London. MA in literature from Cambridge University. Film scholar and historian currently based in Aarhus. Author of *The Cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky* (BFI, 1987) and *Mizoguchi and Japan* (BFI, 2005).

Bevin Yeatman
Born 1949, Christchurch New Zealand. Doctor of Philosophy. Lecturer, Department of Screen and Media Studies, University of Waikato. Research focus on creative practice, new media developments and media philosophy. Teaching focus on television and digital film practice as well as screen theory and creative theory. Published in various international and national journals, including *New Review of Film and Television Studies, Australasian Journal of American Studies* and *3CMedia*.

Previous issues of p.o.v.

1: March 1996	**Three short films: *Cat's Cradle, La Vis, Avondale Dogs***
2: Dec 1996	**Functions of the film title; set-up and pay-off; how films end**
3: March 1997	**Three short films: *Eating Out, The Beach, The Price Is Right***
4: Dec 1997	**Filmic space, camera movement and metaphor in film**
5: March 1998	**Three short films: *Wind, Immediate Departure, The Bloody Olive***
6: Dec 1998	**The art of film editing; Alan Alda on storytelling in film**
7: March 1999	**Three short films: *Come, Possum, Goodbye Mom***
8: Dec 1999	**Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire***
9: March 2000	**Two short films: *The Sheep Thief, New York Encounter***
10: Dec 2000	**Aspects of Dogma 95**
11: March 2001	**Three short films: *Las Nueve Vidas, Peep Show, Kleingeld***
12: Dec 2001	**Comparisons of American and European cinema**
13: March 2002	**Short fiction and documentary films**
14: Dec 2002	***Casablanca***
15: March 2003	**Four short films: *With Raised Hands, Derailment, Funeral at Parc de France, Remembrance***
16: Dec 2003	**Film and politics**
17: March 2004	**Four short films: *Bamboleho, Save the Children, Promise Land, The Chinese Wall***
18: Dec 2004	**Storytelling**
19: March 2005	**Four short films: *Heritage, Cock Fight, Draft, Natan***
20: Dec 2005	**Film and terrorism**
21: March 2006	**Three short films: *Bawke, Staircase, [A]torsion***
22: Dec 2006	**Documentary film**
23: March 2007	**Danish TV Commercials and Advertising Films**
24: Dec 2007	**The Western**
25: March 2008	**Three short films: *Kitchen Sink, T-Shirt* and *The Tube with a Hat***

The March 2009 issue of *p.o.v.*
will be devoted to two remarkable short films:

Alumbramiento / Lightborne
(Spain, 2007, 15 min.)
directed by Eduardo Chapero-Jackson

Awards include:
UIP Prize for Best European Short Film, 2007
Best Short Fiction Film at AFIA Film Festival, 2008
Golden Dragon, Cracow Film Festival, 2008
Málaga Spanish Film Festival, Best Short, 2008

Bullet in the Brain
(USA, 2001, 14 min.)
directed by David Von Ancken

Awards include:
Best Short Film, St. Louis International Film Festival, 2001
Certificate of Merit, San Francisco International Film Festival, 2001
Best Short, Stonybrook Film Festival, 2001
Special Jury Prize, USA Film Festival, 2001