ephemera: theory & politics in organization

The comic organization

What is *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*?

ephemera is an independent journal, founded in 2001. *ephemera* provides its content free of charge, and charges its readers only with free thought.

theory
ephemera encourages contributions that explicitly engage with theoretical and conceptual understandings of organizational issues, organizational processes and organizational life. This does not preclude empirical studies or commentaries on contemporary issues, but such contributions consider how theory and practice intersect in these cases. We especially publish articles that apply or develop theoretical insights that are not part of the established canon of organization studies. e*phemera* counters the current hegemonization of social theory and operates at the borders of organization studies in that it continuously seeks to question what organization studies is and what it can become.

politics
ephemera encourages the amplification of the political problematics of organization within academic debate, which today is being actively de-politized by the current organization of thought within and without universities and business schools. We welcome papers that engage the political in a variety of ways as required by the organizational forms being interrogated in a given instance.

organization
Articles published in *ephemera* are concerned with theoretical and political aspects of organizations, organization and organizing. We refrain from imposing a narrow definition of organization, which would unnecessarily halt debate. Eager to avoid the charge of 'anything goes' however, we do invite our authors to state how their contributions connect to questions of organization and organizing, both theoretical and practical.

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

ephemera 15(3), August 2015

The comic organization

Nick Butler, Casper Hoedemaekers and Dimitrinka Stoyanova Russell

in association with:
mayfly
www.mayflybooks.org

Published by the *ephemera* editorial collective: Armin Beverungen, Bent M. Sørensen, Bernadette Loacker, Birke Otto, Christian Garmann Johnsen, Ekaterina Chertkovskaya, Emma Jeanes, Helen Delaney, Kate Kenny, Katie Sullivan, Kenneth Weir, Konstantin Stoborod, Lena Olaison, Martyna Śliwa, Matthew Allen, Nick Butler, Rashné Limki, Rowland Curtis, Stephen Dunne.

First published for free online at www.ephemerajournal.org and in print in association with MayFlyBooks (www.mayflybooks.org) in 2015.

ISSN (Online) 1473-2866
ISSN (Print) 2052-1499

ISBN (Print) 978-1-906948-28-3

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

Table of Contents

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
ISSN 2052-1499 (Print)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 15(3): 497-512

The comic organization

Nick Butler, Casper Hoedemaekers and Dimitrinka Stoyanova Russell

Introduction

Humour and laughter have become prevalent themes in management and organization studies over the last few decades (Westwood and Rhodes, 2007; Bolton and Houlihan, 2009). This is perhaps unsurprising as joking is a part of all workplaces, not to mention everyday life. Studies have documented the prevalence of clowning, horseplay, pranks, satire, ridicule and lampooning in a variety of settings and at every level in the organizational hierarchy (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). But while joking is certainly pervasive, the meaning and significance of humour at work is by no means uncontested: humour is said to serve variously as a coping mechanism, a subversive strategy and a management tool in contemporary organizations. Starting from this basis, the special issue seeks to explore the 'inescapable ambiguity of humour' (Kenny and Euchler, 2012: 307) in culture, society and organizations.

The role of humour and laughter in organizations has undergone a considerable shift in recent years. For much of the twentieth century, employers attempted to restrict joking practices within industrial workplaces due to the negative impact on labour discipline (Collinson, 2002). Today, however, humour is coming to play a prominent role in ensuring compliance to corporate objectives. This is most evident in contemporary 'cultures of fun', which encourage employees to engage in light-hearted and enjoyable activities in order to secure commitment, improve motivation and ultimately boost productivity (Fleming, 2005). Examples of this have included hiring a 'corporate jester' to poke fun at managerial pretensions, integrating wacky 'dressing up days' into the working week or installing comic artefacts in the office such as novelty clocks or giant inflatable dolls (Warren and Fineman, 2007). The benefits of humour and laughter are

now widely recognized as an essential part of the managerial toolkit (Lyttle, 2007; Romero and Cruthirds, 2006).

In the face of such initiatives, employees might respond with mockery and ridicule as much as lively engagement or wholehearted participation. After all, there is probably nothing less likely to raise a smile than being compelled to have fun. From this perspective, humour – manifesting as parody or sarcasm – serves as a way of distancing oneself from the norms of good corporate citizenship (Kenny, 2009; Westwood, 2004). But while it might be tempting to view such behaviour as resistance against the managerial colonization of employees' thoughts, beliefs and emotions, another interpretation is possible. Cynical humour allows employees to cast scorn on packaged fun programmes at the same time as ensuring the unimpeded functioning of business-as-usual by reifying the notion of an 'authentic self' (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). Humour is therefore a complex and sometimes contradictory element in contemporary organizations (Butler, 2015; forthcoming; Westwood and Johnston, 2012). This explains why we chose Banksy's famous graffiti mural as the front cover for this special issue: the banana, a classic comedy motif, also serves as an instrument of violence and coercion[1].

This special issue aims to bring these complexities and contradictions to light via a series of analyses examining a range of comic phenomena: psychoanalytic approaches to humour in organizations (Karlsen and Villadsen, this issue), masculine joking practices in an IT firm (Plester, this issue), the cultural significance of slapstick in film and TV (Kasper, this issue), the relation between absurdity and heterotopia in *Twin Peaks* (Loacker and Peters, this issue), and several excursions into the world of stand-up comedy (Double, this issue; Kaupinnen and Daskalaki, this issue; Smith, this issue). But before we outline the contributions to this special issue, the editorial will present an overview of the philosophy of humour and laughter. As we will see, philosophy is ideally poised to analyze the ambiguities of comic phenomenon. After all, philosophy – unlike, say, sociology or anthropology – is geared towards reflecting upon paradoxes (Spoelstra, 2007). For Deleuze (1994), the very purpose of philosophy is to stimulate a mode of thought that is beyond (*para*) common sense (*doxa*), what he calls 'para-sense'[2]. The philosophy of humour and laughter thus opens up the

1 Thanks to Stevphen Shukaitis for the cover design.

2 It should come as no surprise, perhaps, that Deleuze's (2006: 214) own description of para-sensical philosophy bears a remarkable similarity to classic definitions of comic incongruity: 'It groups under one concept things which you would have thought were very different, or it separates things you would have thought belonged together'.

possibility of moving beyond common sense assumptions about the comic dimensions of social and organizational life.

Laughter track

As Freud (2002) points out, humour is a distinctly social phenomenon[3]. This is not only the case because it relies on social and cultural context, but also because of the necessity of an other who laughs. The incidence of humour in a shared space and a concrete social situation has led to discussions about its effects – on both individuals as well as on more profoundly shared aspects of social life such as politics, sexual norms and ethnic identity. Since laughter provides an immediate clue that something funny has been encountered, it has typically served as the starting-point for analyses of humour.

It is often claimed that laughter and humour have a beneficial impact on health and well-being. As far back as Kant (1987: 203), laughter was seen to result in a 'slackening in the body by an oscillation of the organs, which promotes the restoration of equilibrium and has a favourable influence upon health'. We find the same sentiments expressed today in positive psychology, the self-help literature and gelastic exercises such as 'laughter yoga' and 'transcendental chuckling' (Jacobson, 1997: 28-9). In effect, possessing a good sense of humour and seeing the funny side of things – even in difficult circumstances – is seen as a way of allowing us to live happier and healthier lives, putting into practice the well-worn cliché that laughter is the best medicine (see e.g. Cousins, 1979; Klein, 1989; 2000).

But humour and laughter are said by some to be not only physiologically and psychologically beneficial, but also socially and politically desirable. For Morreall (2010), comedy is characterized by the same kind of open-mindedness and freedom of thought that is vital for maintaining pluralistic democracies. Forms of humour such as satire and parody are said to have 'kept a critical, democratic spirit alive in the United States' by poking fun at the established order and keeping the government on its toes (*ibid.*: 114). Humour thus has the capacity to encourage irreverence towards authority and vigilance against hypocrisy. By the same token, the power of laughter is seen as a threat to more despotic regimes.

3 The term 'humour' is etymologically derived from ancient Greek theories of bodily humours, which relates to the different states of our moods (i.e. sanguine, choleric, melancholic, phlegmatic). In modern times, the term was associated with the exaggerated temperaments, or 'humours', of comic characters in 17th century theatre. For the purposes of this editorial, the term is used as a synonym for comic phenomena in general – that is, anything that is subjectively experienced as *funny* in some way.

We are reminded, for example, that Hitler set up special 'joke courts' to punish people who made fun of the Nazi regime, such as those who named their pets 'Adolf' or told indiscreet one-liners about Party bigwigs (Morreall, 1983). Such accounts attest to the political value of being able to 'take a joke' by aligning seriousness with authoritarianism, which finds a contemporary echo in comedian Lewis Black's definition of a terrorist as 'a person without humour at all' (cited in Stott, 2005: 104). But while comic laughter can certainly be seen as a force that 'purifies from dogmatism [and] liberates from fanaticism' (Bakhtin, 1984: 123), we would do well to reflect on the fact that adopting a humorous attitude may also have the effect of making us 'more accepting of the way things are' (Morreall, 1983: 128) and so foreclose on the possibility of any radical political change.

Others have ascribed to humour a more subversive role in society. From this perspective, humour can be seen as a way of casting a new and surprising light on those aspects of our everyday lives that we take for granted, so estranging us – albeit temporarily – from conventional ways of thinking and acting (see Karlsen and Villadsen, this issue). This is expressed most forcefully by Critchley (2002: 10), who suggests that a joke 'suddenly and explosively lets us see the familiar defamiliarized, the ordinary made extraordinary and the real rendered surreal'. Humour reveals the contingency of the present state of things at the same time as pointing towards how they might be otherwise. For example, John Kenneth Galbraith's quip about economic forecasting – namely, that its only function is to make astrology look respectable – takes aim at commonly held assumptions about the infallibility of economics by unfavourably comparing a supposedly scientific discipline to a system of superstitious belief. The joke thus compels us to imagine a world in which economists are not viewed as reliable experts but as esoteric charlatans. This tells us that comic ideas have the capacity to show that the existing order, based on a set of foundational assumptions, has no intrinsic necessity and is therefore open to contestation. However, it is important to note that there is no ultimate deliverance to be found in humour itself: 'By showing us the folly of the world, humour does not *save* us from that folly...but calls on us to face the folly of the world and change the situation in which we find ourselves' (Critchley, 2002: 17-8; emphasis in original). While a joke may suspend our reality for a brief instant, highlighting life's absurdities, it cannot alone serve to bring about any lasting transformation. At most, comic laughter sensitizes us to the need to close the gap between how things are and how things should be.

While Critchley's analysis is strictly anthropological rather than theological, other thinkers have sought to uncover the more explicitly redemptive qualities of comic laughter. For Berger (1997: 206), humour rises above ordinary reality at the same time as it puts forward an alternative reality that is 'inserted like an island

into the ocean of everyday experience'. We might think here of the surprise and wonder that we momentarily feel whenever we hear an unexpected witticism or witness a comic scenario that causes us involuntarily to laugh out loud. To this extent, humour shares with religion its ability to transcend mundane experience and reach a state of near ecstasy. This is no doubt why Critchley (2002: 17) is happy to think of jokes as 'shared prayers'. But Berger goes one step further. If faith and comedy are combined, our laughter – prompted by the fundamental incongruity between the finitude of man and the limitlessness of God – ultimately results in salvation:

> Empirically, the comic is a finite and temporary game within the serious world that is marked by our pain and that inexorably leads towards our death. Faith, however, puts the empirical in question and denies its ultimate seriousness... It presents, not an illusion, but a vision of a world infinitely more real than all the realities of *this* world. (Berger, 1997: 210-11; emphasis in original)

Laughter in a divine register brings into stark relief the disparity between earthly pretensions and heavenly splendour, so holding open the promise of a better world to come. The messianic power of humour goes some way in explaining the tradition of the 'holy fool', prominent in Eastern Orthodoxy, whereby devout individuals demonstrate their extreme piety and humility by inverting worldly values through a process of *kenosis* or self-abasement (Ivanov, 2006). For example, sixth-century monk St Symeon of Emesa would engage in outrageous and transgressive behaviour, such as dancing with prostitutes or roaming the streets naked, in order to turn existing social norms of decorum upside-down and expose hypocrisy. Such comical foolishness, which also found expression in the medieval fool and reached its literary apogee with Erasmus, is closely linked to spiritual revelation precisely because it reveals the folly of human propriety in the light of divine wisdom (Palmer, 1994). While it is certainly true that the early Christian church frowned upon excessive displays of mirth that signified a breach of bodily discipline and ascetic control, there is nonetheless a significant tradition of reconciling laughter with faith based on a theological mode of incongruity (Screech, 1997).

What all these approaches have in common is their belief in the positive power of laughter, whether political, social or religious. But humour is not universally viewed as a force for good; comic laughter is also said to have a darker, more problematic side.

That joke isn't funny anymore

It is not uncommon for thinkers to make a normative distinction between – crudely expressed – 'good' and 'bad' forms of humour. To wit: whereas the former is rebellious and challenges accepted norms of thinking and acting, the latter is oppressive and reinforces existing social relations. Critchley (2002: 11), for example, acknowledges that 'reactionary humour' has the potential to 'reinforce consensus and in no way seeks to criticize the established order or change the situation in which we find ourselves', unlike what he terms 'true humour'. We might think, here, of traditional British club circuit comedians from the 1970s and 1980s such as Bernard Manning and Jim Davidson who told jokes about minority groups – such as black, Irish or gay people – that further consolidated negative stereotypes in contrast to innovative post-alternative UK comedians like Stewart Lee, Daniel Kitson or Tim Key who shatter our expectations about the form and content of comedy. Similar distinctions are made in studies of joking practices of work, which tend to draw a boundary between 'repressive humour' (usually employed by managers to exert control over workers) and 'contestive humour' (usually employed by workers to challenge organizational authority) (Holmes, 2000; see also Bolton and Houlihan, 2009; Warren and Fineman, 2007). In such accounts, the disciplinary effects of laughter on individual behaviour is criticized at the same time as the disruptive effects of laughter on the established order are valorized.

The problem with this approach is that humour has the potential to be both disruptive and disciplinary at one and the same time. An instance of comic laughter, in other words, can simultaneously serve to undermine power structures on one level while reinforcing the status quo on another (Butler, 2015; Karlsen and Villadsen, this issue; Westwood and Johnston, 2012). Sick humour or dirty jokes may be offensive to many, but they do break certain taboos and social conventions, not least those of taste and decorum (Dundes, 1987; Legman, 2006). To this extent, we cannot deny that such manifestations of humour may serve to 'liberate' us from established modes of thought. Similarly, if outright racism and sexism are no longer tolerated in modern British society, then it is not particularly difficult to imagine how blue comedians like Roy 'Chubby' Brown might be seen as challenging the perceived liberal hegemony in the name of comic subversion. Indeed, one of the songs Brown (2008) incorporates into his live act is a barbed attack on political correctness entitled 'The right to offend' that marks out all minority groups as legitimate targets of ridicule:

> Midgets, dwarfs, spastics, handicapped, Thalidomide
>
> Spics, wops, Pakis, chinks, Japs and retards

> Asians, gays and lesbians, Rastas who smoke the grass
>
> Political correctness – kiss my fucking hairy arse! (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aj43fgBrbQY)

Having cultivated the image of a 'rebellious truth-teller' in his crude and carnivalesque shows (Medhurst, 2007: 193), Brown is seeking in this song to question the widely held social prohibition against making derogatory jokes about race, religion, gender, sexuality and disability. Whether such humour is viewed as 'good' or 'bad' – or, in Critchley's terms, 'true' or 'reactionary' – depends very much on the set of political and ideological allegiances that one happens to hold. We should be cautious, therefore, in making any strict normative distinctions between different expressions of humour.

One response to this is to collapse the distinction between positive and negative forms of humour entirely and view all manifestations of laughter with equal suspicion. There is a long tradition of misogelastic thought, articulated most notably by the so-called 'superiority theory' of humour that sees laughter as inherently related to mockery. Although Plato and Aristotle are commonly considered as early proponents of this approach, it was Thomas Hobbes (1999: 54-5) who gave superiority theory its foundational definition by suggesting that 'the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly'. In other words, laughter is a form of self-aggrandizement that occurs whenever we recognize the real or imagined deficiencies of others (or ourselves as we once were) – an incongruity based on the perceived high status of one group and the perceived low status of another. Consider, for example, the way the English tell jokes about the Irish, the French about the Belgians, the Germans about the Ostfriesians, etc. (Critchley, 2002: 12).

While this approach to humour has come under sustained critique in recent years (e.g. Morreall, 1983; 2010), French philosopher Henri Bergson persuasively extended the insights of superiority theory by highlighting the collective and corrective dimensions of comic laughter in modern society in his 1900 book *Laughter* (see Butler, 2015). For Bergson (2008), laughter is caused when individuals behave in a comically rigid or mechanical way, failing to adapt to the world around them. Think, for instance, of blooper reels where actors make a mistake during filming (e.g. stumbling over one's lines, involuntarily passing wind, etc.). Or more extreme, the numerous 'epic fail' clips on social media sites where individuals, instead of performing an action according to expectations, end up in some calamitous situation or other. For Bergson, individuals who deviate from social norms in this way will be greeted with ridicule. By laughing at them,

we unwittingly partake in a social gesture of embarrassment that aims to readapt the individual to the natural flow of life. It also reminds all of us that, should we deviate from the shared customs of society, we too will be met with mockery. This view has serious implications for understanding the meaning and significance of humour in society: it suggests that while comic laughter may seem harmless and enjoyable, it in fact contains the hidden purpose of reforming attitudes and actions in line with social conventions as well as reminding individuals that any divergence from these standards will result in outright derision.

Taking these ideas to their logical conclusion, Billig (2005a: 236) argues that 'humour in the form of ridicule lies at the heart of social life' since the threat of embarrassment ensures overall conformity to established codes of behaviour in society. Billig's conclusions, however, are not entirely satisfactory. By offering a robust defence of critical seriousness against the contemporary 'don't worry, be happy' ideology found in positive psychology, Billig neglects to examine forms of humour that function outside of the purvey jokes, quips and witticisms. We might think, for example, of the absurd humour found in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (see Loacker and Peters, this issue) or the dark comedy in Chris Morris' *Blue jam* (Leggott and Sexton, 2013; Randall, 2010). Put simply, Billig focuses on 'funny ha ha' at the expense of 'funny peculiar': whereas the first involves a social mechanism of correction based on scorn and derision, the second prompts us to consider the relation between humour and heterotopia. To explore this further, it is useful to turn to the laughter that erupts at the beginning of Foucault's *Order of things*.

...from a long way off look like flies

Foucault's laughter has received little attention in organization studies (Jones, 2009). This is a shame, because his gelastic outburst at the beginning of the *Order of things* sheds light on a type of humour that falls outside the simplistic duality between 'good' (i.e. rebellious and subversive) and 'bad' (i.e. conservative and disciplinary) laughter found in the critical literature. Referring to the well-known example of Borges' fictional Chinese encyclopaedia, which sorts animals into strange and inexplicable categories, Foucault (2002: xvi) discusses the genesis of his study on the human sciences:

> This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought – *our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and

> threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. (Emphasis in original)

By presenting an altogether different way of knowing the world, Borges' ludicrous taxonomy forces us to recognize the contingent nature of accepted systems of classification (Butler, forthcoming). How is it possible, for instance, for animals to be divided into a group that 'from a long way off look like flies'? Foucault goes on to describes the moment of comic intensity provoked by Borges' *Celestial emporium of benevolent knowledge*. He suggests (2002: xix) that this laughter is not reassuring or consoling, but in fact engenders a sense of 'uneasiness'; it offers no redemption from worldly order, only a critical break with its 'familiar landmarks'. This alerts us to the fact that such laughter is not located in the realm of the *incongruous*, that is 'the linking together of things that are inappropriate' (2002: xix) – for example, the surrealist image of an umbrella and a sewing machine on an operating table. Rather, this laughter is prompted by an altogether different kind of disorder, one that is based in the sphere of the *heteroclite*. In this dimension, 'things are "laid", "placed", "arranged" in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a *common locus* beneath them all' (2002: xix; emphasis in original). In other words, Borges' imaginary taxonomy is not undergirded by a classificatory scheme that would provide a shared point of reference for the animals contained within it (e.g. species, genus, family); there is no principle of unity to be found among the different creatures aside from an arbitrary alphabetization (a, b, c). Foucault's laughter is tied to the realization that Borges' fictional encyclopaedia does away with the implicit foundation on which formal systems of knowledge normally rest, so presenting 'an attack on our way of knowing [and] a direct assault upon our episteme' (Topinka, 2010: 64). Whereas the incongruous always relies on a residual degree of congruence – such as the operating table on which the umbrella and sewing machine happen to meet – the heteroclite does away with such structural support altogether and so presents, as Loacker and Peters (this issue) put it, a site of 'alternate ordering'.

It is in this sense that Foucault associates the incongruous with utopias and the heteroclite with heterotopias, making explicit the political import of the shattering laughter that opens the *Order of things*. Utopias, Foucault (2002: xix) explains, 'afford consolation' by offering visions of perfection and order. In comic terms, we might think of the kind of humour that points towards an idealized counter-reality by contorting the present situation. This is illustrated most clearly by jokes told in Eastern bloc countries that focused on the harsh reality of life under Communism, for example:

> Q. What is colder in Romania than the cold water?

A. The hot water (cited in Lewis, 2008: 3)

On one level, the joke makes us laugh because our expectations are pleasingly confounded: hot water is, by definition, warmer than cold water. But the joke, which ultimately targets the poor housing conditions of the population under Ceaușescu, also contains an implicit normative assumption about how things *should* be. It posits a utopian counter-reality in which hot running water from domestic taps indicates, by way of synecdoche, a higher standard of living in Communist Romania more generally. In the short distance between set-up and punch-line, we are never in any doubt about the wider social and political context that provides the necessary conditions for the joke to be articulated in the first place and without which there would simply be no humour at all. Lest we imagine such utopias are always unambiguous positive, the same point could also be made about the set of unspoken presuppositions about ethnicity that provide the background against which violent racist jokes are able to emerge (Billig, 2005b).

Heterotopias, by contrast, are 'disturbing' because they undermine the basis on which knowledge is formed. As Loacker and Peters note in their Foucauldian analysis of *Twin Peaks* (this issue), heterotopias 'desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source' (Foucault, 2002: xix). Unlike utopias, heterotopias destroy linkages between ideas and contexts rather than directly inverting the order of words and things. Heterotopias aim to establish an altogether different mode of thought that cannot become absorbed within dominant modes of knowledge. Elsewhere, Foucault (2000: 181) speaks of heterotopias in explicitly spatial terms, suggesting that they have 'the ability to juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves'. He gives the example of a theatre or cinema in which other spaces and times are situated within the prevailing order of space and time, which – in a similar way to Borges' fictional encyclopaedia – present a 'space of illusion that denounces all real space...as being even more illusory' (2000: 184), thus exposing the contingency of the present state of things.

We might detect such heterotopian humour in the performances of Cluub Zarathustra, the mid-1990s Dadaist comedy cabaret overseen by Simon Munnery that was eventually reimagined for television as *Attention scum!* in 2001 (see Wringham, 2012). Here, the combustible mix of sub-Nietzschean epigrams, deliberately pretentious poetry, nonsensical riddles, repetition of words and phrases, and aggressive opera bellowed at disruptive members of the audience point towards a comedy in which 'fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the *heteroclite*' (Foucault, 2002: xix; emphasis in original). Perhaps the most indicative aspect of

this heterotopian humour can be found in a one-liner that is archly intoned by Munnery's character, the League Against Tedium, apropos of nothing: 'I do not spyk lyk yow becok I um not lyk yow'. While the accepted standards of spelling and pronunciation are contorted here for comic effect, we are also forced to confront the fact that our way of speaking ('I do not spyk like yow') – and consequently our way of being ('I um not lyk yow') – is one of a number of possible alternatives. By desiccating speech and stopping words in their tracks, we might say that this one-liner acts as a 'kind of contestation, both mythical and real, of the space in which we live' (Foucault, 2000: 181) by drawing attention to the arbitrary nature of our common language: *mythical* because it is based on an imaginary set of linguistic rules and *real* because it is decipherable (if not quite explicable) as a sentence within our own grammatical system. While utopian humour points towards an ideal state yet to be realized by inverting the present reality, such as we find in Communist jokes, heterotopian humour seeks to unsettle the present from within precisely by deviating from the norm. This will no doubt provoke an uneasy laughter that, in the same way as Borges' fictional encyclopaedia, 'shatters and breaks and disturbs' those aspects of our lives that we otherwise take for granted (Parvulescu, 2010: 12).

These questions about the effects of humour are immediately relevant to organizational analysis. For example, as a site in which one's time is sold in exchange for a wage, and one's rights as a free citizen are temporarily suspended under the labour contract, capitalist organizations impose their own logic and order upon its members by appealing to the 'natural' order of life under capitalism. This underscores the potential for heterotopian humour to 'crack up' the reigning hegemony of managerial rule that is accomplished through dry bureaucratic routine or packaged fun initiatives. As Jones (2010: 218[n10]) suggests:

> There are...many very different ways of laughing at organizations and at organization studies. The point here is to stress that the opposition should not be set between the high seriousness of organization studies, or the apparently humourless life inside organizations. Rather, the question is to learn from those who laugh at the insanities of the world, to learn how to laugh differently.

It is this capacity to 'laugh differently' that Foucault brings to the fore in the *Order of Things*, and which we have sought to explore in this editorial. With this in mind, the contributions to the special issue explore humour as something that captures the paradox between the mundane and the strange, between the law and its contestation, between – as Loacker and Peters (this issue: 635) put it – the 'order of the day' and the 'order of the night'.

The contributions

In the first article of this special issue, Mads Karlsen and Kaspar Villadsen (this issue) examine the radical potential of humour to contest or subvert management ideology. This is especially relevant given the recent turn within management discourse and practice to use humour as a way of influencing and governing employees within 'post-authoritarian' organizations. Karlsen and Villadsen examine the influential Žižekian argument that humour in organizations can be seen as a manifestation of cynical reason. On this view, laughing at managerial authority represents no more than a minor transgression of the dominant order and so ironically ends up reproducing that very order. Such pessimism is countered by the possibility of a truly critical humoristic practice within organizations – namely, to expose the fundamental non-closure of reality through comic incongruity.

In the next paper, Barbara Plester (this issue) shows the real-world implications of employing humour as an explicit management strategy. Based on an empirical study of a 'fun culture' in a New Zealand IT firm, Plester examines forms of organizationally-sanctioned hyper-masculine humour – with often shocking results. Drawing on on Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, Plester traces how hegemonic masculinity is enacted and reproduced by various organizational actors at the same time as other identities are marginalized or suppressed. Such collusion with the dominant corporate order – bordering at times on sexual harassment, bullying and intimidation – raises important questions about the ethics of transgressive joking practices in organizations.

Daniel Smith (this issue) provides the first of several perspectives on stand-up comedy, examining the work of UK comic Russell Kane. Smith argues that comedy is able to act as a mode of cultural criticism that provides sociological insight into lived experiences within specific social contexts. For Smith, Russell Kane's comedy extends the insights found in Young and Wilmott's classic study of embourgeoisment among the post-war British working class. Drawing on a range of thinkers such as Simmel, Bakhtin and Douglas, Smith proposes the concept of 'comedic sociology' to explore alternative modes of social-cultural analysis.

In the next contribution, Kevin Casper (this issue) considers the politics of humour in relation to contemporary cultural forms. In his thought-provoking article, Casper contrasts traditional slapstick (for example, the type of mock-violence in Marx Brothers films) and 'simulacra slapstick', exemplified by the TV and film series *Jackass*. With reference to Plato and Baudrillard's philosophical distinction between the original and the copy, Casper argues that simulacra

slapstick – such as the self-harming pranks and hijinks of Johnny Knoxville and co. – problematizes the strict division between 'real' and 'fake'. In this way, Casper draws attention to 'moments where binary systems are short-circuited and social life is shown to be transformable' (Casper, this issue: 581).

Antti Kauppinen and Maria Daskalaki (this issue) frame the work of stand-up comedy within the critical study of entrepreneurship, employing a process philosophy approach. Based on extensive interviews with Finnish comedy club organizers, Kauppinen and Daskalaki suggest that this form of work involves to a desire to interrupt established identities and social roles. As such, stand-up comedy represents a mode of subverting dominant institutional orders and professional norms.

In the penultimate contribution to the special issue, Bernadette Loacker and Luc Peters (this issue) explore heterotopian forms of humour in TV and film. Taking us on a guided tour of David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*, Loacker and Peters (this issue: 621) conceive of organization as a space 'in which heterogeneous orders, conventions and practices interrelate and collide'. To this extent, Loacker and Peters find a celebration of the peculiar and the absurd in a way that invites us to look at the mundane assemblages around us with new eyes.

Finally, Oliver Double (this issue) discusses the way that the theme of work is explored in stand-up comedy routines from the 1970s until the present day. Since comedians are perceived to be outside the conventional workplace (e.g. offices, factories), they inhabit a unique position from which they are able to view – and satirize – organizational life as well as comment on our attitudes towards work and employment. As Double (this issue: 667), a former stand-up comedian himself, writes: 'The unusualness of comedy *as* work allows comedians to create a range of comedy *about* work' (emphasis in original).

references

Ackroyd, S. and P. Thompson (1999) *Organizational misbehaviour*. London: Sage.

Bakhtin, M.M. (1984) *Rabelais and his world*, trans. H. Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Berger, P. (1997) *Redeeming laughter: The comic experience of human experience*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Bergson, H. (2008) *Laughter: An essay on the meaning of the comic*, trans. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell. Rockville: Arc Manor. (Orig. ed. 1900)

Billig, M. (2005a) *Laughter and ridicule: Towards a social critique of humour*. London: Sage.

Billig, M. (2005b) 'Violent racist jokes', in S. Lockyer and M. Pickering (eds.) *Beyond a joke: The limits of humour*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bolton, S.C. and M. Houlihan (2009) 'Are we having fun yet? A consideration of workplace fun and engagement', *Employee Relations*, 32(6): 556-568.

Brown, R.C. (2008) *Dirty weekend in Blackpool – Live* [DVD]. UK: Universal Pictures.

Butler, N. (2015) 'Joking aside: Theorizing laughter in organizations', *Culture and Organization*, 21(1): 42-58.

Butler, N. (forthcoming) 'Humour and organization', in R. Mir, H. Willmott and M. Greenwood (eds.) *The Routledge companion to philosophy in organization studies*. London and New York: Routledge.

Collinson, D.L. (2002) 'Managing humour', *Journal of Management Studies*, 39(3): 269-288.

Cousins, N. (1979) *Anatomy of an illness as perceived by the patient: Reflections on healing and regeneration*. New York and London: W.W. Norton.

Critchley, S. (2002) *On humour*. London: Routledge.

Deleuze, G. (1994) *Difference and repetition*, trans. P. Patton. New York: Continuum.

Deleuze, G. (2006) *Two regimes of madness: Texts and interviews 1975-1995*, trans. A. Hodges and M. Taormina. New York: Semiotext(e).

Dundes, A. (1987) *Cracking jokes: Studies of sick humour cycles and stereotypes*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.

Fleming, P. (2005) 'Workers' playtime? Boundaries and cynicism in a "culture of fun" program', *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 41(3): 285-303.

Fleming, P. and A. Spicer (2003) 'Working at a cynical distance: Implications for power, subjectivity and resistance', *Organization*, 10(1): 157-179.

Foucault, M. (2000) *Aesthetics, method, and epistemology: Essential works, vol. 2*, trans. R. Hurley, et al. London: Penguin.

Foucault, M. (2002) *The order of things: An archaeology of the human sciences*, trans. anon. London and New York: Routledge. (Orig. ed. 1966)

Freud, S. (2002) *The joke and its relation to the unconscious*, trans. J. Crick. London: Penguin. (Orig. ed. 1905)

Hobbes, T. (1999) *Human nature and de corpore politico*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Holmes, J. (2000) 'Politeness, power and provocation: How humour functions in the workplace', *Discourse Studies*, 2(2): 159-185.

Ivanov, S.A. (2006) *Holy fools in Byzantium and beyond*, trans. S. Franklin. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jacobson, H. (1997) *Seriously funny: From the ridiculous to the sublime*. New York: Viking.

Jones, C. (2009) 'Poststructuralism in critical management studies', in M. Alvesson, T. Bridgman and H. Willmott (eds.) *The Oxford handbook of critical management studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jones, C. (2010) 'Lacan in organization studies', in C. Cederström and C. Hoedemaekers (eds.) *Lacan and organization*. London: MayFly.

Kant, Immanuel (1987) *Critique of judgment*, trans. W.S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett. (Orig. ed. 1790)

Kenny, K. (2009) 'The performative surprise: Parody, documentary and critique', *Culture and Organization*, 15(2): 221-235.

Kenny, K. and G. Euchlar (2012) '"Some good clean fun": Humour, control and subversion in an advertising agency', *Gender, Work and Organization*, 9(3): 306-323.

Klein, A. (1989) *The healing power of laughter: Techniques for getting through loss, setbacks, upsets, disappointments, difficulties, trials, tribulations, and all that not-so-funny stuff*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher.

Klein, A. (2000) *The courage to laugh: Humor, hope and healing in the face of death and dying*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher.

Leggott, J. and J. Sexton (2013) *No known cure: The comedy of Chris Morris*. London: BFI.

Legman, G. (2006) *Rationale of the dirty joke: An analysis of sexual humor, first series*. New York: Simon and Schuster. (Orig. ed. 1968)

Lewis, B. (2008) *Hammer and tickle: A history of communism told through communist jokes*. London: Phoenix.

Lyttle, J. (2007) 'The judicious use and management of humor in the workplace', *Business Horizons*, 50(3): 239-245.

Medhurst, A. (2007) *A national joke: Popular comedy and English cultural identities*. New York: Routledge.

Morreall, J. (1983) *Taking laughter seriously*. Albany: State University of New York.

Morreall, J. (2010) *Comic relief: A comprehensive philosophy of humor*. Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Palmer, J. (1994) *Taking humour seriously*. London and New York: Routledge.

Parvulescu, A. (2010) *Laughter: Notes on a passion*. Cambridge and London: MIT.

Randall, L. (2010) *Disgusting bliss: The brass eye of Chris Morris*. London: Simon & Schuster.

Romero, E.J. and K.W. Cruthirds (2006) 'The use of humour in the workplace', *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 20(2): 58-69.

Screech, M.A. (1997) *Laughter at the foot of the cross*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Spoelstra, S. (2007) 'What is philosophy of organization?', in C. Jones and R. ten Bos (eds.) *Philosophy and organization*. London and New York: Routledge.

Stott, A. (2005) *Comedy*. London: Routledge.

Topinka, R.J. (2010) 'Foucault, Borges, heterotopia: Producing knowledge in other spaces', *Foucault Studies*, 9: 54-70.

Warren, S. and S. Fineman (2007) '"Don't get me wrong, it's fun here, but...": Ambivalence and paradox in a "fun" work environment', in R. Westwood and C. Rhodes (eds.) *Humour, work and organization*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Westwood, R. (2004) 'Comic relief: Subversion and catharsis in organizational comedic Theatre', *Organization Studies*, 25(5): 775-795.

Westwood, R. and A. Johnston (2012) 'Reclaiming authentic selves: Control, resistive humour and identity work in the office', *Organization*, 19(6): 787-808.

Westwood, R. and C. Rhodes (eds.) (2007) *Humour, work and organization*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Wringham, R. (2012) *You are nothing: Thee first and onlie hystorie of Cluub Zarathustra*. Cardiff: Go Faster Strip.

the editors

Nick Butler is a member of editorial collective of *ephemera*.
Email: nick.butler@fek.lu.se

Dimitrinka Stoyanova Russell is a Lecturer at the Management, Work and Organisation section, Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University.
Email: StoyanovaRussellD@Cardiff.ac.uk

Casper Hoedemaekers is a lecturer in Work and Organisation at Essex Business School, Essex University.
Email: choedem@essex.ac.uk

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
ISSN 2052-1499 (Print)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 15(3): 513-535

Laughing for real? Humour, management power and subversion

Mads Peter Karlsen and Kaspar Villadsen

abstract

Management and humour are becoming more closely interlinked in contemporary organizational life. Whereas humour was conventionally viewed as a deleterious, alien element at the workplace, it is now increasingly viewed as a valuable management tool. This development raises the question of whether humour can still be regarded as having critical or subversive potential. This article discusses three research approaches to management and humour: the instrumental, the ideological critical, and contemporary critical organization studies, giving particular emphasis to extending the last tradition. Hence, the article situates itself in the critical debate on the function of humour in the workplace and on 'cynical reasoning' recently initiated in organization studies. It seeks to contribute to this debate by defining the features of a critical humoristic practice in a post-authoritarian management context. The point of departure is primarily Žižek's critique of ideology and its application in recent organization studies.

Introduction

In a comedy sketch broadcast on Danish television, employees of a company are called in for a meeting in the company canteen. 'Today I have good and bad news for you,' announces the well-dressed female manager to the anxious employees, 'The bad news is that, unfortunately, we have to reduce staff by 35 per cent'. The camera shows the fear in the employees' faces before the manager continues: 'The good news is that we have teamed up with the company clown from Companyclown.com, who is here to help us all through the difficult time'. Next to the manager enters a clown who uses over-dramatic body language, affected facial expressions and a yellow balloon to mime the manager's message of

dramatic decline in the company's earnings and the extremely unpleasant consequences for the staff, all while the employees look on incredulously.[1]

Now why is this TV sketch funny? The immediate answer is that it is funny because, like any good comedy, it undermines the familiar by turning things upside down. The sketch depicts one of life's most serious situations (workers about to lose their jobs) in an unserious way (it's a clown who tells them). But perhaps the sketch is also funny because at another level it depicts and identifies something familiar, or something that is about to become part of the familiar. Perhaps it is not simply because of the sketch's unexpected, unrealistic nature (a clown present at a company crisis meeting) that it is funny, but also because it in fact contains aspects that are not completely unrealistic. In other words: the sketch may also be funny because it points to something recognizable in our contemporary context. It displays, in an exaggerated, distorted and parodic manner, how leadership has become interconnected with humour and a self-ironic attitude.

It is precisely this linkage between management, irony and humour that is being mocked by the Danish TV sketch.[2] And more specifically, a particular aspect of this linkage. The amusing aspect of the sketch is not only that the serious message is not communicated by a serious manager, but by a clown. That which we thought was serious, the layoff announcement, was in fact funny. Indeed,

1 Eschewing the dichotomy between 'lived reality' and more or less true 'representations' of it (as criticized by Derrida, 1978), we contend that popular culture such as films are just as much a part of our reality than anything else, and that they contribute to the symbolic coding of social reality like other discursive or material artefacts. Žižek justifies studying cultural products, including films, jokes and commercials by arguing that art is the site of cultural conceptions and symbolic coordinates 'expressed at their purest' (Žižek, 2000: 250). Broadly similarly, Foucault discarded the duality of the 'purity of the ideal' versus 'the disorderly impurity of the real' (Foucault, 1991: 80). We follow his assertion that the fact that a particular 'statement', however utopian or grotesque, could be uttered at a particular juncture inevitably takes part in diagnosing our culture. The sketch, broadcast on the comedy program *Krysters Kartel* (DR2), is available (in Danish) at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Xr4KfByT5g.

2 The American comedy series *The Office* contains a similar sketch in the episode 'Halloween'. On the day of a long awaited Halloween celebration the local manager Michael Scott, played by Steve Carell, is called up by the main office who reminds him that he needs to dismiss an employee by the end of the day. Scott, who likes to think of his employees as 'his friends', strives hard to avoid taking the decision about who he has to dismiss – a struggle that culminates in him pretending that the extra head (his Halloween costume) on his shoulder is telling him to let go of his assistant regional manager. The latter refuses to resign, and now tragically comic games begin in which employees successfully pass on the dismissal to another person. See *The Office*; 2nd season; Episode 5 (2005/06).

what makes the sketch funny is that it shows us that something that we thought could only be just for fun, the clown, is in fact deadly serious. The sketch makes us laugh not (only) because it shows us a difference where we expected similarity (the clown appears instead of the manager), but (also) because it shows us likeness where we expected a difference (the clown, like the manager, communicates something serious).[3] What is really funny, and which in our view gives the sketch a critical potential, is the humour that we normally associate with something provocative and subversive here appears on the same side as management. Management is not laughing 'at' the employees but in a way 'with' them. The sketch thus emphasizes that humour is not inherently opposed to power, as we might think, and as the literature on humour has so far tended to assume. On the contrary, there seem to be situations in which humour is quite well-suited as a tool for exercising power in the contemporary context.

As already indicated, it is of course not realistic to imagine a situation exactly like the Danish comedy sketch above, where a clown appears as part of a mass layoff announcement. Nevertheless, the intertwinement of leadership and humour, we shall argue, is quite realistic. Hence, over the last two decades, we can discern a new trend in not only the instrumental leadership literature, where humour has been promoted as a useful management tool (e.g. Malone, 1980; Caudron, 1992; Barsoux, 1996), but also discussed in critical management research, where humour at work has received increased attention (Kunda, 1991; Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995; Collinson, 2002; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Taylor and Bain, 2003; Bolton and Houlihan, 2009; Sørensen and Spoelstra, 2012; Westwood and Johnston, 2012; Butler, 2015). The interest in humour as a managerial instrument reflects a broader trend in which positive psychology and a new discourse on happiness is gaining a growing influence as a guideline for the organization of both our personal life and our work life. It promises to help us live in 'wealthier', 'healthier' and more 'productive' ways, and thus happiness functions as an ethical standard, if not a moral obligation (Zupančič, 2008; Ehrenreich, 2009; Cederström and Grassman, 2010; Binkley, 2011).

Considering the above developments we will raise two main arguments. First, we believe that the Danish comedy sketch reflects something significant about the relationship between power and humour in contemporary organizational life. Our starting point is that humour – as pointed out in the sketch – does not stand

3 A paradigmatic example of this point is the well-known joke by from the Marx Brothers: 'This man looks like an idiot and he acts like an idiot, but don't be fooled, he is an idiot'. See Žižek (2006: 109) for a discussion of this distinction between a form of humour which produces difference where one expects sameness, and a form for humour which produces sameness where one expects difference.

in an inherently critical opposition to management, but has begun to lend itself to management, including humour's ironic, cynical and subversive qualities. More precisely, our thesis is that the managerial use of humour in contemporary society not only seeks to instrumentalize humour's positive effects for management purposes, *but also its critical effects*. By this move, management humour very often takes on a self-critical character. Our suggestion is particularly inspired by Fleming and Spicer's pioneering work on resistance, irony and 'cynical reasoning' in organizational life (Fleming and Spicer, 2003; 2004), which we wish to contribute to here. In the first part of this article, we pursue our argument on the basis of examples from the management literature. We thus discuss and evaluate three major research approaches to the management-humour relationship: 1) the instrumental, 2) ideology critique, and 3) critical organization studies. Our goal is to assess the strengths and limitations of each approach in understanding the increasing use and reception of humour in contemporary management practices.

Second, we believe that sketches like the one above raise an important question regarding humour's potential for resistance: if management itself uses humour and actually benefits from its effects in its exercise of power, is it still possible to regard humour as critical, subversive or emancipatory? In the second part of this article, we address this problem and offer some theoretical reflections on how a critical, subversive humour can be conceptualized in these circumstances. We do this by drawing on concepts originating from Lacanian psychoanalysis and developed by Slavoj Žižek.

Hence, the object of this article is *not* to provide an empirical analysis, but to assess existing approaches and help expanding the framework for analysing the relationship between power and humour in contemporary management. Accordingly, our assessments and contributions are primarily situated at a theoretical and conceptual level. Furthermore, when we use the term 'management' here, we refer to the contemporary prevalent view of management as activities of facilitating, stimulating, coaching and sparring, or in Foucault's words to perform 'an action upon the actions of others' (Foucault, 1982: 790). This view of management contrasts with (the increasingly controversial) hierarchical management, which takes the form of instructions, commands or sanctions. In this light we may better understand the emergence of management humour that aims precisely to stimulate, inspire or promote 'team spirit' and organizational unity by mobilizing the employees' own cultures, attitudes and values.

Humour as gain, critique or uncontrollable surplus?

If – following Simon Critchley (2002) – we approach the matter 'phenomenologically', humour can be described in very broad terms as a specific social practice, and the easiest way to identify this practice is by its impact. On this view, the fundamental characteristics of humour are specific physiological effects such as laughing, giggling, grinning and smiling, and emotional affects including joy, relief, surprise, excitement and enthusiasm. Humour is not *per se* these effects and affects, but rather that which causes them. These apparently positive effects and affects are also invoked to ascribe to humour a certain therapeutic power. However, this is not the only thing that humour is supposed to cause. Sometimes, at least, humour is also believed to produce new perceptions of the surrounding world as well as of oneself (Critchley, 2002: 9-11); it makes creates a distance to the immediacy of things (including oneself), which implies a certain critical potential (Critchley, 2002: 18). Thus, in brief, humour can be defined as a social practice that produces certain bodily effects, emotional affects and psychological perceptions.

Within modern management, humour, irony and laughter have altered their status from having been perceived as fundamentally dysfunctional for management goals and organizational effectiveness to humour being increasingly viewed as a potential positive force (Malone, 1980; Barsoux, 1996). In traditional management discourse, humour in the workplace was principally viewed as undermining productivity and subverting the maintenance of authority. Humour had therefore to be restricted, as part of the necessary separation between job and leisure, work and pleasure. Within the last few decades, however, we have seen the emergence of management practices that explicitly seek to use humour as a tool for achieving various objectives. Humour is used to promote the integration of employees and groups, to break up fixed roles and hierarchies, contest prejudices, to get through crises such as budget cutbacks and layoffs, and it is assumed to promote creativity and innovation in the organization. Concrete examples of the use of humour in management include 'ice-breakers', organizational theatre, corporate clowns, dress-up games and recommendations to leaders to recognize (hidden) workplace humour as a source of non-acknowledged knowledge about the organization.

We divide the research on humour and management into three main groups, while recognizing that such a division can only be schematic and tentative considering the extensive literature on humour within and beyond work life (for a historical overview of theories of humour, see Bremmer and Roodenbrug, 1997). In the place of a detailed examination that pretends to exhaustive

categorization, we will offer brief readings of three examples that represent distinct approaches to humour in relation to management and work life.

Humour as gain

The first group is characterized by an instrumental, positive approach, which enthusiastically sees humour as a useful and not fully exploited management tool. This approach perceives humour solely from the management perspective: humour can be enrolled and used as part of an optimization and streamlining of management tasks. Here, our example is an early article by Paul Malone (1980: 357) in which he presents humour as a 'possible tool that could assist in getting people to get things done'. Malone recounts his own experience as a recruit in the US Army where, after a 60-hour exercise, he and his unit were completely exhausted. To their great frustration, however, the group received an order to prepare for another exercise, and at that moment, the commanding officer who had delivered the message appeared as their enemy, as a torturer. But when the commander added a joke to the order, the mood suddenly turned to one of hysterical laughter, creating an entirely new energy in the group, which forgot its fatigue and could get on with the task: 'Suddenly, the environment changed: the Ranger instructor became a fellow man, not a torturer, the men who had laughed together became a team with a revitalized common cause' (Malone, 1980: 357).

The article depicts several key features that characterize the instrumental approach to humour in management: humour is regarded as a means of releasing built-up tensions in a moment of redemptive energy discharge, 'a comic relief'; humour is a way to break down stifling roles and hierarchical positions; humour can soften the social conflicts; humour can even help managers and others to see the world in a clearer light, avoiding the rigid categories or simplifying performances. Most of these features echo the modern canonical literature on laughter and humour (see Spencer, 2005). Malone's article is paradigmatic for the instrumental approach, in that it bluntly considers how humour can best be appropriated by management. The principle questions for this approach include: which leaders can utilize humour, under which conditions can humour be used, and which forms of humour are most effective in a management context? Malone (1980: 360) says that

> It is my contention that humour is a virtually undeveloped resource that can contribute to enhancing the satisfaction and productivity of human beings at work. The tool has been around for quite a while, but it is used as a toy because no one ever developed a set of instructions.

This request has been well received in the management literature. In the decades after Malone's article, numerous studies have appeared which provide precisely

these kinds of instructions for applying humour. They have focused on how humour can dissolve barriers between managers and employees to produce innovative ideas and learning (Barsoux, 1996); how theatre and play can break down rigid stereotyping among employees (Corsun, et al., 2006), and how 'cultures of fun' can be used to get people to produce more by binding their private life and entire identity to the workplace (Fleming and Spicer, 2004). In the instrumental approach, humour is perceived as a means of freeing up the energy and potential of managers and employees, while humour's potentially uncontrolled and subversive aspect is very seldom touched upon. Viewing humour as a 'tool to be appropriated' by management, the instrumental position generally ignores the ambiguities and critical potential that humorous practices may involve.

Humour as critique of power

The second group takes a critical approach to humour, insofar as humour is viewed as a potentially critical expressive form that employees can apply in relation to management. This interpretation of humour's role amounts to a critique of power, or an 'ideology critique', if we understand critique as uncovering and displaying the hierarchies, symbols and structures of domination in work life. We write 'potentially' critical because many of the contributions see humour as fundamentally subversive and difficult to control due to its informal, hidden and often metaphorical character. Yet they often demonstrate how humour in many cases is controlled by management or fails to achieve the critical effect in relation to existing power structures. An objection to this approach to humour is that it works with a too-rigid opposition between the 'malicious', dominant and exploitative management on the one side and a space of playful and rebellious creativity on the other (Fleming and Spicer, 2003: 304).

An illustrative study of humour's critical potential is a description of a union's satirical resistance strategies in a Brazilian telecommunications company (Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995). The authors express a general feature of critical studies of humour in work life: the assertion that humour can act as a resistance strategy because of its ability to reproduce real conflicts and contradictions in metaphorical terms. Metaphors and satire are typically ambiguous and identifying a precise author behind them is difficult; therefore, they are particularly useful when there is a risk of retaliation by management. The Brazilian telecommunications company, *Telecom*, had an autocratic and militaristic reputation, as illustrated by the sacking of the author of a satirical cartoon in the union members' magazine (Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995: 756). The magazine had for years operated as a medium for employees and trade union representatives' resistance strategies, especially through anonymous

cartoons. Here, the *Telecom* management was depicted as money-fixated, exploitative and militaristic. Real conflicts and events could be represented in the form of fictional characters and events that succeeded in highlighting contradictions and paradoxes in the organization's management practices and caused momentary breakdowns in the managerial authority structures (Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995: 757). In this case, the employees, through relatively organized humour, obtained a platform to exercise leadership criticism and gained some gradual improvements in their own working conditions.

Other contributions within this humour-as-critique approach stress that humour as a medium (e.g. anti-authoritarian, able to display contradictions, spontaneous and uncontrollable) does not guarantee its progressive effects. These features do not prevent humour from being able to support or be incorporated into management strategies. Kunda's (1992) oft-cited study of middle managers' ironic role-distancing in an American computer company shows just how such behaviour can easily be appropriated by managers. The ironic attitude was unorganized, and its occurrence was easily redefined as a demonstration of management's tolerance, openness and commitment to freedom of expression (Kunda, 1992). Other critical contributions argue that humour, such as coarse jokes, can serve to sustain hierarchies of power or subordination between the sexes (Collinson, 2002).

In summary, this approach is critical in two ways: first, by maintaining humour's *intrinsic* subversive potential in relation to exposing power-holders and domination; second, by considering how humour in practice is often instrumentalized as a management technology or partakes in more or less explicit strategies of domination. While this ideology critique perspective provides a powerful view into the managerial appropriation of humour, it has limitations conceptualizing in more detail the inherent ambiguities of humoristic practices.

Humour as an indefinite surplus

The third group is subsumed under the term critical organization studies. This group draws on post-structuralist, neo-functionalist and neo-Marxist theories in examining humour and management (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Sørensen and Spoelstra, 2012). The studies in this group acknowledge the difficulty of making a clear distinction between critical-subversive and instrumentalized humour. They do not start from a clear verdict as to whether humour is by nature essentially subversive; instead, they problematize the dichotomous thinking that positions the 'good' humour against a 'bad' management that seeks to appropriate it. Hence, critical organizational

scholars often emphasize forms of interplay, reversibility and circularity between power and humour. These studies recognize that the norms informing management in modern organizations are not irrevocably fixed but under continuous contestation and reconstruction. In this context, provocative and immediately subversive behaviours may be assigned – at least momentarily – a productive role in managerial practices.

Critical organizational scholars generally share an assumption of a circular, co-productive relationship between management and humour, although they explore it in different ways. Some studies highlight play as a 'doubling' of reality. In play, a virtual world is created where identities, relationships and values can be put at risk and be redefined. Our example is a recent study by Sørensen and Spoelstra (2012) who are interested in the production of virtual reality by play and humour, yet they seek to retain humour's autonomous character. They argue that humour has its own logic, its own telos and its own performances that prevent it from being appropriated completely for functional purposes (Sørensen and Spoelstra, 2012: 2). Humour can indeed operate functionally for organizations, exhibiting organizational difficulties, shortcomings and paradoxes, which can then be mitigated. But Sørensen and Spoelstra (2012: 12) highlight – on the basis of empirical evidence – that humour's auto-logical nature makes it fundamentally uncontrollable, in that it produces a residual surplus that breaks with organizational needs and narrow managerial interest. In fact, humour can become such a strong self-propelling power that it 'usurps', i.e. saturates the processes and relationships of working life.

Sørensen and Spoelstra come close to our present concern, insofar as they precisely address the interlacing of humour, management and power. However, what is lacking in their contribution is more detailed clarification of when humour can be said to have critical, 'usurping' qualities and effects, since no precise normative or analytical criteria are given which would enable us to make such an assessment. The remainder of the article turns to this task.

Psychoanalysis and ideology

Seeking to expand the framework for studying the role of humour in contemporary organizations, we will offer some considerations on what subversive humour can consist of, mainly inspired by Žižek. Žižek's central thesis concerning ideology – and his main contribution to the renewal of ideology critique – is that in order for ideology to work, it always requires a minimum degree of dis-identification in the interpellated subject: 'An interpellation succeeds precisely when I perceive myself as "not only that", but a

"complex person who, among other things, is also that" – in short, imaginary distance towards symbolic identification is the very sign of its success' (Žižek, 1999a: 258-259). Zupančič (2008: 4) underscores this insight in relation to the relationship between humour and power:

> Indeed, one can easily show that ironic distance and laughter often function as an internal condition of all true ideology, which is characterized by the fact that it tends to avoid direct 'dogmatic' repression, and has a firm hold on us precisely where we feel most free and autonomous in our actions.

The point is that any ideological identification, if it is to function, always involves a degree of dis-identification, since no mature, modern individual (who understands himself or herself as free and critical thinking) will completely submit to an ideological identity.[4] As Žižek points out, ideology functions such that 'we perform our symbolic mandates without assuming them and "taking them seriously"' (2002: 70). This insight has consequences not only for our analysis of ideology, but also for our conception of resistance: 'One has to abandon the idea that power operates in the mode of identification...A minimum of disidentification is a priori necessary if power is to function' (Žižek, 2000: 218).

Žižek usually stresses the implicit self-distancing in the ideological interpellation by using the following formula: 'I know very well, but still...'.[5] Following this formula, he describes contemporary ideology – borrowing from Peter Sloterdijk – as a form of 'cynical reason' (Žižek, 1991: 29). The 'cynical' refers, first, to the ideological subject acting against better knowledge. Žižek likes to illustrate this point with the following anecdote about the Danish physicist Niels Bohr. Bohr was once visited at home by a famous scientist. The latter noticed a horseshoe hanging over the door and asked Bohr indignantly: 'Well, my dear Niels Bohr, you don't think that this kind of thing brings good luck, do you?'. 'No, no, of course I don't', Bohr reassured him, 'but I've heard that it also brings good luck

4 Whether Žižek understands the 'cynical' or 'fetishist' character of ideology as a historical specific (in contrast to for instance a 'symptomatic') mode of ideology or as a general feature of ideology as such remains unclear. However, he tends to relate ideology as form of cynicism that relies on dis-identification to a diagnosis of modernity as a 'crisis of investiture', most evident in the impasse of the paternal figure, which results in a general reluctance against identifying with received symbolic mandates (Žižek, 2004: 148).

5 Žižek borrows this formula from a famous article by the Lacanian psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni for whom it summarizes the logic of the perversion of fetishism, which, according to Freud, is precisely a simultaneous recognition and disavowal of the trauma of castration (the phallus is both renounced and kept in the form of a fetish object) (Mannoni, 2003; Freud, 1955c).

even if you don't believe in it' (Žižek, 2008: 300). Second, the cynical refers to ideology admitting to its ideological character, such as when an advertising executive shamelessly says, 'Yes, of course we try to manipulate you into buying our product'. However, ideology can only put its cards on the table in this way because it works – paradoxically, not in spite of but because of our critical distance to it and to that part of ourselves partaking in the ideology. One might say, then, that ideological interpellation only succeeds when it does not succeed completely.[6]

This self-distancing (dis-identification), which is the precondition for ideology, is reinforced by ideology's invitation to criticize, ridicule and create ironic distance to it. When we criticize the ideological interpellation and distance ourselves from it ironically, we thereby confirm the idea that we are in reality different – more valuable, authentic and free – than that very self who acts in accordance with the ideology (Žižek, 2001: 13-14). In other words, when Žižek asserts that it is not through our identification with ideology but precisely through our more or less conscious distancing from it that ideology is maintained, his point is that 'ideology' is itself the perception that there is a dividing line between reality (a true self) and ideology (our 'everyday self'); this dividing line reveals itself in our ironic and critical distancing from ideology.

'Ideology', therefore, is not an illusion that conceals reality from us. For Žižek, ideology is instead the very act of designating something as ideology, i.e. as an illusion, by adding 'critical distance', 'revealing', 'transgressing' and 'freeing ourselves' from it. Hence, as mentioned earlier, we maintain ideology precisely through perpetuating the notion that we can avoid, breach, eliminate, emancipate or separate ourselves from ideology. Žižek's point, therefore, is that it is this very procedure, of stepping out of ideology, i.e. the very distinguishing of ideology (illusion) from non-ideology (reality), that constitutes the fundamental mechanism of ideology (Žižek, 1999b: 71).

6 Readers familiar with Žižek's work might hear in this formulation an echo of his well-known description of the Lacanian subject in terms of the failure of subjectivation, the remainder or gap that resists symbolization. However, we must avoid such conflation. Žižek emphasizes: 'For Lacan the dimension of subjectivity that eludes symbolic identification is *not* the imaginary wealth/texture of experience which allows me to assume an illusory distance towards my symbolic identity: the Lacanian "barred subject" (s) is "empty" not in the sense of some psychologico-existential "experience of a void" but, rather, in the sense of a dimension of self-relating negativity, which a priori eludes the domain of lived experience' (Žižek, 1999a: 259; emphasis in original; see also Dolar, 1993).

Fantasy and cynicism

This distinguishing operation is based on fantasies, or more precisely unconscious fantasies, about the 'genuine thing'; 'the subject who is supposed to know' in contrast to the ignorant, 'the subject who is supposed to believe' in contrast to the enlightened, 'the subject who is supposed to loot and rape' in contrast to the good law abiding citizen. In other words, fantasies are fantasies of wholeness, completeness, fullness (e.g. of the omnipotent primordial father) covering up a basic impasse (in psychoanalytical terms: castration, sexual relationship, the desire of the Other, the Real, etc.). Or, as Žižek formulates it: 'Fantasy is basically a scenario filling out the empty space of a fundamental impossibility, a screen masking a void' (Žižek, 1989: 126). In fact, fantasies have a double function insofar as they both shape our desires and protect us against our desires: 'In this intermediated position lies the paradox of fantasy: it is the frame co-ordinating our desire, but at the same time a defence against 'Che vuoi?', a screen concealing the gap, the abyss of desire of the Other' (Žižek, 1989: 118). Fantasies structures our social reality (our desires) in a way that 'fills out its empty space', and this is what is concealed by ideology, not reality (Žižek, 1989: 32-33). In regard to cynicism, Žižek (1989: 33) asserts: 'Cynical distance is just one way – one of many – to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy'.

That Žižek's conception of ideology has consequences for the analysis of the relationship between power, humour and resistance can be illustrated with a short reference to Critchley's book *On humour*. Here, Critchley briefly touches upon the theme of humour as a management tool. Part of his account is an anecdote about a group of employees staying at the same hotel as him. He observes them one morning engaged in playing kick-ball, ping pong and Frisbee, or as he calls it 'structured fun'. After breakfast, he meets some of them outside for a cigarette exchanging a few words. He writes:

> I was enormously reassured that they felt just as cynical about the whole business as I did, but one of them said that they did not want to appear to be a bad sport or a party pooper at work and that this was why they went along with it. (Critchley, 2002: 13)

In Critchley's (2002: 13-14) view, the cynical stance of the employees was an indication of their resistance, or as he puts it:

> I think this incident is interesting for it reveals a vitally subversive feature of humour in the workplace. Namely, that as much as management consultants might try and formalize fun for the benefit of the company [...] such fun is always capable of being ridiculed by informal, unofficial relations amongst employees, by backchat and salacious gossip.

From a Žižekian perspective, Critchley's analysis is obviously problematic. Critchley completely misses that it is precisely the informal cynical (self-joking) attitude of the employees that makes up the basis of the formalized, structured fun of the management: 'We know very well (that this structured fun is the company's stupid attempt to manipulate us), but nonetheless (we go along with it not to appear as a bad sport)'.[7] Surely Critchley (2002: 14) is right when he concludes that '[h]umour might well be a management tool but it is also a tool against the management'. However, his more or less explicit claim that a cynical distance – or as he points out later in the same book, humour as self-ridicule is in itself a kind of resistance – is highly questionable. The same goes for his distinction between (suppressive) formal and (subversive) informal humour. Žižek can thus supplement critical organizational research on humour in several regards, which we discuss in more detail below.

In this light, it is noteworthy that a number of recent critical organizational studies and studies in the sociology of work demonstrate empirically how power relations in work life are reproduced by employees by means of humour (Kunda, 1991; Willmott, 1993; Du Gay and Salaman, 1992). Kunda's (1991) aforementioned study describes how employees' humorous mocking of official business rituals were used as proof of the management's liberal openness, while at the same time employees actually performed their tasks to perfection. Du Gay and Salaman's (1992) article on 'entrepreneurialism' shows that even if individuals do not take entrepreneurial discourse and its ideal of excellence seriously and maintain an ironic distance towards it, they nevertheless practice it to the fullest in their daily life. And Willmott (1993) demonstrates that people interpret their possibilities to ironically challenge the corporate culture as proof of their self-determination, and that this promotes a frictionless exercise of organizational functions. Common to these studies is their demonstration that 'cynical' employees maintain the idea that they are autonomous agents who have a distance from the management ideology, but they nevertheless perform the company's rituals to the maximum. None of these studies, however, address the problem of which humorous strategies could transgress the demonstrated (ideological) reproduction.

7 Žižek criticizes Critchley's interpretation of Freud's 'humorous' superego, which in contrast to the classical 'cruel' superego that suppresses us by debasing our ego, liberates us by enabling the ego to laugh at its own shortcomings (Critchley, 2002: 93-111; 2007: 77-84). Žižek argues that '[w]hat Critchley strangely leaves out of consideration is the brutal "sadistic" aspect of humour itself: humour can be extremely cruel and denigrating' (2008: 341). The point is that the 'humorous superego' might indeed be as cruel as the (straightforward) 'cruel superego' exactly by exerting humour.

Subversive humour?

Fleming and Spicer are pioneers in introducing the concept of 'cynical reasoning' into critical organization studies (2003; 2004), which constitutes a key lynchpin for discussing how to conceptualize subversive practices of humour. Our initial example with the 'corporate clown' poses a question in terms of the degree to which cynicism fits into contemporary management: has it become legitimate to accompany difficult management decisions like layoffs with humour so that they may be more easily 'swallowed' by employees? (George Clooney's ironic performance in the film *Up in the air* is another example of accepted, blatant cynicism consisting in the routine of bringing in an outsider to do management's dirty work).

In this situation, it is obvious that adding elements of self-caricature and 'clowning' to the management role may be strategically useful, as the clown is a character against whom it is hard to exert serious critique: how do you mock a character who is already clowning around? Faced with this kind of 'fun-filled', self-ironic management, every form of irony and caricature seems destined to fail, as it is already incorporated within the manager's character, who can effortlessly embrace the very distancing that supposedly forms the backbone of humorous resistance. Management takes over the clowning around, and humour becomes a leadership quality.

The question, then, is what kind of humour can operate critically and subversively? Traditional forms of parody, irony and ridicule easily end up being co-productive and supporting contemporary management practices, according to the above research. With inspiration from Žižek and Zupančič, we will now propose two possible analytical strategies for indicating practices of subversive humour. These involve looking for:

I. Humour that is directed towards undermining the symbolic order by targeting 'master signifiers' and practising 'over-identification'.

II. Humour that exhibits and maintains incongruence.

Here, we follow Žižek's premise that any power structure generates an excess of resistance from within its inherent dynamics. The fact that resistance is thus immanent to power in no way implies that every act of resistance is co-opted in the structure, since 'the very inherent antagonism of a system may well set in motion a process which leads to its own ultimate downfall' (Žižek, 1999a: 256). Žižek asserts that our position becomes stronger if we claim that our resistance is grounded in the system itself, articulating inherent antagonisms which may undermine its unity and reproductive capacity. This is possible insofar as the

symbolic order is always by definition 'decentred' around a constitutive void or impossibility. Fundamentally, it is a matter of generating confrontations with 'the real', which we understand as naming the failure of the symbolic order in achieving its own closure. The real becomes the effects of the failure of symbolization, evident as irruptions, impasses and impossibilities inherent in the Symbolic itself (Laclau, 2000: 68).

Humour as over-identification

Our first suggestions concern humour that displays the inherent antagonisms of the symbolic order, particularly targeting postulates of unity, cohesion and homogeneity. Preventing full closure of the symbolic order, antagonisms are to be understood not as objective social relations, but rather as 'the point where the limit of all objectivity is shown' (Laclau, 2000: 72). Unifying concepts like 'participatory management', 'cooperative values', and 'common rewards' are proliferating in contemporary management discourse. 'Diversity management', on the contrary, invokes the idea that although our values and interests *are* indeed divergent, we nevertheless benefit from 'cooperation in difference'. In both cases, the symbolic order is one in which all parties take their natural place in a harmonious whole. Such a hegemonic articulation depends upon a rallying of diverse identities to a reconciliatory representation of the organization or social positions. In this process of contingent, partial fixation, one particular signifier assumes the function of unifying representation. Developing Lacan's notion of 'Master Signifier', Laclau (2000: 70-71) defines 'the empty signifier' as a discursive element which achieves its unifying function by cancelling out its specific content, thereby allowing diverse actors and groups to identify with it. Its signifying content depends not on any non-discursive substance but on its position within a chain of signifiers which endeavour to suture the empty signifier, fixating its meaning (Laclau, 2000: 71). Sustaining its privileged function requires that the signifier's impossibility as a particular representing the universal is not effectively exposed.

Humour, which demonstrates the empty signifier's fragility and fictive universality, has subversive potential because it reveals how a postulated wholeness covers primordial lack, antagonism and non-identity. More precisely, humour can generate a process of contamination of the empty signifier by infusing it with diverse, incongruent content, thereby 'overburdening' its universalizing function. Such contamination may undermine the chain of equivalences and open space for substitutions and whole new articulations: 'a certain meaning which was fixated within the horizon of an ensemble of institutionalized practices is displaced towards new uses which subvert its literality' (Laclau, 2000: 78). Imagine, for instance, an organization in which the

signifier 'our corporate vision' is equated with 'team-spirit', 'individual performance', 'achieving sector bench marks' and 'our unique qualities' that all endeavour to fill its void. Here, humorous interventions could insist on *simultaneously articulating* these particular and incommensurable representations of the organization. Such an insistence on incommensurable identities may overburden and contaminate the empty signifier and the entire hegemonic formation that finds support in it.

A humorous attack on empty signifiers can also be directed towards moments of irruption or collapse which are always inherent potentials of symbolic orders. Returning to our initial example of layoff announcements that operate with the help of a company clown, there is a momentary imbalance in the symbolic order, whose hegemonic representation is unity – that management and employees are part of a common, mutually rewarding project. However, the tragic-comedic moment arises when the clown pops up and displays the impossibility of the assertion of harmonious union and non-conflictuality.

Another possible strategy of humorous destabilization of the symbolic order consists of over-identifying with it (see Fleming and Spicer, 2003: 172-173). Rather than putting ironic distance to the positions and prescriptions directed at employees, an effective strategy could consist of completely embracing and overdoing them. Or, as Žižek asserts:

> In so far as power relies on its 'inherent transgression', then – sometimes, at least – over-identifying with the explicit power discourse – ignoring this inherent obscene underside and simply taking the power discourse at its (public) word, acting as if it really means what it explicitly says (and promises) – can be the most effective way of disturbing its smooth functioning. (Žižek, 2000: 220)

The premise is that any power structure relies on its 'inherent transgression', exemplified by the rule of law which relies on its inherent and continual transgression without which it disintegrates (Žižek, in Contu, 2008: 368). The fact that these acts of resistance and transgression are integral to power does not make it untouchable, but renders it vulnerable to acts that simply take its claims and propositions literally. This may include humour that fully identifies with such claims, even excessively, and hence collapses the self-distance operative in symbolic positions: 'we touch the Real when the efficiency of such symbolic markers of distance is suspended' (Žižek, 2000: 223). Such over-identification can be very humorous and can reveal the antagonistic kernel of a specific social arrangement or position. For example, one might imagine that employees, in introducing 'lean management', which requires continuous generation of ideas from the rank and file, take advantage of this new position to drown management in an abundance of impossible and mutually contradictory

proposals for new work routines, technologies, customer care, etc. This practice is difficult to sanction, in that the employees are doing precisely what is officially expected of them, although in a *too* literal manner. In our example with the company clown, a strategy of over-identification could consist in the remaining employees' insistence on joking about the negative budget balance – a practice that was sanctioned by management when it hired a clown to help inform employees about this. By dissolving the distinction between humorous representation and harsh reality, the employees effectively display both managerial incompetence and the collapse of meaning. According to Žižek, no amount of disguising such misfortunes with a joke or irony can prevent it from having a hurtful effect: 'This collapse of the distinction between pretending and being is the unmistakable sign that my speech has touched some real' (Žižek, 2000: 223). Again, this underlines the uncontrollable and potentially subversive character of humour.

The minimal difference of humour

Our second proposal is based on a certain idea of humour, which in humour literature is usually described as 'the incongruence theory' (e.g. Moreall, 1981; Critchley, 2002; Billig, 2005). This humour theory has its roots in Kant and is further developed by Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard. Also, both Zupančič's and Žižek's reflections on humour, which we will rely on here, can be read as an example of incongruence theory. According to this theory, humour is perceived as misalignment or incongruity between the reality as we expect that it will look like, and the reality as it is expressed, for example in a sketch, a comic story or a practical joke (Critchley, 2002: 3). However, Morreall (1981: 245) emphasizes that not all incongruence is comical since incongruence can also cause negative emotions such as anger or fear. Freud (1955a: 246) remarked upon this aspect in his famous text on 'The uncanny', discussing the intrinsic connection between the comic and the uncanny:

> Then the theme that achieves such an indubitably uncanny effect, the involuntary recurrence of the like, serves, too, other and quite different purposes in another class of cases. One case we have already heard about in which it is employed to call forth a feeling of the comic.

It is the repetition that, according to Freud, links the uncanny and the comic. More specifically, the repetition (of the same) may reveal that the same, i.e. the identical, perhaps does not totally accord with itself, is non-identical, and thereby create a situation where the repetition becomes comical (or uncanny).[8] Here,

8 Another comic (and disturbing) aspect of repetition is the stubbornness or steadfastness which it entails (this becomes especially clear when repetition is related

humour exhibits, plays on and plays with this division in the heart of the same in the core of any identity. Zupančič (2008: 58) also formulates this point with reference to Lacan's concept of the real:

> [T]he Real 'exposed' by comedy is [...] the structural Real (or impasse) the suppression of which constitutes the very coherence of our reality. [...] Comedy succeeds in displaying the crack in the midst of our most familiar realities.

One of the places where humour, according to Zupančič, makes its presence felt most clearly in this sense is in the question of 'reality'. There is something unrealistic about the reality of humour that creates an incongruence between the reality of humour (where the realistic and the unrealistic tend to coincide) and the realistic perception of reality, which we are presented with most of the time. This unrealistic – or 'real', in Lacanian terms – element of the reality of humour is for instance expressed partly in the form of a 'blind' insistence, such as when the cat in a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon keeps on chasing the mouse, even though Tom always ends up being beaten to a pulp. This insistence is unrealistic in the sense that it does not take into account what is dictated to be practical, convenient or realistic. Or, putting it differently, (good) humour involves a dimension that is 'beyond the pleasure and the reality principle'. Zupančič (2008: 217-218) often employs the psychoanalytic concept of (death) drive to illustrate this dimension.[9] A key feature of the death drive, as is well-known, is that it involves an obsession to repetition (hence, Freud [1955b] describes it as 'conservative'). However, any repetition also entails a minimal displacement (and thus an element of novelty).

The concept of 'drive' encompasses a particular conception of the relationship and interplay between identity (repetition) and difference (displacement) which can be utilized in the analysis of humour. The theory of incongruence can thus be refined by the distinction (borrowed from Žižek) between, on the one hand, situations that are comical because they show us a difference where we expected similarity and, on the other, situations that are comical because they show us identity where we expected difference. Accordingly, we can distinguish between two types of incongruence. First, the form of incongruence that can arise when two fundamentally different things meet or are joined together (as in the initial

---

to failure) (see Zupančič, 2008: 29-20). Freud similarly pointed out that the neurotic's compulsion to repeat can have both a comic and a disturbing effect (Freud, 1955a: 236-238). See also Zupančič (2005).

9 Conversely, according to Zupančič (2008: 126), the comic constitutes a good introduction to the psychoanalytic concept of drives. There is an important interconnection between the (Freudian) concept of drive and the (Lacanian) concept of the real: 'drive involves the Real of compulsion to repeat that is by definition "beyond the pleasure principle"' (Žižek, 1999a: 295).

corporate clown example). And second, the kind of incongruence that may arise when two similar things are united (such as the Marx Brothers' 'idiot' joke mentioned in footnote 2). In the latter case, the incongruity arises in that the repetition of the same produces a 'minimal difference' between two identical things. In this way, it is shown that at the foundation of every identity lies an internal division. Or as Žižek explains: 'This very lack of difference between the two elements confronts us with the "pure" difference that separates an element from itself' (Žižek, 2006: 109). Hence, the difference and sameness on which humour plays is, as suggested, not a difference between the reality and a more or less unreal representation of reality, but rather a 'pure' or 'minimal' difference incarnated in reality itself. It is a minimal difference which, according to Zupančič, is expressed when humour displays that there is something in our life that lives its own life, i.e. the drive, the Real (Zupančič, 2008: 218).

Attempts to bring the subject into contact with himself, e.g. in the form of moments of 'comic relief', theatrical role transgression, or momentary openings of authentic speech (Karlsen and Villadsen, 2008) all attempt to conceal this unruliness, this fundamental lack of closure, and yet at the same time produce a potential self-undermining excess. In other words: there is something uncontrollable, something inherently disturbing, even self-sabotaging, about humour. Managers who try to exploit humour as a tool for managerial control will, paradoxically, always be introducing an element of something ambiguous and uncontrollable into the organization.

Concluding remarks

Some researchers have emphasized that workplace humour, parodies, irony and the like are easily absorbed by management and thus do not comprise any sort of fundamental threat to the dominant organization of work life (Kunda, 1991; Collinson, 1992; Du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Contu, 2008). Contu goes so far as to propose that researchers tend to seek out hidden or carnivalesque forms of resistance in order to convince ourselves that there are still pockets of resistance in the undergrowth of workplaces which escape the iron grip of discipline. In this way, hidden forms of everyday resistance are idealized. She relies on Žižek's assertion that inherent transgressions of the symbolic order in fact constitute the ultimate support of this order. Much of the resistance that organizational researchers observe is in fact 'decaf resistance', a resistance that threatens no one and which has no real social costs. Even if humoristic forms of resistance takes a carnivalesque or obscene character, they are 'decaf' insofar as they 'do not seriously challenge the economic reproduction of both producers and consumers' (Contu, 2008: 368). Instead, Contu seeks out genuine acts of

resistance, the 'impossible act of resistance', impossible because it is not based upon or contained within the official discourse and norms against which the act is being exercised (Contu, 2008: 370). It should be acts of resistance which fundamentally challenge and undermine the symbolic order (our meaning-attributing structures of language and symbols) and, in this sense, entail high costs.

We have attempted to demonstrate that humour (at least certain forms of humorous practice) contains such a potential for resistance. It does not, however, necessarily have to be forms of humour resistance that fundamentally alter the symbolic order of the organization. More modest forms of distortions, exposures and calling things into question can (also) open up spaces for confrontation with the failure of closure of the symbolic. Above, we have sought to call attention to the fact that while humour may be managerially useful, it always entails a form of evasive excess, an unavoidable, uncontrollable dimension that makes it risky for those in power to appropriate it, and which therefore endows humour strategies with a subversive, critical potential.

Contu (2008: 379) encourages us to abandon the belief that there is an ultimate authority that can justify the attitudes which guide our actions and take on the full and terrifying responsibility for them:

> The real act of resistance, the act proper, is an act where one assumes fully the responsibility for the act itself, without 'if' and without 'but,' risking all and effectively choosing the impossible, in this sense, 'traversing the fantasy,' as Žižek put it.

While we sympathize with this idea of such a 'genuine' or 'real act of resistance', it seems unrealistic as an imperative for the vast majority of subordinate employees who find themselves in structures consisting of very real authorities, responsibilities, and risk of sanctions. Therefore, apart from the future work of theorizing a subversive humour, we need to begin investigating how humorous practices interact with entirely different forms of dominance, resistance and struggle (Fleming and Spicer, 2003: 171). It follows from our understanding of humour as highly ambiguous and difficult to control that its concrete effects must be studied in relation to other social practices and power relations and situated in the context of specific organizational cultures, identities, languages, and hierarchies. Hence, this contribution is an invitation to undertake both further theoretical elaborations and empirical studies of the interlacing of humour and managerial power in specific organizational contexts. In this way we can begin to better understand corporate clowns and other 'uncanny' instances of humour that allow management to negotiate (and re-negotiate) their relationship

with employees. And we can explore this game from the premise that its outcome is hardly ever completely controllable or determined in advance.

references

Barsoux, J-L. (1996) 'Why organizations need humour', *European Management Journal*, 14(5): 500-508.

Binkley, S. (2011) 'Happiness, positive psychology and the program of neoliberal governmentality', *Subjectivity*, 4(4): 371-394.

Bolton, S.C., and M. Houlihan (2009) 'Are we having fun yet? A consideration of workplace fun and engagement', *Employee Relations*, 32(6): 556-568.

Bremmer, G. and J. Roodenbrug (eds.) (1997) *Cultural history of humour: From antiquity to the present day*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Butler, N. (2015) 'Joking aside: Theorizing laughter in organizations', *Culture and Organization*, 21(1): 42-58.

Caudron, S. (1992) 'Humour is healthy in the workplace', *Personnel Journal*, 71(6): 63-68.

Cederström, C. and R. Grassman (2010) 'The unbearable weight of happiness', in C. Cederström and C. Hoedemaekers (eds.) *Lacan and organization*. London: MayFly.

Collinson, D. L. (2002) 'Managing humour', *Journal of Management Studies*, 39(3): 269-289.

Contu, A. (2008) 'Decaf resistance: Misbehaviour, desire and cynicism in liberal workplaces', *Management Communication Quarterly*, 21(3): 364-379.

Corsun, D. L., C. A. Young, A. McManus and M. Erdem (2006) 'Overcoming managers' perceptual shortcuts through improvisational theatre training', *Journal of Management Development*, 25(4): 298-315.

Critchley, S. (2002) *On humour*. London: Routledge.

Derrida, J. (1978) 'The theatre of cruelty and the closure of representation', in *Writing and difference*. Chicago: UCP.

Dolar, M. (1993) 'Beyond interpellation', *Qui Parle*, 6(2): 75-96

Du Gay, P. and G. Salaman (1992) 'The cult(ure) of the customer', *Journal of Management Studies*, 29(5): 615-633.

Ehrenreich, B. (2009) *Smile or die: How positive thinking fooled America and the world*. London: Granta.

Fleming, P. and A. Spicer (2003) 'Working at a cynical distance: Implications for subjectivity, power and resistance', *Organization*, 10(1): 157-179.

Fleming, P. and A. Spicer (2004) '"You can checkout anytime, but you can never leave": Spatial boundaries in a high commitment organization', *Human Relations*, 57(1): 75-94.

Foucault, M. (1982) 'The subject and power', *Critical Inquiry*, 8(4): 777-795.

Foucault, M. (1991) 'Questions of method', in G. Burchell, C. Gordon and P. Miller (eds.) *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality*. Chicago: UCP.

Freud, S. (1955a [1919]) 'The uncanny', in *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, XVII. London: The Hogarth Press.

Freud, S. (1955b [1920]) 'Beyond the pleasure principle', in *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, XVIII. London: The Hogarth Press.

Freud, S. (1955c) 'Fetishism', in *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, XXI. London: The Hogarth Press.

Karlsen, M.P. and K. Villadsen (2008) 'Who should do the talking? The proliferation of dialogue as governmental technology', *Culture and Organization*, 14(4): 345-363.

Kunda, G. (1991) *Engineering culture: Control and commitment in a high-tech corporation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Laclau, E. (2000) 'Identity and hegemony', in J. Butler, E. Laclau and S. Žižek (eds.) *Contingency, hegemony, universality*. London: Verso.

Malone, P. (1980) 'Humor: A double-edged tool for today's managers?', *Academy of Management Review*, 5(3): 357-36.

Mannoni, O. (2003) '"I know very well, but all the same..."', in M.A. Rothenberg, S. Žižek and D.A. Foster (eds.) Perversion and the social relation. Durham: Duke University Press.

Morreall, J. (1981) 'A new theory of laughter', *Philosophical Studies*, 42(2): 243-254.

Rodrigues, S.B. and D.L. Collinson (1995) '"Having fun?": Humour as Rresistance in Brazil', *Organization Studies*, 16(5): 739-768.

Sloterdijk, P. (1988) *Critique of cynical reason*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Spencer, H. (2005) 'The physiology of laughter', in *Illustrations of universal progress*. Boston: Adamant Media Corporation.

Sørensen, B.M. and S. Spoelstra (2012) 'Play at work: Continuation, intervention and usurpation', *Organization*, 19(2): 81-97.

Taylor, P. and P. Bain (2003) '"Subterranean worksick blues": Humour as subversion in two call centres', *Organization Studies*, 24(9): 1487-1509.

The Office (2005/06) Second season, episode 5: 'Halloween'.

Westwood, R. and A. Johnston (2012) 'Reclaiming authentic selves: Control, resistive humour and identity work in the office', *Organization*, 19(6): 787–808.

Willmott, H. (1993) 'Strength is ignorance; slavery is freedom: Managing culture in modern organizations', *Journal of Management Studies*, 30(4): 515-552

Žižek, S. (1989) *The sublime object of ideology*. London: Verso.

Žižek, S. (1999a) *The ticklish subject: The absent centre of political ideology*. London: Verso.

Žižek, S. (1999b) 'The spectre of ideology', in E. Wright and E. Wright (eds.) *The Žižek reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Žižek, S. (2000) 'Da capo senze fine', in J. Butler, E. Laclau and S. Žižek (Eds.) *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. London: Verso.

Žižek, S. (2002) *Welcome to the desert of the Real*. London: Verso.

Žižek, S. (2004) *Iraq: The borrowed kettle*. London: Verso.

Žižek, S. (2006) *The parallax view*. Boston: MIT Press.

Žižek, S. (2008) *In defence of lost causes*. London: Verso.

Zupančič, A. (2008) *The odd one in: On comedy*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Zupančič, A. (2005) 'Reversals of nothing: The case of the sneezing corpse', *Filozofski vestnik*, 26(2): 176-186.

the authors

Kaspar Villadsen is Professor at the Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy, Copenhagen Business School. He is the author of the books *Power and welfare: Citizens' encounters with state welfare* (co-authored with Nanna Mik-Meyer, 2013, Routledge) and *Statephobia and civil society* (co-authored with Mitchell Dean, forthcoming, Stanford University Press). Villadsen has published on Foucault, organizations, biopolitics and welfare policy in *Economy and Society*, *Theory, Culture and Society*, *Organization*, *Constellations*, *Social Theory and Health*, *Culture and Organization* and more. His current research is on governmental technologies, health promotion, and the problem of state and civil society.
Email: kv.mpp@cbs.dk

Mads Peter Karlsen is Assistant Professor at the Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy, Copenhagen Business School. He did his PhD thesis on Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. He is the author of the book *Pastoralmagt: Om velfærdssamfundets kristne arv* (2008) and the editor (with Lars Sandbeck) of the books *Religionskritik efter Guds død* (2009) and *Kristendom og engagement: Peter Kemps teologi til debat* (2014). Karlsen has published on Foucault, Badiou and Žižek in *New Political Science*, *Journal for Critical Research on Religion* and *International Journal of Žižek Studies*. His current research is on the interrelationship between theology and psychoanalysis.
Email: mk.mpp@cbs.dk

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
ISSN 2052-1499 (Print)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 15(3): 537-559

'Take it like a man!': Performing hegemonic masculinity through organizational humour

Barbara Plester

abstract

This paper examines the effects of humour studied within one organization where physical, misogynistic and homophobic humour is highly emphasized and encouraged. Using the theoretical framework of 'hegemonic masculinity', this paper explains how an idealized masculinity is enacted, promoted and valued through humour performances. The paper details how using humour can protect the power holders and proponents of an hyper-masculine culture. Drawing on Butler's (1990) gender performativity theory, the paper outlines how hegemonic masculinity is performed through humour. Furthermore, women in this organization perform and validate hegemonic masculinity to gain acceptance in an overtly masculine culture. This raises questions about the role of women, marginalised male identities, sexual harassment and coercive organizational culture.

Introduction

According to Freud (1905/1991) joking brings forth our unconscious desires and unsayable thoughts while saving us from hostile reactions through using the joke-form. Humour can be a powerful way of expressing taboo feelings and impulses, and this is true both in social and work contexts. This empirical paper offers rich examples from one idiosyncratic organization described as having a 'fun culture' where humour is the most important cultural element. Employees and managers constantly perform humour that is sexual, sexist and aggressive, which raises questions about the role of women, marginalized male identities, sexual harassment and coercive organizational culture.

Using the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity', I argue that workplace humour is used to establish a hyper-masculine culture in this organization. The humour displayed by the dominant CEO and adopted by most others in the organization includes performances that emphasize hegemonic masculinity while rejecting and mocking alternative expressions of masculinity and, in particular, homosexuality. Additionally, I argue that the women in this organization also use humour to perform hegemonic masculinity in order to be accepted into the dominant masculine culture. Furthermore, the women in this organization validate the masculinized humour performances by emphasizing that they are mere 'jokes' and thus not harmful or contentious. Therefore they find safety in interpreting performances as humour, which frees them from any obligation to protest, complain or raise issues of sexual harassment, bullying or intimidation that may have consequences for their employment.

This paper offers contributions to the current literature in three ways. Firstly, it shows the role of humour in protecting an overtly masculine culture; secondly, it details how hegemonic masculinity is performed and validated through humour; and finally, it examines how women perform and endorse hegemonic masculinity in order to be accepted in an overtly masculine culture.

Humour and organizations

Humour is a 'complex and paradoxical phenomenon' (Linstead, 1985: 741). Conceptually, it can be viewed in different ways: a stimulus that causes laughter; a response to a stimulus; or a disposition towards viewing things in a humorous light (Chapman and Foot, 1976). Psychological humour research maintains that humour is a *process* initiated by a *stimulus* (such as a joke) resulting in a *response* (such as laughter) indicating pleasure (Godkewitsch, 1976). However, even this popular definition is problematic and, as this paper will show, laughter may arise not from pleasure in humour but through other dynamics such as power, coercion and control. Some forms of humour, such as parody, can reveal the 'flimsy ground' on which power is founded (Pullen and Rhodes, 2013: 527). Other forms of humour, meanwhile, may 'perpetuate oppressive and patriarchal cultural norms and structures' (Pullen and Rhodes, 2013: 514). To this extent, humour can play a 'socially normative role' (Butler, 2015: 43) by conveying ridicule and creating embarrassment when humour targets an individual's identity or behaviour.

As organization scholars have pointed out, jokes and humour are pervasive in organizations (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). Much of the early organizational humour research was undertaken in industrial shop-floor contexts (Burawoy,

1979; Collinson, 1988; Linstead, 1985; Roy, 1959) and thus has an overtly male emphasis. Roy (1959), for example, shows how mock-aggressive and mocking humour is used by men to stave off boredom on the factory floor. Collinson (1988), meanwhile, examines humour and the creation of gender identity in the context of shop-floor relations. The men in Collinson's study have to both *take* the jokes and pranks as well as *dish it out* in order to be included in the masculine, anti-management culture that is created.

More recently, Plester and Sayers (2007) have shown that workplace banter is shared between those who know each other well and that contentious topics such as racial differences, gender and sexuality can be the subject of jokes and signal inclusiveness in a joking culture. Joking allows mutual disrespect between participants and is thus a safety valve for expressing social frustrations which allows social order to be maintained (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940; Wilson, 1979). Joking from a higher hierarchical position is paternalistic and gives subordinates a sense of belonging (Zijderveld, 1983) while joking between workers creates an alternative reality that is beyond management's control (Linstead, 1985). Humour can therefore be an important component in creating solidarity, and jocular abuse can emphasize collegial workplace relationships. However, physical forms of humour such as horseplay and pranks have the potential to disrupt work, damage people and/or property, and can have malicious intent. Although workplace horseplay is intended to create humour, it can have 'disastrous results' (Duncan, Smeltzer and Leap, 1990: 274) and even verbal banter or teasing can move from an inclusive collegial perspective to become mocking and derisive (Billig, 2005).

Men's sexuality is pervasive and privileged in many organizational contexts, leading to workplace cultures that 'derogate and undermine women' (Collinson and Collinson, 1996: 30). In Collinson and Collinson's (1996) study of sexual harassment in insurance companies, men perpetuating or supporting sexual harassment framed it as 'just a bit of fun' and so used the notion of 'harmless' joking to excuse sexually inappropriate behaviour. Moreover, the ambiguity of humour can be exploited in men's sexual joking in order to conceal true motives and can reveal unconscious sexual or aggressive viewpoints that are normally kept concealed (see Freud, 1905/1991).

The risks of such humour are most prevalent in 'cultures of fun' where employees are encouraged by management to draw on their internal thoughts and feelings (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009). Management rhetoric that emphasizes employee 'authenticity' emboldens employees to display unique aspects of themselves in the attempt to increase commitment, motivation and productivity. In these neo-normative cultures, 'fun, sexuality, and consumption are not

formally barred' but actively supported (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009: 572). Cederström and Grassman (2008) go further and suggest that modern corporations aim to engage the subversive elements of employees' personalities and harness their 'imp of perversity' (Žižek, 1999: 368-9). This leads them to introduce the term 'masochistic reflexive organization' to describe workplace cultures where 'transgressions and perversions are encouraged' (Cederström and Grassman, 2008: 41). Employees in masochistic cultures are encouraged to enjoy their difference and oppose normative control through disdaining and despising their occupation. The perverse elements of work are celebrated and employees obtain pleasure from their scepticism, which they cynically acknowledge with a kind of masochistic pride.

The turn to neo-normative and masochistic reflexive cultures raises a series of questions. If employees reveal their authentic selves with regards to sexist, sexualized and aggressive urges, would this really be tolerated by organizations? Would some moderating device (such as joking or irony) need to be used to shield such authentic impulses from managerial and societal censure? What are the consequences of revealing authentic sentiments such as masculine dominance, homophobia, sexual discrimination and misogyny? To further probe these questions, the paper now turns to discuss gender dynamics specifically in relation to the performance of masculinity.

Gender performance and hegemonic masculinity

Gender is argued to be a socially constructed process rather than a biological occurrence. Gender formation is therefore highly contextual as the self is in constant flux, fragmented and re-forming itself. Although gendered behaviours tend to be *ascribed* to either sex, there is nothing inherent about the behaviours that may be considered to be 'male' or 'female'. Context, discourses and norms can all influence how gender is performed and perceived (Alsop et al., 2002).

Judith Butler's work is central to the theory of gender performativity. According to Butler (1990: 2), gender performativity is not a singular act but a reiterative practice of discourse 'to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains'. A performance of masculinity or femininity is contextual and can also vary within the same person at different stages throughout their life. Gendered identities are formed from our own performances as well as from those of other people towards us. Gendered performances have a 'script' that can provide us with the ideals of masculinity or femininity and this script guides us to which behaviours are appropriate and which are not.

Butler (1990) relates gendered performances to power, which is pervasive in everyday interactions as well as within institutional frameworks. Gender can be performed in a variety of ways but there are dominant ideals that reinforce power or specific privileged groups (for example, heterosexuals in Western society). In Western cultures, patriarchal and heterosexist ideals are dominant and opposition to them are constructed as marginal and may be socially forbidden or discouraged. Masculinity is a social construct that does not belong exclusively to male bodies, and it can inhibit and repress men as well as women (Alsop et al., 2002).

The term 'hegemonic masculinity' was first introduced in an Australian study of social inequality (Kessler et al., 1982). It is seen as a fantasy of masculinity and is not embodied by all men. Hegemonic masculinity is not assumed to be *normal* but it is *normative* insofar as it embodies 'the currently most honoured way of being a man' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832), which inevitably changes from one cultural context to another. Alsop et al. (2002) identify two key ideas that emerge in critical studies of masculinity: first, that hegemonic masculinity is a cultural ideal and therefore unattainable for most men; and second, that hegemonic masculinity rejects both femininity and homosexuality. Consequently, for men to conform to hegemonic masculinity they must distance themselves from both femininity and homosexuality, which can be achieved through displaying overtly heterosexual and/or homophobic behaviour (Alsop et al, 2002). Therefore, homosexuality becomes 'the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity hence from the point of view of hegemonic masculinity, gayness is easily assimilated to femininity' (Connell, 1995: 78).

Although hegemony does not necessarily legitimate violence, it implies 'ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions and persuasion' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832). Thus, different forms of masculinity can be achieved by all individuals regardless of their biologically sexed body. In other words, the performance of masculine gender is linked to the accrual of status and power regardless of whether the body is male or female (Alsop et al, 2002; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity may include expressions of fantasies, desires and norms, and humour may be one way of articulating these.

From accounts of sexual harassment, joking is presented as a way to articulate aggression and sexism because it can express taboo impulses while offering the joker a 'safety shield' from reprimand and critique. Humour may thus be used to display, perform and validate heterosexual masculinities (Kehily and Nayak, 1997). Joking may be competitive, profane, sexualized and/or aggressive, and those who do not participate may find themselves the butt of the jokes.

According to Lyman (1987), joking allows a symbolic breaking of the rules, which can create excitement and strengthen bonding in masculine cultures. Masculine workplaces are associated with competitiveness, focus more on organisational outcomes than on relationships, and use more jocular abuse and competitive banter (Hay, 1994). Women who want to become part of a masculine group must 'decode male behaviour patterns' and participate in teasing and coarse joking to become 'one of the boys' (Fine and De Soucey, 2005: 131). Women's humour is often exhibited more privately (Hay, 2000) and feminine workplaces, by contrast, are often more concerned with supportive relationships, collaboration and interpersonal dimensions (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003).

Although gender does influence humour styles and usage (Holmes, Marra and Burns, 2001), there are only a few studies that examine the gendered aspects of humour in organizational settings (Johnston, Mumby and Westwood, 2007). However, it is not necessarily helpful to perceive organisations as either masculine or feminine but preferable to consider social practices and the ways in which gender is *performed* inside organisations (Crompton, 2006). Therefore, gender and humour performances are analyzed in the empirical material presented after the method section.

Method

This study was part of an in-depth ethnographic research in four corporate New Zealand organizations located in the finance, law, energy and IT industries. The overarching research objective was to examine the relationship between humour and organizational culture. Data showed that humour and fun practices at the company code-named 'Adare' differed greatly from those observed at the three other organizations. Therefore further analysis of the data from this specific company was undertaken.

Analysis was an iterative process with interviews transcripts, documents and observations repeatedly coded and re-coded into a variety of themes and categories. Early categories included: humour boundaries; types of fun; organizational formality; organizational identity; humour function; and transgressive humour. These themes have been addressed elsewhere (see e.g. Plester, 2009a, 2009b; Plester and Sayers, 2007; Plester and Orams, 2008). In a later reading of the data, gendered aspects were identified while examining the theme of 'transgression' in humour. This theme includes categories of sexual, sexist and aggressive humour and thus gives rise to this investigation into gendered joking and the performance of masculinity.

The data collected from Adare includes detailed observations of fun, humour and cultural events and thirteen semi-structured interviews of 30-60 minutes duration. Interviews were conducted with organizational members with different roles and from all levels of hierarchy, including the CEO and senior managers. Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. Documentary data was collected and included cartoons, posters, photographs and printed jokes. The source is noted beside the title in each empirical example.

On a personal note, I arrived at Adare as a naïve researcher excited by their reputation as a fun-filled, humour-loving company. I left rather battle-weary, worn down by being constantly on my guard, and somewhat shell-shocked by the constant battle for joking supremacy. Although I did not feel truly victimised, I was uncomfortable for the duration of this project and relieved to have survived this site and the pranks that were also played on me. I learned to laugh good-naturedly at all of the offensive jokes and was, in retrospect, alarmed to feel a weird female pride that I could 'take it like a man'. It did, however, take me quite some time and reflexive distance from this overwhelming experience to be able to reflect more critically on the dynamics at play in this company. I am somewhat chagrined to admit that for some of my time here, I had bought into the ardent exhortations that this was all 'just joking'. Latterly, I was able to apply greater reflexivity and recognize that my complicity was a protection device to ensure that I coped as a female researcher in an overtly masculine culture.

Empirical material

Adare is a small Information Technology (IT) company of 25 people. Their core business is providing expert solutions in security and networking. The organizational culture is very informal with a team-based structure. The company has competed in the IT industry successfully for ten years and has recently been sold to a larger organization. The three key operational teams are engineering, sales consulting and office administration. Although all employees have direct access to the CEO, the engineering and sales teams are led by senior managers while the administration team reports directly to the CEO. Of the 25 employees, only three are female.

In order to keep track of the different actors in the following examples Table 1.1 lists the named participants, relevant demographic details and their role in the humour.

Pseudonym	Role	Age / Sex	Tenure/Ethnicity	Humour role
Jake	CEO/ owner	38 - male	10 years, European	Joker, instigator of most humour
Adrian	Engineer	24 - male	3 years, European	Butt of many jokes, retaliates using profanity/vulgarity
Sean	Sales consultant	25 - male	14 months, European	Criticized company humour and became target of jokes
Karen	Sales rep	31 - female	One month, European	Newest employee, trying to fit in
Rachel	Admin manager	36 - female	3 years, European	CEO's sister, thus some immunity to being target of jokes
Ann	Administrator	50s - female	9 years, European	Friends with Rachel, target of some jokes
Pete	Engineer/team manager	35 - male	5 years, European	Senior figure, quieter but joins in with most humour
Dylan	Sales consultant	34 - male	5 years, European	Enjoys the humour, joins in
Chad	Engineer	26 - male	4 years, Korean	Quiet - laughs at joking by others, contributes occasionally

Table 1.1: The protagonists (all names have been changed)

In this owner-operated, small company a variety of humour enactments and printed displays were observed, experienced and discussed in interviews. It was notable that the incidents described below were not observed in any other companies within the larger study. This suggests something different and unusual was operating within Adare. In the thirteen interviews, participants were asked to describe the organizational culture and every participant used the terms 'humour' and 'fun' in their descriptions. This is important to the later analysis as it illustrates that the participants consider the culture and activities to be both fun and funny.

Additionally, all participants noted that this company is very different to other corporate organizations. Many declared that humour and fun at Adare were extreme and risky compared to other companies; that humour was 'free' at Adare; that there were no limits or constraints to humour; and that all forms of

humour and fun were encouraged and initiated by the CEO and senior managers.

Five examples have been selected to represent the differentiated forms of contentious humour that were observed in this company. The selections of these specific examples were made due to their uniqueness in the context of the wider study. Many sexualized, homophobic, violent and misogynistic humour incidents were experienced at Adare, and these were openly enacted and valued. A wide array of sexual, sexist and racially-oriented emails were also displayed on computer screens throughout the office.

It is difficult to display such an array within a short paper so the five selected examples offer a cross-section representative of the humour experienced. Accompanying the incidents are segments from the transcribed interviews in which employees comment on the humour practices, followed by analytical comments and my interpretation of the humour. It is important to note that there were also many mild, non-offensive, everyday humour interactions but these are not the focus of this particular paper. I also acknowledge that to some readers these incidents may not appear humorous and may in fact be interpreted as bullying or harassment. However, the participants from Adare all categorised these as 'humour' and thus they serve as examples of humour and fun for this specific company.

Five humour incidents

1. Practical joke: Falling through the chair (Source: Observations)

Jake and male staff members remove the screws that holds the seat of an office chair to the wheeled base. An unsuspecting computer vendor visits the company and is offered this chair and when he sits he falls to the ground, inciting the whole-hearted mirth of the expectant Adare team. The vendor appears flushed and embarrassed but takes the prank in good spirit and laughs with the others.

Two administration workers reflect on humour that might 'hurt' others:

> It's like knock your socks off, do whatever you like, as long as it doesn't hurt someone or ruin someone's day. It's not some sort of company limit, everybody knows how much humour you can actually do to an individual, it is limited by whatever the person feels, not limited by some sort of policy because we don't have one. (Rachel)
>
> They have gone too far at times and damaged property and hurt and offended people – they don't mean to. You can replace property. Kent went through the

> window, they were playing soccer [in the office] and he went through the window. (Ann)

Although Rachel firmly asserts that humour at Adare does not hurt anyone, the chair prank definitely had the potential for physical harm. This prank had been attempted earlier (on me) but as I had been warned by the women in the company to 'always check your chair', I had not fallen victim to this prank. (At the time I was recovering from knee surgery and a fall could have been quite injurious – this was known to the CEO).

Rachel wants to believe that the jokes will be harmless but the Adare jokers appear to consider the potential for physical harm part of their masculine performance and injury will be risked in the quest for a big laugh. This points to a tough, masculine culture dismissive of harm, which requires those who wish to be included to 'take it'. The visiting vendor understands this dynamic and is instantly included as one of the lads when he laughs at his own fall.

There is some solidarity between the women in this instance as the chair gag was an old favourite and thus they warned me to 'take care'. This is the only instance where the potential for harm is actually acknowledged and it is only by the women. They seem conflicted, because in interviews they firmly assert that the jokes do not hurt anyone but then Ann alludes to the story about Kent being hospitalized. Their warning about the chair gag was given quietly and discretely away from the mocking comments of the jokers, protecting me but also themselves. Openly acknowledging that the humour could cause harm might preclude them from being accepted in the culture and may even rebound in further mocking, jeering and pranks played upon them.

2. Humping employee (Source: Recounted during interview)

Sean had been out on a sales visit and returned to the office with his clients, which included the Managing Director of the client company. Upon entering the office, they found Jake in the middle of the office holding Adrian from behind and simulating a sexual act with him amid catcalls and laughter from the assembled staff. The clients were outraged and left the premises. Jake and his staff all laughed at the clients' reaction. Sean reflects on the incident:

> They [the customers] are really good security consultants, very straight-laced, white shirts, nice clothes, very nice quiet people, so I decided the best thing to do was to set up a partnership with them...so we brought them in – two very quiet, well-mannered men came in and we brought them in and showed them some of the products that we are trying to bring to the market – and there is Jake humping Adrian from behind over the desk...and these two guys were like 'Ooo-kay' and they left. I got a phone call later on saying 'what in the hell is wrong with your

> boss?'...The culture is definitely what I call the benevolent dictatorship, there is a king – Jake – and in many respects he can be very fair and reasonable...and then from a behavioural perspective we dance very close to impropriety at times. We love humour, we love laughter, Jake is probably the industry's biggest practical joker, he once couriered a sack of rubbish over to somebody. Some humour is puerile and toilet humour – and some of the humour is very, very funny. (Sean)

Dylan and Karen discuss the humour:

> The humour can be a bit disturbing. A lot of the humour that I have seen is about putting someone or something down. Adrian, for example, is the butt of a lot of jokes, mainly because he comes across as being really innocent and unable to stand up for himself. He gets a little upset every now and then and people pull back. (Dylan)

> The humour here is very crude, crass, rude, toilet humour. I don't know anywhere else the humour is that much in the gutter – it's better than no humour though. Whatever skeletons someone has – we will dig it all out. (Karen)

The example describes a parody of homosexuality and the employees' quotations highlight some key cultural elements of power, dominance and the performance of hegemonic masculinity at Adare. The humour involves 'putdowns' and Adrian is often the unwillingly submissive target. Dylan indicates that this is 'disturbing' and mentions Adrian's innocence, inability to stand up for himself, and the fact that he gets upset – thus suggesting that such humour could even constitute sexual harassment of Adrian. Karen emphasizes the scatological nature of the humour and Sean has to deal with outraged clients who witness the parody of a sexual act between two males. These comments indicate that the employees know that this humour is socially unacceptable but they justify it in their comments that people 'pull back' and that 'gutter humour' is preferable to no humour. The clients' reaction is another indication that this humour transgresses workplace norms. However, the CEO and his assembled employees laugh heartily even when they lose the clients as customers – thus reinforcing the fact that, for this group, the heterosexual, masculine, joking culture is highly valued and therefore bravado must be exhibited even in the face of lost business.

3. Buttocks on the screen (Source: Observations)

The office administrator (Ann) left her desk on a Friday afternoon to go and buy beer and wine for the usual Friday afternoon drinks. While she was gone Jake corralled Adrian and, ducking behind a partition, instructed Adrian to take a photograph of his (Jake's) naked buttocks. This was quickly uploaded to Ann's desktop and when she returned and switched her computer back on, she was greeted with the photograph filling her screen. She screamed loudly, laughed

loudly and then yelled (jocular) abuse at her boss and other employees who had surrounded her. Her co-worker Rachel commented afterwards:

> Nobody is exempt from a joke, and I mean they get played on Jake too – he takes them as well as gives them...so you have to laugh at yourself. I'm lucky – I don't get the practical jokes – Ann cops it. They won't wet my chair. I'm not the victim. It's not intended to hurt someone – so I don't find the humour here offensive – I take the positives...A day doesn't go by that doesn't incorporate something that we can joke about...The humour here is picking on people and exploiting their mishaps – but humour is only negative if it hurts people. (Rachel)

Again, there is reinforcement of the openly masculine culture as Ann is subjected to a photograph of her male boss' buttocks, and after her initial shock she laughs along. Adrian also has to comply in taking the photograph and this is hardly a pleasant or typical workplace task. This prank highlights the masculine and sexualized culture in the display of male buttocks which could be considered 'sexual harassment' (see Collinson and Collinson, 1996). Both subordinates are compelled to play along with, laugh at and 'take the joke' or risk being excluded from the dominant cultural workgroup.

Rachel openly notes that the humour 'exploits' and 'picks on' employees' mishaps yet she does not equate this with 'hurting people'. There is ambiguity in Rachel's narrative as she states that everyone is targeted – even the CEO – but she simultaneously notes that she herself is not targeted in practical jokes. It is significant that no recorded pranks on the CEO were observed during the research time and Rachel enjoys a somewhat privileged position as Jake's sister. Therefore it is not surprising that she claims that humour at Adare is only negative if it 'hurts somebody' and she does not acknowledge any potential damage in the pranks occurring around her on a regular basis. Having his sister's support and approval possibly prevents any challenges to Jake from the few female employees. Ann had closely aligned herself with Rachel, although this did not render her completely immune to being the target of pranks such as the one above.

4. 'Punch her in the face...to prove you're right' (Source: Document collection and ad hoc discussions)

This offensive phrase is the title of a poster (below) printed out and displayed in A3 size in the staff kitchen. The photographic image and caption had been sent to the CEO from an external contact and he printed it and pinned it up in the staff kitchen.

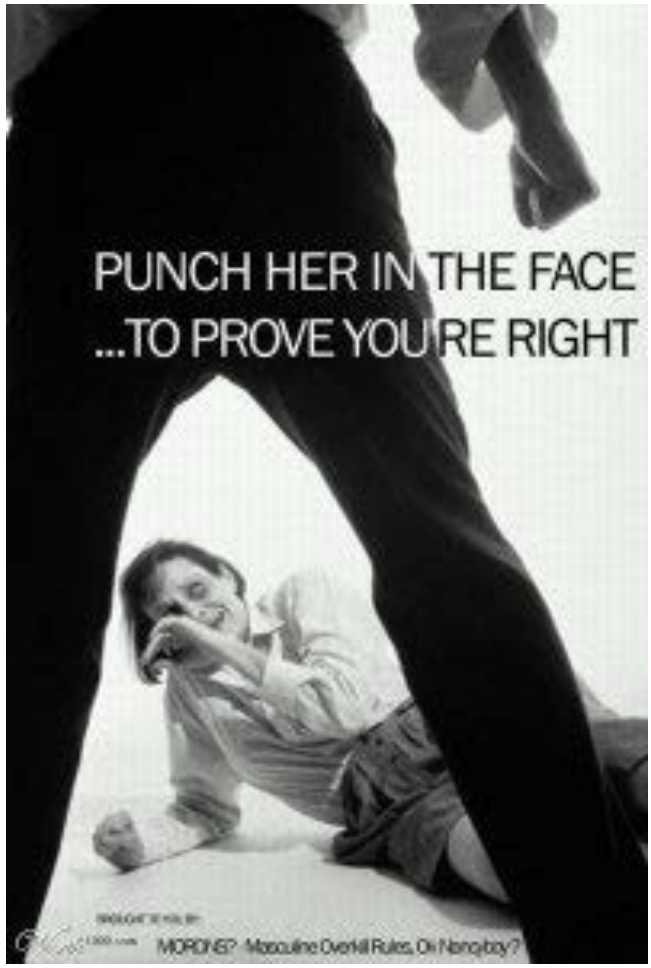

Figure 1: 'Punch her in the face...to prove you're right'

When questioned individually about the poster all staff reiterate that 'it's just a joke' and even the female staff respond with a laugh, a shrug and the comment 'they're just being the boys – we just ignore them'. Two senior managers quip: 'We don't go there [the kitchen], it's for women' and 'anyway the kitchen's just a pathway to the beer'. Not one Adare employee criticizes the poster – although one male engineer does laughingly acknowledge: 'This place is a sexual harassment suit waiting to happen'.

The aggressive misogynistic message of the poster is trivialized by the women's interpretation that the men are 'just...boys'. Senior managers support the sentiments of the poster in their quips assigning the kitchen to 'women' and 'beer'. The comment regarding sexual harassment clearly indicates the engineer's suspicion that this is unacceptable and potentially illegal. Employees defend the poster with a pride in the rebelliousness of it – again reinforcing the

prevailing hegemonic masculine culture. The risk of being considered misogynistic is superseded by the greater risk of individually condemning the poster (it was after all, displayed by the CEO). It is likely that expressing distaste for this poster will invite mocking and ridicule upon the complainer.

Although male dominance, aggression and control is openly displayed in this poster, the female employees laugh the poster off as 'humour' and thus protect themselves from any need to challenge these obvious misogynistic sentiments. Through their compliance in framing this as a joke they avoid having to challenge the prevailing hegemonic masculinity underpinning the organizational culture. Their framing of this as a 'joke' therefore makes them not only complicit in the joking culture, but reinforces the masculine culture. Their supporting laughter reassures the male proponents that this is all just good fun – after all, the female employees are not offended.

5. Morphing Adrian into Mr Spock (Source: Observations)

Adrian is slightly built and has a (mostly) quiet demeanour. This excerpt from the author's observation notes exemplifies a jibe aimed at Adrian by Karen as she socializes herself into the Adare culture:

Karen uses her computer and morphs a photo of Adrian into Mr Spock with big ears and lips. She prints it and then pins the photo on the company notice board. Several people crowd around to look, including Adrian.

> *Chad*: There's even room for a caption.
>
> *Karen*: (smiling at Adrian) He can take it.
>
> Jake comes in and sees the photo.
>
> *Jake*: That's a bit gay! It looks funny – hey it's even better from a distance. Hey Adrian you look like Michael Jackson's bitch!
>
> Everyone laughs.
>
> *Karen*: Oh sorry Adrian.
>
> *Adrian*: No you're not!

Men may use humour techniques that make each other appear vulnerable and emphasize 'the power of dominant versions of masculinity' (Kehily and Nayak, 1997: 73). This power and dominance effect is obvious in the remarks where Jake emphasizes Adrian's vulnerability and implies that he is a homosexual lackey. However, it is notable that this example of masculine humour is initiated by the

newcomer, Karen – a young female. In her attempt to fit in to the masculine culture, Karen creates a joke targeting Adrian – a 'weaker' male who is often the butt of jokes. Thus Karen is performing hegemonic masculinity by using humour to mock Adrian, copying the humour style that is revered and applauded at Adare.

At the start of the interchange, Karen suggests that Adrian can 'take' the teasing but, realizing that she has set him up as a target for homosexual insults, she apologizes for the joke. Adrian's forceful reply shows annoyance and a dismissal of her ritual apology but he smiles to show that he can take the joke. He is aware that Karen has deliberately used him as a target to ingratiate herself with the dominant males and has opened up new opportunities for them to make him the butt of further homophobic jokes.

Choosing particular individuals for homophobic jibes may be a technique to create group solidarity and reinforce masculine culture. This joke further reinforces the status and dominance of the CEO. By adding to Karen's joke, the CEO once again performs hegemonic masculinity, emphasizing his power through homophobic humour aimed at Adrian which in turn reinforces his low status.

In a later interview, Adrian freely uses strong profanity, and claims that he retaliates or instigates jokes on his colleagues – which he sees as an important achievement. However, observations show that Adrian's attempts at humour are met with even more mocking and derision, again reinforcing the prevailing masculine hierarchy – with Adrian still at the bottom. By making Adrian the butt of many jokes and laughing at his reactions, the Adare staff reinforce the competitive prevailing hierarchy, reaffirm their own dominant masculinity and even Karen achieves higher status as she successfully targets the hapless Adrian yet again.

These final extracts from interview transcripts reflect on humour at Adare:

> The managers just work under the assumption of what you see is what you get and if you don't like it then you can 'jump'. I want to be able to be part of the humour; I am the kind of person who would like to be player in all that. I just need a little bit of time to settle in and I will be right there with them. It's the nature of humour – the Koreans are the butt of jokes and get the piss taken out of them and ragged on – but they love it. Jake initiates it – so it's top down. Jake definitely creates the humour. I think within the next few weeks I'm going to have to pull out some tricks from my own sleeve. Everyone has limits – girls more than guys – the senior guys don't take shit and the other two women are safe. (Karen)

When questioned about humour at Adare, Jake supplies only this pithy, uncompromising response: 'If they don't like it they can leave!'. Karen's comments mirror Jake's quote in her recognition that if you don't like the humour you can 'jump'. This is an uncompromising stance understood by the employees – even the newly-hired Karen. Karen has quickly worked out what she needs to do to survive in this competitive masculine culture and has a strategy for her future organizational development that is predicated as much on performing targeted workplace jokes as it is on her actual work performance. Karen indicates that she intends to become 'one of the boys' (Fine and De Soucey, 2005) as soon as she can.

Discussion

Participating in humour at Adare is mandatory and unavoidable. It could be argued that these examples are not even humour. However, employees at Adare definitely framed these incidents as their own workplace humour that differentiated them from other companies through having no boundaries, being risky and 'anti-PC'. Freud (1905/1991) addressed this notion of expressing anti-societal impulses, such as aggression and sexual urges, through tendentious (aimed) joking which offers a release to the joker. Yet Freud's analysis of why people enjoy contentious jokes more than safe, polite ones, does not seem to fully capture the collective, coercive and power elements of the humour at Adare. The proud assertion that humour here is so anti-establishment requires further theoretical examination to explain why these employees are ardent in their extreme performances of transgressive humour.

Viewing Adare through the new organizational cultural forms presented by Fleming and Sturdy (2009) and Cederström and Grassman (2008) does not go far enough into the problematic elements of coercion, control, dominance and patriarchy operating within Adare. Although it might seem to be a site of neo-normative control, where employees are encouraged to express 'authentic' aspects of their identity through jokes and humour, this does not appear to be the cultural form operating within Adare. The freedom to display a unique identity through humour is an illusion at Adare because the only acceptable identity is that of the hyper-masculine heterosexual. As a result, Adare employees have the misconception of freedom while they are controlled through humour. For example, mocking and derision are used as a 'corrective' (Butler, 2015) to behaviours that do not conform to the masculine ideal prevalent at Adare. This masculine ideal is forcefully displayed by the CEO in his constant performances of sexualized, sexist and aggressive humour. Adare employees are not

encouraged to be authentic at all, but are manipulated into acceptable humour and fun expressions prescribed by the CEO.

Neither can Adare be considered a 'reflexive masochistic organization'. Whereas Cederström and Grassman's (2008) analysis revealed employees who despised their own occupations, Adare employees are proud of their their unique organizational culture. Although both groups of organizational employees take pride in workplace perversions, vulgarity, transgressions and cynicism about work, Cederström and Grassman's participants displayed an awareness of the exploitation and dominance of work itself and a masochistic orientation towards being so subjugated – almost enjoying the process. Adare employees do not appear to recognize, or do not want to acknowledge, the dominance and control being exercised upon them primarily by the CEO. These darker aspects seem to be obscured by the flamboyant and mocking humour performances. Cynicism and mockery have been firmly directed towards outsiders who are derided for being humourless and boring – as shown by the mocking laughter towards the outraged clients in example 2.

Cederström and Grassman argue that transgressions and the obscene underside of organizational culture can be understood and masochistically enjoyed as 'a structure of our time' (2008: 56). Contrastingly, Adare employees despise other 'normal' organizations and exhibit pride in their own superior organization because they are unconventional. Although their humour may be perverse, its unconstrained nature successfully obscures the power and control exercised by the CEO. The masculine, misogynistic and homophobic organizational culture is openly displayed but laughed off as a joke and cultural quirk.

In light of this, the discussion moves from new forms of cultural analysis to theories of hegemonic masculinity to further interpret the humour performances at Adare.

The notion of hegemonic masculinity as a performed practice can offer insight into the enactments and displays of sexualized and aggressive humour at Adare. Two themes arise from the data: 1) humour protects the power holders and the hegemonic masculine organizational culture from censure; and 2) hegemonic masculinity is performed by both men and women.

Humour is the vehicle for expressing hegemonic masculinity at Adare because this offers the performers safety through the 'just joking' defence, while allowing them to express a fantasy or desired version of masculinity. In their meta-analysis of hegemonic masculinity, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) discuss social actions and discursive practices that constitute performances of hegemonic

masculinity, but they do not discuss humour. Therefore this paper extends their findings by illustrating how humour can be used to openly perform hegemonic masculinity without risk of reprimand.

Hegemonic masculinity is performed through physical pranks (example 1), exposure to masculine sexuality (example 2), parody and ridicule of homosexuality (examples 3 and 5), and masculine violence towards women (example 4). In both the 'buttocks' (2) and 'humping' examples (3), the CEO physically 'exposes and imposes' (Tyler and Cohen, 2008: 120) his masculinity upon his subordinate employees who must laugh and thus validate his performance. He openly states that the consequence for expressing displeasure is to leave the company, and this blatant sanction highlights his organizational power over anyone who might challenge him in these gender performances.

Tyler and Cohen (2008) assert that the desire for recognition underpins hegemonic gender performances. As we have seen, Jake's performances have achieved recognition in his own company and in the wider IT industry. Because Jake frames his forceful masculine performances as humorous, they are accepted and unchallenged. Without the joking framework to seemingly alleviate his power and control, he could face accusations of dominance and sexual harassment from both male and female employees. At Adare it is not feasible to make a complaint of sexual harassment as the CEO is the main proponent and creator of highly sexualized and aggressive forms of humour. Therefore employees are powerless and must accept the cultural elements or terminate their employment. This shows that sexual harassment is clearly still an issue for women in some industries (as found by Collinson and Collinson, 1996) but my findings also depict how men can be powerless against sexual harassment (seen in examples 2, 3 and 5).

It is significant that the women at Adare both tolerate the masculine humour performances and also create their own humour performances to earn approval from the male power holders. Therefore, this analysis derives from the literature the idea that 'female bodies' may perform hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) and extends this notion by clearly showing just how such a female performance occurs. In example 5, Karen claims her place in the masculine hierarchy by deliberately targeting a 'weak' male in her joke. She creates the opportunity for Adrian to be publicly mocked by being depicted as a homosexual minion by the CEO. Thus Karen is performing masculinity by deriding a 'less masculine' male and her performance is validated by the CEO as he builds on her jibe to reinforce his status as the dominant masculine joker – at the expense once again of the hapless Adrian. In initiating humour that created

homophobic vilification, Karen has successfully performed the preferred form of masculinity and cemented her position in the masculine hierarchy.

Although individually most of these employees are warm, kind and inoffensive, the dominant culture forces them to perform a masculine identity – otherwise, they risk being mocked and shunned. The collective identity at Adare includes a shared version of hegemonic masculinity where homosexuality is perceived as a major threat to the group's masculine identity and therefore homosexuality is continuously and brutally mocked through humour. Queer theory emphasizes that manifestations of gender are performed and parodied (see Butler, 1990) and can include fear of the 'other' and, in particular, the homosexual 'other' (Parker, 2002). Gender performances can parody dominant norms through 'subversive and exaggerated repetition of parodic practices' (Butler, 1990: 120) and thus gender is ritualised through repeated acts – which can make it appear natural.

Sean complained about the embarrassment that the mock-humping incident caused him with the clients and he was then openly derided through jocular abuse by the CEO and others. During the research, he submitted his resignation and was preparing to leave the company. Sean's complaint posed a threat to the dominant masculine culture, so his 'aberrant' behaviour was punished through derisive humour. The increased 'jocular' teasing that Sean received while working out his notice period was conspicuous, uncomfortable and possibly even bullying.

The pranks and jokes contain profane or socially taboo elements such as the notion of punching a woman to show dominance. The poster has shock value (Kehily and Nayak, 1997) and in most corporate environments such a poster would be, of course, forbidden (and nothing even remotely similar was observed in the other studied corporate organizations). This rebellious display further accentuates the power of the hegemonic masculinity in allowing such a socially unacceptable sentiment to be exhibited and defended.

Similar to Collinson's (1988; 1992; 2002) shop floor, the Adare office was rife with uninhibited swearing, pranks, pornographic images on screens, slogans scrawled on wall ('Bruce blows goats' being a memorable one). The major differences to Collinson's seminal work is that this was in a 'white-collar' corporate office rather than in a 'blue-collar' factory. This current study took place twenty years after Collinson's study, a time in which equal opportunity organizations are encouraged and sexual harassment and bullying are at least nominally prohibited. This raises the question: if a company like Adare still exists and is able to flourish, what does this imply with regard to gendered workplace practices and sexual equality in organizations?

The foregoing analysis shows how hegemonic masculinity can be openly encouraged and sustained through using humour and how women can successfully perform masculinity in order to be included in the masculine hierarchy. In a rich depiction of one distinctive culture with elements of neo-normative control and masochistic reflexivity, a culture that promotes sexualization, aggression and sexism is examined. Thus this paper demonstrates how a hegemonic masculine culture, which incorporates sexual harrassment and intimidation, can be created in a supposedly 'enlightened' Western working environment. In the words of the CEO, 'if they don't like it they can leave' – but with this company on their résumé, where will they go?

Concluding comments

Is this fun? Is this play? Is this even humour anymore? These are the questions asked of this data by myself as researcher, by other scholars who have reviewed this work, but not by the participants themselves. The performances, displays and humour enactments at Adare were ardently defended as 'jokes'. Of course, the jokes and pranks at Adare are by no means representative of most modern organizations and thus this could be considered as an extreme, idiosyncratic case. By no means do I attempt to generalize this contextual research to other organizations but there is still a contribution to be made through analyzing this company. However, it is the organizational context for this group of people and there are likely to be other companies that exhibit some similar dynamics (see e.g. Collinson, 1988; 1992; 2002; Plester and Sayers, 2007).

In both my study and Collinson and Collinson's (1996) earlier one, sexual harassment is enacted through jokes and then justified through the defence of 'just joking'. What is new and specific to the current study is that the women and subjugated men of Adare deny any sexual harassment and collude to reinforce the prevailing culture as a fun and joking culture. No one raises the sexual, sexualized, aggressive and physical joking as an issue – although there is one (laughing) admission that sexual harassment allegations *could* be made. In contrast to Collinson and Collinson's study, the women in this study join and support the masculine culture and perform hegemonic masculinity themselves through humour. Although this may be a protective strategy, it also serves as reinforcement for the dominant masculine culture and thus sexualized and aggressive humour incidents are trivialized as mere jokes.

The specific contribution this paper makes is in depicting how women survive and even flourish within a masculine hegemonic culture. In order to accomplish this they must perform hegemonic masculinity themselves, albeit through the

facade of joking. The analysis shows how humour facilitates and protects protagonists from legal or social consequences but there are victims in the quest for superiority and status through targeted joking. It is significant that victims in such a powerful hegemonic masculine culture are equally likely to be found among the male employees, targeted in joking, embarrassed within their company and wider industry, unable to complain, and afraid of what might happen next. However, no matter how offensive or threatening the joking becomes, the cultural imperative within this organization is to 'take it like a man!'.

references

Ackroyd, S. and P. Thompson (1999) *Organizational misbehaviour*. London: Sage.

Alsop, R., A. Fitzsimons and K. Lennon (2002) *Theorizing gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Billig, M. (2005) *Laughter and ridicule: Towards a social critique of humour*. London: Sage.

Burawoy, R. (1979) *Manufacturing consent*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge: New York.

Butler, N. (2015) 'Joking aside: Theorizing laughter in organizations', *Culture and organization*, 21(1): 42-58.

Cederström, C. and R. Grassman (2008) 'The masochistic reflexive turn', *ephemera,* 8(1): 41-57.

Chapman, A.J. and H.C. Foot (eds.) (1976) *Humour and laughter: Theory, research and applications*. London: John Wiley & Sons.

Collinson, D.L. (1988) '"Engineering humour": Masculinity, joking and conflict in shop-floor relations', *Organization Studies*, 9(2): 181-199.

Collinson, D.L. (1992) *Managing the shopfloor: Subjectivity, masculinity and workplace culture*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Collinson, D.L. (2002) 'Managing humour', *Journal of Management Studies*, 39(3): 269-289.

Collinson, M. and D. Collinson (1996) '"It's only dick": The sexual harassment of women managers in insurance sales', *Work, Employment and Society*, 10(1): 29-56.

Connell, R.W. (1995) *Masculinities*. New South Wales: Polity Press.

Connell, R.W. and J. Messerschmidt (2005) 'Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender and Society*, 19(6): 829-859.

Crompton, R. (2006) 'Gender and work', in K. Davis, M. Evans and J. Lorber (eds.) *Handbook of gender and women's studies*. London: Sage.

Duncan, J.W., L.R. Smeltzer and T.L. Leap (1990) 'Humor and work: Applications of joking behaviour to management', *Journal of Management*, 16(2): 255-279.

Fleming, P. and A. Sturdy (2009) '"Just be yourself!": Towards neo-normative control in organisations?', *Employee Relations*, 31(6): 569-583.

Fine, G.A. and M. De Soucey (2005) 'Joking cultures: Humor themes as social regulation in group life', *Humor*, 18(1): 1-22.

Freud, S. (1905/1991) *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*, trans. A. Richards. London: Penguin.

Godkewitsch, M. (1976) 'Physiological and verbal indices of arousal in rated humour', in A.J. Chapman and H.C. Foot (eds.) *Humour and laughter: Theory, research and applications*. London: John Wiley & Sons.

Hay, J. (1994) 'Jocular abuse patterns in mixed-group interaction', *Wellington Working Papers in Linguistics,* 6: 26-55.

Hay, J. (2000) 'Functions of humor in the conversations of men and women', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 32(6): 709-742.

Holmes, J., M. Marra and L. Burns (2001) 'Women's humour in the workplace: A quantitative analysis', *Australian Journal of Communication,* 28(1): 83-108.

Holmes, J. and M. Stubbe (2003) *Power and politeness in the workplace: A sociolinguistic analysis of talk at work*. London: Longman.

Johnston, A., D. Mumby and R. Westwood (2007) 'Representing the unrepresentable: Gender, humour and organisation', in R. Westwood and C. Rhodes (eds.) *Humour, work and organisation*. London: Routledge.

Kehily, M.J. and A. Nayak (1997) '"Lads and laughter"': Humour and the production of heterosexual hierarchies', *Gender and Education*, 9(1): 69-87.

Kessler, S.J., D.J. Ashenden, R.W. Connell and G.W. Dowsett (1982) *Ockers and disco-maniacs*. Sydney: Inner City Education Center.

Linstead, S. (1985) 'Jokers wild: The importance of humour in the maintenance of organisational culture', *Sociological Review*, 13(3): 741-767.

Lyman, P. (1987) 'The fraternal bond as a joking relationship: A case study of the role of sexist jokes in male group bonding', in M.S. Kimmel (ed.) *Changing men: New directions in research on men and masculinity*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Parker, M. (2002) 'Queering management and organization', *Gender, Work and Organization*, 9(2): 146-166.

Plester, B.A. (2009a) 'Crossing the line: Boundaries of workplace humour and fun, *Employee Relations*, 31(6): 584-599.

Plester, B.A. (2009b) 'Healthy humour: Using humour to cope at work', *Kotuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online*, 4(1): 89-102.

Plester, B.A. and M.B. Orams (2008) 'Send in the clowns: The role of the joker in three New Zealand IT companies', *Humor*, 21(3): 253-281.

Plester, B.A. and J.G. Sayers (2007) 'Taking the piss: The functions of banter in three IT companies', *Humor*, 20(2): 157-187.

Pullen, A. and C. Rhodes (2013) 'Parody, subversion and the politics of gender at work: The case of Futurama's "Raging Bender"', *Organization*, 20(4): 512-533.

Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. (1940) 'On joking relationships', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 13(3): 195-210.

Roy, D. (1959) '"Banana time": Job satisfaction and informal interaction', *Human Organisation Studies*, 18: 158-168.

Tyler, M. and L. Cohen (2008) 'Management in/as comic relief: Queer theory and gender performativity in *The Office*', *Gender, Work and Organization*, 15(2): 113-132.

Wilson, C.P. (1979) *Jokes: Form, content, use and function*. London: Academic Press.

Zijderveld, A. (1983) 'The sociology of humour and laughter', *Current Sociology*, 31(3): 1-59.

Žižek, S. (1999) *The ticklish subject*. London: Verso.

the author

Barbara Plester is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Auckland Business School. Her research interests are in the fields of organizational humour, fun and play and she has researched these topics for over twelve years. Other interests include workplace food rituals, social media and the behavioural impacts of smartphone technology. Barbara teaches Organizational Behaviour, Human Resource Management and Organizational Communication at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. She has a lively team of PhD students investigating topics such as leadership humour, cross cultural humour, smartphone behaviour, e-learning and workplace engagement.
Email: b.plester@auckland.ac.nz

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
ISSN 2052-1499 (Print)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 15(3): 561-580

Self-heckle: Russell Kane's stand-up comedy as an example of 'comedic sociology'*

Daniel Smith

abstract

This article explores the possibility that stand-up comedy may provide sociology with a new lens for interpreting social life. Using British comedian Russell Kane as a case study, the article argues that his observational material shares affinities with the sociological tradition of interpretivism. Drawing upon the works of Simmel, Bakhtin, Douglas and Kane himself, the article outlines the concept of a 'self-heckle' – an interpretive device whereby comedy acts as cultural criticism providing sociological insight into the lives of people. Derived from Kane's stand-up comedy, 'comedic sociology' is able to explore social and biographical narratives intersection with wider socio-historical transformations, demonstrating comedy's ability to provide sociological insight into the contradictions, absurdities and incongruities of 'the social' and the potential to imagine life differently.

Introduction

In this article I want to outline comedy's potential to invite people to think differently about the established order through an analysis of the observational stand-up comedy of prominent UK comedian Russell Kane. Kane's observational comedy provides not only a disruption to conventional assumptions but also insights that are potentially of value to the discipline of sociology. While by no

* I would like to thank Dimitrinka Stoyanova Russell and three anonymous referees for their insightful, instructive and critical comments on earlier drafts of this article. Thank you to Matthias Varul for his advice on the first draft as well as Sam Friedman who, on a chance meeting in the Pleasance Bar at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2012, also kindly read and commented as well.

means suggesting that all stand-up comedy is applicable to these claims, Kane's material and position as a stand-up comedian may be considered 'comedic sociology'. Kane's material offers not only insight into social life, where stand-up comedy acts as the vehicle for social commentary (Mintz, 1985), cultural criticism (Koziski, 1997) or communal revelation (Kirby, 1974) but may provide sociological truths not captured by mainstream sociology.

Using Kane's stand-up as my starting point, I want to argue that sociologists may be able to look to certain comedians for methodological insights for illuminating 'the social' in a way which illustrates the absurdities of the social order and its ability to be 'otherwise', a democratic goal. When Bakhtin observed in *Rabelais and his world* (1984: 91-92) that medieval man took refuge in carnival as it turned official images inside out, he noted that it produced an 'ephemeral truth' that, however brief, became the source of an unofficial truth of the people. Kane's stand-up comedy may have such a truth-value. This extends the 'stand-up comedian as anthropologist' thesis (Koziski, 1997) as I explore the 'stand-up comedian as sociologist'. Kane's observational material provides a means to conduct a 'comedic sociology' which consists in observing, recording and dramatising the contradictions, absurdities and incongruities of social life (cf. Koziski, 1997).

In order to achieve this, I illustrate that Kane's stand-up comedy is of operative use to stimulating the 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959). The contradictions of Kane's own life, illustrated in his comedic routines, act as a reflexive device to connect personal troubles of biography with historical and social change. By way of an example, I will demonstrate how Kane's biographical narrative and comic material in his award-winning *Smokescreens and castles* (2011a) can be fruitfully complimented by (as well as being an extension to) Young and Wilmott's classic in British sociology, *Family and kinship in East London* (1957). By placing Kane's material alongside Young and Wilmott's classic text I will illustrate how Kane provides a comedic sociological commentary on the realities of social mobility, embourgeoisment and his sense of self. Using Kane's *Smokescreens and castles* as his starting point, Friedman (2014: 364; emphasis in original) has recently called for a sociological research agenda which is attentive to the experience of social mobility:

> one which attends to the possibility that people make sense of their social trajectories not just through 'objective' markers of economic or occupational success, but also through symbols and artifacts of class-infected *cultural identity*.

As we will see, Kane's experiences of social mobility manifest in his comic observations in *Smokescreens and castles* itself provides this call for a sociology attentive to mobility through symbolic narratives; comedic material provides an

interpretive framework for understanding the meaningful realities of the social. By drawing upon the works of Douglas (1975) and Bakhtin (1981; 1984) I will make the case that comedic sociology can be considered a branch of interpretive sociology in the tradition of Simmel (1971a; 1971b).

Comedic sociology; or, self-heckles

Before I proceed by outlining what comedic sociology is and how certain stand-up comedians, such as Russell Kane, are apposite for producing the contents of comedic sociologies, I should emphasise: *not all stand-up comedians are apt for this role*. British stand-up comedy at present is diverse and not all acts are appropriate for consideration for comedic sociology. British society has witnessed a 'stand-up comedy' renaissance in recent years and, with this, a diversity of material is currently on offer (Friedman, 2011). The diversity of acts spans from surreal, absurdist comics – Tim Key to Adam Buxton – to family-friendly observational material – Michael McIntyre – to satirical, political humour – Stewart Lee and Josie Long.

Since the 'alternative comedy' movement of the 1980s, many 'acts' are social commentators as they make use of the intellectual resources of high-culture to prefigure social and political mandates (Scott, 2005). This spans the 'alternative comedy' of Ben Elton to contemporary political acts, e.g. Mark Thomas (Quirk, 2010), to feminist acts such as Sara Pascoe. The legacy of the 'alt comedy' movement is that 'the culturally privileged are, to some extent, creating new forms of 'objectified' cultural capital via the careful consumption of 'legitimate' items of British comedy' (Friedman, 2011: 348). Friedman (2011: 354) points out – in a similar vein to this article – that comedy has been 'consecrated by academics' in scholarly analysis of their material. With certain comedians – e.g. Stewart Lee – sociological observation and arguments appear in their acts as much as they inform it. Yet not all observational material which satirises or becomes social-cultural commentary is comedic sociology, even if the arguments their material presents have validity, currency or what Witkin (2003) would call the 'truth-value' of a work of art as its contents mirrors the realities found in the organisation of social life.

Rather, the crux of comedic sociology is that it stems from a comedians' sociological imagination, the narrative intersection of biography with socio-historical horizons. This is at the heart of Kane's stand up:

> The genre I work in most frequently is what I like to call socio-observational – a blend of angry sociology and silly observations that allows me to make pseudo-Marxian arguments with an air of *joie de vivre*; basically silliness which may or may

> not have a message...I have large sections with jokes and ponderings upon the received differences between working-class and middle-class culture - ...how working class culture functions on a reverse value-system – how as a child my peers and I would compete to *fail* exams...I bring in various characters, my father, my brother; places...and suddenly the observations and humour are lifted into the realm of what I call the 'utterly human' – to be human is to be simultaneously involved in many narratives at once (Kane, 2007: 127 original emphasis).

Hence certain stand-up comedians, even observational comedians, do not fit these criteria, e.g. Jim Davidson, Michael McIntryre, James Acaster. A comedic sociology rests upon the comic's ability to provide sociological observations which illustrate wider socio-cultural realities; this may or not may arise from the point of intersection with their own biography. In the case of Kane, the biographical element is crucial but this is not essential for 'comedic sociology'[1]. C. Wright Mills' statement that 'men do not usually define the troubles they have in terms of terms of historical change and institutional contradiction' (1959: 3) is able to be contended with Kane's comedy shows as they define personal problems in the light of wider sociological transformations. Penfold-Mounce, et al. (2011: 153) have reminded sociologists that Mills included many practitioners, not just sociologists, into his definition of the sociological imagination: journalists, novelists and, for Penfold-Mounce, et al., the writers of HBO's *The Wire*, or for myself, comedian Russell Kane.

Since it derives from his biography, Kane's observational material is also a branch of interpretative sociology – a hermeneutic commentary upon one's own life. Below I will use Kane's *Smokescreen's and castles* (2011) as an illustration of this comedic sociology but first I want to, theoretically, elaborate upon the parallels between Kane's material and the epistemological position taken in interpretive sociology, especially that of Simmel (1971a; 1971b). By elaborating upon Simmel's philosophy of social science in relation to comedy, I want to draw some connections with the works of Bakhtin (1981; 1984) and Douglas (1975) to illustrate the comic dimensions of the interpretive procedure and illustrate what I mean by a 'self-heckle'.

1 As a referee of this article has pointed out to me, the biographical element is not essential to comedic sociology but rather a strategy employed by Russell Kane. To be clear, the examples and thinking expressed in this paper refer to Russell Kane but, hopefully, will be able to be applied or explored in more general terms. It is, however, beyond the scope of this article to substantiate this and as such I stick solely to Russell Kane as an exemplar of 'comedic sociology' or, as the referee suggested, a reflexive form of 'comedic sociology'.

In Simmel's sociology we find a similar approach taken by the observational stand-up comic, especially Kane[2]. Observational comedians and interpretive sociologists' share an epistemological starting point to their respective crafts and professions. A sociology that interprets life is one that rests upon the comprehension of the ideas and ideals that define it (King, 2004). It follows that to provide a hermeneutic critique of life, that is, draw out the limits of our understanding and comprehension of it, is to adequately understand it and its central ideas and principles of legitimacy (King, 2004: 213). From this, to 'make fun' is to have understood the contents of social life and show their limited conceptions, their internal contradictions and inadequacy to provide a 'full picture' through humour – i.e. incongruity and comic reduction. The 'self-heckle' of this paper is therefore the sociological value of comedy as cultural criticism: it brings to light inadequate, everyday conceptions of the 'social' and demonstrates our partial, limited understanding we may hold about 'other' people.

Self-heckle 1: Stereotypes

Anyone acquainted with Kane's comedy will know the phrase 'self-heckle' comes from his act; a frequent comic refrain, a 'self-heckle' arises when Kane draws attention to his own comic persona, his own material and status as a performer. Owing to his background in English literature, Kane uses the refrain to highlight the reflexivity of comedy, its ability to dissolve the solidity of genres and highlight the constructed-ness of any text, e.g. *'He's so postmodern, he's heckling himself.' 'Self-heckle. Postmodern!'* This device, however, is also a feature of comedic discourse that, when applied to social commentary and observation, acts as a scheme for alternative modes of knowing: comedy provides the realisation that life 'could be otherwise' (see Bakhtin, 1984; 1981; Douglas, 1975).

Simmel's 'How is society possible?' (1971a) offers an intellectual starting point for this feature of comic observation. Simmel (1971a: 6-8) begins with the premise that the 'contents' of social life are not given by any objective reality but rather formed by the individuals who compose them. When it comes to how we conceive of those we interact with, Simmel (1971a:9) claims that all our understandings are 'based on certain distortions'. We never appreciate the absolute individuality of others but rather always have a limited conception of

2 Consider, for example, how Erving Goffman is often accused (somewhat unfairly) that his sociology consists of 'no more than a series of idiosyncratic observations about trivial features of social life' (Giddens, 1988: 252). Gidden's criticism is more the description of some observational comedy than that of a sociologist. What I am suggesting here is that interpretive sociology, which consists in various inferences from the idiosyncrasies of everyday life, is in fact a virtue for comedic sociology and the epistemological position of interpretive sociology as such.

them as a social type, e.g. officer, priest, slave, lord, prostitute, etc.; these are imposed objective categories which are not real in and of themselves. For Simmel (1971a: 10), to fully appreciate the absolute individuality of others is impossible: 'all relations... are determined by the varying degrees of this incompleteness'. Ironically, however, the absolute individuality of each person depends upon the generalisations of social type, e.g. a typical pious priest is such only insofar as he could be equally considered what he is not (Simmel, 1971a: 12-13). Simmel points out that it is in fact the very cloaked or veiled understandings we have of others which 'makes possible the sort of relations we call social' (1971a: 12).

In the case of stand-up comedy, routines rely upon cloaked understandings of others, notably stereotypes, as comedic devices. Through these comedic conceits we gain appreciation of Simmel's philosophical conception of the social. But we also appreciate how Simmel's position allows comedic routines to reveal that the 'world could be otherwise'. Exposure of cloaking allows for a possible release from cloaked social positions. Kane's use of 'self-heckles' on his class position is a case in point. In a BBC Radio 1 broadcast, Kane (2014) asks a woman her name and where she comes from:

> Audience member: Abby.
>
> Kane: Abaaay. The Essex spelling would be ABAAAY, 'Abaaay!' But you're not, you're from London, right Abbs? Where are you from?
>
> Audience member: Suffolk.
>
> Kane: Random! Abbs is so from Suffolk, she's going to heckle me with a Quails Egg! 'Take that you pickey brute!' 'Here's a tomato, that's sun-blushed you Essex mo-fo!'

Here Kane uses cloaked classed stereotypes to illustrate partial understandings of both Abby and himself; Abby's middle-class position is inferred by Kane from her being from Suffolk, extended into food preferences and prejudice toward Kane's Essex-based working class position. Kane's exaggerated, veiled dramatic characterisations of class personages fill in his sociological narrations and observations. By giving class identity an exaggerated veil we gain appreciation that the distorted gaze, which Simmel states is a necessary presence for 'social interaction', is ultimately a fictional personification of someone 'not ourselves'. We are not solely bound to the realities of a stratified society. We are all equally inadequate versions of ourselves. As Simmel (1971a: 10) observes, 'all of us are fragments, not only of general man, but also of ourselves'. Comedy can joyously highlight this facet of the social and, manifest through the comic, laughter is able to free people from the realities that social typologies impose (Bakhtin, 1984).

It is in comedic discourse where this epistemological position on the social is made tenable and, also, where a claim to possible release from class distortions of self gets validity. As Bakhtin (1981) notes, the use of comic verbal style relies upon heteroglossia, the many tonged nature of speech; the diversity and unlimitedness of subject positions available [3]. Comic speech uses 'parodic stylisations' (as Bakhtin calls it) of other people's speech to wrestle authority away from any discourse or claim to a single (and partial) point of view. As Kane parodies classed prejudices, his active bringing together of competing viewpoints of British social class acts as a device to reveal the limits of one-sided class positions. But it also liberates both him and others from class personifications: through the parody we realise the conditions of our own views on other people and how these distortions limit our view of 'the other'.

Self-heckle 2: Persona and ideal-types

That comedy is not 'serious' does not limit its claim to certain visions of the social world (Bakhtin, 1984). Comedy's fictions are similar to sociology's constructed categories. For Simmel, sociology is the study of societal forms and types – from economic exchange to social characters (the poor, the nobility, etc.) – where social processes form their content and determine their specific empirical reality. However, in 'The Problem of Sociology' (1971b), Simmel notes that despite the fact that categories employed ('nobility', 'prostitution', etc.) have no objective reality, 'we' – members of society – are compelled into believing there 'is' a society which constitutes a totality. Simmel (1971b: 27) notes:

> The fact that an extraordinary multitude and variety of interactions operate at any one moment has given a seemingly autonomous historical reality to the general concept of society. Perhaps it is this hypostatization of a mere abstraction that is the reason for the peculiar vagueness and uncertainty involved in the concept of society and in the customary treatises in general sociology.

The empathy required to 'understand' the realities of the social hypostasis, or what Weber (1949) called 'ideal types', is crucial to interpretive sociology's methodology. The quotations from Simmel rest upon the Kantian claim that our knowledge of social reality is dependent upon the point-of-view of the observer (Weber, 1949). As already noted, comedy – like interpretive sociology – relies upon assumed fixed characterisations. And comedy also relies upon a similar hypostasis that Simmel refers to with regard to 'society'. Comedians often use hypostatic ideal-types in their acts, relying upon an empathetic identification with collective categories.

3 For the influence of Simmel's sociology and philosophy of social science on Bakhtin, see Nielsen (2002: esp. 96-99).

Kane may be said to be engaging in ideal-type constructions to frame his comedic narratives and observations. The collective 'we's', as in 'we [nationality]', 'we [ethic group]', etc., is a performative device which does not merely engage an audience but also constructs a line of argument through comic material. Mintz (1985: 75-76) states that comedians act as mediators as they themselves take on collective categories of class, race, gender and so forth to establish their persona and frame their material on this. Russell Kane's 2009 Edinburg Fringe show *Human dressage* is a case in point, reviewed by Cavendish (2009):

> it's the codified, subtly coerced 'dressage'... the way we perform dances – 'social, biological, physical' – to attain approval and acceptance. [...] The more you listen to him, though, the more you're forced to concede that he might well have a valid point. He reduces British behaviour – with its repressions and sudden violent outbursts – to a simple formula: 'the passion and the pause'. Hence all that drunken Friday-night bother we get on the streets – it's the flipside of the rest of the week's restraint. Kane rams his abstract ideas home with clusters of research and concrete examples from his working-class upbringing. His uptight, BNP-supporting dad, his own tortured, autodidactic adolescent self – at once diffident and defiant – and his free-thinking cockney Nan are all trotted out as supporting evidence for his arguments.

What is being implied in Cavendish's review is something like sociological observations becoming the well-spring of comic material. Kane will perform the 'dressage': his role as comic personifies the performative aspects of his social observations. However, his routine engages in ideal-type construction to provide an attempted social aetiology. The fetishisation of national character (as the central facet of nationhood), here 'British repression', is used to *explain* binge drink culture. The conventional point-of-view that people have of 'the British' becomes a source for comedic routines as much as a sociological explanation of 'binge drinking culture'. Such sociological content is a sociological exegesis of wit; to laugh at the social world by way of its own jokes immanently within it. This is not dissimilar to Douglas' claim that 'a joke is seen and allowed when it offers a symbolic pattern of a social pattern occurring at the same time.' (1975: 98) Because of this, social forms/ideal types provide the possibility for jokes to reveal the limitations of human thought on the social.

Self-heckle 3: Narratives beyond society?

The content of Kane's comedic material and its performance is not affirmative of social life as it is established and lived. This is what Bakhtin (1984) refers to as carnival laughter's ability to move beyond official truths to unofficial, universalised truths of the popular assorted masses. For Bakhtin, laughter involves freeing from truths particularised around caste, church and family. The oppressive 'official' thought patterns that are brought to bear on social actors are relieved in the mirth of carnival, ultimately liberating them from internal and

external censor (Bakhtin, 1984: 94). For Bakhtin, the carnival festival gave this popular, 'social consciousness of all the people' (1984: 92) laughter a form and a means to express this libidinal release. Festival became a way to assert alternative truths in a living ritual practice. And yet it remained only a 'mere festive luxury' (1984: 95), a facet of a comedic 'institution' with its own time, place and structured chaos. But the luxury of laughter is not to denounce its power.

While stand-up comedy in Britain is a part of what Adorno would call the culture industries, the material by certain comedians such as Kane cannot be solely reduced to the claims made by critical theorists: 'the paradise offered by the culture industry', to paraphrase Adorno (1973: 142; brackets added), 'is [*not*] the same old drudgery'. In British stand-up comedy, the site of 'festive' popular laughter is the 'set' routine. That said, Bakhtin's 'carnival' has no analogue in contemporary society; the fleshy, convivial experience has little parallel with stand-up comedy. However, the central point to take away from Bakhtin is that the 'people's laughter' is an invitation to imagine the world differently. As such our 'carnival', if we can still use the term, is the institutional comedic 'set' which Kane (2007: 130) identifies as having six types: 'the five-minute 'open spot'; the ten minute half-set; the fifteen minute; the 'paid' twenty; the forty-minute headline set; and the solo show'. These sets are limited in terms of time, of course. Yet Kane argues that the best means to achieve cathartic laughter is the use of story-telling. Narrative is at the heart of the comic's ability to deliver an argument, theme and series of unofficial truths beyond the official reality. This is what Kane (2007: 133), with obvious irony, calls his '"Kaneian" narrative tools':

> Comedy can highlight the hidden narratives of life. It's the opportunity for a blind comic to convey a unifying piece of storytelling to a room full of randomly assembled people and bring them together in empathy, interest and finally, hopefully, laughter of recognition; for narrative, whilst enabling the audience to enjoy the perspective of The Other, a life view of the seemingly alien, can paradoxically show the humanness, the sameness, the ordinariness of this world view.

Beyond our limited experiencing and understanding of the world, the aim of Kane's comedic 'self-heckles', the reflexive-ness of genre and constructed-ness of the social, are an attempt to move 'us' beyond the lived realities, not to a utopia but a re-evaluation of our worlds in conceptual terms.

The logic of comedic sociology; or, how jokes register social contradictions

Comedic sociology will interpret the world *differently* but will not actively *change* it. As Critchley (2002: 17) puts it, 'humour does not redeem us from this world, but returns us to it ineluctably by showing that there is no alternative'. Comedic

sociology, as I want to define it, engages in comic abstractions of wider sociological realities mediated by performative jest so as to illustrate the realities of the social. But nonetheless jokes are discursive; they make arguments for alternatives. Jokes figure in the total modes of speech and argumentative schemes social actors may employ (see Palmer, 1994). Indeed, Douglas (1975) argues that a joke's occurrence should be studied in relation to all modes of linguistic expression found in a society. For Douglas (1975), a joke is something like a logical possibility found within a series of social patterns, practices and symbols. It is an expression which offers a commentary upon the wider pattern of social relations.

Douglas' (1975: 96) argument states that a joke is an utterance founded doubly upon economy of expression and incongruity:

> A joke is a play upon form. It brings into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the appearance of another which in some way was hidden in the first.

Douglas goes beyond this formula to stress the social dimension and context of the joke's utterance – a joke can only appear, Douglas argues, if there is a contradiction within the social structure: 'if there is no joke in the social structure, no other joking can appear' (Douglas, 1975: 98). Jokes express the social situation: the patterns of social relations, their orchestration and implicit, shared assumptions. Kane would agree. For Kane (2007: 125), jokes are also plays upon form, 'a representation of the opposite' which induces a cathexis, as Freud suggested. Crucially, Kane introduces the importance of narrative. The narrative element is crucial to *how* Kane's jokes register social patterns (Palmer, 1994).

Narratives are the keystone to the whole joke material:

> comedy *can* express itself visually...but ultimately it is a language art – and there ARE some rules...[T]here is always a build, a cumulative effect that grows and swells toward a satisfying narrative release. (Kane, 2007: 128, emphasis in original)

This is how Kane's comedic sociology works: it establishes a narrative whereby social contradictions lead the audience through humorous realisations of the social order's contradictions, incongruities and injustices. All via the medium of the joke itself. As Palmer (1994: 113) observes, the narrative structure offered in jokes are often 'realist' in genre, where a point 'a' to 'b' is achieved. In the case of Kane, social realism underlines his comic material. This is what I want to call the 'logic of comedic sociology': it offers observational narratives on key concepts

(e.g. class, race, etc.) in order to produce a symbolic narrative upon wider social realities through the guise of incongruous witticisms.

The clown's propositional fallacies

That being the case, Kane is first and foremost a comedian – not a sociologist in disguise, or political campaigner whose medium is comedy (cf. Koziski, 1997: 92). And his comedy is, as stated, a mixture of social observation and silliness – he is a social commentator who is first and foremost a 'fool', a social type whose paradoxical status makes him simultaneously venerated and denigrated (Klapp, 1949: 161). This is a problem for a comedy that is sociologically resonant. Is Kane actually a fool and therefore not worth listening to? Or is he playing the fool and really an astute social commentator? Following Mintz (1985), I want to argue that Kane's use of foolishness in his comic persona is in fact a mediatory device to construct arguments, a special type of argument I am calling 'propositional fallacies'. Kane combines foolery with foolish discourse in order to provide a narrative means to argue for alternative social-cultural outlooks and understandings.

To begin this claim, Kane's novel *The humourist* (2012) is a good place to start. In a climactic scene, Kane's protagonist, a comedy-savant, is forced to accept Woody Allen's dictum that 'there is no such thing as substance or material, only pure "ineffable funniness"' (2012: 252) by a comedy shaman. Additionally, Kane has argued against the motion of 'does comedy need to have a point?' on BBC Radio4xtra podcast *What's so Funny?* Starting unequivocally, he states:

> Absolutely not. Not at all. I write shows that have a point but I will cry with laughter at Tim Vine [...] I'm what I call socio bi-lingual. I can speak and write in this mode I'm speaking in now, full of self-insight, but I can also can go home and laugh because my mate's farted. [...] This is something I want to explore in the novel I'm writing. Some things are just funny. (Kane, 2011b)

The distinction between ineffable funniness and point-laden material rests upon the social practice of 'comedy', its performative accomplishment, i.e. how 'successful' comedian's acts are.

What Kane calls 'ineffable funniness' is what comedians, as social actors, wish to achieve: they want to make a room laugh. Comedy with a 'point' is achieved if and only if the comedian is funny. David Robb's (2010) study on GDR political 'clowns', Wenzel and Mensching, pin-points this distinction. As Wenzel remarks to Robb: 'The political doesn't interest me in the first instance as a clown. For me the problem becomes political only after I've solved it aesthetically' (in Robb, 2010: 91). Wenzel's point is that, for the clown, the aesthetics comes prior to

point proving. As such, Robb (2010: 91) cogently argues, a clown's act, 'while containing a symbolic revolutionary component, should not merely be reduced to political subversion'. Ineffable funniness is such an aesthetic abstraction; it relies not upon an epistemological argument but rather can be seen to arise from the desire for comedic actors to prove their 'funniness'. Ineffable funniness is sought in comedic practice; it is achieved 'on stage'. However, being 'funny' is what allows comedians to formulate their arguments. Being funny pre-figures the logic and organisation of comedic material, that is, 'the point' or argument they are trying to make.

If comedy is merely unserious laughter, then how does Kane's comedy resonate with the serious issues of sociology? The point is that Kane uses the figure of the clown to mask his more explicit, serious claims. The clown, as Bakhtin (1981: 159) observes, has

> the right to be 'other' in this world, the right to not make common cause with any single one of the existing categories life makes available...Therefore, they can exploit any position they choose, but only as a mask.

Silliness gives Kane comedic licence to figure sociological arguments in his act – that is, 'propositional fallacies'.

Propositional fallacies have the essential feature of a joke as they rest upon incongruity and produce false conclusions. Kane will employ them as a part of his comedic act by way of identifying a contradiction. For instance, 'who invented the equation of overly posh dining room table and working class household?' when the posh table becomes a nuisance and point of contention due to fear of scratches and breakages (Kane, 2011a). Propositional fallacies are a way into the mode of joking Kane performs; they begin a routine. But with jokes, propositional arguments do not produce valid conclusions which affirm the state of affairs in the world, as with official rituals. Jokes may be conceptualised as what anthropologists call rites, or more specifically anti-rites (Douglas, 1975). Unlike rites which resolve contradictions for the celebration of the social order, anti-rites leave the contradiction open to question the social order – for instance, 'who invented the equation posh table and poor family?'

Typically rites have three phases and we may draw comparisons with certain jokes in this respect. While anthropological theory treats rites as a performative practice, the argument I am making here applies to jokes more conceptually rather than as sourced from ethnographical field research as found in anthropology. Van Gennep's *Rites de passage* (1960) states rites have a three-fold structure: A (separation from social order and accepted reality) to B (liminality, movement into uncharted territory) to C (re-integration into social order and

official reality). Conceptually, jokes, however, are anti-rites (Douglas, 1975: 102). In an anti-rite the jester will move from A to B and then back to A so as to not reintegrate but leave contradictions open. A joke connects symbols of social life where the 'the kind of connection of pattern A with pattern B…is such that B disparages or supplants A' (Douglas, 1975: 102) as opposed to official ritual which triumphs existing ideologies. Using the example just given, the pattern is (A) 'who invented posh table / poor family?' to (B) the liminal comedic space where the social situation is questioned, i.e. the comedic content, back to (A) again. As such, material is able to be a propositional fallacy by employing what Freud called the 'tendency to economy' (or thrift) found in wit. Jokes exemplify 'the manifold application of the same words in addressing and answering' (Freud, 1916: 51). A propositional fallacy addresses and answers in the same terms. This tautological operation (of A to B to A) undertaken in observational material on sociological cases is of operative use in critiquing the social world so as to show its inadequacies and limitations.

Jibes on sociological realities use propositional fallacies to critique the existing order. Kane uses this when he critiques what he takes to be negative aspects of social life, a key example being his father's racism. In a bit concerning recycling, he asks,

> Why is it that someone who is right wing and racist, like my Dad is, naturally disbelieves climate change? There is no link whatsoever between hating brown and black people and not being into recycling…If anything you'd think that recycling would appeal to the racist mind: tin in one bag, paper in another bag, cardboard in a separate bag. Everything in its different groups…off to the incinerator. (Kane, 2011a)

Following Quirk (2010: 121) we notice that 'by building on the easily-accepted premise' of the racist, Kane's material seeks to seduce the racist into that which they 'naturally' disparage in order to support his conclusions. This works as a propositional fallacy of the type '*P* therefore *Q*':

> If you are a racist you like to discriminate ([P therefore Q])
>
> Recycling discriminates (& Q)
>
> Racists like recycling. (- P)

Of course, this is fallacious logical reasoning. Its premises are true but conclusion false – it is what philosophers call a 'modus morons': it can be written, [(P therefore Q) & Q] |= P (Teichman and Evans, 1995: 221). This fallacy in the comic routine is thus able to act as a comedic rite. By using the connection of two symbols, racism and recycling, it sociologically translates them into 'right-

wing person' and 'left-wing person' as well as 'working class, right wing father' and 'embourgeoised, left wing son', so that B (recycling, left wing son) disparages A (racist, right wing father). In doing so, the propositional fallacy comes to stand *for* social structure and its contradictions. By way of jest, it celebrates *anti-structure* – communitas and separation from the world (Douglas, 1975:103-104), a freedom from its categories by disparaging them through false but ingenious logic.

Smokescreens and castles: The comedic sociology of embourgeoisment

The culmination of Kane's comedic sociology is his historic double award-winning *Smokescreens and castles* (2011a). What I want to demonstrate here is how Kane's comedic sociology, his use of 'self-heckles' (stereotypes, hypostasis and narratives) as well as 'propositional fallacies', all come together in *Smokescreens and castles* as it develops a narrative arc which is able to illuminate wider socio-historical structures in British society. Kane's narrative in *Smokescreens and castles* provides a personal journey: from working-class council estate in Essex to middle-class stand-up comedian. Throughout there is a series of 'hidden injuries' associated with this self-transformation (cf. Friedman, 2014). It is this biographical narrative which provides the space for the critique of the social structure, the joke of 'becoming middle class'.

Kane's narrative, I claim, is a comedic sociology as it resonates with socio-historical transformations in the British class structure, notably embourgeoisment since the 1950s. With the assistance of the sociological classic, *Family and kinship in East London* (Young and Wilmott, 1957), I will demonstrate how *Smokescreens and castles* is a comedic extension to the sociological realities Young and Wilmott elucidate in their interview/ethnography of ex-London Essex council estate residents. While I do not wish to make any unsubstantiated trans-historical claims regarding the content of *Family and kinship* and *Smokescreens and castles*, I am claiming that one may read the two stories in tandem, one sociological research with a conceptual narrative and the other a comedy show with a biographical narrative[4].

Peter Young and Michael Wilmott's *Family and kinship in East London* (1957) is a study of social change and its sociological narrative is 'about the effect of one of the newest upon one of the oldest of our social institutions. The new is the housing estate...The old institution is the family' (Young and Wilmott, 1957: 11).

4 There is no evidence that Kane has read *Family and Kinship* but he has stated, via personal communication, 'you've intuited most of what I'm up to behind the scenes as it were' (Kane, personal correspondence, 25/01/2013).

Specifically, the impact of the suburban housing estate on the working classes documented through a focus upon residents of Bethnal Green moving to Leigh-on-Sea, Essex. This transformation is where Kane (2008) fits in as *Smokescreens and castles* is about his relationship with his childhood home (the castle) and his father, '18 stone of cockney, shaven headed, racist Bethnal Green, Dad', and *his* growing up in Essex, Leigh-on-Sea.

Family and kinship stands as a sociological document which vividly depicts the experience of post-war 'embourgeoisment' in Britain. The working-class, extended family and neighbour relations with strong social ties of community and social capital was exchanged for 'suburbia' where houses are dotted around the countryside, neighbours are strangers and there is an absence of extended-kinship. Life in Bethnal Green was traded, Young and Wilmott (1957: 128-129) point out from interviews, for the promise it brought to the children – it was 'better for the kiddies' in the form of housing, health benefits and opportunity. Embourgeoisment, symbolically expressed in the move to Greenleigh, bought the Bethnal Green migrants to a comparatively 'unfriendly' environment. Whereas Bethnal Green privileged community and open-ended exchanges between families, Essex offered a polite yet ever present hostility between neighbours. It gave rise to a mentality of 'keeping ourselves to ourselves' as keeping up with the Joneses crept in: 'Just because they've got a couple of ha'pence more than you they don't want to know you', as one Mrs Morrow put it (in Young and Wilmott, 1959: 149).

Kane's *Smokescreens and castles* is metaphor for this mentality of 'keeping ourselves to ourselves' and embourgeoisment producing a 'being better than others' hostility. Kane expresses this by taking as his starting point his father building an extension on their council home and installing a swimming pool in the garden: a 'castle' of a council house. Kane's narrative is situated within the sociological transformation documented by Young and Wilmott and how the 1980s Thatcherite, individualistic bourgeois housing policy impacted upon his upbringing. As Kane explains, buying the council house is a metaphor for the personality of his father but also embourgeoisment. After the council house extension was finished, he says, his parents Julie and Dave become 'Juliet and David overnight' so as to entrench, via elocution, their movement between classes as described by Young and Wilmott: 'their [Kane's parents] accents changing from the broad London accent to the pinched Leigh-on-Sea slightly try-hard Essex accent, which ironically slightly sounds more moronic than the original because the vowels aren't fixed but the end of the words are making the effort' (Kane, 2011a). The joke in the social structure is of social mobility being a contradiction in how Britons classify their world (Cannadine, 2000) through speech patterns: open-vowels means working class, closed vowels means upper

class (Fox, 2004: 73-75). Essex embourgeoisment is performed as a mixture of cockney vowels with pinched upper-class ends of words, a dramatisation of the move from Bethnal Green to Essex manifest in the figure of Kane's father. This offers a symbolic commentary upon the social contradiction of embourgeoisment.

Embourgeoisment becomes the joke in the social structure as it follows the propositional fallacy that social mobility therefore means enjoying the lifestyle of the class they economically now occupy, which Young and Wilmott (1957: 161) explicitly note is in fact not the case: with 'the possession of a new house having sharpened the desire for other material goods, the striving becomes a competitive affair. The house is a major part of the explanation'. Young and Wilmott (1957: 156-157) make the observation that the house is, much like Kane's material, a source of promise and frustration:

> The house is also a challenge, demanding that their style of life shall accord with the standard it sets...They need carpets for the lounge, lino for the stairs, and mats for the front door. They need curtains. They need another bed. They need a kitchen table. They need new lampshades, pots and pans, grass seed and spades, clothes lines and bath mats, Airwick and Jeyes, mops and pails – all the paraphernalia of modern life for a house two or three times larger and a hundred times grander than the one they left behind...The first essential is money for material possession...A nice house and shabby clothes.

This challenge of embourgeoisment sets the tone for Kane's material on his parents class-transformation, observing this through many aspects on Young and Wilmott's 'paraphernalia of modern life': a mother who desires Glade ('Airwick') air fresheners and an obsessive desire to clean; a father who works tirelessly for a Mahogany dining table, a Mercedes car and because of the demand it makes on his money is expressed emotionally in resentment. 'It broke me!' says Kane impersonating his father's hatred for his Mercedes.

Kane's narrative ends with a climatic routine bringing together the social contradiction of embourgeoisment, the promise of 'better for the kiddies' and the past realities of poverty:

> Why work? Because of love and some primal drive for material wealth for the offspring. Brilliant. Then why, as you hand over that plastic-y bit of tat I've been begging for since October..., why do you have to provide that cancerous bit of sadness at the same time, constantly reminding us of how shit it was for you at an equivalent stage? 'Here you go boy, take your toys but remember I rocked back and forth WITH NOTHING and in some way you can't understand, ITS YOUR FAULT!!'...Coming in my room one Christmas...he'd always find me at Christmas, 'the sixth Stella [beer] is in the chamber, time to find the son and give him a tragic image of my childhood'. I'm surrounded by piles and piles of spoilt bastard plastic...I'm in bliss but...I can't stand to think of that little blonde boy in pain, I

> hate to think of my Dad, as boy, sad. He came into my room, 'you got all the toys you want, boy? Good. I'm glad you're happy'...He went out diagonally and...said: 'I'm glad you're happy, boy, but I want you to know one thing...I was seven the first time I tried an egg!'...This was another one of his: 'The first time I tried a fizzy drink I fucking cried!' (Kane, 2011a)

The 'better for the kiddies' ethos mixed with the pragmatic strain on income of embourgeoisment is jokingly expressed in the private experience of a Christmas memory. The biography of Kane is steeped in the transformation of British society: gifts are tarnished with the brush of the sociological change, of a class on the move both geographically and symbolically. Kane's depiction of his parent's embourgeoisment becomes anthropomorphic, expressed in voice, material possessions and emotional guilt. One also notices the propositional fallacies at work: 'if you experience embourgeoisment for the good of the children, the children will be better off and happy'. Kane goes to prove this to be the opposite as his emotional guilt is expressed in sociological guise of 'alternation' – competing systems of meaning (Berger, 1963). It is a rite which connects generations of 'working class father' with 'bourgeois son' so as to disparage the sociological realities of a presumed merit to class mobility (cf. Friedman, 2014). It is as much a critique of classed society as it is a critique of localised child-parent relations.

Conclusion

The value of Kane's material is that it resonates with the audience in laughter as one recognises themselves within it or allows people insights into experience of a social world they are not part of. Yet we must remember that jokes have the capacity to express the contradictions and inadequacies of the social structure but not to change them. Joking resolves none of the contradictions with which the material is a symbolic commentary upon. Jokes instead leave contradictions purely at the level of the imagination. Kane offers no solution in practical terms, only stories whose comedic value allows the imaginative possibility, within himself and audience, to appreciate 'life doesn't have to be like this'. Friedman's (2014: 364) recent call for a sociology of mobility attentive to the 'psychic and emotional life of the individual', specifically 'how social space travel (upward, downward and horizontal) may disrupt the coherency of the self' uses Kane as the case in point for such research. But notably Kane's last words are 'I want the big ideas to adumbrate the comedy without me saying, "Here's my thesis – laughter optional"' (Kane, in Friedman, 2014: 365).

Comedic sociology uses humour to bear out social contradictions, the example in this article being social class and mobility. But the interpretive model outlined

may apply to all areas of society and social life: workplaces and organisations, gender roles, occupational identity, race and ethnicity, age and aging to name a few. As such, the point I want to stress in conclusion is that comedic sociology's laughter, its figuration in astute observations upon social life, is neither to promote change nor to endorse the status quo. Rather the place of the comic is in the 'self-heckles' which this article has spelled out, from observation upon oneself to the social world we live in and the narratives which draw them together. The value of comedic sociology is that by identifying the arbitrary nature of the social, the insights it may make upon social life provides appreciation of the diversity of subject positions. The insights it may provide people on the 'life of others' and the 'life of yourself' are delivered at the level of incongruity, giving the audience an invitation to re-imagine the *doxa* of everyday life (if they wish).

references

Adorno, T. (1973) *Negative dialectics*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Bakhtin, M. (1981) *The dialogic imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, M. (1984) *Rabelais and his world*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Berger, P.L. (1963) *Invitation to sociology*. London: Penguin.

Cannadine, D. (2000) *Class in Britain*. London: Penguin.

Cavendish, D. (2009) 'Edinburgh Festival 2009: Russell Kane, review', *The Telegraph*, 27 August.

Critchley, S. (2002) *On humour*. London: Routledge.

Douglas, M. (1975) 'Jokes', in *Implicit meanings: Essays in anthropology*. London: Routledge.

Fox, K. (2004) *Watching the English*. London: Hodder.

Freud, S. (1916) *Wit and its relation to the unconscious*. London: T. Fisher Limited.

Friedman, S. (2011) 'The cultural currency of a "good" sense of humour: British comedy and new forms of distinction', *British Journal of Sociology*, 62(2): 347-370.

Friedman, S. (2014) '"The price of the ticket": Rethinking the experience of social mobility', *Sociology*, 48(2): 352-368.

Giddens, A. (1988) 'Goffman as a systematic social theorist', in P. Drew and A.J. Wotton (eds.) *Erving Goffman: Exploring the interaction order*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Kane, R. (2007) 'Did you hear the one about a comic's narrative?', in M. Butt (ed.) *Story: The heart of the matter*. London: Greenwich Exchange.

Kane, R. (2008) 'Mintys comedian of the month, February 2008 – Russell Kane'. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d42MeQofr9k]

Kane, R. (2011a) *Smokescreens and castles* [DVD]. Avalon Television Limited.

Kane, R. (2011b) Interview. BBC Radio4xtra podcast *What's so Funny*, 17 June.

Kane, R. (2012) *The humourist*. London: Simon & Schuster.

Kane, R. (2014), '4 Minute Comedy – Russell Kane'.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSBXS-jbczQ]

King, A. (2004) *The structure of social theory*. London: Routledge.

Kirby, E.T. (1974) 'The shamanistic origins of popular entertainments', *The Drama Review*, 18(1): 5-15.

Klapp, O.E. (1949) 'The fool as a social type', *American Journal of Sociology*, 55(2): 157-162.

Koziski, S. (1997) 'The stand-up comedian as anthropologist: Intentional cultural critic', in J. Boskin (ed.) *Humour-prism in the twentieth century*. Michigan: Wayne State University Press.

Mills, C.W. (1959) *The sociological imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mintz, L.E. (1985) 'Stand-up comedy as social and cultural mediation', *American Quarterly*, 37(1): 71-80.

Nielsen, G.M. (2002) *The norms of answerability: Social theory between Bakhtin and Habermas*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Palmer, J. (1994) *Taking humour seriously*. London: Routledge.

Penfold-Mounce, R., D. Beer and R. Burrows (2011) '*The Wire* as social-science fiction', *Sociology*, 45(1): 152-167.

Quirk, S. (2010) 'Who's in charge? Negotiation, manipulation and comic licence in the work of Mark Thomas', *Comedy Studies*, 1(1): 113-124.

Robb, D. (2010) 'Court jesters of the GDR: The political clowns-theatre of Wenzel and Mensching', *Comedy Studies*, 1(1): 85-100.

Scott, A. (2005) *Comedy*. London: Routledge.

Simmel, G. (1971a) 'How is society possible?', in *On individuality and social forms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Simmel, G. (1971b) 'The problem of sociology', in *On individuality and social forms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Teichman, J. and K.C. Evans (1995) *Philosophy: A beginner's guide*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Van Gennep, A. (1960) *The rites of passage*. London: Routledge.

Young, M. and P. Wilmott (1957) *Family and kinship in East London*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Weber, M. (1949) 'Objectivity in the social sciences', in *Methodology of the social sciences*, trans. E. Shills and H.A. French. Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press.

Witkin, R.W. (2003) *Adorno on popular culture*,. London: Routledge.

the author

Daniel Smith is Lecturer in Sociology at Anglia Ruskin University (Cambridge, UK). He has written on social class, British identity, value and celebrity and is currently completing a book entitled *Elites, race and nationhood: The branded gentry* (Palgrave MacMillan).
Email: daniel.smith@anglia.ac.uk

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
ISSN 2052-1499 (Print)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 15(3): 581-600

'I'm so glad you're fake!': Simulacra slapstick and the limits of the real

Kevin Casper

abstract

Drawing on Plato and Baudrillard's theories of the simulacrum, this paper will consider both traditional and 'simulacra' forms of slapstick humor, exploring how they help us reimagine the distinction between what is real and what is fake. Traditional humor theories generally view slapstick as funny because the audience understands that the performers are not actually in pain. Forms of simulacra slapstick, such as those seen in the film *Jackass 3D*, complicate this traditional view of slapstick comedy: in *Jackass 3D* the humorous appeal is not derived from a representation of fake pain and suffering, but from a celebration of real pain and suffering. I will argue that *Jackass 3D* does not, however, capture a more authentic, real, form of slapstick comedy, but creates a sense of the real by means of enhanced images produced by cinematic techniques like 3D technology and high-definition film resolution – in other words, a form of slapstick that functions as its own simulacrum, as an image without any relation to reality or a referent. Ultimately, this paper suggests that simulacra slapstick exemplifies 'breaking point' moments where binary systems are short-circuited and social life is shown to be transformable.

> This show features stunts performed by professionals and/or total idiots. In either case, MTV suggests that neither you or [sic] any of your dumb little buddies attempt the dangerous crap in this show. (Jackass, 2000)

Introduction

This paper draws on a range of sources – rhetorical theory, social theory, philosophy, and literature on humor in organizations – to explore the possibility that we have a lot to learn from frivolity. I argue that *simulacra slapstick* – a form

of slapstick comedy that upsets the stable distinction between the real and the fake that Western philosophy (and its subsidiary disciplines) is founded upon – recalls pre-modern Rabelaisian, carnivalesque images that '[n]o dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow minded seriousness can coexist with' (Bakhtin, 2009: 3). Simulacra slapstick resists confinement within the stable categories of real and fake and ultimately reveals that 'the real is no longer possible' in the era of the hyperreal (Baudrillard, 1994: 19). A sense of the real is something that we still desire: 'We require a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin, which reassures us about our end' (1994: 10). But this sense is now only possible when we create it ourselves.

I seek to explore how the simulacra slapstick of *Jackass 3D* exemplifies 'breaking point' moments where binary systems are 'disrupted and challenged, where the coherence of categories are put into question' and where the 'social life' of institutions are shown to be inherently 'malleable and transformable' (Butler, 2004: 216). What proves most dangerous – yet also potentially productive – about the simulacra slapstick contained in *Jackass 3D* is not that cuts and scabs and bumps and bruises befall the actors. It is that simulacra slapstick functions as simulation that 'attacks the reality principle itself': 'Simulation is infinitely more dangerous [than the real] because it always leaves open to supposition that, above and beyond its object, *law and order themselves might be nothing but simulation*' (Baudrillard, 1994: 20; emphasis in original).

This approach is significant for organizational studies because it problematizes ongoing discussions of parody and satire, which rely on stable binary between the real and the fake. It has been duly noted by many (Kenney, 2009; Tyler and Cohen, 2007; Westwood and Rhodes, 2007; Rhodes and Westwood, 2008) that these critical forms of humor, beginning as a source of resistance for workers, can also become appropriated by management and commandeered into a sterile wasteland of corporate fun days and Hawaiian shirt Fridays. But what has not been as fully explored is that this boundary between resistance and appropriation is not something so easily taken for granted. Ultimately, this analysis causes us to re-think the politics of humor in more general and consequential terms.

Slapstick humor

The longest-running scripted American television program, *The Simpsons*, features a recurring segment called 'The Itchy and Scratchy Show', a children's show-within-a-show that depicts the ultra-violent anthropomorphic exploits of

Itchy, a cartoon mouse, and Scratchy, a cartoon cat.[1] The plotline of 'Itchy and Scratchy' is unvarying: Itchy kills Scratchy. Always.[2] But this predictable outcome is remarkable because of the seemingly infinite ways in which Scratchy meets his gratuitously violent ends. An episode called 'Bang the Cat Slowly' begins with an innocent birthday party for Scratchy, but takes a dark turn when Itchy places a lit bomb into an empty box, uses Scratchy's tongue to wrap the box as a present and snaps the present into Scratchy's mouth like a rubber band. The bomb explodes, and Scratchy's head is blown into the air, where it drifts back down only to be impaled on the spiked end of his own party hat. In 'My Dinner With Itchy', Itchy serves Scratchy what appears to be a glass of wine. Scratchy drinks it, screams in pain and looks down to find that his body has been stripped to the skeleton from the neck down. Itchy shows Scratchy the wine label, a skull and crossbones embossed with the word 'ACID', and throws his own glass into Scratchy's face. His fur and flesh now completely burned off, Scratchy's disoriented skeleton runs screaming from the restaurant and into the street, where he is flattened by a passing trolley car. Predictable as the sunrise, Itchy kills Scratchy. Over and over and over and over again.

The Simpsons, however, is a situational comedy and, for all its gruesomeness, 'The Itchy and Scratchy Show' is a part of *The Simpsons* for a very pragmatic reason: it's funny. The more savagely poor Scratchy gets taken out, the harder we laugh. And even though it might initially seem sadistic to find great joy in such brutal depictions of violence (regardless of the make-believe, cartoon format of the depictions), those of us amused by such things cannot help ourselves: we laugh anyway. Traditionally, the discipline of humor theory would identify 'The Itchy and Scratchy Show' as an example – albeit it a rather extreme one – of slapstick comedy.

Slapstick is a physical form of comedy in which unruly actions are enacted upon a body in an excessive, ridiculous and sometimes violent manner. Because slapstick typically derives its response from an individual's misfortune, it is considered a form of comedy that dramatizes the *superiority theory* of humor. Morreall (1987: 5) defines the superiority theory succinctly: 'According to the

1 Technically, 'The Itchy and Scratchy Show' is itself a segment of 'The Krusty the Clown Show', the favorite television program of the three Simpson children, making 'Itchy and Scratchy' a show-within-a-show-within-a-show.

2 The one exception was the episode 'Burning Down the Mouse', of which Lisa Simpson, remarked, 'This is the one where Scratchy finally gets Itchy'. However, the Simpson's television set gets unplugged in the middle of the episode and we, therefore, miss the one time Itchy gets his comeuppance. When the television set gets plugged back in, Krusty the Clown declares that the network will never allow that episode of 'Itchy and Scratchy' to be broadcast again.

Superiority Theory...we laugh from feelings of superiority over other people, or over our own former position'. Simply put, we feel better when someone else has it worse off than we do. The oldest of the primary three humor theories (alongside the relief theory and the incongruity theory), the superiority theory traces its roots back to Plato. Plato questioned the ethical and moral merits of laughter to varying degrees because he believed that certain types of laughter are 'always directed at someone as a kind of scorn', and he feared that the effects of laughter would lead the human soul away from its rational part and toward the part ruled by appetites and desires (cited in Morreall, 1987: 5).

Today, the superiority theory is seen as somewhat outdated in the circles of humor theory because we now accept that 'there is no essential connection between laughter and scorn', and '[t]he Superiority Theory turned out to be a classic case of a theory built on too few instances' (Morreall, 1987: 3). However, its domination of the philosophical tradition for over two thousand years has left an enduring legacy that is not universally accepted as positive. Morreall (1987: 4), for one, laments the negative impact that laughter's longstanding alignment with scorn has had on philosophy: 'The sloppy theorizing that created and sustained the Superiority Theory has troubled the whole history of thought on laughter and humor'. In other words, not only was laughter something traditionally taken as non-serious because of its jovial and whimsical effects but, when it was taken seriously, it often represented something spiteful in human nature to be treated with great caution and skepticism.

The question of real and fake

The traditional argument for why the Western world has been laughing at slapstick for over two millennia has relied on a stable boundary that separates the real from the fake. Traceable back to Plato's sustained opposition between philosophy's original truth and sophistry's degraded copy of truth, questions of what is real and what is fake have long been a foundational concern to rhetoric and philosophy. In the *Sophist*, Plato defines two different kinds of image-making, 'the art of making likenesses, and [...] the art of making appearances' (1993: 264c). Both the philosopher and the sophist create a resemblance of knowledge, though the former's resemblance is always oriented toward truth, while the latter's is oriented toward persuasion. Therefore, the sophist's 'art is illusory' because the sophist 'deceives us with an illusion' and, as a result, 'our soul is led by his art to think falsely' (1993: 263c). The philosopher's resemblance of knowledge, because it respects the original, is a *true copy* of knowledge, but the sophist's, because it shows no regard for the original, is a *false copy* of knowledge.

Corrigan claims that slapstick comedy's ability to produce the effect of laughter relies on a binary between pain and the absence of pain, reflecting Plato's distinction between true and false copies:

> Pain is never funny in itself. Painful circumstances that turn out to have no serious consequences do provoke laughter. In comedy, action has definite consequences, but these consequences have had all of the elements of pain and permanent defeat removed. The pratfall is a fitting symbol of the comic. Even death is never taken seriously or considered as a serious threat in comedy. (1981: 10-11)

So while a pie in the face and a fall down a flight of stairs might all be examples of us laughing at other people's misfortunes, the latter requires us to believe that it is really not happening –because the real effects are potentially life threatening – whereas the effects of a pie in the face are generally nothing more than an embarrassing mess. We're capable of finding pleasure in malice, but we're not *that* malicious. Corrigan further refines comedy's need to maintain the distinction between the real and the fake:

> [M]anifestations of the ludicrous must be made painless before they can become comic. The writhings of the cartoon character who has just received a blow on the head, the violent events in some of Moliére's plays, or the mayhem committed by slapstick clowns remains funny only as long as it is quite clear that no pain is involved. One reason why the violence of slapstick is so effective in films [...] is that it is virtually impossible to fear for the characters, *since the actors have no physical reality*. (1981: 11; my emphasis)

Because we know, for example, the Itchy isn't really burning Scratchy with acid, we are in some way authorized to laugh at these examples of violence because we accept them as fake.

But both Plato's distinction between the true and false copy[3] and traditional slapstick's reliance on a distinction between pain and the absence of pain become problematized in certain forms of what I call 'simulacra slapstick', examples of which abound in the motion picture *Jackass 3D*.[4] Presumably, both traditional slapstick and simulacra slapstick are copies of an original, real pain. Traditional slapstick maintains an appreciation for the distinction between the real and the

3 In the interest of both lexical consistency and in an effort to resist falling into the theoretical free play between illusion and reality that this paper explores, I will mainly refer to this distinction using the terminology 'real' and 'fake'.

4 For those unfamiliar, the basic premise for *Jackass 3D* is rather simplistic: a marauding cast of misfits and eccentrics perform various pranks, stunts, and gross-out performances on themselves and each other causing injuries (physical, psychological, intestinal, spiritual, etc.) in order to conjure up laughter in the viewing audience.

fake because it always addresses its audience as being a representation of actual pain, never suggesting that the injuries befalling the actors are real. As such, it functions as Plato's *true copy*, maintaining a regard for the original because the audience never has any doubt that its effects are fake. But unlike traditional slapstick, where we are authorized to laugh only when we know the actors' physical realities are not in jeopardy, in simulacra slapstick we clearly witness painful and damaging effects being inflicted and we laugh anyway. In this way, the humorous appeals of simulacra slapstick announce themselves to the audience not as representations of pain, but as actual pain. These appeals rely on the audience having a real, essential sense of the humanness of the actors. But because the appeals of simulacra slapstick are still dramatized for the purposes of making an audience laugh, they are, in Plato's terminology, still a copy of this 'original' pain. Simulacra slapstick, then, tries to hide the fact that it is, itself, an image, a reproduction, a fake, and thus does not show the same distinction between the real and the fake that traditional slapstick upholds. Thus, in Plato's sense, the humorous appeals of simulacra slapstick function as a *false copy*.

But since both forms depict images of physical violence befalling people, they can – at times – resemble each other as well. This, for Plato, is the risk of representation and the reason why the sophist is such a danger: because both the philosopher's copy of knowledge and the sophist's copy of knowledge resemble each other, it is difficult to distinguish between the two. Contemporary rhetorician John Muckelbauer (2001: 228) suggests that the effects of the sophist's false copy are so troublesome to Plato because the sophist claims to be a teacher of wisdom but he is 'a pretender to this lofty lineage, a counterfeiting thief whose very presence threatens the proper inheritance of wisdom'. The sophist possesses the resemblance of knowledge on all subjects, but this knowledge is not original knowledge and therefore falsely leads us away from the pursuit of original knowledge. And because it is difficult to tell the difference between the philosopher's resemblance of knowledge and the sophist's, we might not even know when we are following the wrong one. Muckelbauer (2001: 233) suggests that the false copy, or simulacrum, places at risk the very idea of there being an original at all:

> Resemblance is the very condition for Plato's dialectical movement; that the sophists knowledge and the philosopher's knowledge resemble each other places the dynamic of resemblance and, therefore, dialectical thought, at stake.

In this way, the slapstick of *Jackass 3D* functions as a simulacrum, one that places at risk the very idea that there is, or ever was, a real. Humorous appeals in the film are structured to produce the sense of the real in the audience vis-à-vis images that dramatize injuries to the physical reality of the actors. Because these appeals are presented to the audience as images amplified by various cinematic

enhancements and technological manipulations, however, this realness that the actors experience gets repeatedly called into question. In other words, much of what appears as real in simulacra slapstick – the violence befalling the actors – is actually the effect of Plato's false copy, an image rhetorically produced to create a sense of the real for the audience.

Mutual resemblance: The blurring of cartoon slapstick and simulacra slapstick

In order for *Jackass 3D* to distinguish its humorous appeals from more traditional forms, the film actively works to produce a sense that the effects of simulacra slapstick are real. One important way it does this is by continuously presenting something fake to contrast itself against. In *Simulacra and simulation*, Baudrillard (1994: 12-13) notes that fake spaces like Disneyland function to produce a sense of the real in the surrounding city of Los Angeles:

> Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.

Jackass 3D and Disneyland follow inverse paths to creating a sense of the real: Disneyland produces a sense of realness in Los Angeles by calling attention to its own lack of reality, whereas *Jackass 3D* constructs its own sense of reality by calling attention to what is fake around it. For example, in the opening interlude, the film presents an image of a traditional form of slapstick humor to contrast with its simulacra forms. The first image viewers see on screen in the film's interlude is Butthead, of *Beavis and Butthead*. Butthead's purpose appears to be to explain to the audience that the movie they are about to see will be presented using 3D technology: 'You will see the Jackasses as never before' (*Jackass 3D*, 2010). Beavis then joins in to explain, 'in order to experience this new dimension, you must put on the special glasses that you were given in the lobby'. Butthead looks down at his own hand and says, 'Whoa! Beavis, look at my hand! It's in 3D!'. Beavis, the more moronic of the two, begins to say, 'Really? It really doesn't look too different ...' but his response is interrupted by a punch in the face from Butthead that seems so real to Beavis, it convinces him of the authenticity of the 3D technology: 'Whoa! That's amazing! It felt like you really hit me!'. Beavis continues on about the 'amazing technology', as Butthead continues to punch and slap him about the head and face. This interlude concludes with Butthead saying, 'So sit back and enjoy the movie', as he slaps

Beavis one more time for good measure, punctuating his last slap with his infamous tagline, 'Dumbass'.

While an argument could be made that this segment merely performs the utilitarian 'how-to-put-on-your-3D glasses' purpose that all 3D films must apparently meet (a seemingly unnecessary sort of cinematic regulation along the lines of the way the airline industry still insists on instructing millions of passengers how to put on a seat belt before each and every takeoff), Beavis and Butthead's inclusion here serves the larger purpose of demonstrating how traditional slapstick comedy differs from the simulacra forms found in *Jackass 3D*. For one, while the juvenile sense of humor found in *Beavis and Butthead* might aesthetically be in concert with what will follow in the main event, their performance of cartoon slapstick places *Jackass 3D* squarely within the tradition of slapstick comedy, while also providing it with a point of divergence from that same tradition. Like *Tom and Jerry* and 'The Itchy and Scratchy Show', Beavis and Butthead's cartoon version of slapstick comedy is a non-human form of the genre. As such, it dramatizes the idea that traditional slapstick comedy's success as a form of comedy precludes the absence of pain. Butthead can beat Beavis all day and night, and, even though we might take some pleasure in watching this (partially because Beavis is a character that quickly gets under the skin), we ultimately know that no harm is ever coming to either of them.

Furthermore, the 'new dimension' Beavis makes reference to in the interlude, the incorporation of the 3D technology itself, enhances the manner in which *Jackass 3D* transgresses the boundary between the real and the fake. The entire purpose of 3D, from a cinematic standpoint, is to take the two-dimensional format of film and represent it in a manner that more closely resembles real life (a fact reflected in the name of today's preeminent 3D company: Real3D). In other words, 3D technology, both rhetorically and, in a way, 'physically', is not there for the actors, not there to honor the reality of the action captured on film in a more detailed fashion. 3D technology exists only for the audience. It attempts to produce a visual copy of the action and bring it closer (literally, visually closer) to the audience. But in this effort to produce a more 'real' copy of the original action, its regard for the original becomes dissolved, because it is always moving away from the original, toward the audience. When Butthead slaps Beavis, his hand reaches out into the audience and swings right in front of our own faces, never touching of course. We are still in the free play of cinematic fantasy, yet this gesture provides an authentic approximation – a spatial closeness that *Tom and Jerry* could never approach – that stimulates the perception of the boundary between the real and the fake, making it appear more illusory than we might often admit. Much like, as Baudrillard (1994: 13) argues, Los Angeles relies on Disneyland and other theme-parks such as 'Enchanted Village, Magic Mountain,

Marine World [...] imaginary stations that feed reality, the energy of the real to a city whose mystery is precisely that of no longer being anything but a network of incessant, unreal circulation', *Jackass 3D* also relies on these imaginary stations. The explicit non-reality of cartoon performances and twenty-first century cinematic technology help maintain a distinction between fake forms of humorous appeals found in traditional slapstick and the sense of the real that *Jackass 3D* wants to construct in its own simulacra slapstick. The technological amplification produced by Beavis and Butthead's cameo at the beginning of *Jackass 3D* sets the stage for the non-cartoon performances that will follow, performances that will contrast non-human cartoon slapstick against human simulacra slapstick, as both extremes are continually enhanced by Real3D.

It's real because we say it is

Jackass 3D further produces a sense of the real in its forms of simulacra slapstick by way of the disclaimer. *Tom and Jerry* has been entertaining children for over fifty years with physically violent forms of Saturday morning entertainment without any kind of warning, which is precisely what the sensationalized violence of 'Itchy and Scratchy' satirizes. Even *The three stooges,* the seminal television program starring Larry, Moe, and Curly, a comedy trio born on the American vaudeville stage that went on to become a household name in the United States for four decades, avoided warning the audience about the dangerousness of the slapstick pranks and stunts contained within, even though non-cartoon depictions of eyes being poked and hair being pulled are clearly actions that could be quite dangerous. In all of these examples of traditional slapstick, the assumption appears to be that we know enough to know that what we are seeing on the screen is fake and, therefore, we don't have to be warned otherwise. However, this clear-cut distinction cannot be assumed with simulacra forms of slapstick.

All iterations of *Jackass,* from the earliest television series to the final feature film, have begun (and ended) with a disclaimer about the stunts contained within the film. The epigraph included above is taken from the very first television episode of *Jackass* that aired on MTV in 2000. In it, we see an air of informality, both in the lax grammar of the copy ('neither you *or*...') and in the casual irreverence of the semantic references to 'total idiots', 'dumb little buddies', and 'dangerous crap' (*Jackass*, 2000). In total, this disclaimer tries to downplay its authority and seeks to fit in as part of the show itself, sharing in the anti-intellectual, anti-authoritarian spirit of the performances that will follow. By the time we get to *Jackass 3D*, however, the disclaimer has evolved along with the show's performance budget, becoming appreciably more grown up (i.e. more

legally binding) in the process: 'WARNING: The stunts in this movie are performed by professionals, so for your safety and the protection of those around you, do not attempt any of the stunts you are about to see' (*Jackass 3D*, 2010). Gone are the references to 'total idiots', (apparently they're strictly professionals now), 'dumb little buddies', and 'dangerous crap', and they've apparently run the copy past a high school English teacher as well since the either/or, neither/nor grammatical *faux pas* found in the earlier version has been corrected. Additionally, not only does this disclaimer present a more formal written appearance but it is also read aloud by a young but serious-enough-sounding male, ensuring that even those movie goers trying to send out one final text message before the film starts will at least *hear* the warning, reflecting a clear effort on the production company's part to cover its legal bases in every manner possible. Because, ultimately, that is what a disclaimer of this sort is intended to do: we told you letting a snake bite your penis was a dangerous idea, so you can't sue us if you decide to do it anyway.[5] Ultimately, though, the disclaimer in *Jackass 3D* performs an additional role in that it declares that the film's performances of simulacra slapstick put the actor's safety at risk. Quite literally, it tells us that the simulacra slapstick in the movie you are about to watch is so real that it can hurt you.

The image of the disclaimer serves to explicitly address the physical reality of the human actors and to make the audience aware of how these forms of slapstick differ from traditional forms. But the disclaimer, like the 3D technology of the film itself, shows no regard for the original events. It shows no regard for the physical reality of the actors (they obviously don't heed its advice), but is instead turned toward the audience. It dramatizes the film itself as a false copy, or simulacrum, as always turning away from the original, always structured toward the audience. *Jackass 3D* uses the disclaimer to further set up how its humorous appeals in the form of simulacra slapstick continually reproduce a sense of the real by maintaining the perception that traditional slapstick is as fake as Disneyland.

The force of the image

Two specific skits from *Jackass 3D* dramatize how the film problematizes the distinction between the real and the fake: 'Beehive tetherball' and 'Gorilla in a

5 As the production value of the film increases, so does the film's budget, and so does the film's overall exposure and risk, all of which invites the legal team to step in and remind us all that not everything in life is a joke. The moral here is even Jackasses have to grow up sometimes, and in Hollywood, no matter how fantastically whimsical the story you are selling may be, money is always very, very real.

hotel suite'. Additionally, because both of these bits feature humor created by bringing together the human and the animal, looking at them together helps further complicate the human-animal relationship that has been viewed as foundational in traditional theories of humor. From this traditional perspective, laughter lends a sort of authenticity to the human experience of humor, sequestering it from the experiences of other animals. This makes laughter more 'real' to the human being than to the animal because in the animal kingdom, so the traditional view goes, laughter is impossible. Therefore, any reference to an animal laughing must be fake and naturally divided from the authentic experience of human laughter. While the skits included do not overtly engage in the debate about animal laughter, they do rely on a certain distinction between human and animal in order to perform their forms of simulacra slapstick, while simultaneously problematizing this distinction.

1) Beehive tetherball

The first skit, 'Beehive tetherball', is a quintessential example of simulacra slapstick performed within the *Jackass* oeuvre. The skit produces carnivalesque laughter by celebrating the pain of two *Jackass* actors and, in doing so, revisits Plato's early apprehensions about how malicious forms of humor interrupt the subject's rational pursuit of the good life. In the skit, actors Steve O and Dave England are (minimally) dressed as bears: furry bear ears, wristbands, sneakers, and underwear briefs. The bears play a game of tetherball using a beehive as the ball. The skit's protracted setup, featuring testimony from a professional beekeeper and a predatory animal expert, produces the sense that the actors are in very real danger. The beekeeper, commenting on the roughly 50,000 bees in the hive that will be used in the skit, all but guarantees the punchline will be delivered:

> *Camera operator*: What do you think the chances are of these guys getting stung today?
>
> *Bee Keeper*: They're gonna get stung. Yeah, there's no doubt in my mind, when you hit a ball full of bees, you're going to get stung. (*Jackass 3D*, 2010)

After establishing sting certainty, the predatory animal expert quantifies the range of danger as it pertains to bee stings, a testimony that serves to further ratchet up the drama surrounding the skit's pain and safety levels:

> *Steve O*: How many bee stings do you think we can take?
>
> *Predatory animal expert*: I think it takes about a hundred to kill a man.
>
> *Dave England*: What?

Steve O: There's 50,000 bees in there...

England: Did you just make that up? Please?

The skit unfolds much as one would expect. Steve O and England, before they even take their places around the tether ball, are clearly getting stung, as bees swarm around the dangling tether ball and frantic voices from off-frame ('This is gonna be gnarly now, man!'; 'I'm already getting hit!'; 'Come on! Do it! Do it! Do it! Do it!') highlight the moment's precariousness. Loomis Fall, playing the role of referee (and getting stung himself), introduces the skit while screaming in pain: 'Got a butt-ton of bees! My two sexy players! This is beehive tetherball! Game on!'. Steve O and England hit the ball back and forth about a half dozen times, all the while screaming, swearing, and swatting bees from their face and legs, before England finally submits and runs from the frame, screaming, 'I can't do it anymore!'. As England flees in pain, the promise of simulacra slapstick in the skit becomes successfully realized: everyone involved is repeatedly stung. Rather than being sidestepped here, pain is celebrated, and, as a result, laughter is produced in the audience.

Even though laughing at the misery of Steve O and England's bee stings is clearly an example of the superiority theory of humor, this skit's effects are not reducible to flipping this pain/absence of pain binary by capturing the base, animalistic and painful experience of simulacra slapstick on film in a humorous way. Instead, the formal cinematic techniques used in the production of the skit both create and perform a simulation that produces effects exceeding the naturalness of the skit's bee sting premise and raise questions about distinctions between real and the fake. Throughout the skit, certain cinematographic decisions call subtle attention to safety considerations that are not made explicit in the film's dialogue. For example, while Loomis Fall introduces the skit (with bees already stinging Steve O, England, and Fall himself), standing in the background – yet still clearly in frame – is the predatory animal expert, who is holding a long spear with a sharp metal point at one end. One assumes that this man and his spear are nearby in the event things take a turn for the worse. Similarly, after England flees the game, a camera follows him as he sprints through an open field, arms flailing, in an effort to get as far away from the bees as possible. When the camera operator finally catches up to him, he is hysterical and begins to sob ('Oh, fuck!...Oh, dude...It fucking hurts!...Oh god...Oh fuck!') as bees continue to swarm him ('Please put me somewhere where there's no bees!'). As England pleads for help, parked behind him, yet very much in frame, is an ambulance, present, like the predatory animal expert, to provide assistance to the actors should things take a turn for the worse. Of course there are pragmatic purposes for having these safety measures in place when you are filming a skit like

'Beehive tetherball', but the filmmakers' decision to include these specific safety measures in the film's final cut speaks to how the slapstick staged in *Jackass 3D* produces elevated, hyperreal effects. By using these safety measures as a compositional backdrop to the absurdly irreverent action of the skit the ambulance and predatory animal expert are effectively transformed from their real, pragmatic purposes in the scene into images, or props, that produce effects exceeding their original purposes.

In Baudrillard's (1994: 3) terms, these images dramatize how the simulacrum threatens the distinction between the real and the fake because it doesn't imply a presence, or a regard for an original, but an absence, which calls into question the principle of reality itself:

> To dissimulate is to pretend to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But it is more complicated than that because simulating is not pretending: 'Whoever fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms' (Littré). Therefore, pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary.' Is the simulator sick or not, given that he produces 'true' symptoms?

While the simulation produced by *Jackass 3D* is not technically a kind of sickness (although a case could probably be made), its simulacra slapstick does appear to want to give the appearance that 'true' symptoms are being produced in the actors. In traditional slapstick, we clearly see a form of dissimulation, or of pretending to have what one does not have – pain – in a way that leaves the distinction between real and fake intact. Traditional slapstick implies presence. However, the simulacra slapstick in *Jackass 3D* implies an absence that threatens the distinction between the real and the fake. For while the slapstick antics captured in the film appear to produce real symptoms of pain in the actors (and thus, from a certain perspective, would appear to be of a more real or authentic form of slapstick than traditional varieties), these symptoms are enhanced and heightened in ways that have no regard for the principle of reality itself. Therefore, as images rhetorically produced and structured toward the audience to produce laughter, the simulacra slapstick of *Jackass 3D* becomes neither 'real', 'unreal', nor 'fake', but a sort of virtual reality, a created sense of the real without being actual.

What might have once appeared to have been real becomes transformed into the fake which is then used, as it is throughout *Jackass 3D*, to create a heightened sense of the real for the audience. This paradoxical process is perhaps best dramatized in an exchange at the outset of 'Beehive Tetherball' between England

and an off-camera crewmember. Shortly after England comes to terms with the unfortunate mathematical equation of 50,000 bees + 100 bee stings = death, he asks, with obvious concern for his personal safety, 'So what are we doing here?' to which the crewmember responds, rather cheekily, 'We're making a hit movie'.

2) Gorilla in a hotel suite

While 'Beehive tetherball' transforms real safety measures into on-camera images that artificially create a heightened a sense of danger for the cinematic audience, the 'Gorilla in a hotel suite' skit functions somewhat inversely, creating a sense of real danger vis-à-vis an image of fake danger. The 'Gorilla' skit is a variation on simulacra slapstick in a sense, because unlike 'Beehive tetherball', for example, physical pain is not intended to befall any of the actors. Instead, the punchline for 'Gorilla in a hotel suite' is the emotional trauma that actor Bam Margera's parents, April and Phil, experience when they check into their hotel suite and encounter a full-grown gorilla. The animal is fake, nothing more than actor Chris Pontius in an extremely realistic gorilla suit. April and Phil, of course, don't know this. This scenario is further enhanced by the fact that April and Phil have been recipients of countless pranks at the hands of their son over the years, both in the *Jackass* franchise and in a spin-off television production starring their son called *Viva la Bam*, so there is a strong precedent that the element of chaos makes occasional, unexpected appearances in these people's lives. This particular skit, however, tries to exploit that precedent by making it appear that this is not a prank per se, but a prank gone wrong. The 'Gorilla in a hotel suite' does not perform a real prank, but a copy of a (fake) prank. What this skit dramatizes is the impossibility of staging an illusion in the era of simulation, when images are exchanged only with each other. As Baudrillard (1994: 19) writes: 'The impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real is of the same order as the impossibility of staging illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible'. In other words, faking a prank shows us that a real prank is itself just a performance produced in the image of all the pranks that came before it. Staging a real prank and an illusion of a prank are both impossible in the era of the hyperreal, as Baudrillard (1994: 20) argues in his depiction of a fake holdup:

> Organize a fake holdup. Verify that your weapons are harmless, and take the most trustworthy hostage, so that no human life will be in danger (or one lapses into the criminal). Demand a ransom, and make it so that the operation creates as much commotion as possible – in short, remain close to the 'truth,' in order to test the reaction of the apparatus to a perfect simulacrum. You won't be able to do it: the network of artificial signs will become inextricable mixed up with real elements [...] in short, you will immediately find yourself once again, without wishing it, in the real, one of whose functions is precisely to devour any attempt at simulation, to reduce everything to the real – that is, to the established order itself.

What this suggests, therefore, is that a real holdup is really just a re-enactment of the genre of the holdup, showing us that 'if it is practically impossible to isolate the process of simulation, through the force of inertia of the real that surrounds us, the opposite is also true [...] *it is now impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real*' (1994: 21; emphasis in original), a point the 'Gorilla in a hotel suite' exemplifies.

In the skit, hidden cameras capture the action in both the hallway outside the hotel suite and from various angles inside. As soon as April and Phil enter the suite, two cast members in the hallway lock April and Phil inside. The gorilla appears, dragging a potted plant into the frame and making aggressive sounds and gestures that, obviously, terrify April and Phil, who flee to a corner of the suite, where they watch through a doorway as the gorilla destroys the room. April screams uncontrollably while Phil tries unsuccessfully to leave through the locked front door. At this moment, the skit appears to blow its own cover, as a cameraman runs from a closet screaming, 'Get out! Get out of here!'. What is being performed here is a pretend failure. The joke, however, is that this chaos, this apparently failed prank, is all part of the act, all part of the process of creating a fake copy of a real prank. The front door of the suite is finally opened, and the cast and crew take positions at one end of the hotel hallway while the trainer, played by musician and actor Bonnie 'Prince' Billy, appears to hold the gorilla at bay at the other. From this position of relative safety, an overwrought April and her son have the following exchange, with the cast and crew all feigning the same level of fear and trepidation April is projecting:

> *April*: Oh my god, I never saw a gorilla before.
>
> *Bam*: He's tame.
>
> *April*: He's not tame, he just wrecked the whole room!
>
> *Bam*: Well, no, there's a fucking trainer there.
>
> *April*: Big deal! Did this go wrong or something?
>
> *Bam*: Kinda.

The power of the image to produce a sense of the real is exemplified April's terrified response, as she still believes she is in the presence of real gorilla: 'What was supposed to happen? [...] What was it supposed to be just fun or something?'.[6] Poor Phil's response, however, might prove more indicative of

6 A funny coincidence apropos to this bit is that all the *Jackass* cast members always refer to April by her nickname: Ape.

skit's performative force, as we come to find out that he was so scared by what he thought was a rampaging gorilla in his hotel suite that he sought refuge from the attack in the bathroom. As the camera crew heads back into the suite to check on him, Phil, from off-camera, utters a dejected, 'I shit myself'. Ultimately, the fake prank reveals its full artifice when the gorilla breaks character and begins to speak: 'I need this thing off, I can't breathe. I need this off'. April, upon overhearing the gorilla speak, gets wise to what is afoot: 'Is that a person? That's a fricking person!'. A crewmember steps in and removes the mask, revealing the sweaty, smirking Pontius inside. The gig is up, and a sense of the real has been restored. April, after taking a fresh inventory of the scenario, embraces the now headless gorilla and declares, with a palpable relief that underscores the impossibility of staging an illusion: 'I'm so glad you're fake!'. The illusion has been revealed, dramatizing Baudrillard's (1994: 21) point that real pranks function in the same manner:

> This is how all the holdups, airplane hijackings, etc. are now in some sense simulation holdups in that they are already inscribed in the decoding and orchestration rituals of the media, anticipated in their presentation and their possible consequences. In short, where they function as a group of signs dedicated exclusively to their recurrence as signs, and no longer at all to their 'real' end. But this does not make them harmless. On the contrary, it is as hyperreal events, no longer with a specific content or end, but indefinitely refracted by each other [...] it is in this sense that they cannot be controlled by an order that can only exert itself on the real and rational.

The fact that the gorilla was fake did not render it harmless, as April's blood pressure level and Phil's intestinal discord clearly attest. Instead, the preexisting genre of the prank precedes this attempt to fake a prank, showing that no 'real' prank could ever succeed without this same preexisting 'recurrence of signs' (1994: 21). It is the simulacrum that precedes the original and gives the original its own sense of authenticity.

The paradox of parody and appropriation

Performances of simulacra slapstick function as a sort of hyperreal parody – a parody without origin – of the ultra-violent slapstick comedy of found in contemporary cartoons like *Itchy and Scratchy*, which is, itself, a parody of earlier cartoon violence found in *Tom and Jerry* and *Looney Tunes*, cartoons that were themselves aping on the human-centric style of slapstick with roots as far back as Shakespeare. This iterative trace, or 'parodic repetition', 'reveals "the original" to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original' (Butler, 1999: 41; emphasis in original). What we see here is the free play of parody itself in a slapstick cycle that, on the surface, might seem to evolve in a linear order

from traditional forms to more self-reflexive forms that seek to critique and alter social orders (Tyler and Cohen, 2007; Kenny, 2009; Ellis, 2008; Rhodes, 2001). However, simulacra slapstick is not the 'next phase' of some logically unfolding tradition, but rather performs a kind of break in the chain, an interruption that is as much a return to 'premodern carinvalesque forms' of comedy as it is an evolution of something new (Rhodes, 2001: 376-7). Subversive acts that are immediately legible or anticipated makes their effects more easily appropriated (Tyler and Cohen, 2007). Because of their random spontaneity, however, simulacra slapstick performances are not immediately legible or easily anticipated. As such, they contain a deconstructive force that throws into question essential notions of real and fake and can help us explore other 'noisy provocations [that] act to disturb from within' (Rhodes, Rhodes and Rhodes, 2005: 77).

Similarly, *Jackass 3D* is paradoxically both a form of humor that resists appropriation and one that finds itself commercially appropriated (from a fiscal perspective, at least; definitely not in terms of social acceptance). With a budget almost twice that of *Jackass: Number two* and four times that of *Jackass: The movie* and distributed by the major Hollywood studio Paramount Pictures, a strong case could be made that *Jackass 3D has already been* appropriated and commodified. This is no longer a bunch of skate punks shooting home videos of themselves shitting on the highway and selling the tapes to MTV. This is a bunch of skate punks with the capital to stage a prank – filmed in 3D – where a man locked in a shit-filled port-o-potty and attached by bungee chords to two crane booms is launched 100 feet into the air and made to bounce and slosh over and over and over again amidst a gravity-defying sea of three dimensional shit as the crew and cast look up in horror from below, some moved to vomit. The point here is that tracing the evolution of *Jackass* skits reveals production differences of degree and not of kind.

It is within *Jackass*'s ambivalent stance toward enjoying the spoils of success that seeds of resistance can be found. While there are no explicit representations of management and organizations to be found in the plotless structure of *Jackass,* one could certainly read the evolution of the franchise from a relatively marginalized status within American skateboarding culture to becoming a major motion picture phenomenon as embodying a sort of post-Second World War 'little guy becoming the big guy…importance of hard work' ethos (Parker, 2002: 140). On some level, the story of *Jackass* is a story of hard work and the conservative notion of pulling yourself up with your own bootstraps and making something out of yourself. But where *Jackass* deviates from this narrative is that, for all the franchise's increasing commercial and financial success, there is a palpable feeling that, quite frankly, no one involved really gives a damn about any

of it. Case in point: the self-jeopardizing pranks and stunts that put *Jackass* on the map actually increase in their scope and risk factor as the franchise matures and becomes more successful. In *Jackass 3D*, for example, Johnny Knoxville narrowly escapes death when a horse-sized rocket he is bareback riding blows a piston during its launch, creating enough force to blast a fist sized piece of metal through the shell of the rocket that barely misses Knoxville. Such a prank would have been well beyond the scope of anything earlier manifestations of *Jackass* could have attempted, suggesting there is an inverse correlation happening here between what we think of when we imagine commercial success and what is reflected in *Jackass*. Because even as budgets and salaries increase along with the films' successes, the cast seems to move further and further from the luxury comforts of easy street; they're not sending in the stunt doubles in *Jackass 3D*, even if they can now afford to do so. The laughter created through the performance of simulacra slapstick exceeds any effort to fully contain, thus showing us the radical limits of appropriation and offering new ways to rethink how organizations structure and order the forces at work within them.

Conclusion

The lingering theoretical notion of Plato's true copy and the false copy are dramatized in the relationship of traditional slapstick and simulacra slapstick in terms of how both forms present images of real and fake pain. Traditional slapstick maintains an appreciation for Plato's distinction between the original and the copy because it always announces itself to the audience as a representation of actual pain, never suggesting that the injuries befalling the actors are real. In fact, the humorous appeals in traditional slapstick rely on this distinction to function in the first place. We are authorized to laugh at Scratchy's injuries because he is a cartoon cat. Thus, the distinction between what is real and what is fake is sustained. Simulacra slapstick, on the other hand, complicates and undermines this traditional theoretical distinction. The humorous appeals captured in the simulacra slapstick of *Jackass 3D* want to announce themselves to the audience not as representations of pain, but as actual human pain. However, because *Jackass 3D* is a film its humorous appeals are no more a documentation or confirmation of some essential humanness than the appeals presented in traditional forms of slapstick. Both forms *create* a sense of the real for the audience. *Jackass 3D,* by employing various cinematic techniques to enhance the production of a heightened sense of the real, functions, in Plato's sense, as a false copy, one devoid of concern for the original because it does not try to maintain the same distinction between the real and the fake that traditional slapstick relies on. Even though traditional slapstick and simulacra slapstick are copies that, in a sense, both resemble each other, what simulacra slapstick, as a false copy or a

simulacrum with no concern for the original, shows us is the boundary between the real and the fake was never as distinct as it seems.

I suggest that the simulacra slapstick performed in *Jackass 3D* reveals an endlessly iterative and ambivalent historical performance of parody that both exposes the impermanence of boundaries between an original 'real' and the 'fake' that parodies it and problematizes traditional notions of what it means to be appropriated. As such, the film challenges us to consider a future where we confront the paradox and ambivalence that is already contained within all attempts to create and sustain organizations and social institutions of any kind. Simulacra slapstick exposes the perpetual crisis that lies behind the maintenance of 'potentially oppressive social relationships' and opens up 'the possibility to interrogate alternatives' (Rhodes, 2001: 375). It dramatizes what Critchley (2008: 83-4) describes as a 'laughable inauthenticity', a humorous acknowledgement that 'recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition' where the ego is allowed 'to find itself ridiculous'[7].

references

Bakhtin, M. (2009) *Rabelais and his world*, trans. H. Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1994) *Simulacra and simulation*, trans. S. F. Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Butler, J. (1999) *Gender trouble*. London: Routledge.

Butler, J. (2004) *Undoing gender*. London: Routledge.

Corrigan, R. W. (1981) *Comedy: Meaning and form*. New York: Harper & Row.

Critchley, S. (2008) *Infinitely demanding: Ethics of commitment, politics of resistance*. London: Verso.

Ellis, N. (2008) '"What the hell is that?": The representation of professional service markets in The Simpsons', *Organization*, 15(5): 705-723.

7 On a closing note, the final on-screen image in *Jackass 3D* is a callback to the film's opening disclaimer. Read in the same youthful, yet serious tone as the opening montage, this disclaimer also looks backwards in the past tense, as it tries to buttress any nostalgic impulse that this closing montage and the film itself may have inspired in the movie going audience:

> REMINDER: The stunts in this movie were performed by professionals, so for your safety and the protection of those around you, do not attempt any of the stunts you have just seen. (*Jackass 3D*, 2010)

In other words, it still takes a professional Jackass to be a real Jackass, so don't try to fake it. You might get hurt.

Jackass (2000) Season 1, episode 1. Television program. MTV, 12 April.

Jackass 3D (2010) Motion picture. MTV Films, New York.

Kenny, K. (2009) '"The performative surprise": Parody, documentary and critique', *Culture and Organization*, 15(2): 221-235.

Morreall, J. (ed.) (1987) *The philosophy of laughter and humor*. Albany: SUNY University Press.

Muckelbauer, J. (2001) 'Sophistic travel: Inheriting the simulacrum through Plato's "The Sophist"', *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 34(3): 225-244.

Parker, M. (2002) *Against management: Organization in the age of managerialism*. Oxford: Polity.

Plato (1993) *Sophist,* trans. N. P. White. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Rhodes, C. (2001) 'The Simpsons, popular culture, and the organizational carnival', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 10(4): 374-393.

Rhodes, C., J. Rhodes and D. Rhodes (2005) 'Jackass', in C. Jones and D. O'Doherty (eds.) *Manifestos for the business school of tomorrow*. Stockholm: Dvalin.

Rhodes, C. and R. Westwood (2008) *Critical representations of work and organizations in popular culture*. London: Routledge.

Tyler, M. and M. Cohen (2008) 'Management in/as comic relief: queer theory and gender performativity in "The Office"', *Gender, Work and Organization*, 15(2): 113-132.

Westwood, R. and C. Rhodes (eds.) (2007) *Humour, work and organizations*. London: Routledge.

the author

Kevin Casper is an Assistant Professor of English and Philosophy at the University of West Georgia in Carrollton, Georgia. His research lies at the intersection of rhetorical theory and humor theory. He received his PhD from Louisiana State University and currently lives in Atlanta.
Email: kcasper@westga.edu

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
ISSN 2052-1499 (Print)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 15(3): 601-620

'Becoming Other': Entrepreneuring as subversive organising

Antti Kauppinen and Maria Daskalaki

Abstract

This paper discusses entrepreneurship as a process of subversive organising, a journey towards becoming Other. Examining the field of stand-up comedy in Finland, we argue that the desire to become an entrepreneur is not only an individual quest, but also a social, subversive desire to resist fixed, institutionally bounded professional identities. Subversive desire, performed through de/professionalisation and de/institutionalisation, constitutes entrepreneuring as a social practice of creation: a nonlinear quest towards difference, discontinuity and intuitive futures yet to come. Subversive practice, in this respect, promotes and sustains, rather than resolves, the inherent tensions of entrepreneuring.

Introduction

The concepts of entrepreneurial identity and more generally, identity construction have been widely discussed in the organisation studies literature (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Down and Reveley, 2004; 2009; Simpson and Carroll, 2008; Clarke, Brown and Hailey, 2009; Watson, 2009; Watson and Watson, 2012). These studies describe how and why some people become entrepreneurs and adopt relevant professional identities and others do not (Cohen and Musson, 2000; Down and Reveley, 2004; Cardon, et al., 2009). On this basis, individual-level identity approaches conceptualise professionalisation as the way an appropriate individual is produced (i.e. identity regulation by an organisation); how an individual becomes something other than what that regulated professional image represents (i.e. identity work, such as networking); and how those two elements affect and are affected by self-identity (e.g. Alvesson

and Wilmott, 2002; Alvesson, et al., 2008). Although individual identity work has been studied extensively, the subversive elements of entrepreneurship have not been explained in detail (Rindova, et al., 2009; Bureau, 2013).

In this paper, we ask two questions: First, how does subversive organising affect the construction of entrepreneurial identities? Second, how does subversive desire relate to entrepreneuring? To achieve this we examine identity construction as a discontinuous process of becoming and unbecoming that can promote entrepreneurial behaviour through the subversion of dominant ideologies, institutions, and professional expectations and norms. Specifically, we argue that becoming/unbecoming constitutes a cyclical process that iteratively produces subversive organising.

In doing so, we use the current literature on entrepreneuring to obtain a better understanding of collective identity practices and their subversive nature. Therefore, studying identity as a process and entrepreneurship as a practice, we will be adopting the concept of entrepreneuring (Steyaert, 2007; Rindova, et al., 2009), which captures the ontology of becoming (Chia, 1997; Chia and Holt, 2006). Accordingly, entrepreneurial phenomena are associated with movement, which we suggest is maintained through subversive desire.

Entrepreneurial identity construction from the perspective of becoming has predominantly focused on social practices and discourses (e.g. networking and narrating) and the process of becoming an entrepreneur and establishing the professional identity of an entrepreneur (Cohen and Musson, 2000; Slay and Smith, 2011). The construction of such knowledge is a process that consists of discontinuity events and subversive activities (Bureau, 2013). Recent studies of such discontinuity events position entrepreneuring as a transformative action, with subversion a key driver of the process (Bureau, 2013; Bureau and Zander, 2014). Taking this work further, this paper examines subversive desire by following Bergson (1910; 1946) and his concepts of difference and intuition. These concepts are framed in relation to the individual and collective impact on both professional practices and institutional domains. Therefore, subversion and subversive entrepreneuring, in this context, describe a discontinuous process during which entrepreneurial desires and identity are practised (see for example Steyaert, 2007).

In our study, we focus on stand-up comedy as a loose organisational field in Oulu, Finland. The paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss the concept of subversive desire, a discontinuous process driven by intuition and difference. We then describe the case of stand-up comedy and our methodological approach. In the second part of the paper, de/professionalisation and de/institutionalisation

are proposed as the two processes through which subversive desire is linked with entrepreneuring. These, we will suggest, become productive forces – becoming and un/becoming the Other – and sustain entrepreneuring as a subversive experience.

Un/becoming and entrepreneurial subversion: Difference and intuition

In this section, we discuss the concept of subversion in entrepreneuring in relation to the Bergsonian (1910; 1946) concepts of difference and intuition. In the literature on entrepreneuring, the primary interest is in 'the factors that cause individuals to seek to disrupt the status quo and change their position in the social order in which they are embedded – and, on occasion, the social order itself' (Rindova, et al., 2009: 478). However, little theoretical work has been done to explore aspects of subversive activity in processual terms (see also Collinson, 2002; Fleming, 2005; Bolton and Houlihan, 2009; Westwood and Johnston, 2011; Kenny and Euchler, 2012). In this paper, we focus on the identity work involved, that is, constructing the identity of what you are (e.g. Jones and Spicer, 2005) and what you are *not* (Carroll and Levy, 2008; Watson and Watson, 2012).

Bureau (2013: 220) defined subversion as a 'specific context involving activists, entrepreneurs in this case, who are determined to destroy all or part of a system using efficient techniques and to provoke public scandals and controversy'. Yet, 'despite this diversity in usage, meaning and occurrence, the field of business studies barely uses this term [subversion], or only in very rare cases or rather anecdotal fashion' (Bureau and Zander, 2014: 125). As Bureau and Zander (2014: 125) argue, 'the absence of the term [subversion] is intriguing, as the conditions (both necessary and sufficient), which are required to create a potential of subversion are very similar in both art and entrepreneurship'. Addressing this absence, our work links subversion with discontinuity by suggesting the crucial role that unexpected events – the outcome of discontinuities – play in the process of entrepreneurship. In this process, difference is the key driver, and intuition is a means of imagining the unthinkable: the yet to come (Bloch, 1959).

Thus, we encourage a nonlinear understanding of space-time where entrepreneurial identity is not a fixed state of existence. In contrast, as the reverse of absolute logic (i.e. a sample representing a certain population), entrepreneurial identity construction is a flux process of becoming/unbecoming that challenges discipline-bound, dualistic conceptualisations in favour of a more critical and dialogical framework of sustaining entrepreneurial desire. Becoming/unbecoming is a process in which discontinuities play the role of entrepreneurial events that signify collective creation and therefore serve to

release the desire to overcome both the professional and institutional status quo (Hjorth, 2013). To explicate that, 'we must not forget that states of consciousness are processes and not things; that if we denote them each by a single word, it is for the convenience of language; that they are alive and therefore constantly changing' (Bergson, 1910: 196).

Following Bergson (1910; 1946), having a set of traits is not the most outstanding issue of interest in an element of creation. Our inner world is a 'melody where the past enters into the present and forms with it an undivided whole which remains undivided and even indivisible in spite of what is added at every instant' (Bergson, 1946: 83). In the following section we propose that subversive process is constituted through difference (i.e. the performance of new/unrepeated elements of identity) and intuition (i.e. the practice of the ways of experiencing) – both concepts discussed by Bergson, which, when performed, maintain discontinuity in identity transformation and in turn promote subversive entrepreneuring.

Difference and intuition as properties of subversive entrepreneuring

Creation via intuition is a free movement and unconscious change that is a (conceptual) difference in discontinuity. Action, based on the principles of difference, has the potential for subversion and, in turn, actual transformation. According to Bergson (1946), difference has four forces: a) difference as differences of nature, which is the object of empirical intuition through the ways in which the real divides itself in its embellishment; b) difference through an internal dynamic of open-endedness, ensuring that it differs not only from itself but also from everything like it; c) difference that operates through degrees of actualisation to tendencies and processes; and d) difference as movement through a process of differentiation, division, or bifurcation (Grosz, 2005). Hence, difference does not seek a union but rather the generation of ever-increasing variation or differentiation since difference infiltrates the force of duration (a process of becoming and unbecoming) in all things. In this context, becoming is a self-differentiation process and a quality that emerges or actualises only in duration. Defining duration, Bergson states:

> [T]here is, on the one hand, a multiplicity of successive states of consciousness and, on the other hand, a unity which binds them together. Duration will be the synthesis of this unity and multiplicity, but how this mysterious operation can admit of shades or degrees, I repeat, is not quite clear. (Bergson, 1946: 197-207)

Moreover, intuition has two tendencies that can meld into one another: the first tendency is a downward movement to a depth beyond practical utility, action, and definable results, but that is close to those moments of reflection during which

one perceives inner continuity. The second tendency is a reverse movement in which this downward tendency fuels a movement back to the surface for direct contact with the material, duration with space, a movement whereby the one compresses itself as the Other.

Reading Bergson, Deleuze (1994) observes the proliferation of dualisms, such as becoming/unbecoming, not because reality is divisible or polarised but because each of these pairs is the expression of a single force. The one is not reducible but is the underlying principle or condition of the Other. For Grosz (2005: 12), becoming is thus not a capacity inherited by life, an evolutionary outcome or consequence, but is the very principle of matter itself, with its possibilities of linkage with the living, with its possibilities of mutual transformation, with its inherent and unstable volatility.

Following this tradition, we are not interested in creative destruction as a reinforcing power to create a new venture (e.g. Bureau, 2013). Instead, we focus on the subversive desires that have the potential to generate transformation at the organisational level of entrepreneurial un/becoming (see Bureau and Zander, 2014).

Difference and intuition constitute discontinuity as the white space of an organisation (e.g. Beyes and Steyaert, 2013), an in-between space (e.g. Hjorth, 2005), and an event that subverts the reigning order (e.g. an unexpected discussion in the corridor on the way to the restroom). Subversive desire therefore influences the process of discerning what we collectively are and, especially, what we could become (Hjorth and Steyaert, 2004). Thus, discontinuity as part of a subversive process has a productive element; it is a process that fosters unknown futures, futures yet to come. We attempt to research this productive element with the study we discuss below.

Methodology

Our research is based on a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and so we did not have a hypothesis in mind that we wanted to test. We did know we wanted to find out how subversion and entrepreneuring are related. We thus decided to study the case of three entrepreneuring individuals who are associated with an organisation called Ookko Nää Nauranu (meaning 'have you laughed?' in Northern Finnish slang; ONN hereafter) in order to assess how individuals construct and de-construct their entrepreneurial practice in context. Assessing this, we looked for elements or processes of subversion or subversive organising, that is, the ways in which

resistance to rigid entrepreneurial identities is expressed in the everyday activities of three entrepreneuring individuals. This case is not exceptional, but reflects everyday entrepreneurial practices where subversive dynamics play a crucial role.

ONN is one of the few stand-up comedy event producers in Finland. Traditionally, stand-up comedy event producers provide stand-up comedians (individual entrepreneurs) for events that they organise at bars, theatres, colleges, and nightclubs, but sometimes also for individual customers and entertainment festivals. Often, stand-up comedy event producers are established stand-up comedians themselves. Yet a number of up-and-coming stand-up comedians lack sufficient followers to run their own gigs or produce stand-up comedy events themselves. These individuals (about 60 to 100 comedians) are trying to break into the field, primarily by enlisting their personal contacts or associating themselves with ONN. Our third informant, Ari-Matti, is an example of this group. Nevertheless, for the majority of comics in Finland, stand-up comedy remains a second career that is subsidiary to a job they already have, or hope to find.

During the fieldwork, we attended comedy clubs organised by the ONN entrepreneurs, Zaani and Ville. We were invited to after-show events and got to know established stand-up comedians, up-and-coming performers (including Ari-Matti), and their partners such as the other stand-up comedians performing in the club and the staff working in the clubs or in the cloakrooms. Finally, we spent long nights with all of these individuals in their 'office space'. This office space was where individuals physically worked (including backstage) but also included virtual spaces such as public postings on web blogs and Facebook. These postings were also transcribed and analysed along with the material from our discussions and observations. All the empirical material was first gathered in the native language of informants (i.e. Finnish) and it was then translated by a professional translator into English.

When analysing the data, we did not focus on a specific organisation as the unit of analysis, but on how organisational fields (like stand-up comedy) are disrupted and subverted by entrepreneurial behaviour of the actors involved. Through this we wanted to explore how entrepreneurial activities are framed and re-framed through the inherent tensions embedded in organising everyday entrepreneurial discontinuities (a process of iterative becoming/unbecoming). One of the crucial components in this process is to 'un-become' what other stand-up comedians have become: to converse with the 'other' in an intuitive way. The stand-up comedy field is thus used in this paper as a negotiated practice between agents' desires for subversive practices (i.e. to change the way stand-up comedy is produced) and institutionally bounded structures and regimes.

In particular, we focused on how a fixed entity (ONN) was organised alongside the subversive tendencies of the ONN entrepreneurs and one up-and-coming stand-up comedian. We shadowed, listened to and recorded stories, and analysed public blog posts of Ari-Matti, Zaani and Ville over a period of ten months, keeping a diary throughout. The duration of our recorded material with all three is 315 minutes. Each meeting lasted around two hours and was framed around organising as well as the process of becoming (an entrepreneur). Our approach followed Czarniawska's (2008) suggestion to concentrate on organising, rather than organisations, when combining ethnographic fieldwork with storytelling. As Czarniawska writes, the point is not to identify fixed things, but instead to capture the dynamics of organising in the empirical data. By focusing on the *how* questions, we wanted to reveal the processes of discontinuity and the tensions experienced across the two realms; enacting fixed organisational identities and ensuring entrepreneurial practice remains subversive.

To achieve our aim, we analysed the stories of organising while at the same time observed real-life interventions in order to reveal the entrepreneurial emancipation that current literature describes (see Alvesson, et al., 2008; Carroll and Levy, 2008). These are described as small, creative, and deconstructive actions that cannot be observed merely by analysing discussions and conversations because such emancipations occur (when they occur) in everyday practices and in the in-between spaces (Hjorth, 2005), yet they can be found in tales from the field (Van Maanen, 1988; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995). It was this combination of stories and observed interactions that revealed fluctuations in organising; a discontinuous relationship between what is structurally rigid and bounded (i.e. existing stand-up comedy institutions) and the desire for subversive practice (i.e. those needs and emotions to subvert and bring about change). In the next section, we explore further how this discontinuous relationship unfolds by focusing on two processes: 1) un/becoming de/professionalised and 2) un/becoming de/institutionalised.

Entrepreneuring as subversive organising

Stand-up comedy is a field in which artists must convince not only the audience but also (and especially) their networks of their ability. Failing to do so can severely restrict performers' opportunities and the likelihood of becoming famous or sustaining a career in comedy. Social acceptance is crucial for stand-up comedians and extensive time and effort are frequently needed to obtain sufficient bookings to become established. Finnish comedy venues are unlikely to pay travel and accommodation expenses for untested stand-up comedians. A

comedian must cover those costs while simultaneously building interpersonal networks.

Therefore, the identity of a new entrant in the field is bounded by the desire to become a professional stand-up comedian, to conform to established practices, and to find ways of embedding oneself into existing professional networks. Yet entrepreneurial practices related to those events show critical elements of (subversive) organising. In this section, we highlight two dimensions of such organising – de/professionalisation and de/institutionalisation – that illustrate the fluid process of entrepreneuring as subversive organising.

Un/becoming de/professionalised

The story of ONN began when one of the founding entrepreneurs (Ville) was a student with an idea of starting a stand-up comedy club. It was an aspiration shared with his friend Zaani, with whom Ville was then producing TV shows. Both were frustrated with the quality of stand-up comedy clubs in Finland. Clearly, a stand-up comedy company was completely different from what they had previously produced together. One day while driving, Ville and Zaani began discussing the issues plaguing the stand-up comedy clubs in Finland. The passage below from one of the interviews shows Ville and Zaani reconstructing the starting point of their entrepreneurial adventure:

> *Ville*: The lighting was like in this room now, completely green chairs for the audience. Well, I entered this room and thought, what the fuck is going on here? Forty-seven people are sitting in a room for 300 people, and all the people are sitting far away from each other. I sat down somewhere in the back part of the auditorium and was looking around; there was no music at all. I felt like we were waiting for a wedding couple in a church. And then, suddenly, a stand-up comedian enters the room like, saying just 'Hi'. What a fucking atmosphere!
>
> *Zaani*: And the microphone did not work. They did not even have a person responsible for the acoustics in there or anything. So, that was the starting point. Everything was missing.

Ville and Zaani wanted something other than what was available: in their words, better than the 'fucking badly produced clubs'. In one interview, Zaani explained how frustrated they were at that point:

> We decided that we will *not* do this, and we will *not* do this, and we will *not* do this. For one and a half years, we observed and discussed. We started not to lose, so we had all the tactical plans. If somewhere there was an imaginative attack, we would be ready. This is the way.

Becoming an entrepreneur, accordingly, means deciding what *not* to do. However, as Zaani explained in one interview, this concept is not a dualist process of negation of one for the other:

> As an entrepreneur…you should avoid comparing entrepreneurship and family life with each other. Instead, your own mental balance needs to be strong as an entrepreneur. That supports the family life, too. I prefer to go out and have drinks. I am honest about it. I have enjoyed that for many years already. It is a social hobby. I meet lots of good people that way. And that's it.

De/professionalisation therefore is a *process of continuous reflection*, a personal/professional intuitive journey (a downward movement), and 'an imaginative attack' that maintains entrepreneurs' desire for subversion and creative art (the subversive practice of narrating). Reflection sometimes involves attacking a convenient professional atmosphere. For example, Zaani recalled one of the professional venues he had worked at:

> Many people might have bad experiences, so one knows him or herself. That is the issue that needs to be taken care of. One of the things is that a bad atmosphere at work is something that everybody talks about, but nobody reacts to it…You can always leave, and you will always survive.

Moreover, de/professionalisation is also about creatively exploring the environment and attempting to make new connections, even if that means leaving an unattractive workplace. Clearly, *creative exploration* is about being aware of where things stand and attempting to change the ways of thinking through creative collaborations and new formations, that is, the possibility of initiating change (Jones and Spicer, 2005). Subversive desire underpins that notion and fosters the process of entrepreneuring. Ville's reaction below signifies his desire to do things differently and subvert existing expectations and professional norms:

> I can tell you, I have received negative feedback from being an entrepreneur. Well, I am an eight-year master's degree student in the Department of Technology. I am somewhere in the middle now, but it doesn't interest me. My family told me that, 'Now you should finish your school and start working for Rautaruukki [one of the biggest steel companies in Finland], and then you go to Tornio [a town in Northern Finland]', and so forth. And then you will buy a family-style Volvo and make it in that way. Hell, I will not do it that way! Well, it's that kind of thing where someone thinks that way and then comes to you saying something like that. The starting phase of a career as an entrepreneur goes in such a different direction than what people expect, but you won't do it that way.

The story of Ari-Matti (the up-and-coming stand-up comedian who worked closely with the ONN entrepreneurs) demonstrates his intention to be subversive through negotiating his possible identities and their performance: 'It is not the

real me on the stage; it is a representation of me', he explains. At the same time, he writes in a public blog post:

> And in answer to the question of how far you can get in stand-up comedy in a year...The work trip of 28 hours consisted of a couple of aberrations, free alcohol, irregular eating, and much disturbed sleeping. Do I want to spend my weekends that way? No, definitely not, but I am ready to spend *all* of my working days in this way. (http://bugi.oulu.fi/~arimatti/entry/110905.php; emphasis added)

One cannot simply repeat that which already exists; de/professionalisation denotes a constant need to *reconstruct one's identity* yet at the same time maintain dynamic open-endedness. Ari-Matti explains this further:

> The first gig was the kind that I was already so frustrated when the first comedian was going on. I was so frustrated at that point, and that feeling remained; it took until about 15 minutes after my own gig, and I was still sniggering. The second gig was a more peaceful experience, as I knew that I could make it and perform there. I got about a seven-minute slot in the second gig in Tampere [a city in central Finland], and I knew that I could make it and my jokes were funny and the audience came along well. After that second gig, I had kind of an artist or star feeling, as I got an artist passport that allowed me to go everywhere in the festival area without paying any entrance fees and standing in the queue. I didn't need to, that happened at that second gig at the Tammer Festival in Tampere; I didn't need to have any kind of ticket, but I could go everywhere with my artist passport. That felt great.

He showed that he is aware of the pressures towards professionalisation of comedy acts; yet he was ready to explore other possible identities, experiment, subvert and re-establish himself:

> I was hanging around with Zaani after the gig, and we went to a couple of bars before he took a train back home. At the train station, I wondered whether I should also go to sleep, as the other comedians who had families had gone to sleep already. Then I thought that, 'No, damn, I am kind of "a star"', so I went to see what was going on there rather than going to sleep.

He added when commenting on so-called professional behaviour:

> There are stand-up comedians who go to every single event to perform. I've heard that there have even been weddings where a stand-up comedian has managed to ruin the whole thing by telling jokes that made the bride cry and so forth.

He did not want to become a professional in those terms. During one of the interviews, when describing the evolution of their activities in relation to their establishment as entrepreneurs, Zaani stated with conviction, the importance of embracing liminality by practicing difference as degrees of actualisation:

> Entrepreneurship needs to be kept as a parasite in a way that this company is a parasite for us, and we need to do so much work on it for it to work. In our case, that parasite likes us, and it does not suck on us too much. Some day, if that parasite becomes evil in nature and becomes a very big mite, then it might need to be replaced.

For Zaani and Ville, there is always the option to abandon the whole idea if it begins to involve more work than pleasure, or if ONN comes to resemble all of the other stand-up comedy clubs in Finland. For them, this venture encapsulates the desire to choose a different course and become active agents of change. De/professionalisation therefore also means constantly moving towards un/becoming, seeking transformation by *embracing liminal positions*. Subversive entrepreneuring, in turn, is a process that is constantly in flux: one cannot simply reproduce existing identities but must instead creatively explore others and, by doing that, also subvert normative practice.

Un/becoming de/institutionalised

The desire for flexible communitarian professional relations and anti-conformist identities is combined with a realisation that certain activities require a form of formalisation and institutionalisation. The ONN entrepreneurs described an unsuccessful application for funding from the municipal authority of Oulu. Ville explained:

> It happened that when trying to convince the group of culture-focused administrators in Oulu, you should have a shitty programme [an idea for producing a cultural product]. For example, there should be a guy who craps on waxed paper and dances on it. And then the applicants also need somebody to watch that programme. And our company has been in those meetings in which there were about a hundred people presenting. And we are the only company that has something to say. Everybody else is *tingeli, tangeli, tingeli, tangeli* [baby-talk in Finnish], and then those people are watching us in a way, like, 'There are these guys…'. And then they wished that we disappeared from the stage, and after us there comes a strange guy who sets himself on fire…leading to a situation in which you get the money if you have certain…stuff. In the near future, we will apply for a grant for a fictitious event, and then we will get 50,000 euros!

Zaani continued:

> But, then, if the only issue is how to get a grant and financial support from somewhere, then those are the wrong principles for a company or for some activity, if one only thinks about how to get a grant. Instead of that, you should think about how to produce a programme that is interesting and nice. Right?

Ville concluded:

> Right? The starting point cannot be based on the wish to get a grant…then those guys rent a place and spend the grant…And after that, those guys start to think

> that, 'Oh shit, somebody should perform over there, and those actors should be paid as well. Where do we get the grant for the parts of the programme?'

Their descriptions convey a clear sense of anger and frustration, as the narration includes many non-words ('*tingeli, tangeli, tingeli, tangeli*'). In addition, the frustration is evident from the way the narrative constantly veers from one issue to another. Ville and Zaani's linguistic interactions – and the many swear words – reveal a process of attempting to convince one another how they should continue their stand-up comedy clubs according to a certain method, asking one another 'Right?' a couple of times, with the second person responding similarly: 'Yes, that is the way, right?' In that manner, Ville and Zaani established their 'hobby' as an entrepreneurial field of action that deserved funding based on institutional metrics. Nevertheless, they realised that the demands of establishing a business may lie outside what they call their 'creative practice', although they found this rather frustrating. Ville described the business side of their activities during one of the interviews:

> We just went to the accountant and asked about the best form for the company; OK, Päivi (their accountant) has been kicking our arses for many years telling us that, 'This has to be done like this and this like that'.

For Zaani and Ville, re-constructing the professional boundaries of their 'business' was overwhelming at times and conflicted with their ideological motives. At one level, change emerges as an individual process of becoming Other through the investigation of differences (*identity transitions*). At another level however, actors *mobilised collective processes* and challenged the existing culture of Finnish stand-up comedy (see Bureau, 2013; Bureau and Zander, 2014). Trying to maintain inner continuity, they are determined that, despite institutional pressures for isomorphism, 'the context where stand-up works' has to evolve. Zaani explained how dysfunctional some established practices are:

> The most difficult thing in our work is that people don't know how much it depends on the context of a stand-up comedy club and how difficult it is to build one. You need to understand that stand-up can be compared with a theatre play. It requires the full concentration of the audience. So you cannot organise a cocktail event at the same time and play some music as well or give speeches simultaneously. And then the comedian comes: 'Now, it's my turn'. No.

Being able to maintain creative energy, a necessary component for subversive entrepreneuring is not simply a business-related issue but a social, collective issue; an issue that also involves civil engagement. This is demonstrated in activities that the participants are engaging with that lie outside their professional practice boundaries. For example, Ville photographed a sticker that protested against extremist religious group in Finland. The sticker had the following message: 'The [name of the group removed for reasons of confidentiality] –

raping children since 1844'. He posted that picture on his Facebook profile and commented that 'finally, someone is right'.[1] Within an hour, 300 people had shared Ville's photo. Following this, Oulu police got involved and his Facebook account was scrutinised. Based on the public interest in Ville's Facebook post, ONN published an advert about their next club night, noting in the following gig announcement, 'Ville is good at taking pictures'.

Creative energy, in this context, entails a dynamic yet integrative framing of entrepreneuring as a subversive practice. Through a movement whereby the one compresses itself as the Other, subverting processes disrupt structures (using social media). Their Facebook page is used not only as a site where professional activities are shared but also as a space for political activity. When organising expresses a potent, communal desire to do things differently, entrepreneuring becomes a form of organising as the Other, a process of embedding an activity into a wider social practice, a creative process of changing how one views the world.

Discussion

Organising differently can be viewed here as the interplay between two forces: the need to conform and adopt pre-existing norms and regulations, while at the same time to subvert and disrupt socially accepted ways of organising. In other words, organising is constructed as subversive entrepreneuring: from intense desire to change the expected, established and conventional, to the pressing need to engage with institutional (and legal) structures so not to fail. That is, on the one hand, becoming fixed or 'crystallized' (Daskalaki and Mould, 2013) – through abiding to established processes and practices and – while, on the other hand, constantly engaging with a process of un-becoming by maintaining a degree of fluidity which will allow for 'openings' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) to bring about resistance and change. Being able to balance and creatively subvert contested forces of becoming different, and establishing new practice, while simultaneously working within current established institutional settings, is crucial in entrepreneuring.

As Table 1 shows, the two processes of de/professionalisation and de/institutionalisation together co-constitute entrepreneuring as subversive organising and are co-constituted by the entangled performances of the interrelated properties discussed in this section. Continuous and creative

1 There had recently been a great deal of discussion of paedophilia in that group in Finland. Ville wanted to express that he was against that activity, although it would be unfair to assume that all the people in that group mistreat children.

reflection that mobilises collective action beyond established personal and professional practice boundaries, as well as flexible boundary positions that embrace in-between identities, institute spaces where subversive entrepreneurial activities can emerge.

Properties	De/professionalisation	De/institutionalisation
Entrepreneuring as subversive organising	Continuous reflection	Mobilise collective processes
	Creative exploration	Expand professional practice boundaries
	Reconstruct one's identity	Identity transitions
	Embrace liminal positions	Pursue activities outside their creative practice

Table 1: Entrepreneuring as subversive organising

Accordingly, entrepreneuring as a subversive form of organising is performed through de/professionalization and de/institutionalization, a process that entails moving within and across different practice realms, maintaining fluidity, while at the same time performing alternative identities. These performances, we showed, can potentially reframe personal identities and, at the collective level, also challenge established practices and values. These two processes are entangled and co-dependent and highlight that subversive dynamics operate in both the micro/individual and the macro/institutional level.

The two properties of subversive organising, de/institutionalization and de/professionalization, are practiced through the interplay of intuition and difference as these were theorized, following Bergson, in the first part of our paper (see Table 2).

Properties	De/professionalisation	De/institutionalisation
Intuition as a downward movement	*Continuous reflection* Example from the data: 'As an entrepreneur…you should avoid comparing entrepreneurship and family life with each other. Instead, your own mental balance needs to be strong as an entrepreneur. That supports the family life, too.'	*Mobilise collective processes* Example from the data: 'The most difficult thing in our work is that people don't know how much it depends on the context of a stand-up comedy club and how difficult it is to build one. You need to understand that stand-up can be compared with a theatre play. It requires the full concentration of the audience. So, you cannot organise a cocktail event at the same time and play some music as well or give speeches simultaneously.'
Intuition as a reverse movement	*Creative exploration* Example from the data: 'Many people might have bad experiences, so one knows him or herself. That is the issue that needs to be taken care of. One of the things is that a bad atmosphere at work is something that everybody talks about, but nobody reacts to it.'	*Expand professional practice boundaries* Example from the data: Ville's photographic protest against an extreme religious group in Finland and the police's investigation of this issue. Also, Zaani's statement 'Ville is good at taking pictures'.
Difference	*Reconstruct one's identity* **Difference as dynamic of open-endedness:** A force of internal difference Example from the data: 'I knew that I could make it and my jokes were funny and the audience came along well. After that second gig, I had kind of an artist or star feeling, as I got an artist passport that allowed me to go everywhere in the festival area without paying any entrance fees and standing in the queue. I didn't need to, that happened at that second gig at the Tammer Festival in Tampere; I didn't need to have any kind of ticket, but I could go everywhere with my artist passport. That felt great.'	*Identity transitions* **Difference in nature:** The investigation of differences, natural articulations of the real Example from the data: 'But, then, if the only issue is how to get a grant and financial support from somewhere, then those are the wrong principles for a company or for some activity, if one only thinks about how to get a grant. Instead of that, you should think about how to produce a programme that is interesting and nice'.
	Embrace liminal positions **Difference as degrees of actualisation:** Tendencies and processes expressed only in particular degrees Example from the data: 'Entrepreneurship needs to be kept as a parasite in a way that this company is a parasite for us, and we need to do so much work on it for it to work. In our case, that parasite likes us, and it does not suck on us too much. Some day, if that parasite becomes evil in nature and becomes a very big mite, then it might need to be replaced.'	*Pursue activities outside their creative practice* **Difference as a movement:** Process of differentiation Example from the data: 'We just went to the accountant and asked about the best form for the company; OK, Päivi [their accountant] has been kicking our ass for many years telling us that 'this has to be done like this and this like that.'

Table 2: Entrepreneuring as subversive organizing: Difference and intuition

That is, continuous reflection and creative exploration facilitate processes of de/professionalisation and signify both a downward and a reverse reflexive movement that ensures inner continuity while at the same time meeting the Other through direct contact with the material. Further, de/institutionalisation is a process that challenges boundaries through collective mobilizations that

embrace the continuity/mobility interplay. Finally, the four categories of difference (adopted from Bergson, 1946) highlight liminal identity positions and enact iterative identity transitions, which maintain tensions in entrepreneurial practice.

Concluding remarks

This study suggested that that the desire to become an entrepreneur is not only an individual quest of becoming but also a social and unconscious process of resisting the pitfalls of fixed and institutionally bounded professional identities. Through the case of stand-up comedy organising activities in Finland, we argued that entrepreneurial un/becoming performed relationally as a subversive practice, sustaining rather than resolving the tensions of entrepreneuring. Prior work on identity construction discusses individual identities in existing organisations; this study offers a perspective on identity as a social subversion process that is part of entrepreneurial creation. Subversive desire, the need to create something different, is driven by intuition and difference, components that are discontinuously performed within professional boundaries and existing institutions. We thus suggested that the study of entrepreneuring as subversive organising and explored entrepreneurial identity construction as a process of de/professionalisation and de/institutionalisation.

Prior research on entrepreneurial identity (e.g. Watson and Watson, 2012) approached identity construction as an individual quest. Adopting this level of analysis, the destructive element is an individual desire for subversion. In this paper, we wanted to expand on this notion, and also to explore subversive desire as a driver for change that individuals achieve collectively. Hence we employed this specific case study, which does not describe a spectacular or 'heroic' entrepreneurial story (Ogbor, 2000); instead it shows how subversive dynamics can be identified in 'everyday entrepreneurial practices'. These practices, we propose, can potentially reframe identities and, collectively, challenge and transform institutional fixities. Thus, desire for subversion is not only the intent to revolt politically (Bureau, 2013) but also a collective engagement that can create alternatives. We therefore urge scholars to take this quest further and examine the notion of collective subversive practices and how they can create new organisational forms, especially when no organisation is in place initially (see Bureau, 2013; Bureau and Zander, 2014).

The ethnographic methodology adopted in this study – linking storytelling with participant observation – allowed the study of people who practice identity construction through everyday events or inherent discontinuities. Discontinuity

is a critical element of entrepreneuring that signifies that identity construction is a constant process of transformation. The nature of entrepreneuring, therefore, involves destroying the existing status quo and reinforcing (rather than trying to amend) discontinuities in identity construction. More precisely, such a difference is based on an unconscious intuitive desire to de/professionalise and de/institutionalise the organisation of stand-up comedy; viewed as a perpetual movement rather than as a fixed state of existence. Additionally, the discontinuities in identity construction occur through the desire for otherness, for the Other-yet-to-come; and this is what guides entrepreneuring. In that sense, discontinuity events cannot be placed in a time series to reflect a cumulative process. Instead, the nature of discontinuity events drives a nonlinear process of creation (Hjorth, 2013): the possibility to implement the desire for subversion in its productive form (e.g. the creation of an emerging organisation).

The desire for subversion involves a break from both what is already there and a move towards what is yet to come. Clearly, social encounters are embodied (see Holt, 2008) and influence future social performances. Social relations and power dynamics are performative acts and events (Butler, 1993). The process of becoming is linked with the entrepreneurial contexts within which social relationships are conducted. Though a processual reading of Bureau (2013) and Bureau and Zander's (2014) work, we proposed that entrepreneurial subversion goes beyond intention and actually translates into processes (de/professionalisation and de/institutionalisation) through elevating individual desire to a social (civic), collective quest. Identities are indeed constructed within a social/professional realm and the tensions embedded within entrepreneurial practice highlight the fragile and dynamic qualities of both social institutions and social identities. Adopting a post-structuralist perspective, we explored these subversive dynamics through everyday performances.

Accordingly, spheres of action and rules are entangled with human behaviour, identities, and individual and collective practices and cannot be explored as separate entities with one doing something to the other. The world is an ongoing open process of 'mattering' through which mattering itself acquires meaning and form in the realisation of different agential possibilities (Barad, 2003). The fundamental issue is the exploration of the de-stabilisation processes (entrepreneurial subversive events), which reinforce and accelerate change. In this context, we proposed the processes of de/professionalisation and de/institutionalisation through which subversive desire is practised. Further empirical research is needed to explore other processes through which entrepreneurial identities are constructed as highly contentious and subversive experiences. We hope that with this work we have initiated this discussion and

offered inspiration for more work on the role of subversion in entrepreneurial identity construction.

references

Alvesson, M. and H. Willmott (2002) 'Identity regulation as organizational control: Producing the appropriate individual', *Journal of Management Studies*, 39(5): 619-644.

Alvesson, M., K.L. Ashcraft and R. Thomas (2008) 'Identity matters: Reflections on the identity construction scholarship in organization studies', *Organization*, 15(1): 5-28.

Barad, K. (2003) 'Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter', *Gender and Science*, 28(3): 801-831.

Bergson, H. (1910) *Time and free will: An essay on the immediate data of consciousness*, tr., F.L. Pogson. Montana: Kessinger Publishing Company.

Bergson, H. (1946) *The creative mind: An introduction to metaphysics*. New York: Kensington Publishing Corp.

Beyes, T. and C. Steyaert (2013) 'Strangely familiar: The uncanny and unsiting organizational analysis', *Organization Studies*, 34(10): 1445-1465.

Bloch, E. (1959) *The principle of hope, vol. 1*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Bolton, S.C. and M. Houlihan (2009) 'Are we having fun yet? A consideration of workplace fun and engagement', *Employee Relations*, 31(6): 555-568.

Butler, J. (1993) *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. New York: Routlege.

Bureau, S. (2013) 'Entrepreneurship as subversive activity: How can entrepreneurs destroy in the process of creative destruction?', *M@n@gement*, 16(3): 204-237.

Bureau, S. and I. Zander (2014) 'Entrepreneurship as an art of subversion', *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 30(1): 124-133.

Cardon, M.S., J. Wincent, J. Singh and V. Drnovsek (2009) 'The nature and experience of entrepreneurial passion', *Academy of Management Review,* 34(3): 511-532.

Carroll, B. and L. Levy (2008) 'Defaulting to management: Leadership defined by what it is not', *Organization*, 15(1): 75-96.

Cohen, L. and G. Musson (2000) 'Entrepreneurial identities: Reflections from two case studies', *Organization*, 7(1): 31-48.

Collinson, D. (2002) 'Managing humour', *Journal of Management Studies*, 39(3): 269-288.

Chia, R. (1997) 'Thirty years on: From organizational structures to the organization of though', *Organization Studies*, 18(4): 685-707.

Chia, R. and R. Holt (2006) 'Strategy as practical coping: A Heideggerian perspective', *Organization Studies*, 27(5): 635-655.

Clarke, C.A., A.D. Brown and V.H. Hailey (2009) 'Working identities? Antagonistic discursive resources and managerial identity', *Human Relations*, 62(3): 323-352.

Czarniawska-Joerges, B. (1995) 'Narration or science? Collapsing the division in organization studies', *Organization*, 2(1): 11-33.

Czarniawska, B. (2008) 'Organizing: How to study it and how to write about it', *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 3(1): 4-20.

Daskalaki, M and O. Mould (2013) 'Beyond urban subcultures: Urban subversions as rhizomatic social formations', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 37(1): 1-18.

Deleuze, G. (1994) *Difference and repetition*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987) *A thousand plateaus*: *Capitalism and schizophrenia*. London: Athlone.

Down, S. and J. Reveley (2004) 'Generational encounters and the social formation of entrepreneurial identity: 'Young guns' and 'old farts'', *Organization*, 11(2): 233-250.

Down, S. and J. Reveley (2009) 'Between narration and interaction: Situating first-line supervisor identity work', *Human Relations*, 62(3): 379-401.

Fleming, P. (2005) 'Workers' playtime? Boundaries and cynicism in a "culture of fun" program', *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 41(3): 285-303.

Glaser, B.G. and A.L. Strauss (1967) *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Grosz, E. (2005) 'Bergson, Deleuze and the becoming of unbecoming', *Parallax*, 11(2): 4-13.

Holt, L. (2008) 'Embodied social capital and geographic perspectives: Performing the habitus', *Progress in Human Geography*, 32(2): 227-246.

Hjorth, D. (2005) 'Organizational entrepreneurship: With de certeau on creating heterotopias (or spaces for play)', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 14(4): 386-398.

Hjorth, D. (2013) 'Public entrepreneurship: Desiring social change, creating sociality', *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, 25(1-2): 34-51.

Hjorth, D. and C. Steyaert (eds.) (2004) *Narrative and discursive approaches of entrepreneurship: A second movements in entrepreneurship book*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Jones, C. and A. Spicer (2005) 'The sublime of object of entrepreneurship', *Organization*, 12(2): 223-246.

Kenny, K. and G. Euchler (2012) '"Some good clean fun": Humour, control and subversion in an advertising agency', *Gender, Work and Organization*, 19(3): 306-323.

Ogbor, J. (2000) 'Mythicizing and reification in entrepreneurial discourse: Ideology-critique of entrepreneurial studies', *Journal of Management Studies*, 37(5): 605-635.

Rindova, V., D. Barry and D.J. Ketchen, Jr. (2009) 'Entrepreneuring as emancipation', *Academy of Management Review*, 34(3): 477-491.

Simpson, B. and B. Carroll (2008) 'Re-viewing "role" in processes of identity construction', *Organization*, 15(1): 29-50.

Slay, S.H. and A.H. Smith (2011) 'Professional identity construction: Using narrative to understand the negotiation of professional and stigmatized cultural identities', *Human Relations*, 64(1): 85-107.

Steyaert, C. (2007) ''Entrepreneuring' as a conceptual attractor? A review of process theories in 20 years of entrepreneurship studies', *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, 19(6): 453-477.

Strauss, A. and J. Corbin (1990) *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. California: Sage.

Van Maanen, J. (1988) *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Watson, T.J. (2009) 'Narrative, life story and manager identity: A case study in autobiographical identity work', *Human Relations*, 62(3): 425-452.

Watson, T.J. and D.H. Watson (2012) 'Narratives in society, organizations and individual identities: An ethnographic study of pubs, identity work and the pursuit of "the real"', *Human Relations*, 65(6): 683-704.

Westwood, R. and A. Johnston (2011) 'Reclaiming authentic selves: Control, resistive humour and identity work in the office', *Organization*, 19(6): 787-808.

the authors

Antti Kauppinen works as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Management and International Business at the Oulu Business School. His Ph.D. thesis considered organisational entrepreneurship from the perspective of organisational creativity. His major argument is that entrepreneurship is a space for play and innovation. His current research considers subversive entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial failures, and opportunity creation.
Email: antti.johannes.kauppinen@gmail.com

Maria Daskalaki is an Associate Professor at the School of Management, Kingston University, UK. She graduated with a BA in Psychology and an MA from Lancaster University in Organisational Analysis. She then completed her PhD in Organisation Studies at Royal Holloway, University of London. She is currently involved in interdisciplinary research on a wide range of themes and subject areas including urban social formations and embodied creativity, solidarity economy, alternative forms of organising as well as autobiographical narratives, mobilities and identity.
Email: m.daskalaki@kingston.ac.uk

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
ISSN 2052-1499 (Print)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 15(3): 621-649

'Come on, get happy!'[1]: Exploring absurdity and sites of alternate ordering in *Twin Peaks*

Bernadette Loacker and Luc Peters

abstract

This paper is interested in investigating the complex nexus of sites of organizing and absurdity emerging from the persistent undermining and intermingling of common orders, logics and conventions. In its analysis the paper refers to an example from popular culture – the detective series *Twin Peaks* – which presents a 'city of absurdity'. The series is discussed utilizing Foucault's (1986) concept of heterotopia which allows us to convey the 'other side' of 'normal' order and rational reason, immanent in sites of organizing. Fundamentally, the sites in *Twin Peaks* evoke an understanding of organization as a dynamic assemblage in which heterogeneous orders, conventions and practices interrelate and collide. Analysed through a 'heterotopic lens', *Twin Peaks* contributes to the exploration of absurdity as a form of humour, and more generally to a sensitive and vivid knowing and experiencing of organization, organizational 'otherness' and absurdity.

Introduction

> I think humor is like electricity. You work with it but you don't understand how it works. It's an enigma. (Lynch in Murray, 1992/2009: 144)

Humour and comicality are integrative aspects of human behaviour, relations and experience, emerging and manifesting themselves in variegated forms,

1 In the second season of *Twin Peaks*, Leland Palmer, the father of murdered Laura, suddenly shows up with his hair all turned white. He starts singing 'forget your troubles, come on get happy, waiting for the judgment day', and drops down to the floor with a heart-attack.

functions and outcomes (Westwood and Rhodes, 2007: 12). Based on the assumption that in contemporary organizations ludicrous and obscure elements and practices are notably widespread (Collinson, 2002), the present paper shares a particular interest in exploring the complex interrelation between organizational sites and absurdity, which is an aspect of humour hardly explored within organization studies (OS). Absurdity essentially operates by consistently colliding and juxtaposing different social and discursive orders, norms and conventions (Dougherty, 1994). Through doing so, it highlights the 'disturbing' and unsettling facet accompanying comicality in organizational contexts, and beyond (Butler, 2015; Cooper and Pease, 2002).

The film director and artist David Lynch, amongst others, has drawn on the nexus between humour and the absurd. In one of his interviews, Lynch, often referred to as the 'master of the absurd, the surreal and grotesque' (Hewitt, 1986/2009: 29), argued that 'humor exists in the midst of serious things, or in the wrong place; it's the weirdest intersections in life' (Andrew, 1992/2009: 148). That which occupies 'the wrong place' and that which deviates from the 'regular picture' is then what Lynch conceives of as the absurd (Breskin, 1990/2009: 85). With that said, the absurd tends to emerge as what is without obvious, uniform meaning but erodes, undermines and counter-acts common, apparently rational logic(s) and order(s) (Palmer, 1987). As a result, the absurd seems to be concomitant with ambiguous, more or less productive effects for sites of organizing and the individuals operating within them (see also Kenny and Euchler, 2012).

Empirically, we explore absurdity as a form of humour and vivid aspect of organizational life with reference to an example from popular culture (Westwood and Rhodes, 2007) – the TV series *Twin Peaks* (TP), produced by David Lynch. We argue that TP illustrates a space or 'city of absurdity' *par excellence* (Blassmann, 1999). It is a genre-splicing work of film art, a parodic, 'convention-defying detective story' (Lavery, 1995: 16). More precisely, TP is an intense fantasy about high-school life in a small US town somewhere near Montana, in which events follow the murder of a young woman, who 'turns out not to be as pure as everyone thought' (Woodward, 1990/2009: 51). Central to the series is the exploration of the town's involvement in the girl's death. In combining a police investigation with a TV soap opera with strong surreal elements, the series prominently alters and undermines 'normal' orders, established boundaries and the 'grid' of common meaning – in television narratives, but also far beyond (Telotte, 1995: 165). Apart from the 'stark disturbances in the order of things' (*ibid.*: 162) that infuse TP's sites of organizing, there is, moreover, a very mysterious dimension to TP's 'multi-layered' characters involving an ominous sense that anything could befall them (Woodward, 1990/2009: 50). More often

than not their dialogues and interactions appear, like the general course of action, absurd and ludicrous. Essentially, TP seems to be a 'strange carnival' where various 'strange things are said' (Andrew, 1992/2009: 148), and where meanings are often nebulous and 'scattered'.

In our exploration of TP we will utilize Michel Foucault's concept of *heterotopia*. Heterotopias are 'other sites' or 'spaces of alternate ordering' that connect and juxtapose different orders, norms and practices in one site (Topinka, 2010). Foucault first introduced the concept in *The order of things* in 1966, followed by a lecture he gave for architects on the question of space the next year (Foucault, 1986). Heterotopias are, against the background of Foucault's later work (1984), often read as 'spaces of resistance' closely linked to power *and* freedom (Dumm, 2002). However, initially, Foucault (1970) mainly highlighted the ability of heterotopias to order and categorize – words, things, images and knowledge – in *other*, not taken for granted ways. For this reason heterotopias are commonly associated with an 'irritating' and 'disturbing nature' (*ibid.*: xvi). It is this condition of 'disturbing the order of things' (Westwood and Rhodes, 2007: 6) that inspired us to use the notion of heterotopia as an analytical lens in our study of TP as a 'city of absurdity'. This concept allows us to illustrate how TP's sites of (other) organizing function and operate. Namely, as spaces of subversion, recreation and potential de(con)struction of dominant social and organizational landmarks.

Within OS, however, the concept of heterotopia is still seldom noticed and explored. This is surprising as the notion of heterotopia paradigmatically illustrates Foucault's (1970) concern to challenge any seemingly given classification, 'grammar' or 'natural' order of things and words. In highlighting the varied, relational and contested character of processes of ordering (Johnson, 2006), the concept provides the field of OS with an alternate perspective on *organization* (Burrell, 1988). Heterotopias form a counter-construct and thus the opposite of a uniform and rational notion of organization, 'endued' with clear and stringent purposes and means (Kornberger and Clegg, 2003). They illustrate the relevance and power of multiplicity and 'otherness' for the emergence of organization and, in doing so, trigger ideas regarding modifying and potentially reversing established modes of knowing, seeing and speaking about organization (de Cock, 2000).

As an exemplary instance of a wide set or 'bundle' of heterotopias, the analysis of TP promises to be illuminating for our understanding of (other) organization and organizing. TP introduces us to a world of organizing in which order and disorder, realism and surrealism, and comic and darkness are linked and intermingled in complex and dynamic ways (Telotte, 1995: 160; see also Clegg, et

al., 2005). With its focus on the 'other', deviant and disruptive sides of organizing, TP, analyzed through a heterotopic lens, evokes both the constraints and absurdities concomitant with a static and representational understanding of organization (de Cock, 2000). With that said, our exploration of TP's 'city of absurdity' contributes to studies on organizational humour and, more specifically, absurdity as a form of humour (e.g. Cooper and Pease, 2002; Westwood and Rhodes, 2007). Moreover, our heterotopic analysis contributes to OS interested in the significance of otherness and absurdity for organization and sites of organizing (e.g. Hjorth, 2005; Kornberger and Clegg, 2003). It offers different opportunities to reflect upon the question of what 'ordering differently' implies for contemporary organization(s), work and life.

The paper is structured as follows: In section 2, we briefly introduce and discuss studies of humour in and *of* organization. In section 3 we outline, with reference to TP and the work of David Lynch, the possible contributions of film and TV to the analysis of organization and organizational phenomena. Section 4 introduces Foucault's concept of heterotopias as 'spaces of difference and other order/ing'. In section 5, we use this concept to explore the operating and working of TP as a 'city of absurdity'. In section 6, we discuss the organizational implications of our analysis, arguing that the study of TP's sites of other organizing prompts a vivid and critical perception of organization(s). Section 7 summarizes the central insights and contributions of the paper.

Humour and absurdity in/of organization

Research on humour and comicality in organizations and the workplace is an increasingly prevalent topic in OS (Westwood and Rhodes, 2007). The field can broadly be divided into two traditions, the functionalist and the critical tradition. Provided that humour is 'appropriately' managed and controlled, it is, in the former tradition, associated with beneficial managerial and organizational outcomes, for example, organizational commitment, creativity, diversity, collective learning and problem-solving (Cooper, 2005; see also Westwood, 2004). While there is, indeed, 'a danger of humour, as an enormously rich and complex facet of human behaviour, being appropriated by a managerialist discourse' (Westwood and Rhodes, 2007: 4), there is also the assumption that humour cannot be fully captured and instrumentalized by management (Collinson, 2002). In critical OS research it is claimed that humour also involves the *potential* to defamiliarize and question common sense and taken for granted order and practice. This defamiliarizing is based on the capacity of humour and the comic to say 'other things and truths' or to say things differently (Cooper and Pease, 2002). Humour can also be used as a 'tool against management'

(Critchley, 2007), and thus as a source of subversion of dominant orders, structures and relations of power. We position our study within the context of this critical tradition and argue, following Westwood and Rhodes (2007: 4), that it is suitable to account for 'the complexities and ambiguities of humour'. This implies that humour, its functioning and its effects are considered as neither simply managerialist nor purely resistive (Kenny and Euchler, 2012: 320). Humour can contribute to both the undermining of established social and organizational orders and distinctions, and to their reproduction and maintenance (Butler, 2015).

However, most studies of humour 'at work', be they part of the functionalist or critical tradition, study humour *in* organizations. While we consider work and the workplace interesting contexts for the study of humour, in the present paper we, in contrast, look at humour *of* organization (Westwood and Rhodes, 2007). This means that we examine how organization – and its humorous sides – are represented in popular culture. Assuming that such representations are not simply un- or surreal (*ibid.*), we analyze, as mentioned above, the TV series *Twin Peaks*, which is full of ludicrous and absurd aspects of organization. Under-explored in OS as a form of humour, absurdity notably reveals the ability of comicality to break up and intervene in prevalent orders and mundane meanings (Critchley, 2007: 24; Palmer, 1987). A more precise definition of absurdity makes this clear: the absurd is usually understood as a matter or phenomenon that a) contradicts or goes beyond *formal logic* and reason; b) is not in accordance and alignment with *common sense* and commonly held values and expectations; and c) is linked to *ridicule*, foolishness and laughter (Dougherty, 1994: 141). While it is, on that basis, commonly argued that absurdity's intermingling of different, seemingly unreasonable and contradictory orders and conventions provokes the perception of meaninglessness and nonsense (Cooper and Pease, 2002: 309), we claim that the absurd is not solely about lack of meaning and order, but about *other* orders and logics of ordering (see also de Cock, 2000). Evaluated as a threat to 'serious' order and rational reason that frequently, yet not necessarily, prompts laughter (Kavanagh and O'Sullivan, 2007: 244), absurdity is also often equated with unease (Westwood, 2004). To us though, absurdity is above all about the persistent reversion and questioning of conventional boundaries and distinctions that define what is 'real', 'normal' and logical, and what is 'unreal', 'abnormal' and illogical (Collinson, 2002: 270).

However, we acknowledge that the multiple 'other orders', meanings and realities that absurdity evokes and is based on surround it with ambiguity and a subversive potential, playing out in the context of organizations and beyond (Palmer, 1987). The example of *Twin Peaks*, which conveys various bizarre sites, characters and behavioural patterns, all dispensing and violating ordinary reason

and logic of order, will provide us with further insights into the complex 'nature' and operations of absurdity as a form of humour and element of organization/organizing more generally. First, we discuss, with reference to David Lynch, film and TV as a medium of organizational analysis.

Organizational analysis, film, TV and the world of David Lynch

In art media, such as literary fiction, photography or film, organization and work are often portrayed in a more complex and diverse manner than they are in conventional academic writing. Following scholars such as Warren (2008), Hancock (2005) and Weiskopf (2014), we argue that artistic-aesthetic engagements with questions of organization can contribute to a vivid perception of organizational life and phenomena. More specifically, the medium of film undermines abstract and generalizing representations of organizational practice and knowledge, and *illustrates* instead their particular, multifarious nature (Foreman and Thatchenkery, 1996: 49). Like other forms of social inquiry, film thereby *in*-forms and is informed by the (organizational) reality it delineates (Westwood and Rhodes, 2007; see also Cooper and Law, 1995). Further, we argue that film can, similar to TV series like *Twin Peaks*, trigger our imagination and provide us with the chance to both critically and creatively reflect upon established, often idealizing images of organization and organizing (Weiskopf, 2014).

With regard to David Lynch and his approach to film, we first note that, for the American artist, film provides the opportunity to 'make experiences', namely 'experiences that would be pretty dangerous or strange for us in real life' (Murray, 1992/2009: 136). Following Lynch, film is an art medium that subverts and plays with well-known boundaries, meanings – and with our senses. In 'film, things get heightened; you see things a little bit more and feel things a little bit more' (Breskin, 1999/2009: 80) and differently. This way, film can 'open a window' (Andrew, 1992/2009: 148). This also applies to TV, an art form that Lynch considers as notably interesting as it offers privacy and intimacy, next to openness and 'great narrative freedom' (Chion, 1995: 103). When watching TV, people are 'in their own homes and...well placed for entering into a dream' (Henry, 1999/2009: 103). They are well placed for entering another space and world.

In this respect the aesthetics of Lynch's film and TV art is widely acknowledged as unique within the American film industry (Breskin, 1990/2009). While the majority of this industry presents clear 'morality tales' for western society and organizations (Weiskopf, 2014), Lynch's work does not 'serve' or come up with

straightforward, easily accessible and uniform sets of moral codes and values. Rather, filmic art works such as TP show that Lynch persistently challenges, reverses and erodes prevalent – societal, work- and organization-related – values and orders (such as 'good' and 'evil', real and surreal, normal and deviant), and thereby commonly prompts mockery and the perception of absurdity (Lavery, 1995). Central to TP is, indeed, the pulling of 'events, images, and language out of their normal conduct' (Telotte, 1995: 172) – which often forces us to laugh and 'to see them anew' (*ibid.*).

With these contexts in mind we briefly turn to the series itself. After its release in spring 1990 TP was soon considered 'the most original and weirdest soap opera to grace the television screen' (Odell and LeBlanc, 2007: 47). A central reason for this evaluation resides in TP's systematic resistance to linear narrations and 'narrative closure' (Henry, 1999/2009), resulting in the emergence of various and steadily colliding narratives and plots. The 'otherness' and absurdity often ascribed to TP and its complex storyline(s) (Telotte, 1995) are further sustained by a very dense and detailed scripting of TP's subplots, 'making up' TP as a 'soap opera in extremis and in minutia' (Odell and LeBlanc, 2007: 72). Odell and Leblanc (2007) suggest that it is unlikely that any other series 'could get away with the multiple cliff-hanger conclusion' (*ibid.*) to TP's seasons one and two; yet, as TP reverses any conventional (TV) code and order(s), it seems, for instance, perfectly normal that its characters 'interrupt the action to enjoy the smell of good, fresh air, the aroma of a good cup of coffee or an apple pie, or even the heavenly pleasure of peeing in the woods' (Chion, 1995: 111). In conjunction with dancing dwarves, echoing owls and restless trees, TP displays emotions that are notably moving and, at times, hardly bearable and disturbing (Breskin, 1990/2009). More generally, the TV series creates an extraordinarily intense atmosphere and aesthetic aura that allows people to get immersed 'in the fullest possible way' (Lavery, 1995: 7; see also Hancock, 2005). In placing upfront the obscure, absurd and eccentric sides of social and organizational life, this piece of film art provides the epitome of a 'Lynchian experience'. Through doing so, it also offers us the opportunity to learn and practice 'other thinking' of organization, i.e. a thinking that subverts linear, homogeneous and reason-based logics, and instead promotes multiplicity, openness and difference in/of organization(s) (Clegg et al., 2005).

Only at very first sight does TP appear as an ordinary murder mystery, happening in a 'peaceful' American town. Together with Special Agent Dale Cooper, the series' main protagonist, we soon realize that the murdered homecoming queen, Laura Palmer, lived a precarious, multi-layered life. We then start to understand that TP is 'full of secrets', variegated orders, ambiguous

characters and 'supernatural' overtones (Hewitt, 1986/2009).[2] Before we analyze TP's 'city of absurdity' in more detail, we discuss below the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia. It will serve as an analytical lens in our exploration of TP's sites of (other) organizing.

Figure 1: Agent Cooper driving into Twin Peaks[3]

The concept of heterotopia

Following Foucault, heterotopias present 'spaces of difference and otherness'. As such, they can be understood as spatial sites that 'organize a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them' (Hetherington, 1997: 41). Due to this quality of 'other organizing', they often interfere in and disturb established orders and modes of ordering (*ibid.*). By not being 'in place' or the 'right' place, heterotopias serve to remind us first and foremost of the contingency of social, cultural and discursive orders and classifications (de Cock, 2000). They intrude 'an alternate reality on a dominant one' (Westwood and Rhodes, 2007: 6) and, by this means, contribute to the emergence of ways of seeing, speaking and knowing 'differently'.

2 For a more detailed introduction to *Twin Peaks*' storyline see, for instance, Blassmann (1999) or http://www.notcoming.com/features/a-guide-to-twin-peaks/.

3 Figures 1, 3 and 4 are screenshots taken by the authors.

When introducing the concept, Foucault (1986) focused on heterotopias as textual/discursive spaces and thus primarily explored the links between space and the order of (spoken, written or visual) texts. Characteristic of textual heterotopias is the undermining of language, common names and symbols and the tangling of syntax (Dumm, 2002: 35). They 'desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source' (Foucault, 1970: xvii), and through doing so 'dissolve our myths' as regards coherent and stable classification schemes that 'hold together' words and things (*ibid.*: xviii). However heterotopias do not only unsettle and shatter discursive orders – but also 'the order of things' (Dumm, 2002: 43). As Foucault's (1970: 6) later reflections on the concept show, heterotopias have a physical (i.e. social-material) condition too. Their basic characteristic though remains the same: as 'other spaces' heterotopias challenge and disrupt dominant patterns and modes of ordering knowledge and truth. Over the years, heterotopic notions that focus on the interrelation between space and culture have also gained in significance within OS, and more generally the social sciences. Contemporary studies of 'other spaces' are mainly inspired by the idea of 'thinking space socially' (e.g. Hjorth, 2005; Kornberger and Clegg, 2003; Topinka, 2010).

Following Foucault (1986), there are essentially six characteristics or principles that can be attributed to heterotopias as social sites. Firstly, 'spaces of other ordering' exist in every culture. They are 'designed into the very institution of society' (Hjorth, 2005: 393) and as such are *universal* (Topinka, 2010: 57). Secondly, heterotopias are dynamic spatial sites. Their *functions* and use can *change* over time (Dumm, 2002: 40). Thirdly, heterotopias are *multiple spaces* that juxtapose heterogeneous spaces and orders in one site (Foucault, 1986). Fourthly, heterotopias are connected with *time*. Time can be interrupted, compressed, accumulated, intensified or simply be fleeting in 'other spaces' (Davis, 2010: 670). Fifthly, heterotopias are *different* from all other sites that they might reflect or discuss. Yet they are not completely separate or disconnected from other social sites (Dumm, 2002: 40). Finally, this implies that heterotopias do not exist on their own; they are *relational* and thus have a function in relation to all 'the space that remains' (Foucault, 1986: 27). Given these premises or principles, heterotopias are not to be confused with 'utopias' or spaces of pure imagination. While they can hold close relations to imaginary-symbolic sites, heterotopias are 'real sites' that reflect upon the conditions of the present (Davis, 2010: 663). In Foucault's (1986: 24) words: heterotopias are places which exist as 'something like counter-sites in which...all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted'.

In his few texts on other spaces, Foucault discussed various kinds of social heterotopias to illustrate their complex 'nature', functions and relations.

Amongst other places he refers to homes of the aged, psychiatric hospitals, cemeteries, brothels, theaters, museums, carnivals and ships as heterotopic sites (Foucault, 1986: 27). Considering this diversity, it seems self-evident that heterotopias both constitute and are accompanied by manifold effects. This aspect is worth foregrounding, especially as many Foucauldian scholars tend to interpret heterotopias in terms of 'ideal' spaces of resistance, subversion and transgression (Hjorth, 2005; Johnson, 2006). Whilst we acknowledge the ability of heterotopias to suspend established orders, we do not consider them only as sites from where resistance and critique emerge (Dumm, 2002: 38). We understand them initially as discursive or social sites that juxtapose and connect different logics and practices of order/ing. In our reading, this characteristic also constitutes them as 'spaces of absurdity'. As such, heterotopias often produce disturbance and irritation (de Cock, 2000) – and, as Foucault notes in the preface of *The order of things* (1970), by extension and at times, laughter. Laughter commonly emerges when all taken for granted taxonomies, 'ordered surfaces', and 'familiar landmarks of my thought' (*ibid.*: xv) break, and conventions, sets of relations, words and things 'that are inappropriate' (*ibid.*: xvii) collide and erode.

That said, we want to highlight that heterotopias, as spaces encompassing otherness and elements of absurdity, do not inevitably liberate from dependencies and constraints (Dumm, 2002). Their potential to – verbally, visually or physically – interrupt, play with and re-create dominant orders and norms does not imply that heterotopias necessarily demonstrate 'zones of freedom and full escape' from power and domination (Topinka, 2010: 70). While other spaces are often 'reserves of the imagination', they are not external to, but infused by power and power's disciplining and normalizing tendencies (Foucault, 1986: 27). We hence argue that heterotopias produce chances for effectively destabilizing and rethinking common ground and order(s) that appear given and 'natural'. At the same time, however, heterotopias can potentially foster (subjection to) power and control (Dumm, 2002: 34). This ambiguity should, in our view, be acknowledged in the thinking and writing on heterotopias and their functioning.

In light of these elaborations, let us recapitulate: heterotopias are 'alternative', 'altered' and 'alternating' spaces that commonly interfere, break with and transgress the 'architecture of the everyday'. In putting emphasis on the other sides of prevalent logics of order and structures of power, they reveal the contingency, multiplicity and relationality of the 'familiar landmarks' that shape our worlds and organizations and the experience thereof. On this basis, we intend to more systematically explore TP's 'city of absurdity'. Seen through the analytical lens of heterotopia, our study will point out how TP's sites of

organizing emerge and are constituted on the basis of variegated, contested and juxtaposing 'other' orders, conventions and practices.

Spaces of other order and absurdity in *Twin Peaks*

> Through the darkness of future past, the magician longs to see. One chants out between two worlds. 'Fire... walk with me'. (*Twin Peaks*, season one/episode two)

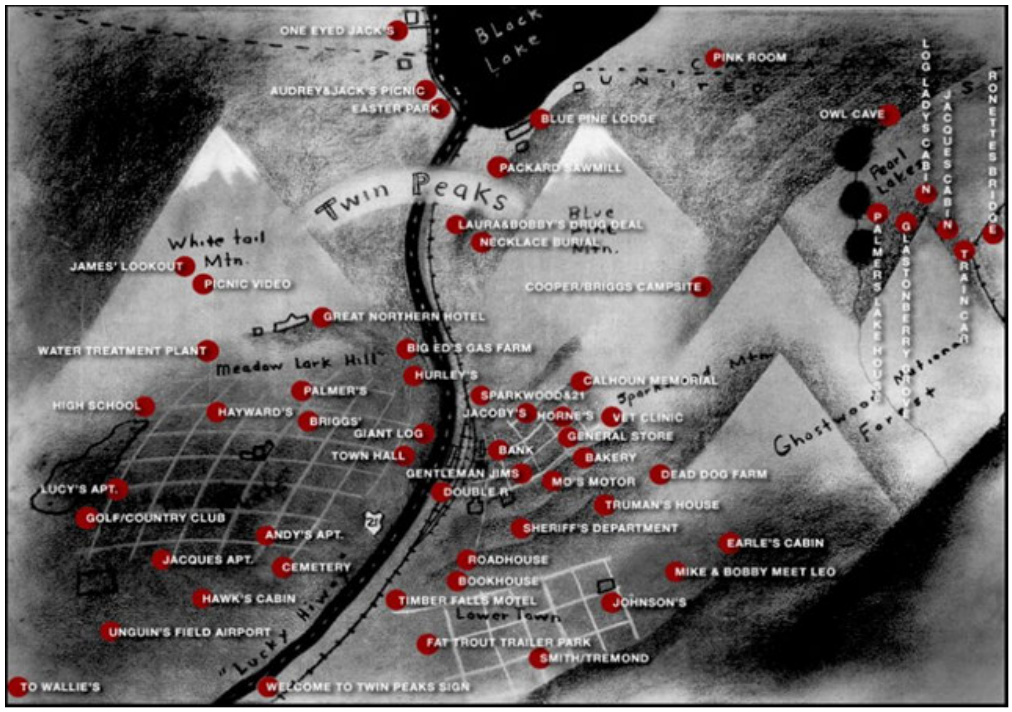

Figure 2: Map of Twin Peaks. Image drawn by David Lynch [http://welcometotwinpeaks.com/locations/twin-peaks-maps/].

The following discussion shows that TP is not a traditional 'whodunnit' (Hewitt, 1986/2009). Rather than providing clear and distinct motifs and answers, TP's world is concomitant with obscure, multifaceted and shifting motifs and reasons. By revisiting Foucault's six characteristics of heterotopias, we first illustrate how 'spaces of alternate ordering' work and what they look like in TP. Subsequently, we emphasize how the interruption and undermining of common order and sense, well-marked within TP, evokes absurdity in the practices, relations and conduct of the town's central characters.

The town's heterotopic sites

In TP we see a wide variety of heterotopias. The town illustrates that heterotopias are, first and foremost, *universal* (Foucault, 1986). The Great Northern Hotel, for instance, presents an interesting site of a heterotopia of deviance, i.e. a site that is characterized by practices and behavioural patterns that essentially differ from common norms, codes and conventions (Dumm, 2002: 39). Aside from being a place that lodges people like Special Agent Cooper, it is a place where salient characters get together and where 'anomalous activities' – most often with the consent of Benjamin Horne, hotel owner and business man – take place. The Roadhouse presents another 'heterotopia of deviance' which follows its own rules and codes of conduct and does not welcome everyone – as with One Eyed Jacks, the casino-brothel which is just across the border in Canada. Due to the forbidden rites and practices that occur there, it tends to present a 'heterotopia of crisis', mainly attended by people who are in a state of transition and change. The town's hospital is another 'space of otherness' where not everyone goes on a regular basis, and where the behaviour of the 'inmates' clearly deviates from 'normal' behaviour. Another interesting place is the Packard Sawmill. Its qualities of otherness are initially difficult to discern. For many TP inhabitants it is an ordinary place of work. However, there are also many secret and illegal activities that take place in the sawmill, to which not everyone gets access. Furthermore, there are several sites in TP that exist in-between the 'real' and the 'imaginary' (Davis, 2010). These other sites tend to open themselves up in dreams – the Red Room, the dark and evil Black Lodge, or the Ghostwood Country Club & Estate – a space in the business imagination of Benjamin Horne. That said, we note that most sites in TP are infused by twisted other orders. Yet there are sites in which other orders are eminently pronounced – for example in the Red Room, where there is only backwards talk and movement – and there are sites which present themselves as less (obviously) deviant and different, like the Double R Diner, the place where people get together, having 'damn good coffee' and cherry pie.

The functions – *raison d'être* (Foucault, 1986) – and use of heterotopias are also not static but can *change* over time (Dumm, 2002: 39). In TP, we mainly see this change of function in its symbolic heterotopias. The business fantasies surrounding the Ghostwood Country Club & Estate are, for instance, subject to constant modifications of focus and imagery; over the course of the action, this site seems to diverge from its short-term, profit-oriented focus and develop into a 'project' that is mainly interested in what can be referred to as 'alternative business'. Changes in symbolic sites in TP are, however, frequently linked to changes in physical sites. The Great Northern Hotel, for example, originally serves Benjamin Horne as a place from where he could initiate 'big business'

deals. At some point though, he starts to lose interest in such arrangements and instead gets involved in social endeavours, reflecting upon the question of how to 'make the world a better place'. We also notice other changes in the operations and organizing practices at the Great Northern. For example, we see how espionage enters the hotel. Audrey, Benjamin Horne's daughter, and Donna, Laura Palmer's best friend, are increasingly interested in secretive activities, which suggests that it is no longer Agent Cooper and the policemen alone who are engaged in detective work. However, changes of *raison d'être* can also be observed in other sites. As time passes we realize that some of TP's heterotopias lose their quality and intensity of 'difference and disturbance' and hence turn into more ordinary sites (see also Kornberger and Clegg, 2003). At the same time, we perceive the opposite development: sites like the Police Station show that ordinary and rather authoritative sites can also be transformed into spaces of otherness.

Following Foucault (1986), heterotopias are, moreover, *multiple spaces* where sites and orders meet that are normally kept separate. In drawing together 'places that are foreign to one another' (*ibid.*: 25), this characteristic makes heterotopias also appear as 'spaces of absurdity'. In TP, we frequently see a twinning and colliding of mundane *and* rather fictive and surreal sites and orders. The Great Northern is, in this context, once more illustrative: it is not only a hotel, a ballroom, conference center, a premise and living quarters; it is also a site from where several mysteries, secrets and sublime dreams and visions – like the one of the Ghostwood Country Club & Estate – emerge and disseminate. Similarly, TP's Police Station: it is the place officially responsible for solving crime, but it is also a place for friendship and affairs, *and* a place for 'thinking, perceiving and acting differently', as for example Cooper's investigation method of 'mind-body coordination' suggests. As such, TP appears to be full of sites where orders connect that are commonly considered incompatible (Topinka, 2010). Often, it is the order of 'the good and pleasant' that interweaves with the order of 'evil and dark'. For instance, TP's mysterious woods present a heterotopic site that contains entry points to both good and evil orders. These orders are illustrated by the White and the Black Lodges, which are 'places of testing' and boundary crossing. While the White Lodge is a place of hope and possible relief, the Black Lodge, mainly mastered by the rules of 'evil Bob', is a site that emerges as notably opaque, bizarre and mysterious. Amongst other things, this is due to the language spoken: it is turned upside down, resulting in a full inversion of the common sense of grammar and syntax. That said, we observe that TP's woods appear to be unsettled. To us, this unsettledness mainly symbolizes the ongoing struggle of different intermingling orders and forces of power that shape TP and its various sites of organizing (Hetherington, 1997).

Another specific feature of heterotopias is that they are informed by and linked to different orders and layers of *time* (Dumm, 2002: 40). Commonly, they present temporal passages and are thus 'not oriented toward the eternal, but are rather absolutely temporal' (Foucault, 1986: 26). Looking at the world of TP, we instantly see a fusion of time layers in the Red Room, the White Lodge and the Black Lodge. These are mythical sites that occur in dreams or between realities and hence make a separation between past, present and future often impossible (Davis, 2010: 670). A giant who is moving in-between these spatio-temporal sites, while advising Cooper, can be seen as the embodiment of the colliding of different times in TP. The Ghostwood Country Club & Estate also adopts a position in-between the real and surreal. It aspires to step beyond its ghostly incarnation and create a 'time of realization' and enactment; yet this is 'work in progress'. Further, there are various physical spaces of so-called criss-crossed time. For instance, the Roadhouse where regular time stops for people. Here they can enjoy leisure time and forget their sorrows. The Great Northern presents another place where different times intersect, for example a time of rest and a time of business. As a place of entertainment, One Eyed Jacks is yet another site where times intersect and become intensified: there is a 'time of erotica', a 'time of gambling' and a 'time of good and bad luck'. Generally, we note that TP's sites of other ordering foster a non-linear, event-focused notion of time, and present the eroding of different times as anything but unusual (Kornberger and Clegg, 2003).

Heterotopias are, furthermore, *different* from all other sites that they reflect (Foucault, 1986). They follow their own logics of order/ing, and contain specific *entry*- and *exit*-mechanisms (Hetherington, 1997). In TP, we see sites of other organizing that follow very particular principles, codes of access and 'cleaning rituals'. Their 'deceptive entries' and 'illusive exits' are illustrated by various signs and symbols, for instance the trees which are in violent motion, or the traffic lights which constantly swing and thereby 'reflect the town's outward and inward self' (Odell and LeBlanc, 2007: 48). The twin peaks themselves also symbolize the borders and boundaries of the town; they connect, disconnect and tighten the locale. Another symbol, which highlights the entrance rules to sites of otherness, is the secret. TP is 'full of secrets' – and spying and control attempts are concomitantly widespread. At least this is what sites, where some of TP's characters lurk around, like the Police Station, the Great Northern or One Eyed Jacks with its surveillance cameras suggest. For instance, Audrey, who proves to be Cooper's informal 'assistant detective', specializes in using the secret places in the Great Northern, from where she eavesdrops on whoever conducts business. In a similar manner, Laura's former schoolmates Bobby, James and Donna turn into self-appointed detectives as time passes. In TP, complex surveillance and control practices are thus 'in play', regulating the entry and exit of its other sites.

However, this does not mean that these sites are isolated or simply enclosed (Dumm, 2002: 40). Even very secretive sites such as the Black Lodge reveal that, under certain conditions, spaces of other order open up and become accessible.

Finally, spaces of otherness do not exist on their own. As *relational sites*, heterotopias are connected to other social sites for which they have a function (Foucault, 1986). Sites in TP that are interlinked in complex ways are, for instance, the Great Northern, the Ghostwood Country Club & Estate, One Eyed Jacks, the Police Station, the Roadhouse and the Double R Diner. As to the function of the latter, we note that the coffeehouse serves as a mainly peaceful 'site of the day', where people can enjoy a cup of coffee and, while doing so, re-cover from or compensate for the daily 'travails' and pressures stemming from other, potentially more challenging, sites. The Double R is the central connecting site in TP as everybody, no matter where s/he comes from and to which 'business' s/he belongs, longs for its coffee and pie. However, there are also other 'spaces of compensation' in TP (Foucault, 1986). For example, One Eyed Jacks, which presents, in contrast to the Double R, a 'site of the night'. As such, it is a site where boundaries are and can be transgressed, and illegal desires and addictions, like sex or cocaine addictions, can be lived out. Nonetheless, One Eyed Jack remains connected to TP's other sites. What is more, it seems to allow some of these sites to operate in a more ordered manner. Therefore, we argue that in TP the 'order of the night' and the 'order of the day' – signifying order and dis-order – are mutually dependent on each other (Cooper, 1990). As for the question what or who exactly connects the town's different heterotopic sites and orders, we further, observe that connectors take on various forms – symbols, objects and subjects all act as connectors. On an imaginary plane, the dream is, for instance, a crucial connector in TP. There are revealing, yet often disturbing, dreams and visions, like those Cooper and Sarah Palmer, Laura's mother, have of 'evil Bob'. There are, besides, more re-creative – 'American' – dreams about the opportunities, empowerment and liberty life might generally offer. Either way, TP's dreams are not innocent, but have real, corporeal effects. On a related note, we see that there are various artifacts and objects in TP, informing the activities and relations at stake. We see, for instance, how coffee and donuts become these coveted objects which connect people – as does cocaine consumed by several inhabitants of TP, or Laura's ubiquitous picture as homecoming queen. There are, eventually, particular characters that operate as mediators between TP's sites of organizing, like Benjamin Horne, the Log Lady and, above all, Agent Cooper. With regard to Cooper, we observe that he operates in many respects like a 'shaman'; he sees everything with everything and everyone connected. Over the course of the action this results in Cooper merging with the world of TP (Blassmann, 1999).

The above discussion explored *Twin Peaks* through the six principles Foucault (1986) ascribes to heterotopias. On balance, we see in TP diverse spaces of otherness, namely, physical (e.g. the Great Northern), imaginary (e.g. the Black Lodge), as well as textual heterotopias (e.g. the backwards talk in the Red Room). What they share is their nature of 'being different': they are all composed of multiple, intermingling (dis)orders that frequently reverse and undermine common sense, uniform logic and rational reason. Our analysis thereby portrays TP as a 'city of absurdity'. With that said, the following sub-section places its emphasis more explicitly on TP's absurd elements, practices and modes of conduct. We will refer to TP's central characters and show how their conduct is both informed by and constitutive of the absurdities integrative to TP's spaces of alternate ordering and organizing. We will, furthermore, discuss some of the – *more or less* precarious – effects that potentially come along with the colliding and eroding of familiar orders and landmarks.

Figure 3: Cooper, Laura and the backwards dancing dwarf in the Red Room

Juxtaposing multiple orders: Prompting and sustaining absurdity

That rational, ordinary reason and conventions are contested and exist above all on the surface is in TP most obviously illustrated by the character and life story of Laura Palmer. Everyone wants to see the orderly pattern in the high-school homecoming queen, but Laura conducts a mysterious and precarious 'phantom life'. That is to say, drugs, illicit sex, sadomasochism, and hints of devil worship are or were the hidden, yet real, highlights of Laura's after-school life (Telotte,

1995: 162); a life that seems the inverse and mockery of uniform order, continuity and composure to which Laura, like some sort of 'vampire, returned by the light of day' (*ibid.*). In pointing to, amongst other things, the persistence, juxtapositioning and dynamic interference of the 'order of the day' and 'the order of the night', Laura's life – far from being innocent – evokes a first sense of the absurdities infusing the world of TP. This sense feels reinvigorated when we examine how Agent Cooper proceeds with the murder case and generally navigates through TP's sites of other order/ing.

Cooper's investigation practices notably challenge conventional ideas of work and organizing. While the work of F.B.I. agents is commonly informed by distinct orders and formal logic, Cooper's investigation is not guided by 'quasi-scientific principles'. Rather, he starts out with the premise that 'two and two do not always equal four'. Following the attempt to go beyond 'normal coding' and 'formulaic research' – namely in his work and life – Cooper, more specifically, applies an aesthetics- and spirituality-invested investigation technique which he refers to as the 'Tibetan method'. In putting emphasis on the principles of 'open seeking', intuition, dream-based guidance and bodily experience, the Tibetan method is meant to allow Cooper and the policemen the development of 'freedom from fear'. Cooper's genuine acknowledgement that indeterminancy, ambiguity and absurdity are vivid elements of the investigation is also reflected in his firm belief that 'the shortest distance between two points is not necessarily a straight line'. This belief also affects how Cooper treats so-called facts relevant to solving the murder case (Blassmann, 1999: 13). He relates to various 'data' sources and does not prioritize apparent 'rational' facts and reason over other sources of insight, such as intuition, feelings or affect. Cooper seems to have realized that there is no 'right', given or a-contextual knowledge, truth and meaning that could guide him through the 'jungle' of TP (see also Cooper and Law, 1995).

In twisting and undermining common meaning and convention(s), the unorthodox investigation methods Cooper utilizes, in part, invoke what Cooper and Pease (2002) have referred to as *comic absurdity*, i.e. absurdity that prompts laughter. In TP this is essentially triggered by circumstances in which 'pointedly absurd alterations' (Telotte, 1995: 165) and interruptions of 'normal' order(s), practice and conduct are presented as the most 'natural' thing (Lavery, 1995). A closer look at TP's 'multi-dimensional' characters, their extraordinary preferences and socially maladjusted behaviour further conveys this: Agent Cooper, for instance, is portrayed as somebody who discovers the world of TP, and the smells and flavours it provides, 'with the wonderment of an angel falling from the sky' (Chion, 1995: 110). He drinks a cup of hot coffee and enjoys a donut as if this were his first or last chance to do so. His highly developed enthusiasm for the world of TP also leads him to recite his every thought and activity into a

dictaphone. We thereby get the impression that, for instance, the movement of the trees and the practice of meditation are as important to Cooper and his investigation as are the results of the autopsy processed or the exchanges with other FBI agents. Another complex and bizarre character in TP is the Log Lady. She carries a log everywhere she goes; the log appears to be talking to her, and she operates as its ambassador. For the silent listener these dialogues appear confusing, 'supernatural' and thus difficult to 'decode'. Then there is Leland Palmer, one of TP's most hybrid figures. He plays golf in his living room, he dances and likes singing, preferably in the most inappropriate situations. Amongst other things, he is an entertainer, a lawyer and business man, an eccentric, a father – and a murderer. However, there are many more characters in TP that show eccentric and/or deviant behaviour: there is Benjamin Horne and his comical little brother Jerry, who are ecstatic in their praise for their baguettes with French brie, while – *en passant* – debating and fixing their next big business deals. There is policeman Andy, who cries and has a breakdown at the scene of any disaster, and there is one-eyed Nadine, whose entire energy goes into the creation of completely noiseless drape runners – before she has an accident and falls into a coma from which she awakens as a high-school girl with 'super strength' (Telotte, 1995: 165). The inhabitants of TP just take note of such sudden transformations – not more, not less.

This is only a small 'assortment' of the bizarre and exaggerated conduct and interactions of TP's salient inhabitants. Together with the various magnificently opaque small joys, depicted in ridiculous detail, they provoke the perception of absurdity that gives the series its very specific comicality (Lavery, 1995). However, it is also important to note that, in TP and its sites of (other) organizing, absurdity and thus the colliding and reversal of common sense, order and practice do not always prompt comic effects. In typical Lynchian manner, the break with the 'normal order of things' (*ibid.*: 11) is portrayed in TP as both comical *and* dark and mysterious (Murray, 1992/2009: 141; see also Westwood, 2004). Against this background we will yet examine TP's *darker* sides, thereby returning to TP's main story, its central character Cooper and the investigation he is charged with.

While the dynamic interweaving of different orders and forces, such as the normal and deviant, the good and evil, or the dark and the light, builds from the beginning an integral part of TP's 'city of absurdity', we observe that, over the course of the action, an increasing imbalance emerges between forces and practices that mainly order and connect, and forces that disorder and disconnect the sites in TP. Cooper and the police officer have the task and responsibility to restore 'order and law' in TP. However, we soon learn that they do not succeed in that regard. The solving of the murder case also does not help in restoring order;

somehow more and more problems start to emerge with the arrest of Laura's murderer – who is, as it turns out, her father Leland who was used as host by 'evil Bob'. A particular, destructive form of disorder and 'evil' has apparently threatened TP for a long time; and it seems that the interaction with, or the fight against, this dark order cannot be eliminated. While Cooper primarily acknowledges multiple juxtaposing meanings and orders and the general dynamics and contingency of the world (Tsoukas and Cummings, 1997), he struggles with and is irritated by those orders, forces and sites that he cannot understand, access or negotiate. This is shown by his handling of parasite Bob, who represents the supernatural, evil order in TP. Bob's power center is the Black Lodge, TP's darkest and most mysterious site (Blassmann, 1999: 44). For Cooper, this site is over-burdening. He can hardly counter-act its (dis)orders, which notably challenge his energy, optimism, empathy and inner strength. In consequence, he partly loses his 'freedom of fear', which he developed while being involved and active in other, more open and creative sites of other organizing (Hjorth, 2005).

As time passes, we observe that the dynamic power game between different orders in TP's sites is essentially disturbed by the town's dark forces. These forces weaken and threaten Cooper's position, his autonomy and integrity. In the last scene of TP we, indeed, observe Cooper looking into a mirror, and turning slowly into evil Bob. As Cooper tends to be the central mediator in TP and even its embodiment, these dark forces also threaten TP's sites of alternate ordering. Towards the end of the series it seems that some of these sites partly lose their quality of difference and otherness and, concomitantly, their potential to reverse, transgress and recreate dominant and dominating orders and forces of power (Foucault, 1986). We therefore conclude that the eroding of intertwining orders can be accompanied by precarious effects for sites of organizing and the individuals operating within and across them (Dumm, 2002).

By way of recapitulation: while destructive forces gain ground at the end of the story of TP, we see that 'what starts out as a mystery, still remains a mystery'. Instead of providing us with a consistent, linear storyline and a stable and uniform logic of order, TP provides us with a 'story of absurdity'. This means that TP presents an 'open narrative form' (Henry, 1999/2009) involving multiple 'other' orders and contested meanings which appear initially to not belong together, but ultimately do. Good and evil, comic and darkness, dreams and nightmares, real sites and supernatural sites – they all form ambiguous 'doppelganger' pairs that are bonded and relate to each other and, thereby, convey absurdity as an inherent element of TP and its sites of organizing (Telotte, 1995). With this in mind, we now want to discuss, and reflect in more detail, on the organizational implications of our analysis of TP's other sites and

orders. So, what does the latter mean and imply for our understanding of work and organization?

Otherness, multiplicity and absurdity as immanent in organization

> Heterotopias are informed by the transgressions of their boundaries, by the enunciations they encourage and the contradictions they incite. We can see their effects everywhere we choose to look, but the question is whether we will so choose. (Dumm, 2002: 46)

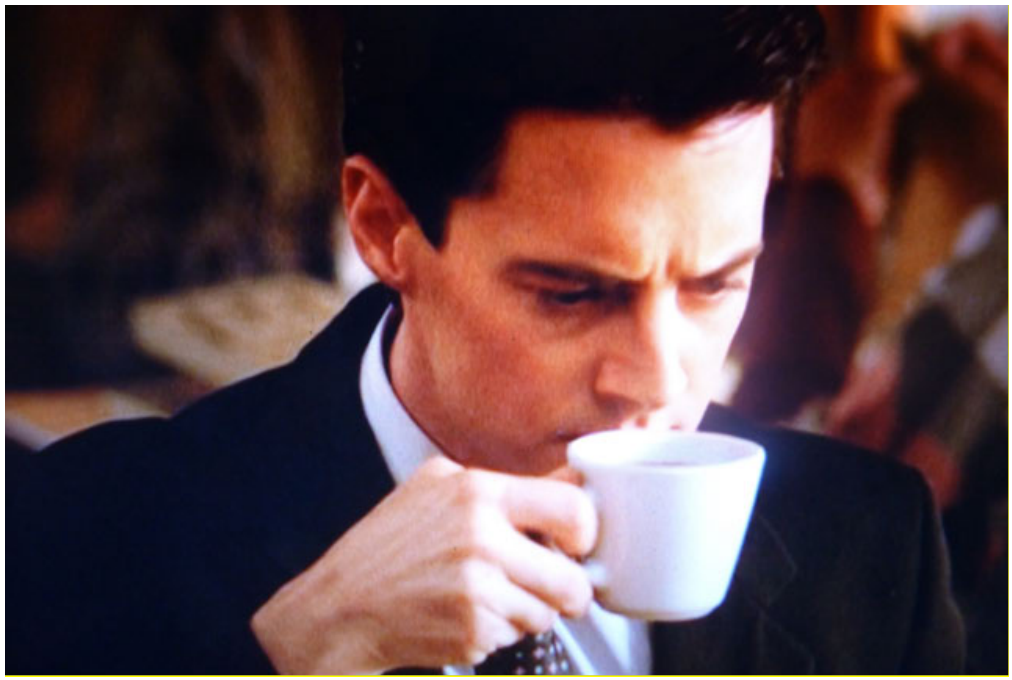

Figure 4: Agent Cooper at the Double R Diner

Utilizing Foucault's (1986) concept of heterotopia, our analysis has focused on the TV series *Twin Peaks* as a means of exploring the interrelation between sites of organizing and absurdity. We have argued that TP presents a 'city of absurdity' in which most sites can be understood as spaces of alternate order/ing. As we have illustrated, spaces of otherness are commonly shaped by diversity and complexity as to their functions, operations and effects (Foucault, 1986). In 'juxtaposing unlike elements' (Dumm, 2002: 41) and 'deviating from the regular picture' (Breskin, 1990/2009: 85), they can 'open the possibility of new arrangements' (Dumm, 2002: 41) and modes of acting 'differently'. However, at the same time they can be challenging and constraining. Particularly in instances in which well-known orders and boundaries are fully disrupted and dissolved,

other spaces can, as shown, turn into sites of destabilization, marginaliation and potential de(con)struction (Kornberger and Clegg, 2003).

On a related note, we see that other sites transform in time and space and are relational in orientation. Despite their nature of being different they are linked to other sites and orders (Davis, 2010). In TP, we mainly observe a persistent intertwining and colliding of 'real' and 'surreal', imaginary sites and orders. Often concomitant with the breaking and subversion of uniform, rational order(s) is the perception of unsettlement and absurdity, which can, but does not necessarily, trigger laughter (Foucault, 1970: xv; Kavanagh and O'Sullivan, 2007). In any case, the explored intermingling and contestation of common orders and conventions leads to the realization that in 'real' life – and organizations – there is, as Audrey says, 'no algebra'. Through this insight, we also realize that it is not the straight paved roads, but the curved mountain paths that matter and that bring TP's story/ies and sites of organizing to life.

Hence, TP tends to be a 'maze' (Blassmann, 1999: 49) constituted of multiple, seemingly contradicting and obscure formulas, codes and landmarks (Westwood, 2004). This maze shapes and is shaped by TP's inhabitants, their practices and conduct, as most notably seen in the case of Cooper, TP's main character. Cooper is immediately absorbed by the atmosphere and aura of TP, as if there were a 'natural purity' to it. He deliberately allows the world of TP to connect with him and, over the course of the action, it acts parasitically on him and eventually swallows him. Cooper acting as a combination of private eye and cultural (and perhaps organizational) ethnographer, explores and 'learns about the community, learns more than it knows about itself' (Lavery, 1995: 13) and, through doing so, allows us to learn with him. It is thus Cooper who connects us, as viewers, with the world of TP. Through his embrace of the intertwining of order and disorder, real and surreal, comic and dark, we get the chance to perceive and be affected by the fundamental ambiguities and absurdities immanent in TP's sites. Put differently, in acknowledging the often absurd 'disturbances in the order of things' (Telotte, 1995), Cooper triggers our imagination of seeing, experiencing and thinking about order and organization in another way (see also Weiskopf, 2014).

Following Mauws and Phillips (1995: 634), good narrative fictions provide us with detailed and plausible life-worlds that are, at the same time, 'complex, ambiguous, unique, and subject to the situational logic, interpretation, resistance, and invention that characterize real organizations'. We consider the TV series TP as one such good fiction. Beyond presenting an extraordinary piece of art, it is also an insightful 'resource' in our quest to further understand how contemporary organizations work in their increasing complexity and obscurity

(Collinson, 2002). TP deals with a variety of organizational issues and phenomena, such as culture, power, surveillance, strategy and change. Yet the images it draws of organization and work are different from those we commonly encounter in organizational analysis (Foreman and Thatchenkery, 1996). In a powerful manner they challenge the notion of organization as a unitary entity composed of rational and homogeneous order and, instead, portray organization as a multiple, dynamic, frequently absurd and paradoxical practice and phenomenon (Kornberger and Clegg, 2003). In foregrounding the opaque pleasures and variegated struggles and strategies TP's inhabitants engage in, TP allows us to perceive organization and organizational sites in a vivid, critical light (Warren, 2008).

The intertwining play with and transgression of boundaries and limits that aim to define and distinguish 'normal' order(s) and conventions from abnormal and deviant order(s) are a significant and recurring element in the art work of David Lynch (Hewitt, 1986/2009: 31). In TP, this 'play', as for instance symbolized by the blinking traffic lights or the two peaks above TP, is presented as crucial for the emergence and development of the various stories, relations and sites 'at stake'. Translated into the context of organization, we can hence argue that the series' title *Twin Peaks* already reminds us of the complementary role of boundaries for all sites of organizing (Cooper, 1990). Boundaries are regulative forces that act as both connectors *and* dis-connectors (*ibid*.). Yet their operating is not to be understood in a linear, straightforward way. Rather, analyzed through the concept of spaces of otherness (Foucault, 1986), TP clearly evokes that what is defined and evaluated as organizational order and disorder, inside and outside, or rational and absurd, is not given, clear-cut and exclusive (Burrell, 1988). These distinctions and categories are provisional and contested *and* mutually dependent and constitutive of each other (Woodward, 1990/2009: 58; Foucault, 1970). Instead of considering organization as a practice of separating and opposing one category or thing to another (Dumm, 2002: 45), our heterotopia-informed study of TP thus allows us to refer to boundaries as a shifting 'between condition', putting organization in perspective as a creative assemblage that continuously relates and connects diverse, seemingly contrasting orders, practices and relations (Clegg et al., 2005: 154; Knights, 1997).

That said, our analysis suggests that organizations are complex and contested *processes* of 'social ordering' (Hetherington, 1997: viii) rather than stable, self-evident 'things' with distinct structures and properties (de Cock, 2000; Foucault, 1986). While 'the formal-cum-abstract mode of reasoning ... of the early organization theorists' (Tsoukas and Cummings, 1997: 668) hardly allows us to account for a dynamic, multifaceted and ambiguous social and organizational reality, we argue that organizational analyses based on concepts like heterotopia

can account for this. In the light of heterotopic analysis organization emerges as an *ambiguous* 'space for play, movement and disclosure' that 'invites' us to reconsider and experiment with organizational orders, limits and limitations (Hjorth, 2005; see also Cooper and Law, 1995). More specifically, the application of the concept of heterotopia reveals that organization is *as much* about the creation of 'disruptions with normalising and regulating forces' (Hjorth, 2005: 396) – and thus about complexity – as it is about attempts to impose order and regulations and, in that way, attempts to reduce complexity (Dumm, 2002). Through going beyond organization's constraining, unifying and disciplinary sides and thus the common 'obsession with order and control' (Burrell, 1988), we claim that the concept of heterotopia holds the potential to contribute to a thinking and knowing of organization that is informed by creativity, complexity and multiplicity (Kornberger and Clegg, 2003).

With this in mind, we want to return, one more time, to our study of TP. Fundamentally, we consider TP to be an embodiment of 'alternate order/ing' that allows us to *experience* social and organizational life as varied, ambiguous and, in many ways, absurd. As a piece of film art it favours and 'replaces dry knowingness with enthusiasm' (de Cock, 2000: 603) and imaginative thinking. The heterotopic analysis of TP as a 'city of absurdity' 'in which elements of existence otherwise unconnected to each other connect' (Dumm, 2002: 39) enables us to vividly question and subvert unitary, representational notions of order and organization (Clegg et al., 2005). With its emphasis on the *qualities* of other ordering and organizing, our analysis, in fact, suggests that heterogeneity, difference and absurdity should be considered constitutive 'elements of organizational existence' (Foucault, 1970). In TP, organization tends to happen through 'interconnecting yet heterogeneous actions' (Cooper and Law, 1995: 246) and through playing with and crossing the boundaries of any, seemingly given, order – not through staying within them (Dumm, 2002: 44).

This nexus is most notably expressed by the unconventional investigation, organizing and management practices of Agent Cooper. These are deeply informed by spirituality and sensuality and, as such, exist beyond and challenge rational, mechanistic and calculative thinking as to work and organization. In his investigation, Cooper does not operate on the basis of traditional dualisms (Knights, 1997); he does not make hierarchical distinctions between 'facts and fiction', real and surreal, rational reason and affect or intuition. Hence, there is no order or source of insight that can claim to be the right or true one for the investigation. Rather, Cooper combines different knowledge sources and practices in his work; this provides him with a certain autonomy and scope that enables him to maneuver through TP's *mêlée*. More generally in TP, strategies at – and outside – work are portrayed as variegated and loosely coupled; they

emerge, interweave and change depending on the situations, territories and social encounters TP's inhabitants are involved in and with. In TP 'everyone seems to become a detective', and vivid lateral interventions in strategies and the general course of action seem to be more prominent than authoritatively imposed orders and prescriptions. Power thus seems to be in 'the hands of many', undermining the existence or development of a monolithic, stable and clearly locatable center of power (Topinka, 2010). We note that, as a consequence, TP's modes of organizing are complex, shifting, intuition-oriented and frequently absurd. Practices of 'other' organizing and managing (such as the 'bordello-business' practices in One Eyed Jacks or the 'Tibetan investigation methods') essentially attack and mock common ideas of organization as being about consistency, logic, abstract planning, long-term strategies, external programming or fixation.

This returns us to our premise that there is a *comical* element to the breaking and colliding of familiar orders and modes of ordering (e.g. things and words) – and, thus, to absurdity (Cooper and Pease, 2002; Foucault, 1970). In TP, the comical reversal and disturbing of 'habitual ways of ordering reality' (Westwood, 2004: 789) are both 'natural' and pivotal to the emergence and development of its sites of other organizing. We are, however, aware that, beyond the world of TP, the juxtaposing of 'alternative perspectives on reality' (Rhodes and Westwood, 2007: 6) is often assessed as a challenge and threat to order and organization (Kenny and Euchler, 2012). With these contexts in mind, we need to be aware of the complex and sometimes unsettling side effects that can accompany absurdity as a form of humour and as a vital element of organization. In persistently undermining rational reason and the formal logic of order, absurdity exposes the 'other' side, the 'supplement' of ordered reality (Cooper and Rease, 2002). Its critical-reflexive potential lies then in its capacity to 'open up', 're-frame' and give visibility to organizational issues and challenges that are routinely rather 'unspeakable' (Critchley, 2007). However, as illustrated with reference to TP's sites of alternate order/ing, absurdity is neither necessarily comical nor solely critical and subversive 'in nature'. As with other forms of humour, absurdity can empower and liberate *and* constrain and discipline. Its very basis is thus ambivalence (Palmer, 1987: 213; Butler, 2015). With regard to contemporary organizations, which are seemingly infused by ludicrous elements and practices, this means that absurdity as a particular form and aspect of humour certainly has 'a place in the picture' (Murray, 1992/2009: 144). However, 'where that place is and where it isn't' (*ibid.*), and how it is played out (Collinson, 2002) – tends to remain contested and dynamic.

Conclusion

Using the example of *Twin Peaks*, examined through a heterotopic lens, this paper has explored the nexus of absurdity and sites of (other) organizing. In our analysis, we have illustrated that TP is full of alternate orders and sites which are, despite their otherness, relational and thus interlinked in variegated ways (Foucault, 1986; Kornberger and Clegg, 2003). While sites of otherness transform in time and space and can, as has been shown, be imaginative and (re)creative and/or de(con)structive and constraining (Hetherington, 1997), they unanimously challenge idealizing, abstract images of organizational sites as uniform, distinct, stable and clear-cut (Hjorth, 2005). In TP's sites we observe an ongoing questioning of, intermingling of and struggling over distinctions and categories such as order and disorder, 'good' and 'bad', normal and abnormal, or comic and dark (Dumm, 2002: 42; Cooper, 1990). Therefore, our heterotopia-informed study of TP as a 'city of absurdity' suggests that social and organizational orders, codes and conventions are diverse, provisional, and often fragile and obscure (de Cock, 2000). Far from being calculative and controlled unities of order, TP's sites of other organizing illustrate that organizations are multifaceted and dynamic assemblages where apparently opposing, yet complementary, orders, practices and 'elements exist simultaneously' (Foreman and Thatchenkery, 1996: 59; Cooper and Law, 1995).

Finally, in the light of these insights, we want to highlight that, as an art form, the medium of film and TV provides us with a rich chance to heighten the 'other', absurd and ludicrous aspects of social and organizational life (Cooper and Pease, 2002; Westwood and Rhodes, 2007). More generally, the medium allows us to gain a sensitive and critical understanding of the complex processes of organization and organizing (Hancock, 2005). This seems to be of particular value if one agrees with Telotte (1995: 164) that the ways we usually speak about our organizational world 'seem ill-suited to the ghost-like shifts' in TP, which 'strike at the meaningfulness, or the potential for meaning, we assume' (*ibid.*). Indeed, TP, which is full of unresolved mysteries, otherness and absurdity, left us with a nagging question: can we accept, in our lives, our workplaces, organizations and in our representations thereof a 'different vision of order, one that includes, even embraces, disorder, or must we have things neatly arranged, like stacks of sugared donuts, a sweet "police-man's dream", a dream of order?' (*ibid.*: 171-2).

This paper has examined Lynch's *Twin Peaks* through Foucault's (1986) still under-explored and under-utilized concept of heterotopia to sustain and further advance discussions of the 'other', seemingly 'disordered' and 'disturbing' sides and qualities of organizations. Its intention is to contribute to OS with regard to

alternate order(ing) and organization (Cooper, 1990; Kornberger and Clegg, 2003; Hjorth, 2005), as well as to studies on organizational humour (Butler, 2015; Westwood and Rhodes, 2007) and, more specifically, absurdity as a form of humour (Cooper and Pease, 2002). Essentially, our analysis of TP's 'city of absurdity' aims to encourage the development of a 'heterotopic sensibility', i.e. a sensibility for 'thinking difference' and 'thinking differently' (Johnson, 2006). Such a sensibility allows us to acknowledge and affirm the contingent juxtaposing and intertwining of multiple, contested and sometimes unsettling and absurd elements and (dis)orders as being immanent to and constitutive of organization, the practice of organizing and, following Foucault (1986), the practice of imagination, creativity – and freedom.

references

Andrew, G. (1992/2009) 'Naked Lynch', in R.A. Barney (ed.) *David Lynch. Interviews*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Blassmann, A. (1999) 'The detective in Twin Peaks'. [http://www.thecityofabsurdity.com/]

Breskin, D. (1990/2009) 'David Lynch', in R.A. Barney (ed.) *David Lynch: Interviews*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Burrell, G. (1988) 'Modernism, post modernism and organizational analysis 2: The contribution of Michel Foucault', *Organization Studies*, 9(2): 221-234.

Butler, N. (2015) 'Joking aside: Theorizing laughter in organizations', *Culture and Organization*, 21(1): 42-58.

Chion, M. (1995) *David Lynch*. London: British Film Institute.

Clegg, S., M. Kornberger and C. Rhodes (2005) 'Learning/organizing/becoming', *Organization*, 12(2): 147-167.

Collinson, D.L. (2002) 'Managing humour', *Journal of Management Studies*, 39(3): 269-288.

Cooper, B. and E.C. Pease (2002) '"Don't want no short people 'round here'": Confronting heterosexism's intolerance through comic and disruptive narratives in Ally McBeal', *Western Journal of Communication*, 66(3): 300-318.

Cooper, C. (2005) 'Just joking around? Employee humor expression as an ingratiatory behavior', *Academy of Management Review*, 30(4): 765-776.

Cooper, R. (1990) 'Organization/disorganization', in J. Hassard and D. Pym (eds.) *The theory and philosophy of organizations*. London: Routledge.

Cooper, R. and J. Law (1995) 'Organization. A distal and a proximal views', *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*, 13: 237-274.

Critchley, S. (2007) 'Humour as practically enacted theory, or, why critics should tell more jokes', in R. Westwood and C. Rhodes (eds.) *Humour, work and organization*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Davis, T. (2010) 'Third spaces or heterotopia? Recreating and negotiating migrant identity using online spaces', *Sociology*, 44(4): 661-677.

De Cock, C. (2000) 'Reflections on fiction, representation, and organization studies: An essay with special reference to the work of Jorge Luis Borges', *Organization Studies*, 21(3): 589-609.

Dougherty, V.M. (1994) 'Absurdity and the limits of literalism: Defining the absurd result principle in statutory interpretation', *The American University Law Review*, 44: 127-166.

Dumm, T. (2002) *Michel Foucault and the politics of freedom*. Boston: Rowman & Littlefield.

Foucault, M. (1970) *The order of things: An archaeology of the human sciences*, trans. anon. Andover: Tavistock.

Foucault, M. (1984) *The history of sexuality, vol. 2: The use of pleasure*, trans. R. Hurley. London: Penguin Books.

Foucault, M. (1986) 'Of other spaces', trans. J. Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, 16(1): 22-27.

Foreman, J. and T.J. Thatchenkery (1996) 'Filmic representations for organizational analysis: The characterization of a transplant organization in the film *Rising sun*', *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 9(3): 44-61.

Goldsmith, L., T. Huddleston, J. Jediny and R. Taylor (2006) 'A guide to Twin Peaks'. [http://www.notcoming.com/features/a-guide-to-twin-peaks/]

Hancock, P. (2005) 'Uncovering the semiotic in organizational aesthetics', *Organization*, 12(1): 29-50.

Henry, M. (1999/2009) 'David Lynch: A 180-degree turnaround', in R.A. Barney (ed.) *David Lynch: Interviews*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Hetherington, K. (1997) *The badlands of modernity*. London: Routledge.

Hewitt, T. (1986/2009) 'Is there life after *Dune*?', in R.A. Barney (ed.) *David Lynch: Interviews*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Hjorth, D. (2005) 'Organizational entrepreneurship: With de Certeau on creating heterotopias (or spaces for play)', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 14(4): 386-398.

Johnson, P. (2006) 'Unraveling Foucault's different spaces', *History of the Human Sciences*, 19(4): 75-90.

Kavanagh, D. and D. O'Sullivan (2007) 'Advertising: The organizational production of humour', in R. Westwood and C. Rhodes (eds.) *Humour, work and organization*. London: Routledge.

Kenny, K. and G. Euchler (2012) '"Some good clean fun": Humour, control and subversion in an advertising agency', *Gender, Work and Organization*, 9(3): 306-323.

Knights, D. (1997) 'Organization theory in the age of deconstruction: Dualism, gender and postmodernism revisited', *Organization Studies*, 18(1): 1-19.

Kornberger, M. and S. Clegg (2003) 'The architecture of complexity', *Culture and Organization*, 9(2): 75-91.

Lavery, D. (1994) 'Introduction', in D. Lavery (ed.) *Full of secrets: Critical approaches to Twin Peaks*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Mauws, M.K. and N. Phillips (1995) 'Understanding language games', *Organization Science*, 6(3): 322-34.

Murray, S. (1992/2009) 'Twin Peaks: Fire walk with me: The press conference at Cannes 1992', in R.A. Barney (ed.) *David Lynch: Interviews*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Odell, C. and M. LeBlanc (2007) *David Lynch*. Herts: Kamera Books.

Palmer, J. (1987) *The logic of the absurd: On film and television comedy*. London: BFI.

Telotte, J.P. (1995) 'The dis-order of things in *Twin Peaks*', in D. Lavery (ed.) *Full of secrets: Critical approaches to Twin Peaks*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Topinka, R.J. (2010) 'Foucault, Borges, heterotopia: Producing knowledge in other spaces', *Foucault Studies*, 9: 54-70.

Tsoukas, H. and S. Cummings (1997) 'Marginalization and recovery: The emergence of Aristotelian themes in organization studies', *Organization Studies*, 18(4): 655-683.

Warren, S. (2008) 'Empirical challenges in organizational aesthetics research: Towards a sensual methodology', *Organization Studies*, 29(4): 559-80.

Weiskopf, R. (2014) 'Ethical-aesthetic critique of moral organization: Inspirations from Michael Haneke's cinematic work', *Culture and Organization*, 20(2): 152-174.

Westwood, R. (2004) 'Comic relief: Subversion and catharsis in organizational comedic theatre', *Organization Studies*, 25(5): 775-795.

Westwood, R. and C. Rhodes (eds.) (2007) *Humour, work and organization*. London: Routledge.

Woodward, R.B. (1990/2009) 'A dark lens on America', in R.A. Barney (ed.) *David Lynch. Interviews*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

the authors

Bernadette Loacker is a member of the editorial collective of *ephemera*.
Email: b.loacker@lancaster.ac.uk

Luc Peters is an independent philosopher and writer. His book *Cliché & organization: Thinking with Deleuze & film* was published in 2014. The book was nominated for management book of the year in the Netherlands and an English version will be released in 2015. His books *In the mirror* (with Dr. Anthony R. Yue), *(dis)CONNECTION*, and *Frank Lloyd Wright – NOMAD* will be published in 2015. He is now writing a novel, with the working title *FooTprinTs*. He is a regular at various conferences like EGOS and SCOS. Besides writing, he works as a manager and consultant, is a guest-lecturer and a

hard-rock drummer. Between his travels and adventures, Luc lives and works in the Netherlands. For more information, see: www.lucpeters.net.
Email: info@lucpeters.net

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
ISSN 2052-1499 (Print)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 15(3): 651-669

'What do you do?': Stand-up comedy versus the proper job

Oliver Double

Abstract

Stand-up comedy is often seen as such an unusual choice of profession that it barely even qualifies as being a 'proper job'. Because comedians are seen as existing outside the world of conventional employment, they have a unique position from which to view the everyday reality of work as most people experience it. This paper looks at a range of gags and routines from the early 1970s onwards that either reflect on the unusual nature of the job of being a comedian or cast an amused light on more conventional forms of employment. Theories about stand-up comedy and humour in the workplace will be used to explore the relationship between comedy *as* work and comedy *about* work.

'I wish I had a proper job'

At the Edinburgh Fringe in 1984, Tony Allen – a pioneer of the British alternative comedy scene and an anarchist to boot – was watching a show featuring three American stand-ups, and disliked the way one of them was working the room.[1] Allen later recalled the kind of question that this comic, Larry Amoros, was asking: 'Who's that you're with and how much did you pay for her?'. Alternative comedy sprang into life partly to challenge this kind of cheap sexism, and Allen found a way to wreak revenge on Amoros:

1 For a definition of 'working the room' and a discussion of the purpose it serves, see Mintz (1985: 78-79).

He used to work his way across the front row and I purposefully sat down right at the end where he'd finish. Eventually he came up to me and said, 'What do you do?' I replied, 'I'm a comedian. What do you do?' (Connor, 1990: 11)

As well as being a clever put-down – having delivered his line, Allen left the show to the applause of the rest of the audience – this exchange is very revealing. The gag plays on one of the standard questions which comedians ask punters whilst working the room: 'What do you do?' This well-established ploy allows the comic to comment on the nature of the punter's job, often in the form of a ritual insult. Allen's joke plays on the convention by getting in first with a ritual insult of his own, which turns the whole thing on its head by suggesting that Amoros is too unfunny to actually qualify as a comedian.

This incident highlights two important points. Firstly, that a standard stand-up technique allows comedians to cast comic aspersions on forms of employment more conventional than their own. Secondly, their own job brings with it unusually specific requirements – the need to elicit laughter – without which it can hardly be said to exist at all.

Allen is by no means the only performer to make a joke based on the idea that being a stand-up comedian is unlike any other job. In the second series of his TV show *Alexei Sayle's Stuff* (1989), Sayle sends up audience participation by complaining about the way comedians go out into the crowd and start physically messing about with individual punters, all the while enacting the very behaviour he is complaining about. As if realising his mistake, he suddenly stops what he is doing and confesses:

> God, isn't it a humiliating job being a comedian, eh? [laughter] My dad'd be embarrassed if he could see me now. Mind you, he used to sexually molest elephants for a living. [laughter] God, I wish I 'ad a proper job.

This cues a song, in which he fantasises about the 'proper job's he could be doing, including being a computer programmer, a dispatch rider or working in a cake shop. It concludes with the couplet: 'You'd turn me off like that if I wasn't funny / It's just as well that I earn far too much money'.

Around the same time, Ben Elton (1987) also had a routine which sent up audience participation, arguing that choosing a volunteer from the audience means 'the comedian has run out of jokes' and leads the first three rows to think to themselves: 'Fuckin' 'ell, I hope he doesn't choose me, I hope he doesn't choose me!'. Elton suggests another way punters could respond to this:

> Why do you hope he doesn't choose you, you could tell him to piss off, couldn't ya?? [laughter] 'No, piss off, get on with your job, I've paid! [laughter] Fuck off, I'm not getting up onstage, I've been at work all day, entertain me! [laughter] Do I ask you to come down where I work and *polish my lathe?'* [laughter].

On the face of this, these jokes come from opposite angles. Sayle explicitly contrasts being a comedian with having a proper job. Elton, on the other hand, applies the logic of conventional employment to his own job, thus suggesting perhaps stand-up comedy should be viewed in the same light as the kind of engineering work which would involve using a lathe. Like both Sayle and Allen, Elton was part of the early alternative comedy scene which was strongly associated with left-wing politics, and he was particularly known for his socialist, anti-Thatcher opinions. With hindsight, comparing himself with a lathe operator could be seen as delusions of working-class grandeur, given his actual background as the son of a noted physics professor. Nonetheless, although the joke likens stand-up comedy to skilled manual labour, ultimately it works because the comparison is incongruous. In both cases then, the implication is that stand-up comedy is an unusual kind of employment, outside the category of the proper job.

This idea is reasonably common in stand-up routines, and continues to occur in more recent examples. In a routine from his 2011 TV series, Stewart Lee recalls moving to London in the 1980s to try and establish himself in the capital's alternative comedy scene, and having to get a job as a librarian to sustain himself. Once he is getting enough work to give up the day job, he hands in his notice, and tells the head librarian he is going to be a professional comedian. The first laugh comes when he recalls her reaction: 'Oh, you never seemed very funny'. He gets more laughs by playing on the very different demands of being a librarian and being a comedian, pointing out how impossible it would be to try and be funny in a library:

> I know, I don't know what I was supposed to do in the, in the library, you know. [quiet laughter] In silence. [laughter] Put the books away in a funny way. [laughter].

Then he becomes characteristically self-referential, comparing being a librarian with the particular way that he tackles the job of being a comedian:

> Funny thing is though, as I was leaving – the other librarian turned to her and said, 'I think he is a funny librarian, actually. It's just that you – have to 've seen a lot of other librarians to realise what it is he's doing'. [extended laughter] And the other went, 'No, you're wrong. [laughter] You're', she said, 'you're either a funny librarian or you're not. And he's not – a funny librarian'. [laughter] And the other one said, 'Well he is, because he's – he *is* a librarian. But he also, it's like he comments on what a librarian is'. [extended laughter]. (Lee, 2011)

Here, Lee is playing on his popular image as a comedian who comments on the very form of stand-up comedy itself by satirizing or subverting its techniques and conventions.[2] The joke works by transposing this logic to the world of the far more conventional job of a librarian, and it gains the incongruity necessary to provoke laughter precisely because stand-up comedy is seen as being unlike any other profession. If comparing being a comedian to having a proper job is funny, then comparing being a comedian's comedian to having a proper job is even funnier.

Stand-up comedians are self-employed as sole traders seeking contracts from venues and broadcasters, often employing agents to help them achieve this. Ultimately, their market value is based on their ability to make an audience laugh, as the venues which contract them are unlikely to offer future bookings if they send the punters home disappointed. As a result, by paying the ticket price, it is ultimately the audience that employs them in a commercial venture which trades laughs for money.

Tony Allen's joke works by suggesting that Larry Amoros was reneging on this basic deal, by being too obnoxious or unfunny to offer the audience the amusement they should expect, and the audience's response suggests he might have been right. Ben Elton's lathe joke makes the deal explicit. He has the imaginary audience member telling the comedian to 'get on with your job' because, 'I've paid!'. In Elton's eyes, audience participation is a scam, because it relies on the paying punter contributing to the work which will create the laughter he or she has paid for.

In a performance at the Old Birmingham Repertory Theatre in the late 1990s, Mark Thomas takes the point further, telling the audience 'this is my job, this is what I do'. A few punters laugh at this simple statement – probably for the well-established reason of stand-up comedy not being seen as a 'job' – and he picks up on their cynicism, saying, 'But – this is, this is how I earn my money, and, and this is how I've become middle class as well, thank you for paying for that. [laughter]' (Thomas, 1998). Here, stand-up is not only explicitly a form of trade, allowing the comedian to earn his money, it is also a vehicle for class mobility. Unlike Elton, Thomas came from a working-class background. His father was a builder, and he himself worked on a building site after completing a drama degree at Bretton Hall. Indeed, shortly after this gag he moves into a routine about the 'very fuckin' short period of time' he spent in the construction

2 For example, a 2004 review claims that, 'Lee's wilful sophistication will not stroke everyone's funny bones...it relies on your knowledge of the rules it's toying with' (Maxwell, 2004).

industry. Becoming a comedian, a trader in laughs, has given him the money to escape his background and become middle class.

Like most forms of trade that enable class mobility, stand-up comedy demands dedication and sheer hard work. Sarah Millican explains that it involves 'working your arse off', and contrasts comedians who 'don't necessarily have funny bones' but have a 'workmanlike' attitude, with others who 'are hilarious and put no work in'. The former, she believes, can make a good career, whereas the latter 'don't get anywhere'. The reason why 'brilliant' people don't make it is because 'they don't have the work ethic' (Millican, 2012).

Of course, although their profession may be seen as unusual, most comedians will have had proper jobs before they started their careers in stand-up. Their previous engagement in the world of conventional employment can become part of the act, as with Lee's librarian routine and Thomas's comments about working in construction. This kind of routine can help to cement the comedian's relationship with the audience. The fact that they once had a proper job means that they have something in common with the people they are performing for, and thus comics who have never experienced the world of conventional work can be at something of a disadvantage. Ross Noble, for example, who started doing stand-up in his mid-teens, says, 'I'm different from the people in the audience purely because I've never had a job, I've never had a normal existence, and all I've ever done is stand-up' (Noble, 2004).

Some performers play on the specific nature of other jobs they have had, and previous employment can form the basis of an entire Edinburgh show, like Alfie Moore's *I Predicted a Riot* (2012), which hinged on the comedian's long experience as a police officer. Moore presents what *The Guardian* has described as 'a comedic meditation on the sometimes absurd, occasionally dangerous and often misunderstood world of modern policing' (O'Hara, 2012), and he sees stand-up as a 'powerful medium' with which to share his cop's-eye perspective:

> 'What rank do you have to get to in the police before anyone will actually listen to you? Very high, I would suggest. [As] a comedian, people listen'. (in O'Hara, 2012)

For some, becoming a comedian is seen as an escape from conventional employment. When I was on the circuit, I remember a comic who had started in stand-up comparatively late in life regularly saying how glad he was that he had swapped the nine-to-five life for a job that only required him to work for twenty minutes every night. The hardworking Sarah Millican (2011) even tells her audience how stand-up has allowed her to escape:

> I've only been doing stand-up for about six years and before that my life was quite substantially different. I was married – and I had a job that I hated so much, I used to try and get knocked over on the way in. [extended laughter].

'I'm the best in the business'

The position that comedians enjoy – being seen as having escaped the sphere of conventional employment – gives them a unique perspective from which to comment on the world of the proper job. Many of the critiques they offer particularly focus on issues of status and hierarchy in the workplace, sometimes relating this to the idea that conventional employment can ultimately feel rather pointless.

Josie Long provides an unusual example in her 2008 show *Trying is Good* in a routine which describes a job which is, if anything, even less conventional than her own. Whilst applying to join a gym, she finds herself waiting in an office which looks down on a swimming pool where there are 'lots of very little children, very tentatively trying to navigate their way across' a floating inflatable obstacle course. She continues:

> And then at the side of the pool, there was a man – whose job it was – was to stand there – *with a powerful hose!!* [quiet laughter] Just picking 'em off! [laughter] *Getting rid o' the weak!* [laughter] Which is one fing, until you realise that's his *job!* [laughter] Like, at dinner parties, people can go, 'Oh sorry Ewan, what, what do you do for a living?'

She then adopts a smug, self-satisfied attitude and cod Morningside accent to act out his imagined reply:

> 'Me? Oh, I hose children off a floating assault course. [loud, extended laughter] That's what I do. [laughter] How long have I been doing it? Twenty five years, I'm the best in the business'. [laughter] 'Why do you do that?' 'Presumably to upset them, I don't know. [laughter] I don't enjoy my work!' [laughter]' (Long 2008)

On the face of it, Long is simply sharing her comic delight at discovering somebody with a ridiculously bizarre job. In fact, she is also sending up more general aspects of the world of work. 'Ewan' – her imagined version of the man with the hose – is exaggeratedly proud of his chosen profession when asked about it at a dinner party. The gag works by incongruously transposing middle-class pride over career status to a bizarre job, but by extension it also suggests that boasting about more conventional jobs might be similarly ridiculous. Moreover, 'Ewan' is proud in spite of the fact that he has no idea what the point of his job actually is, and admits that it brings him no fulfilment. Again, the

point can easily spill out to more conventional types of work which may be unfulfilling and seem to have no obvious point or purpose.

Generally, comedians get laughs by focusing on more conventional careers, and this often happens in the process of working the room. One comic who has made this a central part of his act is Al Murray, who performs in character as the Pub Landlord, an engagingly boorish Little Englander who regales audiences with plainly ludicrous opinions fuelled by misplaced pride and petty bigotry. Murray often starts his shows by asking a series of individual punters their names and what they do for a living. He establishes these people as characters, coming back to them throughout the rest of the show. Much of the comedy springs from how what each punter says relates to the basic dynamics of Murray's character. The Pub Landlord loves Queen and country, fry-ups, Formula One racing, the military, and anything typically British and working-class. He despises Europeans (especially the French), computers and new technology generally, anything effete and middle-class, and effeminacy – in spite of hints that he himself has suppressed homosexual desires.

Sometimes, the jokes hinge on the character's ridiculously old-fashioned sexism. He picks out a woman from the front rows, and asks her:

> What do you do, my sweet? Bearing in mind the correct answer for a woman is of course secretary or nurse. [laughter] You're a teacher? Fantastic! Half secretary, half nurse. [laughter and applause]. (Murray, 2007)

Anything conspicuously masculine is instantly applauded. Discovering that a punter called John designs ships, he crows with delight:

> You design ships? [laughter] That's more like it, innit, eh? [laughter and some applause] What sorta ships – mainly? Chris? Warships? That is even more like it, innit? [laughter].

Then he turns back to a punter called Jeremy – who he has derided for his job as a mobile phone designer – and sneers, 'All you can do is, like, "Well, let's put the buttons a bit higher up." [laughter]' (Murray, 2001). Even though the satire seems to be mainly aimed at the character's laughably blinkered stupidity, there are also sideswipes at our attitudes towards work. When a punter called Geoff says he has his own business, the Pub Landlord presses him for more details, and on discovering that Geoff's business is based on cleaning office windows, he openly scoffs: 'Yeah, we – n'yeah. I can see why you've thrown up this smokescreen, mate [extended laughter]'. He then acts out how he imagines Geoff to be at work, cleaning windows with a cloth whilst desperately telling himself, '"I work for myself!"' and '"I'm my own fucking boss!"' (Murray, 2007). Each pathetic statement gets a fresh wave of laughter.

Similarly, when a punter called Chris says he works in 'logistics', the Pub Landlord ruthlessly presses him for more information, gradually peeling away the layers of pretention implicit in that description:

> Pub Landlord: Logistics? [laughter] Narrow it down, mate! [laughter] When I pop out for a pint o' milk, I'm doing logistics, aren't I? [laughter]
>
> Chris: Food distribution.
>
> Pub Landlord: Food distribution? [laughter] You still really haven't told us what you fuckin' do. [laughter] Yeah, when I sort out the peas and the carrots on my plate, that's food distribution. [laughter] When I decide to eat the yolk last of my fried egg, *that* – [laughter] is food distribution. [laughter] What d'you mean, food distribution? Come on Chris – shit or get off the pot, what is it? [laughter]
>
> Chris: We send food out to supermarkets.
>
> Pub Landlord: You send food out – to supermarkets? You work in a warehouse. [laughter and applause] How long you been doing that?
>
> Chris: Er, two years.
>
> Pub Landlord: Two years? What d'you do before that, Chris?
>
> Chris: Er, student.
>
> Pub Landlord: Student? What degree did you do?
>
> Chris: Computer Science.
>
> Pub Landlord: Computer? And you ended up driving a forklift. [laughter]. (Murray 2001)

Of course, the contemptuous conclusions that the Landlord draws about what Geoff and Chris actually do for a living may well be wholly inaccurate. Geoff might spend his days behind a desk running a thriving business rather than working with squeegees and buckets of water; and Chris might work with a complex IT system rather than a forklift. However, although much of the character's comedy derives from his conspicuous wrongheadedness, occasionally there is insight behind his ramblings. As with Josie Long's routine about the swimming pool hose-man, Murray is satirizing the way people use language to disguise the nature of their work, and exaggerate the level of status their career affords them. Additionally, the 'forklift' punchline pokes fun at over-qualification, portraying Chris as somebody whose training in something as sophisticated as IT has led to a comparatively menial warehouse job.

Alexei Sayle (1989) – who joked about wanting a proper job – tends to joke about forms of pretentious language which are closer to home, within the artistic sphere he inhabits. He might, for instance, present a hilarious parody of a pretentious fringe theatre director:

> 'Yeah. We're gonna kind of like interface with the audience [laughter] in a demotic interrelation workshop mode, you know. [laughter] Co-related actors and performers and the audience together, in a workshop-moded situation, you know'. [laughter].

He then drops the character to make his own comment: 'Actually, anybody who uses the word "workshop", who's not connected with light engineering, is a twat. [laughter]'.

This jibe debunks the pretention of fringe theatre by contrasting it with a more literal, down-to-earth approach to life found in less artistic careers. Just as Ben Elton's gag likens him to a lathe operator, so the reference to light engineering aligns Sayle with the world of skilled manual labour. This reflects a political worldview influenced by his upbringing by working-class Marxist parents. An article in *The Face* from 1982 describes Sayle's desire to attract a working-class audience to his shows as 'tantamount to an obsession', and highlights his distaste for the 'self-serving social mobility of British comedians from working-class backgrounds'. However, Sayle was aware that being self-employed – a trader in laughs – put him in an ambiguous position within the class system:

> 'I'm a member of the petit bourgeoisie and Marx said that the petit bourgeoisie could choose which class they have their cultural affiliations with. I chose to have mine with the working class'. (in Taylor, 1982: 18)

'The biggest drawback we have, the Protestant work ethic'

In these examples, career-based self-aggrandisement and the general pointlessness of work are held up for ridicule, but some comedians make more radical critiques of conventional employment. Sayle's gag might align him with skilled manual labour, but he was not one to romanticise the workplace. His 'proper job' song was clearly at least partly ironic, given that one of the careers he imagines pursuing in it is computer programming – the butt of more than one of his routines.[3] In a performance at the Theatre Royal, Nottingham in 1983, he directly asks the audience to think about their experience of work:

3 For example, see 'The Wine Bars of Old Hampstead Town' (Sayle, 1982).

> Actually, I'd like you to think for a minute, right, erm – right, those of you who've actually, er, got jobs, right, erm – not many of you probably, but erm – those of you who've actually got jobs, I'd like you to think for a minute about your boss, right. Think about your boss. Isn't he an *absolute fuckin' knobhead*, eh?? [laughter] Isn't your boss always a *total fuckin' dickhead*, eh? Isn't that a wonderful system where we got where the total knobheads always rise to the top, you know? [laughter]. (Sayle, 1983)

Although the terms Sayle uses might fall short of formal Marxist analysis, the last line suggests more than simple venting of individual workplace frustrations. He specifically derides the entire *system*, and as the routine continues he expands on the idea that incompetents rise to positions of power in the workplace, imagining the manager of a nuclear power station reacting to impending meltdown by ineffectually swanning around shouting, 'Five cups of coffee please, Sandra'.

In a 1970 show at the Village Gate in Greenwich Village, Dick Gregory – a contemporary of Lenny Bruce, and arguably the first politicised African-American comic to appeal to mixed-race audiences – starts his act by working the room in an overtly political fashion. He picks out an individual punter and enquires, 'Can I ask you, what kind of work do you do?'. Discovering the man is a trucker opens up a comic discussion of a recent industrial dispute:

> You with the Teamsters? Oh, Teamsters, Teamsters mess y'all around in Chicago. You see the Teamsters got the big one. Did you dig that? One sixty five a hour raise, baby, did you dig that? Damn right! How much did y'all settle for? Eighteen cents more. Eighteen cents – [quiet laughter] Eighteen cents more, what the hell you mean eighteen cents more? Eighteen cents more than what –? Eighteen cents more than what you was *gittin'!* [laughter] Damn right! Them brothers, they took care of the *business* in Chicago, Jim. Yeah, they was *cryin'*, they said, 'If you get that raise, *baby* food gonna go up'. Cat said, 'We don't give a Goddamn, ain't no babies drivin' trucks anyway'. [laughter] Now you all gonna reopen up your contract, or you – you – you – y'all locked yourself in there? All right. And y'all might get in trouble – driving one of them trucks through Chicago. With them cheap wages y'all settle for. Matter of fact, I might throw a brick at you myself. [laughter]. (Gregory, 1997)

The dispute in question saw Chicago truckers holding out for a pay increase of $1.65 an hour, as opposed to the $1.10 agreed by the employers and the national Teamsters union. Around 800 Chicago trucking concerns locked their workers out to try to hold to $1.10, but many other businesses agreed to pay the extra 55 cents an hour above the national deal (*New York Times,* 1970).

Like Al Murray, Gregory takes his time wheedling precise information out of the punter, keen to get the specifics of the deal his union branch struck with his employer. He carefully checks whether the trucker got an eighteen cent raise, or

eighteen cents above the national deal. His perspective is politically radical, siding with the strikers rather than complaining about any inconvenience the strike might have caused to the general public. Indeed, the baby food gag even ridicules the employers' attempts to use guilt to persuade the truckers to go back to work. He firmly aligns himself with the most radical strikers – the Chicago truckers who held out for the biggest raise – and against the national union who 'mess[ed] y'all around in Chicago', and even the man he is talking to who has settled for 'them cheap wages'.

Mark Thomas (1998) makes an even bolder statement, directly attacking the Protestant work ethic and portraying the world of the proper job as a nasty, dangerous place:

> Because we automatically respect authority, we obey all the fuckin' rules. The – the biggest drawback we have, the Protestant work ethic. How, how many times do you ever fuckin' hear this, 'Well – hard work never hurt anybody'. Wrong! [laughter] Wrong! Fuckin' hard work – is fuckin' unpleasant! [laughter] What you mean, is a week on the sick never hurt anybody. [laughter] Hard work gives you stomach ulcers, angina, heart attack. Guess where fuckin' industrial accidents happen? [laughter] Work! [laughter] Fact – no-one has put their hand through a threshing machine in their own living room, and that is *true!* [laughter].

This leads into the routine about his experiences working on building sites, and an observation about builders' propensity to steal things from work cues him to ask the audience, 'What's the best thing anyone here's nicked – from work?'. The audience are quick to respond, with individual punters confessing to stealing a fridge, a computer and the bar takings from Butlin's holiday camp. Thomas gets the best part of ten minutes of improvised banter with these workplace thieves, congratulating them on their daring: 'A *fridge*? That is *very* good! Oh, fuck me, we've turned into *The Generation Game*, this is brilliant! [laughter]'. His joy is increased when it transpires that the fridge was stolen from a restaurant, but when he discovers it was an extremely small fridge, he becomes less delighted:

> You had a fridge this big in a fuckin' restaurant?? [a few laughs] No, you fuckin' sold hot coffee and fuckin' burgers out the back of a caravan!!! [laughter] Worked in a restaurant, my arse! [laughter and some applause]

Once again, we see a comedian ridiculing a punter for talking up his career, but in this case his achievement as a workplace thief is also being called into question.

This is more political than a gleeful celebration of criminality, though. It follows on from Thomas's assertion that work is 'fuckin' unpleasant', and his criticism that we are generally too keen to 'obey all the fuckin' rules'. The suggestion that workplace theft is a tiny rebellion against authority becomes more overt when the

Butlin's thief explains that he stole the bar money to allow him to go grape-picking in France. Thomas congratulates him by saying, 'You are Birmingham's Reggie Perrin, you're cool! [laughter]'. The reference is telling, as the sitcom character Reginald Perrin escaped the rat race and the pressures of work by faking suicide and assuming a new identity.

'Conduct to be ridiculed and rejected'

Taken together, these examples suggest a subversive critique of the proper job. Career status is ridiculous and dishonest. Bosses are hateful and incompetent. Workers should fight for the best pay deal available, in spite of the advice offered by their employers and agreements made by trade unions. The workplace is unpleasant and dangerous and workplace theft is an acceptable form of payback. How might we judge the apparent radicalism of this comic perspective?

Theories of comedy tend to stress the importance of licence. Referring more to tribal clowns than professional stand-up comics, Douglas (1999: 158) suggests that the joker is 'a privileged person who can say certain things in a certain way which confers immunity'. Mintz (1985: 74) attributes the stand-up comic's 'traditional *license* for deviate behavior and expression' to the fact that he or she is 'defective in some way' and 'presented to his audience as marginal' (emphasis in original). Similarly, Marc (1989: 18) argues that because comedians draw attention to 'deviant and deficient' aspects of their personality, they appear to be 'dangerously outside the boundaries of social control' and are 'capable of saying things that most of [the audience] would not consider saying in public'. When comedians joke about their profession scarcely amounting to a proper job, they are clearly setting up the idea that they are 'marginal' and even 'defective', thus giving them the licence to critique the world of the proper job, apparently from the outside.

Theories about the role of humour in the workplace mirror this idea, suggesting that just as the comedian is an outsider observing the world from without, so humorous exchanges are seen as being entirely separate from normal workplace activities. Joking represents a frame break, a temporary respite from the seriousness of work, within which we can be as subversive as we like before casting aside our reservations and getting back to the job. This idea is even echoed in a gag told by Henning When (2010), in which he typically plays on the stereotype of German hyper-efficiency:

> But let me get one thing straight, we Germans, we like a laugh just like you Brits. The only difference is we Germans, we laugh – once the work is done. [laughter]

> Whilst you laugh *instead* of – [laughter] a-ha! – doing any meaningful work. Yeah, and er – [laughter].

This tends to suggest that however apparently subversive comedy may be, it is ultimately conservative. Because joking is seen as, to use Linstead's (1985: 761) words, 'an aside from normal discourse', it acts as safety valve. Hansot (1986: 201) argues that

> [O]nce we adopt a given frame to interpret our reality and ourselves, the shoe will begin to pinch, the fit will not be quite right, and we will again look for the temporary relief of a new frame-break...After a frame-break we seem to be able to resume activity within a frame with greater ease...after the joke...the social order persists.

Similarly, Mintz (1985: 74) argues that the comedian can be a 'negative exemplar' who reinforces the social order because '[h]e represents conduct to be ridiculed and rejected, and our laughter reflects our superiority, our relief that his weaknesses are greater than our own'.

These arguments seem to ring true in relation to comics like Al Murray or Henning Wehn, who adopt characters or personas which are more or less distinct from their true identities. Murray says that the Pub Landlord 'couldn't be any less like me' (2012), and it is reasonably well known that the performer is a middle-class Oxford-educated liberal, very different from the hectoring, reactionary working-class character he plays on stage. With Henning Wehn, the divide is less clear – he presents more a persona than a clearly defined character – but he still performs in a highly exaggerated version of himself. For example, earlier in his career he would theatricalise the stereotype of German hyper-efficiency by timing the act with a stopwatch.

With comedians like these, there does seem to be a clear 'frame-break'. It is signalled to the audience that the person they are watching on stage is not real, and that the views expressed are not sincerely held by the performer. The Pub Landlord and Henning Wehn are clearly 'defective' – the former an ignorant pontificator, the latter an eccentric overly concerned with efficiency – and they do seems to represent 'conduct to be ridiculed and rejected', as Mintz puts it.

In fact, comedians like Murray and Wehn are politically complex, with layers of ambiguity and occasional shafts of genuine insight. In a show at the Playhouse Theatre in London in 2001, the Pub Landlord encounters a punter called John, who says he works for UBS bank:

> It's not a proper bank, is it mate? [laughter] You're a city boy, aren't ya, eh? [laughter] 'Is the market confident this week?' [laughter, some applause] Should

> fucking well hope so, you get a million pound Christmas bonus, *I'd* be confident, I don't know about you. [laughter] Parasite, take us all down with you. [laughter]. (Murray, 2001)

Coming a few years before a major economic crisis fuelled by the recklessness of investment bankers and the bonus culture in the financial sector, such comments are surprisingly prescient.

In other examples, it is much less clear that the performance is 'an aside from normal discourse'. Many comedians adopt stage personas which are far less distinct from their offstage identities, and the opinions they express onstage are – whilst allowing for some degree of exaggeration – sincerely held. Mark Thomas, for example, acknowledges that his stage persona is a 'bigger version of me' (Thomas, 2004), but the anti-authoritarian left-wing stance he espouses in his comedy is absolutely consistent with the political campaigning he conducts in his offstage life. Given this, it is hard to believe that he is offering up his views simply to be 'ridiculed and rejected'.

However, Mintz (1985: 74) also allows for a 'fascinating ambiguity' in stand-up whereby 'to the extent that we may identify with [the comedian's] expression or behaviour...or publically affirm it under the guise of "mere comedy", or "just kidding", he can become our *comic spokesman*' (emphasis in original). Similarly, Linstead also acknowledges humour's 'enormous symbolic power' (1985: 762). The key to this is for humour to break out of its 'non-real' frame:

> [I]f we were to look for a change in the organizational or social order to occur as a result of the demystifications of humour, these symbolic reversals must be transposed into a 'real-life' framework, and actualized in a real situation...Humour can have great impact in the world by having its content transposed and defined as serious, but also by transposing real-world content into the humorous frame, and defining it as humorous in an indelible and irreversible way. (1985: 763)

In Thomas's stealing from work routine, the boundaries between 'real-life' and the 'non-real' seem extremely permeable. The comedian talks to real people in his audience, and they admit to what we can reasonably assume to be real workplace thefts. Essentially, they are publically confessing to criminal behaviour, to the approval of the comedian, and – judging from the laughter and applause – the rest of the audience. There is little here to suggest such conduct is being ridiculed and rejected.

Work and non-work, employment and unemployment

In the 1990s, Mark Steel – a political radical, who was for many years a member of the Socialist Workers Party – used to perform a routine which suggests an

interesting model of the relationship between 'real-life' and the 'non-real'. It begins: 'Now what I want to talk about this evening is how we need a radical change in this country really, a change in the way people run their lives, and I mean a real change, and I think particularly about the way we work' (Steel, 1996). Having stated his aim, Steel begins to justify it by arguing that 'every person hates their job', and proves the point with an observational gag in which he acts out lying in bed in the morning and trying to postpone having to go to work:

> 'Oh, one more minute. [laughter] [yawns] Then I'll get up'. Then the minute comes to an end, 'Fifty eight, fifty nine – [quiet laughter] Right, on the count of three. [laughter] One, two, and one more – minute'. [laughter].

He then imitates 'this little voice that'd creep out from the back of your head' which says, '"You could always take the day off sick, you know!" [laughter]'. His solution to this problem is 'just simply to make having a job illegal [laughter]'. He counters the objection that 'nothing would get done' by arguing that nothing gets done at work anyway. By way of illustration, he acts out being shown around the office at the first day of a new job, getting laughs for the detail of his characterisation, and his imagined supervisor explains the role he is to fulfil: '[Y]our job is to go through all of the newspapers, er, very carefully, one by one, and er, and colour in the Os [laughter]'.

As the routine continues, Steel rules out the alternatives to the tedium of employment. He sends up the idea of self-employment by imagining somebody simultaneously playing the role of employer and employee, telling himself off for getting to work late:

> 'Morning! Afternoon! What time do I call this? I want to see me in my office in half an hour. Oo, I sound in a mood this morning!' [laughter].

Unemployment is not an option, he argues, supporting his contention by satirising stringent government guidelines which make it hard to claim benefits. He likens this process to a TV game show, a version of the Yes-No game which concludes:

> 'Were you available for work this morning?' 'I was!' 'Even when you were on the toilet?' 'Yes'. GONG! 'No! You were on the toilet, so you can't 've been available for work!' [laughter].

Steel argues that 'most people love doing things [like] cooking and gardening and do-it-yourself, but they can't do it because they're at work all day. And so they can't do anything constructive!' The routine concludes with him imagining the perfect world that would emerge if having a job were made illegal, with

everybody cooking, gardening and doing DIY for each other and experiencing true fulfilment from the work they voluntarily engage in:

> And people'd be out in the garden at one in the morning and they'd be tapping away and they'd be going, 'One more minute. Then I'll go to bed. Oh, I do love doing this underpinning. [quiet laughter] On the count of three, one two three. One more minute. [quiet laughter] Then I really will stop.

What Steel proposes is a kind of utopia in which all work would be done for its own sake, and thus – like stand-up comedy – not be seen as work at all. Paul Ricoeur (1986: 17) argues that utopias are escapist because

> [n]o connecting point exists between the 'here' of social reality and the 'elsewhere' of the utopia. This disjunction allows the utopia to avoid any obligation to come to grips with the real difficulties of a given society.

Clearly, Steel is not suggesting a realistic plan for an alternative society. There might be enough cooks, gardeners and DIY enthusiasts to feed people and keep homes maintained, but how would they find enough sewage fans to keep the drainage system going? Nonetheless, Ricoeur suggests that utopias can serve a useful purpose because they offer a 'nowhere', an 'empty place from which to look at ourselves'. He argues:

> What must be emphasized is the benefit of extraterritoriality. From this 'no place' an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted. The field of the possible is now open beyond that of the actual; it is a field, therefore, for alternative ways of living. The development of new, alternative perspectives defines utopia's most basic function. May we not say then that imagination itself – through its utopian function – has a *constitutive* role in helping us *rethink* the nature of our social life? Is not utopia – this leap outside – the way in which we radically rethink what is family, what is consumption, what is authority, what is religion, and so on? Does not the fantasy of an alternative society and its exteriorization 'nowhere' work as one of the most formidable contestations of what is? (1986: 15-16; emphasis in original)

Steel's comic utopia contests *what is* by offering a very real critique of the work that takes place in proper jobs. His examples may be exaggerated or whimsical – clearly nobody has ever been employed simply to colour in Os in a newspaper – but the experiences he describes reflect his actual experiences of the proper jobs he had before becoming a comedian. In his memoir *Reasons to be cheerful* (2001), he relates the experience of lying in bed saying 'one more minute' to a period working in the telephone department of the Post Office at Elephant and Castle. Later, he worked in an office at a London Transport engineering depot, where his work was almost as pointless as colouring in Os:

> Each day a small pile of forms came in, and I had to copy the information on to another set of forms and return them to the office who'd sent them in the first place. The purpose of this was never explained. (2001: 95)

His solution may be unworkable, but it is clearly put in at the end of the routine for more than comic effect. The reincorporation of 'one more minute' is clever – both reversing the logic of the lying in bed gag and creating a circular structure for the routine – but it is not the funniest possible way of finishing the act. There are only two comparatively quiet laughs, and the final line gets no audible reaction whatsoever. However, the audience's appreciation of Steel's idea is signalled by the extended applause that follows almost immediately afterwards. What he offers is a wistful vision of a working life vastly more rewarding than the ones many of us endure on a daily basis. By suggesting a fantastical alternative to jobs which are pointless, alienating and unrewarding, he is asking his audience to question and challenge the status quo in their working lives.

Conclusion

Stand-up comedy is a legitimate if highly specialised profession, but numerous gags and routines rely on and promote the idea that it lies outside the world of conventional employment. It may require, as Sarah Millican points out, a powerful work ethic, but the toil that lies behind the performance is rarely considered. Instead, the notion of trading in laughter is incongruous enough to be used as the basis of jokes. The unusualness of comedy *as* work allows comedians to create a range of comedy *about* work. Stand-ups see the everyday world of the workplace from the outside, and they trade in an activity – humour – which is seen as outside of the normal discourse. This gives them licence to satirise fundamental attitudes about our working lives, from status and hierarchy to the core principle that the work we do serves a tangible, useful purpose. They may not be able to suggest any realistic solutions to the problems they identify, but their utopian thinking provides a 'formidable contestations of what is'.

references

Connor, J. (1990) *Comics: A decade of comedy at the Assembly Rooms*. London & Basingstoke: Papermac.

Douglas, M. (1999) *Implicit meanings,* 2nd edition. London & New York: Routledge.

Elton, B. (1987) *Motormouth* [LP]. UK: Mercury Records.

Gregory, D. (1997) *Live at the Village Gate* [CD]. USA: Collectables.

Hansot, E. (1986) 'Framing the organization: Humour in the workplace', *History of Political Thought*, 7(1): 187-203.

Lee, S. (2011) *Stewart Lee's comedy vehicle*. BBC2, 25 May.

Linstead, S. (1985) 'Jokers wild: The importance of humour in the maintenance of organizational culture', *Sociological Review*, 33(4): 741-67.

Long, J. (2008) *Trying is good* [DVD]. UK: Real Talent.

Marc, D. (1989) *Comic visions: Television comedy and American culture*. Boston : Unwin Hyman.

Maxwell, D. (2004) 'Stewart Lee', *The Times*, 9 August.

Millican, S. (2011) *Chatterbox live* [DVD]. UK: 4DVD.

Millican, S. (2012) Interview. Marlowe Theatre, Canterbury, 23 April.

Mintz, L. (1985) 'Standup comedy as social and cultural mediation', *American Quarterly*, 37(1): 71-80.

Murray, A. (2001) *The Pub Landlord live: My gaffe, my rules* [DVD]. UK: Universal.

Murray, A. (2007) *The Pub Landlord: Live at the Palladium* [DVD]. UK: ITV DVD.

Murray, A. (2012) Interview. By telephone, 2 April.

New York Times (1970) 'Drivers hopeful of Chicago pacts – union offices kept open to facilitate any agreements'. 12 April.

Noble, R. (2004) Interview. Orchard Theatre, Dartford, 24 June.

O'Hara, M. (2012) 'Policeman turned comic: Insider insight needed more than ever', *The Guardian*, 17 October.

Ricoeur, P. (1986) *Lectures on ideology and utopia*. New York and Guildford: Columbia University Press.

Sayle, A. (1989) *Alexei Sayle's stuff* [TV]. BBC2, 19 October.

Sayle, A. (1982) *Cak!* [LP]. UK: Springtime Records.

Sayle, A. (1983) *Live at Nottingham Theatre Royal* [bootleg cassette]. UK.

Steel, M. (1995) *The stand-up show*. BBC1, 8 April.

Steel, M. (2001) *Reasons to be cheerful*. London: Scribner/Simon & Schuster.

Taylor, S. (1982) 'On yer bike, commie!', *The Face*, 32: 16-19.

Thomas, M. (1998) *Live* [CD]. UK: Laughing Stock.

Thomas, M. (2004) Interview. Clapham, 27 February.

Wehn, H. (2010) *My struggle* [CD]. UK: Laughing Stock.

the author

Oliver Double is a Senior Lecturer in Drama at the University of Kent, where his teaching of stand-up comedy has gained national attention. He has written widely on stand-up comedy and popular performance, notably the books *Stand-up! On being a comedian* (Methuen, 1997), *Getting the joke: The inner workings of stand-up comedy* (Methuen, 2005; revised 2nd edition, Bloomsbury, 2014), and *Britain had talent: A history of variety theatre*

(Palgrave, 2012). Before becoming an academic, he was a professional stand-up comedian on the UK comedy circuit.
Email: O.J.Double@kent.ac.uk

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
ISSN 2052-1499 (Print)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 15(3): 671-676

The great denial of the monstrous in organization theory

Maria Laura Toraldo and Gianluigi Mangia

review of

Thanem, T. (2011) *The monstrous organization*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. (HB, pp. 160, £65.00, ISBN 978-1-84542-178-6)

Incipit

When we began this review of *The monstrous organization,* we encountered an uncommon reading of organizational theory and life, populated by monsters, fantastical creatures and deviant bodies. The according of relevance to monstrosity has not aroused the same curiosity in Western authors, with certain fields of studies allocating greater prominence to monsters and monstrous aspects of life than others. The guiding question for our analysis was inspired by this disparity: why, within Western culture, do images of monstrosity abound in literature, paintings, architecture and cinema, whilst scant interest has been directed towards monstrous bodies and creatures in organizational theory and management studies?

An explanation for such a disparity is provided by Thanem as he outlines the rationalist pursuit of organizational theory which contributed to marginalizing the monstrous. The author indicates that 'Cartesian dualism is actualized in a wide range of organizational practices and theorizing' (23). This has been inherited by mainstream accounts of organizations from early-management theories inspired by scientific management principles to neo-institutionalist

theories, decision-making theories, organizational sensemaking and the tradition of critical management studies. This introductory point becomes crucial to explaining why monstrosity has been neglected in organization studies. Critical studies and mainstream approaches have in common an obliviousness to the materiality of organizational life. It is on these premises that the book begins with an attempt to develop an ambitious project: an alternative organizational ontology which seeks to reconcile the 'material, social and discursive realities' of organizations (32).

In addition to an introductory chapter, the book consists of five chapters and an epilogue, which outlines an envisioned future for organization studies in which the monstrous will finally be reintegrated. The chapters are specifically assembled into five thematic parts: Chapter 2 explores the historical constitution of organization studies, clarifying how the monstrous has been 'killed'. Chapter 3 provides an account of the exploitation of the monstrous, with a narrative replete with examples from biotechnology (the manipulation of animals' embryos), bodily waste (the manufacturing of fertility drugs), consumer products (the Monster Energy drink) and the entertainment sector (movies such as *Monsters, Inc*. and numerous fantasy movies). Chapter 4 is a miscellanea on the monstrous in Western thinking (e.g. the Victorian freak show), while Chapter 5 forms the backbone of the entire book, where an alternative ontology – a monstrous realist ontology – is proposed.

The book is varied in terms of the topics it covers, and it goes on to include theoretical works (e.g. actor-network theory) and illustrative examples of how the monstrous can be exploited and created by organizations. As opposed to being a unitary corpus, the book discusses the various means by which organization studies scholars have related to the monstrous, with the guiding thread being the great denial of the monstrous in the literature.

This review will be organized as an ideal conversation between three themes of the book: 'killing monsters', 'exploiting monsters' and 'monstructing', as well as our own understanding of monstrosity in literature, paintings, architecture and cinema. By creating connections and parallels and by highlighting dissimilarities, we hope to provide an original understanding of *the monstrous organization*.

Killing monsters

A spectre has always hovered over the history of organization theory. Cognitivism was the byword in identifying the dominance of order over confusion, boundary-setting over boundary porosity, homogeneity over the multiplicities of roles and

sexualities and stability over the act of transforming. Thanem's initial chapter delivers a sharp outline of the book's objectives and the revolutionary project for the study of organizations that he intends to pursue. For Thanem, the neglect of monstrous aspects of organization is due to the persistent tendency to set boundaries, or to think in terms of hierarchical levels and the division of labour. Simultaneously, the 'killing of the monstrous' is traceable to the disregarding of the body – both by denying its status as an object of inquiry and by privileging a univocal sexuality.

Despite the exclusion of monsters from the territory of organizational studies, the monstrous has exerted a certain fascination in the Western imagination. As the Italian semiotician Umberto Eco observes, the 'monstrous represents the breaking of natural laws, the danger and the irrational which is out of human control' (Eco, 1987: 384). Eco suggests an interesting aspect of monsters in that they redirect the attention to irrational aspects of the human mind. For example, Greek mythology is habitually populated by anthropomorphic creatures, monstrous in their being, neither human nor animal. Their bodies are frequently hybrids that violate natural forms, as is the case with the Gorgons (with hair composed of living snakes and sharp boar fangs) or the Minotaur (with the body of a man and the head of a bull). In this light, the monstrous represents a way to express subversive aspects of life, and yet those aspects pertain to the sphere of the irrational. For instance, monsters generated by the unconscious, and their link with the human imagination, are recurring themes in paintings. The well-known etching by Goya, 'The sleep of reason produces monsters' (1799), depicts a man asleep surrounded by various horrific creatures, owls and bats. The most obvious reading is that when Reason sleeps, the imagination produces monsters. However, it is also worth noting that a converse interpretation may apply: that Reason alone, without imagination, leads to foolishness. Whether or not we subscribe to either of these interpretations, the explanation seems to lie in the ability to balance two sides of the same coin. This line of reasoning is suggested in Thanem's prologue, where the monstrous is not set in a binary opposition to the organization. Instead, the author's hope is that monsters may be naturalized as an integral part of organizational life.

Exploiting monsters

The monstrous has proven to be a fruitful category upon which to draw, and Thanem provides an account of how it has been instrumentally exploited by the entertainment and advertising sectors, as well as by biotechnology, transgenic technology and the media. In this regard, one of the most detailed cases deals with the consumer drink Monster Energy, in which the author engages in a lively

critique of the iconography of monstrosity as well as the ability to harness the rhetoric of procuring strength and resistance, all with the aim of encouraging consumption. Simultaneously, Thanem provides examples from animated films which have the Monstrous being as their core subject. Movies such as *Monsters, inc.*, *Spiderman 3* and *The Dark Knight* are instances of commercial success which are heavily reliant on monstrous imagery.

Thanem goes on to refer to monstrosity with a more abstract meaning, providing examples of manipulation and transformation perpetrated by biotechnology and body-related waste, which somehow lead to monstrous creatures. Transgenic technology is, for instance, deemed monstrous insofar as it is used to speed up production in agribusiness, with dubious advantages for health.

To reinforce the theory of the Monstrous, Thanem provides examples that illustrate how consumer culture, technology and commercialization intertwine in contemporary society. However, it is worth noting that the use of the monstrous to criticize society is not novel. One of the most renowned illustrations by Bosch abounds with recurring images of monsters and horrific creatures: the visionary and well-known 'The garden of earthly delights' (c. 1500), is populated by weird creatures, with its right-hand panel representing Hell, with transfigured animals, demons and mutant creatures representing a defeated humanity – the monstrous here being an allegory of human corruption.

In this vein, beginning with a reflection on the mistreatment of the monstrous and the use of the monstrous imaginary for commercialization, Thanem, at least from our own reading, engages in a broader critique of present-day society (and, consequently, contemporary organization theory), which manifests in the reforming zeal which drives the author's alternative organizational ontology.

Monstructing organisational theory

The second part (Chapters 5 and 6) deals with ontological issues, which embodies the reformative spirit of the book. Thanem intends to propose alternative theoretical grounds on which to lay the foundation for a monstrous organizational theory. Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, the author fine-tunes an 'ontology of becoming' (92), which enables the monstrous ontology to emerge. Thanem provides a critique of studies inspired by actor-network theory, critically scrutinized for obstructing materiality and the bodily aspects of organizations. Turning his attention to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblages, Thanem outlines an ontology of multiplicity, which allows monstrous forms of embodiment to become part of organizational life. Indeed,

in Thanem's words: 'a monstrous organizational theory requires a monstrous and realist ontology of heterogeneous and embodied assemblages' (9). This last quotation speaks volumes about materiality and the desire for different bodies co-existing in organizations. The overall interest for transgender and sexuality – and the explicit sexual viewpoint of the author – is a way of raising the issue of transgender people in organizations and finally dealing with 'monstrous' bodies.

Before concluding with an epilogue, Thanem reflects upon the concepts of ethics and politics. Without entering into a detailed analysis, it is suffice to say that, by combining the works of Hardt and Negri on multitude, along with Spinoza's concept of 'affective ethics', an inclusive organizational theory is proposed, opening up the way to alternative modes of organising and working, in which monstrous bodies will finally acquire their place.

In conclusion, our interpretation of the book necessarily sees a parallel with the post-apocalyptic *The scarlet plague* by Jack London (1912). Will the future of organizational theory be reborn from the ashes of the existing inadequate traditions of organization studies, as desired by Thanem? Or will the envisioned 'Monstrous Organization' perhaps have to face a more 'barbaric' era, as in London's *Scarlet plague*, once a monstrous engagement has disrupted traditional social and organizational norms?

With this in mind, we will wait and see what future lies ahead on the horizon for organization studies.

references

Eco, U. (1988) *Art and beauty in the Middle Ages*. Yale University Press.

Eco, U. (1994) *Apocalypse postponed,* trans. A. McEwen. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Borges, J. L. (1957) *The book of imaginary beings*, trans. A. Hurley. London: Penguin Classics Deluxe.

Law, J. (1991) *A sociology of monsters? Essays on power, technology and domination*, *Sociological Review Monograph*, 38. London: Routledge.

London, J. (1912) *The Scarlet plague*. New York: Macmillan.

the authors

Maria Laura Toraldo is a Postdoctoral Researcher at Grenoble Ecole de Management, France. She was educated at the University of Bologna and holds a PhD from the University Federico II of Naples. She has been a visiting researcher at Warwick Business

School and Essex Business School. Her current research interests focus on novel forms of work and new ways of working within contemporary organizations. She is also interested in the emotional and affective dimension of work, particularly within the creative sector.
Email: maria-laura.toraldo@grenoble-em.com

Gianluigi Mangia is an Associate Professor of Organization Studies at the University Federico II of Naples, where he currently teaches Organization Theory and Information Systems. He holds a Ph.D. in Organization and Business Administration from the University of Molise. He was Visiting Scholar at Cardiff Business School, Visiting Researcher at London School of Economics, and Visiting Doctoral Student at Warwick Business School. Gianluigi's research interests are around power and resistance in organizations, and more recently on organizational research methods.
Email: gianluigi.mangia@unina.it

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
ISSN 2052-1499 (Print)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 15(3): 677-688

Yes we can! Doing phronesis

Donncha Kavanagh

review of

Flyvbjerg, B., Landman, T. and Schram, S. (2012) *Real social science: Applied phronesis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (PB, pp. 322, $34.99, ISBN: 9780521168205)

Real social science: Applied phronesis is an important book. Edited by Bent Flyvbjerg, Todd Landman and Sanford Schram, it is a valuable sequel to Flyvbjerg's (2001) highly cited *Making social science matter* (MSSM). In that book, Flyvbjerg argued that social science should not model itself on the natural sciences, and that social scientists – since they study reflexive, conscious human subjects – should not seek to build generalizable, predictive models akin to those of the natural world, but should instead focus on not just what is true, but what is the *right* thing to do in particular settings. In developing his argument, Flyvbjerg drew heavily on Aristotle's distinction between epistemé, techné and phronesis, a distinction that is foundational to understanding this current collection. Epistemé is abstract, universal, logically deduced knowledge of relations between objects that do not admit to change, such as the form of knowledge encapsulated in a trigonometric theorem based on geometrical axioms. Techné, or productive knowledge, is the know-how possessed by an expert who understands the principles underlying the production of an artefact or a state of affairs. In contrast, phronesis is the practical wisdom that develops through deep familiarity with the contingencies and uncertainties of different social practices. What Flyvbjerg adds to Aristotle's concept of phronesis is a keen appreciation of power and reflexivity in producing situated knowledge to guide intelligent social action.

In large part, the present volume seeks to articulate and exemplify what this concept of phronesis means as a distinctive stream of social science research.

It achieves this objective quite well. While one might think from the introduction that the book is a collection of examples of phronetic research in practice, this is the case in only eight of the fourteen chapters. Chapter 2, written by one of the editors, Sanford Schram, but drawing heavily on Flyvbjerg's MSSM, is an excellent introduction to, and history of, phronetic social science. Schram, who is Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at CUNY, mentions that MSSM became a 'manifesto' for the Perestroika movement to open the field of political science to alternative approaches, but – ironically, given that context matters so much to phronetic researchers – little is said about this Perestroika movement. In fact, the movement is named after an anonymous 'Mr. Perestroika' who, in 2000, emailed the editors of the *American Political Science Review* with a polemic criticizing the fact that almost all articles published in that journal were based on a positivist understanding of social science and that the journal privileged game theory, statistics and formal modelling. This context is important because readers of *ephemera* might consider this particular spat to be 'oh so 1980s'. Indeed, parts of Schram's chapter, and some of the more evangelical writing of the editors, will remind readers of Burrell and Morgan's (1979) seminal book on paradigms of social inquiry and the subsequent 'paradigm wars' and debates about 'paradigm incommensurability' that engaged organizational scholars during the 1980s and early 1990s (Aldrich, 1988; Reed, 1990; Willmott, 1990). Schram poetically describes 'positivism and interpretivism [as] the oil and water of social science research' (22) – which is the incommensurability position – and his argument is that methods can and should be mixed. Perhaps this makes for interesting reading in political science, but given that John Hassard (1990) was doing this twenty-four years ago, it all seems a bit dated.

But perhaps not. Burrell and Morgan's book was seminal, though maybe what's most interesting about their work now is how their four-paradigm framework has morphed into a two-paradigm world view of positivism and interpretivism, both of which are located on the 'order' side of the change-order dimension of their taxonomy, while the two 'radical' paradigms ('radical humanism' and 'radical structuralism') have all but disappeared. In a way, then, the phronesis movement can be seen as a robust attempt to bring 'change' back in as a core part of theorizing and academic work. This alone makes it important, not least because research methodology textbooks used in doctoral education programmes routinely structure research around a continuum that goes from positivism (or quantitative research) to interpretivism (or qualitative research) at the other (see, for example Bryman and Bell, 2011). In particular, phronetic social science foregrounds the *cui bono* (who benefits?) question that tends to be sidelined in

methodology textbooks. And perhaps properly, we should think of three rather than four paradigms of inquiry: positivism, which seeks to develop epistemé or scientific knowledge; interpretivism, which is focused on describing how things come to be and how actors interpret the world; and phronesis, which is primarily concerned with what is right and ethical, and intervening to make things better in particular settings. Phronesis also provides a valuable counterpoint to the influential distinction between what are known as Mode 1 and Mode 2 understandings of knowledge production (Huff and Huff, 2001). If Mode 1 is concerned with discipline-based scientific practice and if Mode 2 is problem-centred, transdisciplinary and attendant to the needs of funding agencies, then phronetic research describes quite a different understanding of knowledge production. Elsewhere, I have introduced the idea of Mode Φ (Φ, phi, being the first letter of the Greek word for phronesis, φρόνησις) to distinguish its focus on 'rectitude' from Mode 1's focus on 'rigour' and Mode 2's focus on 'relevance' (Kavanagh, 2012).

Chapter 3 is written by another political scientist and the book's third editor, Todd Landman, who argues that narrative analysis is particularly suited to phronetic social science because it allows meaning and power relations to be uncovered in a way that other methods cannot. Curiously, given the chapter's focus on marshalling evidence, this assertion is supported little by way of an evidential basis. The chapter discusses different types of – and approaches to – narrative analysis and briefly illustrates the method through a discussion of the work of truth commissions. However, the most useful and original part of the chapter is in the last page, where Landman poses a series of questions for anyone interested in using narratives as a primary method for establishing evidence in social science research. Many of the questions are relevant to researchers using methods other than narrative analysis.

The fourth chapter, by Arthur Frank, is a carefully crafted exploration of the relation between phronesis in doing social science and what Frank calls 'everyday phronesis'. The latter idea has three aspects: it is content (a stock of experiential knowledge), a quality of persons (a capacity to acquire and use this knowledge appropriately) and a form of action (a practice in which the knowledge is used and gained). Frank reiterates the ever-present theme that '*real* social science is when studying the world has the effect of changing it' (48; emphasis in original). Rather than trying to define phronesis, he instead illustrates it with a sketch of a central character in Tolstoy's *War and peace*, Nikolay Rostov, who learns how to act appropriately through closely observing peasants at work. Through doing so, Rostov learns their way of speaking, the hidden meaning behind their words, and their notions of good and bad, all of which makes him a better manager in that particular setting. Translated into social science research, the basic principle of

the tale is that the social scientist should seek to learn from the participants, and to learn, through observation, how to identify those participants he should learn from. Frank's interpretation of Rostov is that the latter would not be able to articulate what exactly he has learned, or be able to represent it as a text for others, and so perhaps it is no surprise that his intellectual soul-mates are Bourdieu and Foucault. He likes Bourdieu's concept of habitus because it is embodied, durable, and habitual – though still allowing inventive improvisation in conditions of uncertainty – and while habitus does not determine action, it does predispose the actor to feel that some actions are right or even necessary. In many ways, a game is not just a metaphor for habitus; habitus is actually a game, and the implication that Frank takes for phronesis is that 'practical wisdom is generally specific to a particular field' (55), much like having a feel for the game of tennis is different from having a feel for the game of hurling. I'm not convinced of that, however. My own preference is Aristotle's distinction between poiesis and praxis and his association of techné with the former and phronesis with the latter (techné and phronesis both being forms of knowledge). Poiesis describes an activity associated with making or fabricating something. Praxis, in contrast, is not structured around a separately identifiable outcome, but is instead a domain of activity where the end is realized in the very doing of the activity itself. Praxis, then, is not akin to a *particular* game, but is instead about habitual activities or virtues such as friendliness, honesty, truthfulness, and loyalty, which transcend any particular poiesis, any particular game. Seeing habitus as a form of game is important because games have stakes, winners and losers, trickery and cheating, while players must be willing to take risks, to take moves, to strategise, and to think of the short and long-term implications of a move in a play, both within and without the game. Importantly, the distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* – and their associated forms of knowledge, *techné* and *phronesis* – is between productive and ethical activity, with the latter always being in the context of a power game. Frank asserts, not quite convincingly, that phronesis 'is much like power as imagined by Foucault' (64). The individual comes to be in the world through a series of confrontations where something significant is at stake, akin to moves in a game. As each of these confrontations is infused with power, phronesis is required.

The focus on power continues in the next, rather long and somewhat rambling, chapter by Stewart Clegg and Tyrone Pitsis, both well-known scholars in the organization theory community. Lukes' (1974/2006) three-dimensional view of power provides the intellectual basis for their analysis, especially his third dimension of power, which is centred on how the less powerful have an inability to recognize, much less realize, their own interests. This is an old idea, going back to Marx's notion of false consciousness, but it continues to confront each new generation of social science researchers with a fresh version of an old

problem: how can theorists presume to know that they themselves are not manifesting false consciousness, especially if they avoid engaging with the material reality of those about whom they theorize? For Clegg and Pitsis, phronesis provides the best way of avoiding the trap that is the transcendental position, because it, at a minimum, recognises that power matters in the various relations that researchers develop and maintain as they do empirical research. After a rather long-winded discussion on power and value, they seek to illustrate the point through drawing on their study of a megaproject alliance charged with upgrading the sewerage system around Sydney. What began as a study on learning within the alliance changed to a study of alliance value-creation and sense-making – largely because new players seemed to be sceptical about academic research – and that question again changed as the constellation of actors shifted. One of the findings of their research – that politicians were using the alliance to sway voters in marginal electorates – shocked the professional practitioners being studying and was a 'major blot on the cognitive landscape of the project professionals for whom pride in the project was paramount' (85). The practitioners' taken-for-granted assumptions about the world were disturbed as they came to see, with Clegg and Pitsis, that power determines what's of value and what's rational. While this may illustrate how phronetic research can help practitioners transcend their false consciousness, it is hardly to be expected, necessary or possible in all phronetic research. What *is* to be expected in phronetic research, however, are volatile research questions, given the role that practitioners are accorded in framing the research endeavour. In a project setting the network of stakeholders is constantly changing and so perhaps it is not surprising that the authors of this chapter became frustrated with the way their research question kept changing according to the whims of different practitioners. They were also uneasy at having to justify the value of academic research to practitioners, culminating in their lament that 'Australian managers, when compared globally, are not as academically curious as their Danish, German or Swiss counterparts' (86). Yet what Frank's earlier chapter reminds us is that phronetic researchers can always learn from the researched, and should neither patronize nor proselytize practitioners who are likely to be suspicious of researchers with an overt (political) agenda and of practices they see as contrary to their understanding of 'good' research.

The next chapter, by Bent Flyvbjerg, is just as autobiographical – though more insightful – as Flyvbjerg discusses his own experiences negotiating another political nexus, namely the media. His key point is that if one wants to maximize the impact of research on public deliberation, policy and practice – and this is perhaps the defining feature of phronetic research – then one has to engage intelligently and skilfully with the media. This chapter is valuable because reflections on the relationship between social science research and the media are

relatively rare, as are explorations of why so many scholars are hyper-concerned with academic exposure and yet disinterested in public impact. If phronetic research is to gain traction, this is perhaps the most important chapter in the book, not least because the mass media is the so-called 'fourth power' of government (along with the legislature, the executive and the judicial). But getting academics to engage with the media is no small task given the deep-seated antipathy to such an endeavour that goes all the way back to ancient Greece where there was a profound conflict between the philosopher and the polis, which culminated in Socrates' execution. The fact that Socrates could not persuade his judges of his innocence showed Plato that the city is unsafe for the philosopher and also led him to doubt the validity of *persuasion*, which the Greeks saw as the highest and truly political art. Hannah Arendt (1990: 75-6) has explored this in an insightful essay in which she explains how the *sophos*, the wise man as ruler, must be seen in opposition to the current ideal of the *phronimos*, the understanding man whose insights into the world of human affairs qualify him for leadership, though of course not to rule. Philosophy, the love of wisdom, was not thought to be the same at all as this insight, *phronésis*. The wise man alone is concerned with matters outside the polis.

Plato's argument that the philosopher could and should be king was lost with the death of Socrates 'who was the first philosopher to overstep the line drawn by the polis for the *sophos*, for the man who is concerned with eternal, nonhuman and nonpolitical things' (Arendt, 1990: 77). This line is present in Flyvbjerg's story about his own experiences with Danish and international media, especially in the attempts to intimidate him and stop him from criticizing overspending on public megaprojects. For instance, he tells one story where a high-ranking government official told him, over lunch, that if his research results reflected badly on the government then the official would 'personally make sure [his] research funds dried up' (99). But this just excited Flyvbjerg, who recognized that he had touched a 'tension point' in the network of power relations that is 'fraught with dubious practices, contestable knowledge and potential conflict' (100). The phronetic researcher's job is to seek out such tension points, where they can effect most change by problematizing existing practices, even if this blurs the lines between social science and investigative journalism. Flyvbjerg's contention is that working with mass media is crucial to doing phronetic social science and it can take a negligible amount of time compared to the vast number of hours that go into research. A key lesson is that the researcher's priority should be to *study things that matter to the communities in which we live in ways that matter*, which is a slogan that should be posted throughout the methodology labyrinth that has engulfed tribes of social scientists. Flyvbjerg presents a compelling list of lessons learned from his engagements with mass media and the public sphere, though he suspects that few social scientists will follow his path, preferring

instead to live 'according to the ancient Latin motto *bene vixi qui bene latuit* (they who live unnoticed live well)' (118). It is a job of work to change this institutionalized practice, but one that is worth doing.

Questions about power and the relationship between the researcher and the researched are also the focus of the next chapter by Corey Shdaimah and Roland Stahl, in which they argue that collaborative research (CR) is immensely suited to Flyvbjerg's theory of phronesis. A defining feature of CR is non-academic stakeholders participating in the planning, implementation and interpretation of a research project, and, perhaps more importantly, researchers participating in a larger social project. While CR has traditionally focused on consensus building within research projects, Shdaimah and Stahl emphasise that conflict should be the norm in any research question that matters (which are the only questions that matter for phronetic researchers). To illustrate the power processes in a CR project they draw on a project in which they were hired by a non-profit organisation to conduct research on the organization's advocacy work around the home repair needs of low-income homeowners in Philadelphia. Similar to Clegg and Pitsis, the researchers encountered resistance to the research, with funds spent on research being contrasted with resource limits elsewhere, and they also observed similar tensions between those who fund research, those who conduct research, and the so-called subjects of social science research. In this context, it is perhaps no surprise that the overall research question was contested, subject to change, and potentially at odds with the interests of stakeholders. The lessons from this chapter are that the researcher needs the ability to recognize and negotiate the conflicts that come with phronetic research, to willingly abdicate some normal privileges, and to participate in arenas where the researcher may have very little power.

Similar themes are explored in chapter 8, in which Leonie Sandercock and Giovanni Attili discuss their ongoing research into the conflicts embroiling two small First Nations communities in northern British Columbia, or what they describe as the 'inconvenient truth of Canada's apartheid' (138). In this study, the *cui bono* question – which is one of the guiding questions of phronetic research – is especially salient, as is articulating a clear research question, which, in this case, was about how relations between Native and non-Native Canadians could be improved in that specific time and place. Not unlike the way Flyvbjerg blurred the boundary between social science and investigative journalism, Sandercock and Attili use film as a mode of inquiry to maximize their impact on the public discourse. The authors are acutely aware of the politically charged nature of the phenomenon as well as the possibility that their research may 'exacerbate the existing polarisation' (147). Hence, choices must be made, and the researchers are reflexive and open about the political and ethical dilemmas they negotiated.

Their story reads well, ending with optimism and a whiff of suspense, which might display their knowledge of the crafts and craftiness of good story-telling.

Chapter 9, by Steven Griggs and David Howarth, is a story about airport expansion in the United Kingdom, which is suited to the phronetic approach as it is certainly an important issue for many communities, citizens and corporations. Similar to the authors of the previous chapters that follow the interpretative tradition, Griggs and Howarth grapple with how to *represent* the actors' points of view, how to *explain* the practices from which these points of view emerge, and also how to critically *intervene* in these practices. Helpfully, and similar to some of the other chapters, they begin by setting out how they engage in the practice of doing phronetic research. This involves problematizing a particular practice of interest, identifying what matters and why it is important, and then providing a compelling, power-centred explanation of the context's underpinning logic (rather than laws) that goes beyond mere description. But this chapter is also a good illustration of the pitfalls into which the phronetic researcher can fall. First, their story becomes submerged in the ins and outs of the 'wicked problem' (Rittel and Webber, 1973) that is aviation policy, and too often the authors miss the sweet spot between giving the detail of the story and giving too much detail. Second, they undermine the legitimacy of their stance in the debate by continually referring to the government's 'fantasmatic narratives' (the thesis that aviation expansion and environmental protection are compatible objectives). Emotive language, especially when it leverages neologisms, does not an argument help.

The next chapter, by Tricia Olsen, Leigh Payne and Andrew Reiter, is fascinating and an excellent example of phronetic research using quantitative data. Most importantly, their research question is interesting and relevant: what is the appropriate configuration of transitional justice mechanisms (trials, amnesties and truth commissions) in dealing with past atrocities, and how should we adjudicate on the particular actions taken in the case of Brazil? While Landman's earlier chapter on truth commissions involved a detailed content analysis of submissions made to particular truth commissions, here the authors' dataset is their own database of transitional justice mechanisms, extracted from Keesing's World News Archive, which they then correlate with standard indices of human rights and democracy. What they find is that none of the mechanisms on their own has a positive correlation with changes in democracy and human rights measures; that truth commissions, on their own, have a statistically significant but *negative* relationship with human rights; and that two combinations – trials and amnesties, or trials, amnesties and truth commissions – are positively correlated with democracy and human rights measures. They then provide a

compelling explanation for these results that should be especially relevant to those dealing with post-conflict situations. As I say, interesting.

Virgina Eubanks' chapter explores the connection between phronetic research and feminist epistemology. It is somewhat surprising that the links between the two domains have been overlooked heretofore because both put power at the centre of analysis, both insist on reflexivity, both are keen to integrate the perspectives of the less powerful in situated settings, and both wish to produce knowledge that is more true *and* more just. The argument is convincing, but the unspoken implication is that phronetic research can become an easy umbrella to cover what are already large fields of inquiry. For instance Eubank's work, which is presented in this book as an exemplar of phronetic research, is based on a study done between 2001 and 2003, even though the term phronetic research was only introduced in 2001 when MSSM was published. This study which was originally focused on reducing the 'digital divide' for low-income women, shifted in orientation as the women being studied articulated their own concerns, which were centred on justice and citizenship rather than access to technology or technical proficiency. Eubanks, like some other authors in this collection, had to grapple with shifting research questions as well as the issue of whether and how to integrate her civic engagement in a political struggle with her academic work and identity. And similar to some of the other authors (and probably in response to editorial direction) Eubanks itemises the learning highlights from her study, which she labels as an example of 'feminist phronesis'. Most of these are to be expected, but they also surface some issues that I will return to later.

One of these issues is brought centre-stage in the next chapter by William Paul Simmons. To what extent, wonders Simmons, is Flyvbjerg 'calling on social scientists to get involved and *do* politics in lieu of merely *studying* politics' (246; emphasis in original). In answering this question, he turns to Aristotle who clearly saw phronesis as not merely a form of knowing, but something that is realized through action, and, at the pinnacle, it is realized through the art of legislation. One consequence of Aristotle's argument is that phronesis will be ascribed only to a select few, with others being marginalised or, using Simmons' language, 'cauterized'. To counter this, he draws on Spivak's writings on representing marginalised voices and Dreyfus's model of skill acquisition to advocate an 'anti-hegemonic phronetics'. He then presents a short case study of a new Masters in Social Justice and Human Rights that sought to instantiate some of these ideas through, in particular, a research methods course that evolved into an action research course in which the students engage with community stakeholders to address a current community problem. It is a good story about how phronesis can be brought into the classroom.

The penultimate chapter, by Ranu Basu, seeks to bring space into phronesis. Basu's interest is in the centrality of space in poverty management, social planning, neoliberal rationality, and geosurveillance, and she explores these issues through a case study of a redistributional funding model adopted by the Toronto District School Board. However, this chapter was one that seemed to lose its way somewhat and seemed unsure of its contribution, other than to show that phronetic research has an important, yet often forgotten, spatial dimension.

The book's editors return in the final chapter which reiterates the themes running through the collection, especially the idea of problematizing tension points. Overall, this is a good read and a worthwhile contribution to the growing literature on phronetic social science. However, the book, and the field more broadly, has some rough edges, which I will now briefly consider. First, the book's evangelical tone sometimes makes for uncomfortable reading. This is especially so when Flyvbjerg and his co-editors set phronesis against what is, at best, a caricature of the natural sciences and, at worst, a serious misrepresentation, given what we know about the highly socialised nature of scientific practice (Kuhn, 1962/1970) allied to the results of numerous laboratory studies which show that science is a socio-material, agonistic and messy practice (Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Knorr-Cetina, 1981). Second, Flyvbjerg and his supporters say very little about the overlap between phronetic research and 'critical' perspectives, which is an odd oversight given that at least 22 'critical' journals commenced publication between 1969 and 2009 (Parker and Thomas, 2011). At the very least there seems to be some overlap, and presumably many of the articles published in journals like *ephemera* or *Organization* could comfortably wear the phronesis brand. Third, there is perhaps an excessive and unwarranted optimism in the degree to which individual academics can have a direct impact through doing phronetic research. Maybe the individual academic influences events over a longer time period, for instance, by using research to inform the teaching of undergraduates who may apply the knowledge many years later. Moreover, it hardly seems necessary to engage in practice as much as the advocates of phronesis would have us believe. After all, and the analogy may be unfortunate, but few would suggest that criminologists can only make a worthwhile contribution if they actually practice crime. Fourth, will Flyvbjerg's interest in 'minutiae and local micro-practices' (234) rise above the every-present possibility that macro processes are operating behind actors' backs? Fifth, will a piece of phronetic research become a series of wild goose chases as the research adjusts to the interests and desires of the researched, and, as Simmons would have it, the researcher must 'constantly interrogate current conditions' (253)? In short, are phronetic researchers destined to be frenetic researchers?

But we should end by highlighting the value of phronetic social science. Perhaps most importantly, it articulates a position that is a coherent alternative to both interpretivism and positivism, two poles around which so much social science inquiry has been framed. It also properly sidelines methodological questions – and debates about whether qualitative or quantitative data should be collected – by foregrounding the research question and emphasizing that the research question should matter. This is important as taught programmes on doctoral research in the social sciences spend considerable time teaching students how to conduct research and very little on how to formulate *important* research questions, which is where Flyvbjerg's idea of 'tension points' should be especially helpful. The literature on phronesis now includes, thanks to this book, quite detailed descriptions of how one should conduct phronetic research. We can only hope to see much more of this type of research in the future.

references

Aldrich, H. (1988) 'Paradigm warriors – Donaldson versus the critics of organization theory', *Organization Studies*, 9(1): 19-25.

Arendt, H. (1990) 'Philosophy and politics', *Social Research*, 1: 73-103.

Bryman, A. and E. Bell (2011) *Business research methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Burrell, G. and G. Morgan (1979) *Sociological paradigms and organisational analysis*. London: Heinemann.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2001) *Making social science matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can count again*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hassard, J. (1990) 'An alternative to paradigm incommensurability in organisation theory', in J. Hassard and D. Pym (eds.) *The theory and philosophy of organizations*. New York: Routledge.

Huff, A.S. and J.O. Huff (2001) 'Re-focusing the business school agenda', *British Journal of Management*, 12: S49-S54.

Kavanagh, D. (2012) 'Problematising practice: MacIntyre and management', *Organization*, 20(1): 103-115.

Knorr-Cetina, K. (1981) *The manufacture of knowledge*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Kuhn, T. S. (1962/1970) *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Latour, B. and S. Woolgar (1979) *Laboratory life: The social construction of scientific facts*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Lukes, S. (1974/2006) *Power: A radical view*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Parker, M. and R. Thomas (2011) 'What is a critical journal?', *Organization*, 18(4): 419-427.

Reed, M. (1990) 'From paradigms to images: The paradigm warrior turns post-modernist guru', *Personnel Review*, 19(3): 25-40.

Rittel, H.W. and M.M. Webber (1973) 'Dilemmas in a general theory of planning', *Policy sciences*, 4(2): 155-169.

Willmott, H. (1990) 'Beyond paradigmatic closure in organisational enquiry', in J. Hassard and D. Pym (eds.) *The theory and philosophy of organisations*. New York: Routledge.

the author

Donncha Kavanagh is Professor of Information and Organisation at UCD Business School, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland. His interests include the history of management thought, play and innovation. For further information, see http://donnchakavanagh.com

Email: donncha.kavanagh@ucd.ie

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
ISSN 2052-1499 (Print)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 15(3): 689-695

Public policy at work: A feminist critique of global economic development

Jessica L. Rich

review of

Jain, D. and D. Elson (eds.) (2011) *Harvesting feminist knowledge for public policy: Rebuilding progress*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India. (HB, pp. 396, $55.00, ISBN 9788132107415)

Harvesting feminist knowledge for public policy addresses gender and socioeconomic inequalities spurred by the 2008-2009 economic downturn and exacerbated by increases in food prices as well as shortages, access to fuel, and financial failures of the state and banking industries. The book project is a product of the 2000 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action as well as eleven years of discussion among feminist thinkers envisioning alternative futures with goals of social and economic justice. Forwarding a critique of market economies, *Harvesting feminist knowledge* challenges the concept that growth is the key to development while arguing for policies that promote a more socially-just economy. The collection offers a breadth of justice-oriented solutions beyond policy reform. Through the lens of feminist and economic development theories, the authors argue that current solutions to global economic crises encourage growth to the detriment of poor communities across the world, with the attendant physical, social and economic violence against the women who reside in them. Of particular interest to gender and organization studies scholars, the book emphasizes the problematic of informal and unpaid work, the role of the state in economic development, and the potential impact of women-led movements. Together, the authors outline an agenda of grassroots mobilization,

collective action, and a reimagining of alternatives for a more socially-just world. *Harvesting feminist knowledge* moves from discussions of policy reform to more radical questions of capital and gender as the authors envision future possibilities.

The discussion begins with a redefinition of the concept of work, challenging current economic policies and their treatment of informal work, in particular. Chapters by Jain, Benería, Collas-Monsod, Jhabvala, and Otobe address the lack of attention to women's informal work in public policy. Collas-Monsod, for example, pushes for the removal of the 'cloak of invisibility' by policy-makers with the inclusion of time-use data in GDP estimations, as well as the recognition of the impact that housework, family care and voluntary service work have on a nation's economy (93). Castañeda and Grammage's chapter, 'Gender, global crises and climate change', and Fall's chapter, 'The cost of the commoditization of food and water for women', extend the problem of work further by adding environmental crises into the equation. The physical and mental health of families and communities will continue to be stressed by consequences resulting from climate change, with increased pressure on the informal work that women contribute. The chapters by Castañeda and Grammage, and Falls, suggest policy solutions that privilege local knowledge and that value human rights to natural resources in the face of oncoming, environmental crises. Complicating the efforts to create more inclusive policy, however, is the necessity of the state's involvement in policy development, a critique of which is largely missing until the end of the text. The final chapters raise questions of power, ideology and masculinity, as well as the complexities of looking to the state as provider of rights, especially in a post-colonial, global economic climate that favors neoliberal policies. For example, policy-makers at the state level must recognize informal work through processes that require a transformed valuation of unpaid labour. As McFadden observes in her chapter on the challenges of feminist movements in Africa, 'our assumptions about the state…and our understandings of class and the practices that accompany privilege and power…urgently require closer and more radical scrutiny' (294). According to McFadden, women's movements must recognize the inequities produced by capitalism if they are to create real change.

The first two chapters of *Harvesting feminist knowledge* approach economic policy through reform, focusing on a human development approach and challenging neoliberal economic systems. Elson asserts that policy-makers must 'put social justice first' by focusing on human rights rather than economic markets. Especially in a post-crisis world, Elson's approach offers directions that privilege the human over profit and that invest in the cooperative efforts of communities, including those that involve unpaid labour most often contributed by women.

Socially-just economies, for Elson, recognize gender equality as a significant goal and require social investment in public goods and services, such as education and health. Seguino also focuses on policy reform in the chapter '"Rebooting" is not an option: Toward equitable social and economic development'. Seguino offers a vision for policy that challenges neoliberal goals of market deregulation and short-term economic growth and suggests strategies that promote long-term subsidies for small business and agricultural endeavors, regulation of central banks, and currency transaction tax (CTT) that can be used to generate social insurance if future crises arise. The state becomes especially important for Elson and for Seguino, both of whom look to government processes to seek reform rather than an upheaval of policy-producing systems.

Like Elson and Seguino, the authors in later chapters of *Harvesting feminist knowledge* recognize the role of market liberalization in rising social, political and economic inequality among women and men across the globe. Here, the book moves toward a provocative question: how might informal labour practices be counted in economic policy? These authors assert the necessity of recognizing the informal labour of women as significant in a nation's economic health. Jain turns to a case study of India in her discussion of hunger and economic success, emphasizing poverty as a gendered experience that men and women suffer differently. A nation's economic growth, Jain asserts, does not equal food security or nutrition for all; rather, 'the rich get hungrier' (Jain, 2011: 51; Sen, 2010). As corporate farms replace subsistence farms, women are impacted the most due to their role in supplying and preparing food for their families, often having to travel farther to find fuel and resources, such as water. Benería also observes the importance of informal labour, however, she provides evidence of a global move toward informalization of all labour through subcontracting, home-work production of goods and other precarious work. She notes in her chapter on 'Globalization, labor and women's work' that the largest proportion of informal work involves poor women in developing countries, who often leave their own families to care for the children of the wealthy and middle class in developed countries. Collas-Monsod's chapter, 'Removing the cloak of invisibility', recalls past efforts by the United Nations to calculate informal and unpaid work, as part of a country's national income. She highlights the case of the Philippines, in which gender-sensitive data were included in income measures. These data show that GDP in the Philippines increased by up to 40% from 1990-1998 with the inclusion of unpaid work. Collas-Monsod also cites findings from the Philippines case that women contribute approximately 71-73% of total unpaid hours when they are employed and up to 91% for women who are not involved in the formal, paid workforce (104). Jhabvala returns to India to address informal work in her chapter 'Poor women organizing for economic justice'. The author follows a powerful women's trade union in India, the Self-Employed Women's

Association, which organizes and studies the collective efforts of women workers. Jhabvala concludes that organizing informal workers is necessary, as is the inclusion of their voices in representative bodies at the regional, national and international levels. Otobe follows Jhabvala with a discussion of the International Labour Organization's decent work policy, which asserts that rights, productive employment, social protections and dialogue about labour and work are necessary for poverty reduction. Otobe takes a similar stance as the other authors in her call for women's unpaid work to be a part of any intervention into decent work policies.

Castañeda and Grammage extend the work of the previously mentioned authors with their focus on climate change as a factor that will impede unpaid work and also strike the most vulnerable, namely women, who predominantly participate in informal labour. Fall, too, speaks to the problem of commoditization of food and water services, which impacts women who, in the face of scarcity, are required to maintain care-taking responsibilities on less or travel farther in sometimes dangerous conditions in order to procure provisions for their families. United Nations climate change reports marginalize gender, according to Castañeda and Grammage. The authors recommend investment in policies that work toward gender equality. Women, for example, are often excluded from decision-making bodies or not considered to be stakeholders in resource management. Most important, Castañeda and Grammage suggest not only attention to gender relations, but also to differentiated gendered experiences, to the dangers of essentializing men and women based on biology, and to seeing local community members as actors rather than as passive respondents to change. Privileging local knowledge can inform policies that attend to resource scarcity and inform policy-makers of the impact that it, and other consequences such as malnutrition, disease and trauma, places on local communities.

The solutions offered by many of the authors suggest a common thread: that unpaid and informal work be included in economic policy. By employing the concept of bubbling up, as opposed to trickle down, authors challenge policy-makers to focus on women first and emphasize the importance of women organizing at the local, grassroots level in order to create broader economic change. Economic policy, the authors state time and again, must account for unpaid work. Jain's solution, for example, is to empower women to 'reclaim democracy and development' at the local level and then to build solidarity more broadly. For Benería, improving labour conditions is necessary for women's situation to improve, as is refining policies that currently export women's labour at the cost of fragmenting their own families for the sake of capital. Collas-Monsod points to the UN's System of National Accounts (SNA), which continues to exclude unpaid activities as part of a nation's income. Adding to the support

for women's movements, Silliman, in the last chapter, calls for women's groups to embrace progressive masculinities and to challenge the gender binary that divides women's and men's groups as both strive for equality. While the authors support the inclusion of unpaid work in policy, few question the cultural and political structures that will push back on these efforts. Collas-Monsod, for example, states that the SNA relented in their efforts to count unpaid work in national statistics due to a 'lack of demand' on the part of nations' policy-makers and the desire to uphold the status quo that keeps women's unpaid work invisible and exploitable. Without further critique of the state, in their present, neoliberal form, the arguments made for policy change will be difficult to achieve.

Throughout the discussions of unpaid work, arguments suggesting that public policy is the key to women's advancement are constrained because these policies must be recognized by power that rests with the state and the ideologies of those who continue to operate it. The State, and the corporate interests embedded in it, remains unexplained in *Harvesting feminist knowledge*. What is the State's role in change? How might change be hindered at local, national and international levels if policy-makers refuse to recognize unpaid work or women's well-being as significant to broader economic policies? For example, while Jhabvala recognizes the significance of organizing poor women toward economic justice, she admits that 'scaling up' is necessary for broader impact and also that efforts rely on both State and transitory corporate interests in order to succeed. Small groups lose power as larger organizational bodies usurp them. The State's cooperation, then, is necessary in maintaining women's voices beyond grassroots organizing. Climate change policies, too, are dependent on wider national efforts of developed countries to regulate emissions. While the authors offer productive solutions, the problem of the paternalism, patriarchy and neoliberal policies maintained at the state level continues to plague promising outcomes.

Wendy Brown, in her book *States of injury: Power and freedom in late modernity* (1995), may provide a productive approach to a public policy-based critique of the State. Brown asserts that the State has replaced the man in women's lives, offering welfare and care in place of husbands and fathers. Further, Brown (1995: 11) recognizes the role of neoliberal policies, stating that in the 1970s, 'as the Right promulgated an increasingly narrow and predominantly economic formulation of freedom and claimed freedom's ground as its own, liberals and leftists lined up behind an equally narrow and predominantly economic formulation of equality'. Groups who are interested in progressive social change, therefore, must question the State's role as provider of rights and critique the 'wounds' that political groups maintain as sites of identity in their struggle to gain rights and recognition by the State. While arguments within *Harvesting*

feminist knowledge envision a more socially-just future, they run up against political bodies that reaffirm women's identities as wounded and in need of the State to rectify past wrongs. Brown, on the other hand, suggests a 'postindividualist' conceptualization of freedom that moves from identities garnered from injuries of the past ('who I am') toward forward-looking, collective futures ('what I want for us') (51). Through a critical perspective of the political and the State, policy becomes less of a striving to possess rights that are kept out of the hands of women and more of a demand to redefine work and the value that the State places on the informal work of women.

There are moments in *Harvesting feminist knowledge* that open up a critique of the State and that strengthen the discussion of informal and unpaid work. Seguino, for example, claims that the focus of policy should be on the social rather than on the state, which she contends is controlled by exclusive groups of officials (15). Fall, too, offers examples from Tanzania, Bolivia and Ghana, in which communities' grassroots efforts successfully challenged State efforts to privatize water systems to the detriment of their people. Further, McFadden's chapter on African feminism offers a particularly strong critique of capitalism and power, stating that women in Africa have been homogenized as '"breeders" for colonial capitalism...kept outside any direct relationship with the state and/or public institutions' (297). Citing the case of Zimbabwe, McFadden recognizes that women's organizations have been recognized only if they are able to operationalize the neocolonial policies of the state. These organizations have been absorbed through discourses that maintain Africa as dependent on the West, particularly through women's NGOs, which can problematically reify neoliberal structures. McFadden suggests that a period of introspection is necessary for feminists. She also asserts that feminists should trace the conjunctures in which radical changes occurred for women, in order to retrieve feminist history for the present (302). McFadden's directions align with Brown's assertions: that a challenge to the contemporary, neoliberal State must involve a critical perspective, and introspection, that recognizes the co-productive processes of power and capital through which policy is determined.

In conclusion, *Harvesting feminist knowledge* provocatively challenges policy-makers to question conceptions of work and opens possibilities for public policy through redefinition. Scholars and practitioners of public policy, development studies, organization studies, and gender studies will find encouragement in the suggestions made by the contributors to this book. Public policy is one means through which social change can, indeed, 'bubble up'. As reiterated by the authors, however, women's labour all too often is unpaid and made invisible. *Harvesting feminist knowledge* offers a detailed critique of specific policies that, if maintained, will continue to marginalize women, at best. At worst, these policies,

when left uncritiqued, produce outcomes that endanger the physical and mental well-being of women and the global communities in which they reside.

references

Brown, W. (1995) *States of injury: Power and freedom in late modernity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Jain, D. and D. Elson (eds.) (2011) *Harvesting feminist knowledge for public policy: Rebuilding progress*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India.

Sen, A. (2010) 'The rich get hungrier', *New York Times*, 28 May.

the author

Jessica L. Rich is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research interests include critical organization studies and examining how work and labor are evolving in light of global environmental change.
Email: jlrich@email.unc.edu

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
ISSN 2052-1499 (Print)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 15(3): 697-704

The reinvention of tradition: Marxist art history and the organization of radical politics

Andy Murray

review of

W. Carter, B. Haran and F.J. Schwartz (eds.) (2013) *ReNew Marxist art history*, London: Art Books. (HB, pp. 520, £45.00, ISBN 978-1-908970-11-4)

In the introduction to his book, *Icons of the left,* O.K. Werckmeister (1999: 1-2) argued that the problem Marxists faced after the collapse of the Soviet bloc concerned not so much the validity of their ideas, but whether they could have any lasting organic relation to effective political organizations and action in capitalist society. Any claims to a revival of Marxist thought in a globalised capitalist economy must therefore not revert simply to historical scholarship on the subject, or worse, hagiographic and nostalgic writing, the types of which Werckmeister sought to critique. Instead, it must have a clear-sighted relevance to contemporary politics and culture (Werckmeister, 1999: 156-57).

Werckmeister writes as an art historian. The recent history of this discipline is a particularly interesting test case for those interested in producing a politicized research culture. Art history has had a long and rich Marxist tradition, from the writings and designs of William Morris, through to an inter-war series of art historians alienated by the rigid doctrines of the Second Internationalist and Stalinist *Diamat*, and then a further generation radicalised by the New Left and the events of May 1968. The aim of a recent essay anthology, *ReNew Marxist art history* (henceforth *RMAH*), is not only to study this tradition, but also to provoke art historians to revive it (thus the ambiguity of the highlighted 're-' in the

'*Re*New' of its title). Two other anthologies published prior to *RMAH* pursue similar goals. *Marxism and the history of art* (Hemingway, 2006a, henceforth *MATHOA*) and *As radical as reality itself* (Beaumont et al., 2007, henceforth *ARARI*) also presented themselves as attempts to reinvigorate Marxist research in art history and visual culture. Perhaps aware of Werckmeister's warning, the editors of these volumes argue that a return to a Marxist tradition in art history could be something more than an exercise in nostalgia (Beaumont, 2007: 16; Hemingway, 2006b: 1; Roberts, 2007: 21). This review evaluates their strategies in producing a contemporary culture of Marxist scholarship. This exercise is of interest not just to art historians, but those pursuing similar projects in the humanities and social sciences.

The idea of a revival of a 'culture' of Marxist scholarship, rather than simply Marxist ideas, is particularly important for art history. Because Marx himself wrote little on art, Marxist concepts and ideas were developed by a long and complex history of debates amongst Marxists and scholars from the late-nineteenth century to the present. This situation differentiates the Marxist revival represented in RMAH, MATHOA and ARARI from similar revivals in other disciplines that focus on specific concepts based in Marx's work. A current revival of 'labour process theory' in organization studies, for instance, argues that a pre-1914 Marxist view on the relations between work, capital accumulation and value is the most useful in understanding the organization of labour in contemporary, post-industrial societies (Adler, 2007). Borrowing a term from Eric Hobsbawm, Paul S. Adler, the foremost scholar in this revival, claims to hold a 'paleo-Marxist' position, one in which seemingly 'retro-' Marxist ideas are argued to have contemporary relevance (Adler, 2007: 1314). In contrast, art historians cannot claim a single or dominant Marxist set of concepts in relation to art. Instead, they have to engage with the complex and scattered strands of Marxist thinkers and schools in the history of their discipline.

This situation for Marxist art history means that, paradoxically, the idea of revival in *MATHOA*, *ARARI* and *RMAH* depends on the idea of 'tradition'. The claim to renew Marxist art history depends on both the idea of Marxism as a continuous tradition (the tradition being renewed) and on the idea of Marxism as a counter-tradition critiquing the orthodoxy of the present conditions for art historical research and thereby justifying its renewal[1]. The exploration of Marxism as both a historical tradition of thought and a living counter-tradition provides the logic for

1 The idea of a Marxist tradition is used repeatedly by the editors with this meaning (14). The term counter-tradition is used once to describe the Marxist history of art, but with the meaning of its use clearly stated (26). The idea of a counter-tradition is also used by John Roberts (1994b: 14) in his introduction to *Art has no history!*.

the selection and collection of the essays in *RMAH*, *MATHOA* and *ARARI*. *ARARI* is focused mostly on the idea of Marxism as a 'counter-tradition' by collating essays that most concern modern and contemporary art, or by directing Marxist theory towards contemporary problems. *MATHOA*, on the other hand, is mostly focused on producing a historiography of the Marxist art historical tradition from William Morris, through a series of art historians with strong presence of German and Austrian émigrés, to the development and waning of the New Left during the 1980s. Both Marxism's traditions and Marxist critiques of contemporary scholarship are pursued equally in *RMAH*, with a section of essays on contemporary or near-contemporary art, and a section on historiography that extends its investigation into non-Marxist figures such as Aby Warburg and Walter Pater.

However, the key stake of these anthologies is neither the critique of the present nor re-evaluation of the past. It is rather the definition of Marxist research itself. This is evident when one contrasts these anthologies with earlier ones. The advantage of the anthology format for Marxist art history during in the 1970s and 1980s was that it left relatively open parameters for a multifaceted and diversified subject matter. I am thinking of anthologies such as *Marxism and art* (1972) edited by Lang and Williams, the later anthology by Maynard Solomon also called *Marxism and art* (1979), and the short though sophisticated collection *Aesthetics and politics,* first published in 1977 (Adorno, et al., 2010). These books were the means by which students could navigate themselves through a very complex body of scholarship that dealt with broad, open-ended problems on the social nature of aesthetics and artistic production. In the same sense, *RMAH*, *ARARI* and *MATHOA* use the anthology-format for the same purpose. But their editorial essays attest that these collections are not just open explorations in their subject, but projects aiming at a tighter definition of Marxism and Marxist art history. Each volume argues that the project of renewing Marxist history is one of extracting it from the forms of art historical practice that have dominated over the last thirty years: Marxist art history is to be differentiated from postmodern and post-structural scholarship, but also from the new art history, cultural studies, visual culture and the social history of art (Hemingway, 2007: 32-33; Leslie, 2007; Beaumont, 2007)[2]. The editors of *RMAH* claim that their intentions are 'to provide a snap of the state of an art history that can be considered properly Marxist' (6).

2 A study of Marxist art history's tensions with cultural studies, and an account of why an art historian like Andrew Hemingway 'stayed within' art history while others left the subject when it underwent Marxist and post-structural critique, forms the first essay of *RMAH*. See John Roberts's (2003) essay, 'Art history's furies'.

One might have noticed a problem here. Marxist art history is defined against what it is not. The definition of what is 'properly Marxist' in concrete, conceptual terms is never directly dealt with in the editorial arguments of these texts. The declaration of Marxism's difference to other traditions in cultural theory does not seem intended to clarify Marxist ideas, but to mark a change in the history of how Marxists understand their own identity. That *RMAH*, *ARARI* and *MATHOA* distinguish themselves so definitively against post-structuralism, in particular, marks a recent and significant shift. This becomes evident when one compares these anthologies with two earlier ones, *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (Nelson and Grossberg, 1988) and *Art has no history!* (Roberts, 1994a). The editors of the former volume argued that Marxism would maintain its relevance only by undergoing a post-structural critique that would integrate it into the theoretical trends that developed during the 1970s and 1980s (Nelson and Grossberg, 1988: 7-10). However, the editors also noted that this process creates a 'crisis of definition' for Marxism as its traditional categories and foci – economic relations and the class struggle integral to them – become side-lined (Nelson and Grossberg, 1988: 12). This process led Fredric Jameson to note, in his contribution to the volume, that he felt 'one of the few Marxist's left' (Jameson, 1988: 347)[3]. It is this crisis of definition for Marxism that perhaps led the editor of the second volume, John Roberts, to identify the same contrary relationship between Marxism proper and post-structuralism as claimed by *RMAH*, *ARARI* and *MATHOA*. However, whereas Roberts (1994b: 20-23) sought to revise the excesses of post-structural thought by confronting some very particular theoretical problems, the latter volumes are more emphatic that Marxism is an contrary intellectual agent to post-structuralism, and its resurgence is necessitated by the increasing institutionalization, if not instrumentalization, of post-structuralism within art history departments, museums and journals.

Putting post-structuralism aside, *RMAH*, *ARARI* and *MATHOA* also display a distrust of contemporary theory and sociology. This distrust is stated most openly in Warren Carter's introduction to *RMAH* where he diagnoses a 'rush to the contemporary' in recent art historical scholarship, a movement partly precipitated by the esteemed position of the journal, *October* (25-6). He reads into this focus on contemporary art and its twinning with contemporary theory a pseudo-avant-gardism consistent with the current demands of art patronage found in museums and in the market. This distrust of the contemporary may also extend to contemporary Marxist scholarship. Figures as obscure to many

3 See also Perry Anderson's unflinching defence of his classical Marxist position against accusations of 'logocentrism' as 'a kind of common sense' (Nelson and Grossberg, 1988: 337).

outside the field of art history like Arnold Hauser and Meyer Schapiro take much more prominence in these collections than the publicly more prominent 'neo-Marxists' of the present. Figures such as Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri, Jacques Rancière and Slavoj Žižek are only occasionally cited or discussed (Roberts, 2007: 25-7). That such instances of citation and discussion are relatively rare and brief, and that the editors of *RMAH* argue that some historical perspective on them is needed by a future project on Marxist art history (13), indicates that they are yet to earn trust from at least the contributors of these anthologies.

For research interests at least, this distanced stance on contemporary theoretical trends and the greater attention given to more neglected academic figures is one of the most valuable elements on these collections. But in his introduction to *ARARI*, John Roberts develops some ideas on the political value of such historic studies and their importance to assuming the contrarian positions found in the editorial essays of *RMAH*, *ARARI* and *MATHOA*. Studies of the traditions of Marxist art history reveal a period in its development when radical politics was genuinely divisive amongst scholars, and such divides were themselves productive. It is not so much a revival or clarification of the methods and theories of the earlier generations of Marxists that is important here (and Roberts does not like the idea of 'revivalism' for this reason), but rather the production of what he calls an 'openly political and contestory culture' (Roberts, 2007: 21). A revival of Marxism would not simply be the revival of the use of Marxist terms and concepts, but the framing of the debates across the expansive field of art history on political terms.

Perhaps unfortunately, the studies of Marxist art history within *ARARI*, *MATHOA* and *RMAH* also reveal their own limitations in producing this 'contestory culture'. If one is to draw a clear distinction between these current Marxist anthologies and the interwar and New Left art historians they describe, it is that whereas the former are focused on the history of Marxist art historians and artists in the modern and contemporary periods, the latter were also involved in debates concerning the medieval and early modern periods and engaged in using, adapting and subtly subverting the conceptual tools they inherited from formalist and stylistic art history. If a lesson is to be drawn from the studies in these volumes, it is that a Marxist revival has to concern itself not just with theoretical debates about its conceptual tools, history and contemporary position, but also with providing Marxist solutions to art-historical problems faced by non-Marxist art historians.

This is an obvious point. But it is one that points to the limitation of the anthology format. If a Marxist revival in art history depends not on the validity of specific concepts and schools of thought, but on a politicized research culture

across the various fields of the discipline, this cannot be sustained by the limited and closed forum of the anthology. The ambitions of *RMAH* in particular extend beyond its substantial size. The subject matter of this collection is wider than that of *MATHOA* and *ARARI*. It includes papers that extend further than the concerns for the historiography of Marxist art history and Marxist critiques of contemporary art and art historical institutions. As well as sections on these subjects[4], this collection has two further sections on subjects related to landscape painting on the one hand, and on modernism on the other. This has expanded it to a much greater size than its forebears. It comprises twenty-seven essays and is just over 500 pages long. It seems, therefore, that if a renewal of Marxism in art history would ultimately require the presentation of research framing the debates on Marxist terms across the discipline, it could only present itself in a serial format, such as a journal or a book series, as was seen during with the journals *BLOCK* and *Kritische Berichte*, which defined the development of the new art history in the 1970s and 1980s. Hopefully, *RMAH* will encourage the establishment of a journal dedicated to sociological, if not Marxist, work in art history.

In his introduction to *RMAH*, Carter asks what 'a social history of the social history of art would look like' (14). His answer is that it would be a history of art historical institutions: museums, journals, auction houses and university departments. Partly, I hope to have shown that Marxist anthologies have themselves had an interesting history within the discipline of art history, and would occupy a small corner or footnote of a social history of the discipline. They trace how Marxists in art history and cultural studies have understood and debated their position within the discipline through the last several decades. Marxists have to consider how they use such institutions. The success or failure of contemporary Marxist art history may show how Marxist revivals in humanities and social science research depend not just on the coherence or usefulness of Marxist ideas, nor just on their ability to critique contemporary institutions and intellectual trends, but also on the production of living forums and communities of dedicated scholars across an expanse of research interests. I do not claim that this is a satisfactory response to Werckmeister's problem on the relationship between Marxist academics and political struggles. For many, academic institutions are an insignificant, even irrelevant, site of political contest. But if Marxist scholars can organise themselves in this little backyard of theirs, then their influence is more likely to extend beyond it.

4 See sections one and four: 'Marxist theory in practice' and 'Marxism in a new world order'.

references

Adler, P.S. (2010) 'The future of critical management studies: A paleo-Marxist critique of labour process theory', *Organisation studies,* 28(9): 1313-1345.

Adorno, T., W. Benjamin, E. Bloch, B. Brecht and G. Lukács (2010) *Aesthetics and politics*. London: Verso.

Beaumont, M., A. Hemingway, E. Leslie and J. Roberts (eds.) (2007) *As radical as reality itself*. Bern: Peter Lang.

Beaumont, M. (2007) 'Preface', in M. Beaumont, A. Hemingway, E. Leslie and J. Roberts (eds.) *As radical as reality itself*. Bern: Peter Lang.

Hemingway, A. (ed.) (2006a) *Marxism and the history of art: From William Morris to the New Left*. London: Pluto Press.

Hemingway, A. (2006b) 'Introduction', in A. Hemingway (ed.) *Marxism and the history of art: From William Morris to the New Left*. London: Pluto Press.

Hemingway, A. (2007) 'Marxist art history now', in M. Beaumont, A. Hemingway, E. Leslie and J. Roberts (eds.) *As radical as reality itself*. Bern: Peter Lang.

Jameson, F. (1988) 'Cognitive mapping', in Nelson, C., and L. Grossberg (eds.) *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*. London: MacMillan Education.

Lang, B. and F. Williams (eds.) (1972) *Marxism and art: Writing in aesthetics and criticism*. New York: David McKay Company, Inc.

Leslie, E. (2007) 'Marxism against cultural studies,' in M. Beaumont, A. Hemingway, E. Leslie and J. Roberts (eds.) *As radical as reality itself*. Bern: Peter Lang.

Nelson, C. and L. Grossberg (eds.) (1988) *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*. London: MacMillan Education.

Nelson, C., and L. Grossberg (1988) 'Introduction: The territory of Marxism', in Nelson, C., and L. Grossberg (eds.) *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*. London: MacMillan Education.

Roberts, J. (ed.) (1994a) *Art has no history: The making and unmaking of modern art*. London: Verso.

Roberts, J. (1994b) 'Introduction: Art has no history! Reflections on art history and historical materialism', in J. Roberts (ed.) *Art has no history: The making and unmaking of modern art*. London: Verso.

Roberts, J. (2007) 'Marxism and art theory: A short conspectus', in M. Beaumont, A. Hemingway, E. Leslie and J. Roberts (eds.) *As radical as reality itself*. Bern: Peter Lang.

Solomon, M. (ed.) (1979) *Marxism and art: Essays classic and contemporary*. Brighton: Harvester Press.

Werckmeister, O.K. (1999) *Icons of the left*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

the author

Andy Murray is a PhD Student at the Department of the History of Art, UCL. In a few of weeks he will be submitting his dissertation on the tomb of Philip the Bold of Burgundy.
Email: andrew.murray@ucl.ac.uk