

SOTTO ANALISI Comedy, Repetition and Racial Stereotypes on Television

The article explores the relation between television sitcom, repetition and stereotypes. I will outline comedy's affinity with repetition, in relation to the genre in general and in particular to the case of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (Creator: Larry David, HBO, 2000-2011). *Curb* is a comedy series that narrates the personal and professional life of Larry David, who plays himself and who previously co-created and wrote one of the most successful sitcoms on American television, *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-1998).

Curb does not fulfil all the criteria of a sitcom, at least according to the dominant definitions of the genre. Sitcoms in general have been categorized as a conservative form of television due to their repetitive form, their content and their use of stereotype. In what follows, I will trouble this appraisal by re-evaluating racial stereotypes, and especially anti-Semitism. The article moreover employs psychoanalytic theory, which has proven to be a productive analytical tool not only for the importance it places on repetition in the creation of subjectivity, but moreover for the issue of comic representation.

In her book on comedy, Alenka Zupančič argues:

Comedy's affinity for repetition is a well-established fact, and repetition is among the most prominent comic techniques. There might, however, exist a deeper affinity than a merely technical one [...]. As the other side of repetition as technique there exists [...] repetition as constitutive of the comic genre as such¹.

Before exploring this argument further, I will analyze repetition as a comic technique. In a technical sense, Henri Bergson claims that we inevitably have to laugh if, for instance, a speaker involuntarily repeats a gesture:

I find that a certain movement of head or arm, a movement always the same, seems to return at regular intervals. If I notice it and it succeeds in diverting my attention, if I wait for it to occur and it occurs when I expect it, then involuntarily I laugh. Why? Because I now have before me a machine that works automatically. This is no longer life, it is automatism established in life and imitating it. It belongs to the comic².

According to Bergson, automatic repetition and the imitation of other people are comical because their mechanical automatisms contradict the ongoing change in our "inner movements", which trigger our typical gestures. Real life would never allow repetition, yet repetition allows us to believe there is something mechanical at work behind the living.

We instinctively feel that the usual devices of comedy, the periodical repetition of a word or a scene, the systematic inversion of the parts, the geometrical development of a farcical misunderstanding, and many other stage contrivances, must derive their comic force from the same source³.

According to Bergson, this derives from the interrelation between change and automatic, the living and the mechanic.

The idea that hidden mechanisms incite laughter and pleasure coheres with Jacques Lacan's understanding of repetition and pleasure. Like Bergson, Lacan claims that the repetition of words inspires laughter, that the mere repetition of words and sentences is pleasurable, especially for children. The analyst does not refer to comedy, but rather to children's stories and games. Similarly, Bergson stresses that one can find every ingredient of the comic "in the children's games, the mechanism of which they reproduce"⁴.

SOTTO ANALISI Writing about games, Lacan argues that “repetition demands the new. It is turned towards the ludic which finds its dimension in the new. [...] The adult, and even more the advanced child, demands something new in his activities, in his games”⁵. The new that evolves precisely out of the identical repetition of the same is not limited to games, but includes stories and texts too: “It can be seen in the child, in his first movement, at the moment when he is formed as a human being, manifesting himself as an insistence that the story should always be the same, that its recounted realization should be ritualized, that is to say, textually the same”⁶.

Lacan stresses that the most radical diversity is constituted by repetition itself⁷. Zupančič explains that the “new” in textual identical repetition is, at first sight, not a successful realization, but rather the failure of repetition:

Textual, mechanical, stereotyped repetition is the mode in which the young subject, behind the scenes of the seemingly monotonous story, repeats the exciting story of a fundamental split or incongruity in her own being and meaning. On this level, Lacan’s point seems to converge with Deleuze’s principal thesis from *Difference and Repetition*: the persistent failure of repetition ultimately brings us to the conclusion that the only thing that repeats without fail is difference itself. Lacan and Deleuze differ, however, on one crucial point which concerns precisely the question of failure in repetition⁸.

The point made by Lacan and Deleuze is not that failure is the cause for repetition, that we repeat because we missed it the first time around. For Lacan, the failure of repetition means something else. The child enjoys repetition, because its “failure nevertheless realizes something, and this something is precisely what he wanted to see, appearing in the form in which he wanted, or was able to see it”⁹. The subject wants to see again and again the disturbance of pure failure. Something fleeting and elusive, “something perceptible at one moment and gone in the next”¹⁰. This moment, as I hinted earlier, is the realization of the signifier. One realizes that in this process something is lost, yet it shines in that moment as elusive, “the subject’s own shooting star in the Real”, as Zupančič formulates it effectively; the object *a*. “And it is precisely this object that constitutes the ‘radical diversity’ that Lacan emphasizes in the above quote, linking it to repetition”¹¹. This diversity gives repetition the impression of being new. Zupančič’s argument is that comedy fulfils a demand for the new because it includes a repetition of that repetition. Mladen Dolar similarly relates Lacan’s writing to his own reflections on comedy. For Dolar, the identical repetition of the same sentence necessarily results in humour. The “new repetition of the same line becomes more funny, as if a snowball effect would gather along the line, with each new occurrence of the same”¹². In addition to some of the more famous lines in Molière’s plays, Dolar gives us a more up-to-date example, the TV series *‘allo ‘allo* (BBC1, 1982-1992), in which at some point in every episode a character repeats the same line: “Listen very carefully, I shall say this only once”. Dolar comments on this recurring sentence as following:

Of course the line is all the more funny since its repetition which occurs with a clockwork precision immediately contradicts its content. [...] We know of course that the thing will happen in the next episode, we know, when the woman appears, exactly what she will say, and she says it – yet we cannot be but surprised [...] we cannot resist the laughter, its very stupidity and infinite repetition it is unstoppable. [...] And here, I think, is the gist of repetition: its clockwork precision and yet its unpredictability, its surprise; one gets surprised by what is utterly expected¹³.

As in Bergson’s definition of the comic and repetition, Dolar addresses a similar form of repetition: an automatic, mechanical one that is expected yet not boring, rather it elicits an “unstoppable”¹⁴ laughter. Through repetition, the absence of meaning “gathers new meaning”¹⁵. It is interesting that Dolar chooses

SOTTO ANALISI television as an example, since such repetition is a main feature of the medium. Even more than theater or cinema viewers, the television audience can expect a comic performance at the same time of the day or week. In addition, on television the exact same shows are repeated in reruns, therefore people enjoy an identical repetition, a medial specificity that Dolar does not mention¹⁶. Before providing examples of this kind of automatic repetition, and its alleged opposite – the unexpected – I will turn to the specificity of the sitcom.

Sitcoms and repetition

In television's most prominent comic genre, the sitcom, repetition is fundamental. The format itself is founded on repetitive features. Stanley Cavell stresses that format is even more relevant to television than genre or authorship is for cinema. "To say that the primary object of aesthetic interest in television is not the individual piece, but the format, is to say that the format is its primary individual of aesthetic interest"¹⁷. If the format is more important than the singular accomplishment, which features belong exactly to the format of the sitcom?

Brett Mills defines canned laughter as a constitutive feature of the sitcom: "One of the easiest ways to realize you're watching a sitcom is to hear the reaction of the audience on the laugh track"¹⁸. An aspect that Mills does not mention in regard to the laugh track is the relation between the living and the mechanical that is stressed by Bergson. "Canned" laughter appears paradoxical, moreover due to another aspect cited by Bergson: "involuntary" laughter. In the case of canned laughter, we do not witness a spontaneous outcry in the face of automatized gestures, but rather an automatic reaction that should inspire spontaneous laughter, in case the audience has missed the joke. For Žižek, though, canned laughter does not cause the audience to laugh, but replace it: the laugh track laughs in the place of the audience. As Žižek states, "[t]his is what is so unsettling about "canned laughter": my most intimate feelings can be radically externalized, I can literally laugh and cry through another"¹⁹.

"Canned laughter" is rooted to the repetitive nature of comedy to the extent that it becomes the technical reproduction of an allegedly spontaneous outcry. But it also has a psychological dimension that can be identified in a psychoanalytical reading of repetition: when the other, the "machine", laughs instead of us, we allegedly become part of a social group. Therefore, the laugh track creates an illusion of social unity, as Mills also stresses. For Jane Feuer, every genre establishes itself by means of re-iteration: "Through repetition the cultural 'deep structure' of a [...] genre 'seeps to the surface'"²⁰. Trailers reproduce specifically funny moments, the set is usually the same apartment, house or office where the action takes place. "The pleasure of comedy comes from exactly the opposite of surprise, the joy coming from the reiteration of the known"²¹. Repetition is furthermore a part of the content in sitcoms. In many cases, the attraction²² is the everyday family or working lives of ordinary people. Marriage is supposed to offer the context of daily repetition, "it is presented as the scene [...] in which the prospect is not for the passing of years (until death parts us) but for the willing repetition of days, willingness for the everyday"²³. The ordinary life of a family is one of the most common motifs of situation comedies because it embodies the repetitive and uneventful. For Cavell, sitcoms offer the opposite of those events, catastrophes and otherwise traumatic incidents that constitute the other side of repetitive television: "If the event is something the television screen likes to monitor, so, it appears, is the opposite, the uneventful, the repeated, the repetitive, the utterly familiar"²⁴. For Žižek, this kind of repetition is similar to Kierkegaard's ethical repetition: "instead of chasing the elusive moments of esthetical pleasure, we rely upon the certitude of repetition. Repetition is a sign of maturity [...] we find satisfaction in the return of the same, like the happy marital couple who has overcome the yearning of exotic adventures"²⁵. The process identified by Kierkegaard takes place in the present, yet it opens up a horizon: it is a stage between aesthetic repetition, which shows the impossibility of repetition, and religious repetition, insofar as it introduces a change. Ethical repetition contradicts comic repetition, since the latter has no metamorphosis, no change, no development, as we know from *Seinfeld's* slogan

SOTTO ANALISI “no hugs, no learning”²⁶. This formula seems to reject the existing models of the sitcom. Feuer defines the salient features of the sitcom as “half an hour format, the basis in humor, the ‘problem of the week’ that causes the hilarious situation that will be resolved so that the new episode may take place in the next week”²⁷. Many other authors agree that the sitcom lacks development, is static and conservative and reaffirms stability via the fact “that each episode returns to the equilibrium with which it began”²⁸. Like Feuer, the German media scholar Knut Hickethier describes television similarly as a return to a former state of equilibrium:

The audience wants from the series the repetition of the well-known, which is well-known because it is repeated. There must be added something new, because the new reassures the certainty of continuity and constancy. Normally, the repetitive is introduced into the structure of dramaturgy like “state of beginning – disruption by a surprising event – annihilation of the disruption – regaining the former state”²⁹.

This pattern, which one could also translate as “equilibrium – disruption – return to a state of repose”, is opposed to the temporality of trauma and catastrophe in television as described by Mary-Ann Doane. According to Doane, crisis on TV coincides with that “theory of the catastrophe that defines the catastrophe as discontinuity in a former stable system”³⁰. The temporality of the catastrophe is defined by the moment that disrupts the previously stable system of television, represented, for instance, by sitcoms.

What Mills, Brooks and other authors call “postmodern sitcoms” are between these two systems of constancy on the one side, and discontinuity on the other. In these sitcoms, not do problems remain unresolved, but they are added and intertwined, and everything worsens. The audience is not supposed to identify with the characters, as it “could in a program with more psychological development of characters”³¹. Sitcoms instead provide us “with an almost pure cultural conflict. [...] We are invited to test our own cultural assumptions, because ‘the antagonists are cultures’ and the characters ‘charged cultural entities’”³². These sitcoms are “nihilistic caricatures of modern life”³³. The lack of individual identification in particular is a condition for a culture-critical sitcom. The postmodern sitcom combines the lack of psychological development with complex storytelling, so that different plotlines culminate in a bad situation.

This narrative structure also fits *Curb*. In the episode *Soda and Salt* (s03, e03), for instance, Larry is jealous of a tennis partner of his wife Cheryl. He finds them laughing on the couch in his house and gets more suspicious when Cheryl, getting a phone call while she is in the car, “warns” her friend that “Larry is in the car”. Larry complains that “the story is getting worse” when he hears the Al Green tape that the tennis partner made for Cheryl. In another story line, the Davids forget to give friends a wedding gift. They buy an expensive bottle of wine, but it is rejected by the couple because it comes too late. So Cheryl, her tennis partner, Larry and Ted Danson drink this bottle of wine for dinner in a restaurant. However, sitting in the restaurant is also the husband of a saleswoman with whom Larry had a conflict. The man violently attacks Larry and spills some of the wine on Cheryl’s chest, inciting her tennis partner to prepare a stain-removal mixture that he massages onto Cheryl’s breasts.

In the end, the different plotlines culminate in a very embarrassing situation and not in a happy solution, contradicting Feuer’s description of conventional sitcoms. But no one, especially Larry David, ever learns from these unresolved problems. The film and television philosopher Lorenz Engell has stressed that characters never learning is constitutive of the episodic format: in every episode a very standardized, identical game takes place over and again, as if the characters have forgotten everything from the past. The characters never learn anything new; they always know everything, but they do not change at all³⁴. In view of its lack of development, Engell associates the episodic format with Kierkegaard’s aesthetics of repetition, automatism, similarity, and reproduction. He declares that identical repetition is impossible,

SOTTO ANALISI and that mechanical-aesthetic repetition can only repeat the impossibility of repetition. For Deleuze, this first moment of aesthetic repetition belongs to the comedic, “which does not bring about anything new and does not change a thing [...]. It operates by insufficiency or failure. A subject is confronted with this repetition when an action is absolutely too big for her”³⁵.

This “too big” does not appear adequate to describe the situations that Larry David confronts. On the contrary, most of the issues he faces evolve from a lot of minor, everyday problems³⁶. The humorous aspect of these situations lies in the paradox that Larry David is already a successful millionaire, yet is unable to resolve the difficulties of everyday life. For Zupančič, this reflects of the function of repetition in comedy: “It functions in the background of something that has always-already succeeded, and draws its power from there”³⁷. For Zupančič, “repetition is always a repetition of representation”³⁸. She argues this in regard to theater:

For it seems that there is an inherently theatrical element involved in repetition – theatrical in the sense of belonging to theater, not in the sense of being melodramatic, exaggerated, or affected. This might be explained [...] by the point made above: that repetition is essentially repetition of a configuration: that it doesn’t represent anything, but is itself the very content of what it represent. [...] This relationship between repetition and representation [...] is well expressed in French theater terminology. In theater, we start with “repetitions”, for rehearsals are called repetitions, and we end up with *la première*, with the first (performance or the first night)”³⁹.

The relation between comedy, repetition and theater is staged in the first and fourth season of *Curb*. The first season is about an HBO-special that Jeff and Larry organize. Larry hosts different shows in comedy clubs as preparation for the final show – which he ultimately cancels because it is “too big” for him, therefore failing in his aim. The main plotline of the fourth season is the rehearsals with Ben Stiller and David Schwimmer for the famous musical *The Producers* on Broadway. The final episode ends with the opening night, which is also the title of the episode. Here the order of things is reversed: repetition comes first. Mel Brooks invites Larry to play the main role, being sure that Larry will fail, since Brooks’s secret plan is to retire with his wife after this failure. Since the opening night is a success, the order of failure and success is inverted: because this show is a success, it is a failure for Mel Brooks. Vice versa, the show is a success even if Larry fails. Indeed, in the middle of the show he obviously forgets his line and stutters senseless sentences. The text he forgets is actually about how a failure of a production can make more money than a success, which is exactly what Brooks presents in *The Producers*. David Schwimmer, who plays the accountant Leo Bloom, tells Larry about this calculation and Larry forgets his answer. The audience is shocked and several people leave the theater, causing a flailing Larry to make jokes about his cousin who is in the audience. People start to laugh, and return to their seats. It is therefore actually by accident, through forgetting, that the representation works. Zupančič describes the relation of coincidence and rupture as a gap in signification, as a relation between the Symbolic and the Real. Lacan describes this relation through a reading of the Aristotelian connection between *tyche* and *automaton*⁴⁰. *Automaton* belongs to the Symbolic and refers to the iterability of signs, while *tyche* refers to contingency. Dolar suggests that *tyche* and *automaton* are not opposite kinds of repetition, but rather they

exist together and intertwined. To put it simply, *tyche* is the gap of the *automaton* [...]. In every repetition there is already, in a minimal way, the emergence of that which escapes symbolization. [...]. There is a contingent bit which dwells in the gap, which is produced by the very gap, and this imperceptible bit is the stuff that comedy puts to maximum use⁴¹.

SOTTO ANALISI The configuration that is repeated for Zupančič is the “signifying dyad” of the representation of alienation: “this implies that it repeats a certain configuration. But by repeating this configuration it also repeats the Real of its other side, that is to say, the subject’s unrepresented presence in the Real”⁴². This presence of the Real, or the relation between *tyche* and *automaton*, is even better staged in the final episode of the third season, which has a similar title: *Grand Opening*. Three weeks before the inauguration of a new restaurant that Larry opens with some friends, the chef quits. The new chef has Tourette’s Syndrome, a “neurological disorder characterized by repetitive, stereotyped, involuntary movements and vocalizations called tics”⁴³. He yells involuntarily words like “motherfucking cocksucker, asshole”. This kind of repetition is the opposite of the kind of repetition that is necessary in representation: it subverts it. Yet at the same time, it comprises the “other side” of representation. Larry does not want to fire the chef, as he assumes that he is a Holocaust survivor when he sees a number written on his arm. (Later it turns out that it is only a lottery number, another example of chance). The opening night goes well. Larry greets a lot of friends and everyone seems to be satisfied. Later, however, the chef yells from the kitchen out of the blue “shitface, cocksucker, asshole, son of a bitch”. Larry reacts by yelling “scumsucking whore”, Jeff continues and everyone in the restaurant is yelling, and a collective outburst of laughter starts. People seem to be relieved to say these words, although they have no idea what caused the exchange. In comedy, therefore, we witness not only the repetition of representation, but also its other side. The automatic representation of signifiers and the accidental occurrence of something that subverts an identical representation are inherent to the live nature of theater. The relation between sitcom and theater is already well established in television studies: the sitcom has its origins in theater, vaudeville, stand-up comedy and the music hall, and it has been called a “video approximations of theater”. “This can be seen not only in the performance style and method of shooting which, as in theatre, usually relies on the audience being positioned as in the fourth wall”⁴⁴. One can argue in regard to this origin that the sitcom offers an electronic substitute for the theatrical experience⁴⁵.

One of the directors of *Curb*, Larry Charles, compares its production to theater: “It feels very contrived and unnatural, almost like one of those stage shows from the turn of the 19th century where the villain came out and twirled his moustache. On *Curb*, we’re able to achieve a level of verisimilitude, of reality, that’s really invigorating for a director”⁴⁶.

Zupančič believes that comedy provides a challenged perspective on “the world and ourselves”. Her thesis is that tragedy and comedy are based upon and revolve around a fundamental discrepancy. That discrepancy emerges from the discordance between the intention of the act and its actual effects, between desire and its satisfaction, between appearance and truth. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, desire inhabits the discrepancy between the demand (as articulated in the signifier) and its satisfaction⁴⁷. While tragedy is essentially the pain of this difference, comedy addresses it in another way: “[c]omic satisfaction thrives on things that do not exactly add up. They thrive on these discrepancies as a source of pleasure rather than pain”⁴⁸. Both tragedy and comedy are part of this configuration, but each of them approach it from different sides: tragedy is on the side of the demand and comedy on the side of satisfaction. Yet more than merely delivering satisfaction, it “restores to the essentially unsatisfied demand its *jouissance*”⁴⁹. Zupančič adds: “Comedy or, more precisely, comic sequence is always inaugurated by some unexpected surplus-realization. This surplus-realization may well be produced by failure, by a mistake, an error, through misunderstanding (and it usually is), but the moment it occurs it changes the very structure of the field”⁵⁰.

Stereotypes and Race in Curb Your Enthusiasm

Zupančič argues that comedy involves stereotypes because it ignores the psychological depth and motives of characters⁵¹. One reason for the stereotypical portrait of characters in comedy is that

SOTTO ANALISI something universal, for instance jealousy, becomes concrete. We know from many comedies that a character represents a “single” or “unary trait”, as the German term *einzigster Zug* is usually translated. Freud, as well as Walter Benjamin, wrote about these singular characteristics in regard to comedy. The unary trait is the essence and form of the comic character. In comedy this trait is usually more important than individuality. It is connected to a character but at the same time it is cut off. Lacan describes the unary trait as “before” a character: “The unary trait precedes the subject. *In the beginning was the word* means *In the Beginning stands the unary trait*. [...] *Simplex*, singularity of the trait, this is what we cause to enter the real, whether the real likes it or not”⁵².

The unary trait is *before* the subject, it belongs to language, to the Other; however it is not just the Symbolic, it is how the subject is connected to words. It belongs to a subject, but at the same time it is outside of him or her, attached from somewhere else. Bergson claims how the singularity of a character is related to the comic:

The vice capable of making us comic is [...] that which is brought from without, like a ready-made frame into which we are to step. It lends us its own rigidity instead of borrowing from us our flexibility. We do not render it more complicated; on the contrary, it simplifies us. [...] The reason is that, however intimately vice, when comic, is associated with persons, it none the less retains its simple, independent existence, it remains the central character, present though invisible, to which the characters in flesh and blood on the stage are attached⁵³.

In comedy the trait of a character, even if very stereotypical, does not determine him or her intrinsically. In Larry David’s case, Taine Duncan asks if “*Curb Your Enthusiasm* reinforces the stereotyping of American men as either narcissistic philanderers or neurotic impotents?”⁵⁴. For her Larry is the later, a neurotic anxious personality, and she provides some psychoanalytical and social explanations for this. She suggests that *Curb* provides ethical lessons and claims it might let us “see the possibilities for ethical, healthy, and independent American men”⁵⁵. Duncan asks if the show does so by hyperbolizing the cultural extremes and illuminating the ridiculous nature of these false alternatives. Although comedy does exaggerate cultural extremes, within the context of *Curb* it is hard to “demonstrate how unproductive such behaviors really are”⁵⁶. The series does not psychologically explain Larry’s neurosis, nor does it seek to teach the audience a lesson, although it is often painful to see the consequences of Larry’s behavior. I would be inclined to believe Zupančič’s assumption that in comedy “we are dealing not so much with the protagonist’s ‘inner struggle’”⁵⁷.

Contrarily to Duncan’s analyses, I cannot perceive an inner struggle, nor even something buried “deep inside” his character. He openly lives his neurosis, but nevertheless makes no effort to change anything. Zupančič describes a detachment from institutions and family bonds in comedy, a detachment that we can also observe in *Curb*. Comic characters are never “intersubjective”. For instance, when Larry assumes that he might have been adopted, he becomes very excited and easily connects with his alleged biological parents (s05, e10 *The End*), who describe his foster parents using the crudest Jewish stereotypes: “the guy was nervous and the woman was loud”.

Since Larry’s “new” parents are Mid-Western, gentile Caucasians, Larry’s adaptation of their lifestyle is portrayed in a way that parodies whiteness. His dressing style changes immediately, he goes fishing and hunting, he drinks a lot, but he also sheds some of his neuroses about his Jewishness, a point on which many television criticisms were focused. At least in this episode, Jewishness is associated with selfishness. While the new Christian Larry decides during a church service with his new parents to donate a kidney to Richard Lewis, the latter is not willing to lend Larry a golf club.

This lack of reciprocity can also be regarded as inherent to comedy itself, rather than as a Jewish stereotype. The singular trait is closely related to stereotypes, which assume that subjects are determined

SOTTO ANALISI by a single feature: race, gender, sexuality. This category is invariably very simplistic.

Samuel Weber stresses the social and political significance of comedy, and the singular trait, and relates them to Freud's notion of identification. Freud describes identification as a desire to become similar to a person by adopting his or her traits, perhaps only a "single trait". Identification is only partial: "It must also strike us that [...] the identification is a partial and extremely limited one and only borrows a single trait from the person who is its object"⁵⁸.

But this does not mean that the unary trait, if we call the stereotype such, is not set into motion. While Larry David is driven by his single trait, his Jewish neurosis, it is also contextualized. Weber writes of the function of the single trait in comedy:

In the case of the comic character, individuality becomes 'singular' and a 'trait' by being on stage. The stage, whether tragic or comic, or neither, always involves a relative, relational situation, in which space and time converge but never close or conclude. The space of the stage is always open to transformation. [...] The single trait is thus 'comic', lends itself to laughter and to amusement by presenting itself in isolation, and yet never being absolutely cut off from its surroundings, its past and its future. This is why the singular trait is always tendentially on the move, on the run, drawing away from something and towards something else⁵⁹.

This openness to transformation in the context of a theatrical stage is very important, especially when these traits are racially connoted. In another episode, Larry has several encounters with black people. In "The Surrogate" the perspective on racism becomes more complex. Larry is obviously racist, he is not a neutral observer of racism who might change from racist to non-racist. The episode contains several comic sequences. In one, Larry must pass a medical test to prove that he is physically able to play in *The Producers*. While his heart is being tested, a very attractive nurse comes in and Larry's heart beats faster. It turns out that this African-American woman is the current girlfriend of Larry's friend, Richard Lewis. Over lunch Richard tells Larry that he is afraid that he cannot satisfy her, because she may be accustomed to the bigger penises of black men. As a consequence, Larry starts to ask African-American women about their sexual experiences.

Wanda Sykes challenges Larry when he asks an African-American customer to get his car, assuming that he is the valet. She says: "So you automatically think the black man is the valet? I saw it. 'Get my car boy'". Larry excuses himself with the argument that the man is wearing a red tie and black suit. Wanda answers ironically that "of course" she would also assume every black man in a suit works at a parking lot, though Larry also would not assume this if the man was white. Larry then asks Wanda if the penis sizes of black men and white men differ. Wanda refuses to answer.

Afterwards Larry buys a baby shower gift and chooses a dark-skinned looking doll that the saleswoman calls biracial. But Larry calls the doll "mulatto" at the baby shower party. Someone corrects him: "Biracial is what we call it usually". Then, later, he asks a black nurse at a hospital about penis size. She answers his question and lets him know that there is no difference and that it is "really a kind of a myth". When she tells him that her parents are black and white, Larry mentions the "mulatto" doll. Again, she points out this word is old-fashioned. Larry is "not learning." He already was told not to ask this question and avoid the word "mulatto"⁶⁰. He nevertheless pushes this further still. We see Richard and Larry in front of urinals and Larry explains to Richard the myth of penis size. Then the famous basketball player Muggsy Bogues enters the bathroom and both Larry and Richard obviously stare at his penis while all three urinate. Even once the myth of the big black penis has been debunked, he still must have a look.

The episode ends with Larry locking his car while a black man accidentally passes by. The man hears the lock and asks if Larry assumes that he wants to steal his car. Larry answers that it is not a "race thing". Again, Wanda Sykes witnesses this scene and comments: "Here again: a black man in a suit parks cars,

SOTTO ANALISI black man no suit, he gonna steal your car". Then she asks him about a script she gave Larry to pass onto a producer, which was turned down, wanting to know if Larry told the producer that she was black, which Larry denies. Wanda asks him to do so, because "white men like to be liberal and help a black person", and accuses Larry of not knowing when to play the race card.

Wanda Sykes functions as the super-ego that corrects Larry's racial behavior. At the same time, she refuses to become the expert on racial matters. In another episode, when Larry asks her if it is wrong to assume that black men wearing bowties are Muslims, Wanda responds: "Why you asking me some bullshit like that? What the fuck – I'm not your link into the black world, okay? So stop asking me shit about black people and stuff" (s05, e02, *The Bowtie*).

Wanda is characterized by only one trait, her blackness. I would argue that the singular trait functions as the Master-Signifier race in *Curb*. Another example is the episode *Affirmative Action* (s01, e09) in which Larry is again forced to confront his racism. First he meets Richard Lewis's black dermatologist whom he offends by asks him if his profession has to do with the "affirmative action thing". Nevertheless, later Larry must go to his house and ask him for a prescription for Cheryl. There is a party at the doctor's house and Larry excuses himself for the former comment, only to repeat it in front of the guests, insisting several times that it was "nothing". His comment was bad enough, but his repeated excuse that it was "nothing" makes it even worse. At the doctor's house, Larry bumps into a writer that previously he had not hired, and she assumes that the real reason for his decision was that she is black. In both situations Larry is accused of racism, with good reason. Even though his decision not to hire the woman was not race motivated, he still nepotistically hired a white friend of Cheryl's. The fact that Larry repeats his "joke" about affirmative action in front of a group of black people changes the Master-Signifier of race. Larry and Cheryl assume the position of a minority in this group. The repetition sets Larry's joke into another context, he now must ask himself seriously why he made it. The viewing audience might also conclude that the joke is offensive.

Can repetition destabilize a Master-Signifier, as Zupančič argues? She writes

Master-Signifiers enter the scene of comedy not in order to have the last word, but in order to be repeated there (as well as subjected to other comic techniques). Their repetition is not simply their affirmation. An identical reaction (of a character) repeated ten times necessarily has its repercussions on the stability of the Master-Signifier involved. And the repercussions of this kind of comic repetition usually point not in the direction of stabilizing the repeated position but, rather, in the direction of shaking it⁶¹.

The Master-Signifier of race is not reaffirmed in this episode through repetition, but brought into question. The more Larry insists that it is about "nothing", the more important it becomes, evoking the other situation when he insists that it is not a "race thing". "Nothing" seems to become equivalent to the "race thing".

In the sixth season of *Curb*, race is not merely Larry's "sensitive point", but other Master-Signifiers such as blackness exercise a similar power. The arbitrariness of racial signifiers becomes more obvious. For instance, in the episode *The N Word* (s06, e08) there is a similar situation to *Affirmative Action*. But this time Larry only overhears someone else in the bathroom using the n-word in a telephone conversation. He is very upset and tells the incident to someone else. While recounting the phone conversation, he quotes the other man saying "ni**er". A black doctor hears him using the word and is very offended and upset. When recounting the story at home, the Blacks, a family who live at Larry's house, overhear him, again without realizing that he is quoting someone. They temporarily move out. It is not clear if Larry understands that even quoting the n-word hurts people. Nevertheless at the end of the episode he has to testify in court on the matter, and seeing that several black people are in the room he refuse to repeat the word. In this case, the repetition and different (or similar) reactions of other characters to a signifier

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destabilizes it; it becomes clear that the word should not be used at all, not even to quote racists.

The relationship between a white majority and a black minority that is almost always signified as “racial” difference changes in the sixth season when the Blacks move into David’s house, after they lost their own in a hurricane. Loretta, her mother Auntie Rae, her children Keysha and Daryl and her brother Leon have important parts in the series, and Larry begins a relationship with Loretta in the seventh season. After they separate, Larry still lives with Leon until the final season.

JB Smooth becomes the other best friend of Larry, and consequently appears more regularly than other black comedians in the series. Larry must partially submit to the rules of the family, which leads to several comic situations. He is the owner and “master” of the house. Within the world of the series this is deemed normal, though Larry strongly resists when Cheryl’s parents bring a huge Christmas tree to the house (s03, e09, *Larry, Mary, and Joseph*). The presence of the Blacks signal that he is not the “master” of the house anymore, and whiteness is also less of a Master-Signifier. This is also another feature of comedy that Zupančič describes: “The first crucial step in the art of comedy is thus to create/extract and put forward the right Master-Signifiers. That is to say, Master-Signifiers that, in all their arbitrariness, convey not simply the ‘essence’ of a character or situation but, rather, their acute or sensitive point”⁶².

We can apply this statement to *Curb*. First, whiteness was created as a Master-Signifier at the essence of the characters. In the sixth season, other Master-Signifiers such as blackness obtain similar power. The arbitrariness of racial signifiers becomes more obvious. When Larry starts to date Loretta he “so embraces the Blacks that Wanda jokes she’s nominated him for an NAACP award (s07, e01, *Funkhouser’s Crazy Sister*)”⁶³. Larry’s attempt to embrace black culture might be connected to his own distance from the mainstream (Christian) culture, as a Jew. Rocha goes as far as suggesting that Larry rejects white culture: “Larry’s open, though often awkward, embrace of our cultures is even more striking given his nearly universal condemnation and rejection of white culture”⁶⁴.

In comparison with *Seinfeld*, which was also written by Larry David, *Curb* is more openly Jewish. When the Blacks introduce themselves with their last name, he says “This is like my name was Jew, Larry Jew, cause I am Jewish”. Here we have a simple version of racial signification and the designation of the single trait. Vincent Brook has argued, on the connection between Blackness and Jewishness, that Jewish identity is situated between mainstream white culture and minority culture and is therefore determined by more than one trait. He bestows on Jews a unique historical insider/outsider status within American society⁶⁵. Although Jews were politically and socially active in the civil rights movement, they are often excluded from a multicultural approach to difference, because of this insider/outsider status⁶⁶. For Brook, too, the “Jew’s role in the entertainment industry would appear to serve a paradigmatic example of such negotiation between marginalized groups and majority culture”⁶⁷. The acceptance of Jews in majority culture clashes with the opposing desire of Jewish people to preserve their identity, as well with the reluctance of other minorities to admit Jews into the multicultural fold. Holly A. Pearse transmits this ambivalent situation on *Curb*:

In recent years, a nouveau anti-Semitism has cropped up in cultural studies, aligning Jews with the white, wealthy, capitalist oppressor, as opposed to the oppressed minority. This alignment has placed Jews beyond the interest of post-colonial investigations into race relations and out of the discussion of multiculturalism. In the face of this nouveau anti-Semitism, Larry David’s work reminds us that rumors of the Jewish cultural assimilation in America may be greatly exaggerated. While some scholars are quick to align Jews with the white power base, David’s comedy reflects a time of Jewish oppression, and reminds us that while the glass ceiling might be shattered for Jews in official life, there are still bumps, socially, in America — where a Jewface like him cannot be ‘gentiley’ enough to get into the country club⁶⁸.

SOTTO ANALISI In later seasons *Curb* presents a multicultural society and discusses different demands, needs, and political issues, but from a comic, Jewish insider/outsider perspective. Politically, Larry David might claim a minority position as well. He seems to claim that he does not belong to white mainstream culture but instead is alienated, for instance when he applies for membership at the golf club. Byers and Krieger summarizes *Curb's* Jewishness as following:

Curb uses familiar Jewish themes, such as comic alienation, assimilation anxiety, and conflict between Jews and gentiles, via the perpetual misfortunes of Larry David's character—a hapless nebbish. Although David is a privileged Jew in his financial and social standing, his persona is much like Woody Allen's: a misfit at odds with the world, even with the Jews he encounters⁶⁹.

In part Larry conforms to Jewish stereotypes: he avoids sports and outdoor activities, while his gentile wife is able to partake in the wealthy life of beaches, drinks, and tennis. Some critics have in fact criticized the series for depicting Jewish self-hatred. Arye Dworken wrote in the *Jerusalem Post*: "David exemplifies the worst qualities in the Jewish stereotype and displays them unabashedly, as if they were badges of honor"⁷⁰. She claims this game with stereotypes was funny until the fifth episode, at which point the humor turned into self-hatred, as is especially evident in the portrayal of orthodox Jews: "His portrayal of Orthodox Jews [...] is reminiscent of the cartoons published by the Germans and French during World War II (the only thing missing were the grossly exaggerated noses)"⁷¹. While there is some basis in this claim, the portrayal of orthodox Jews is intrinsic to comedy in its attempt to portray people in a stereotypical way, by means of a single trait.

I have sought to suggest here that the repetition of stereotypes might effectively subvert their racist content. Similarly, Byers and Krieger argue with Žižek that newness can only emerge from repetition, because "repetition always contains that kernel of difference/excess, that possibility of multiple points of identification inherent in the way we engage with television"⁷². They assume that *Curb* offers radical possibilities for reimagining Jewishness, as well as other racial signifiers. The repetition of the stereotype, the single trait and the Master-Signifier of race establishes the conditions for a play of combinations, obstructions and redoubling of this signifier. For this reason the repetitive structure of the sitcom does not show *per se* its conservative nature, but on the contrary reveals its subversive power. The question remains of whether this could be applied to any sitcom. This article has examined just one example, since the comical use of racial stereotypes is so politically sensitive that scholars ought to analyze them prudently.

Michaela Wunsch

Notes

1 Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In. On Comedy*, Cambridge (MA), The MIT Press, 2007, p. 149.

2 Henri Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4352/4352-h/4352-h.htm>) (1901). Last seen: February 3rd 2016.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts. The Seminar XI*, New York-London, Norton, 1998, p. 61.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*

8 A. Zupančič, op. cit., p.172.

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9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ivi*, p. 173.

12 Mladen Dolar, "Comedy and its Double", in Robert Pfaller (ed.), *Stop That Comedy! On the Subtle Hegemony of the Tragic in Our Culture*, Wien, Sonderzahl, 2005, p. 197.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ivi*, p. 198.

16 Brett Mills, *Television Sitcom*, London, British Film Institute, 2005, p. 15. Mills mentions that classic sitcoms in particular are repeated in prime-time slots.

17 Stanley Cavell, "The Fact of Television", in John G. Hanhardt (ed.), *Video Culture. A Critical Investigation*, Layton/ Utah, Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1986, p. 197.

18 B. Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

19 Slavoj Žižek, "Will You Laugh for Me, Please?" (<http://lacan.com/zizeklaugh.htm>). Last seen: February 3rd 2016.

20 Jane Feuer, "Genre Study and Television", in Robert C. Allen (ed.), *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 119.

21 B. Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

22 The term "attraction" refers to Tom Gunning's term "cinema of attractions". Gunning analyzes early movies that have been less diegetic or interested in psychological depth of characters. Even the ordinary life of a family seems to be the opposite of spectacular attractions, and early sitcoms evolved from variety shows that are closely related to this kind of early cinema. See Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions. Early Films, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde", in Thomas Elsaesser, Adam Barker (eds.), *Early Film. Space, Frame, Narrative*, London, BFI, 1990, pp. 56-62.

23 Stanley Cavell, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary", Sterling M. McMurrin (ed.), *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1988, p. 117.

24 S. Cavell, "The Fact of Television", *cit.*, p. 197.

25 Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood In and Out*, London-New York, Routledge, 2007, p. 90.

26 Robert Hurd notes that while many scholars and critics quote this description of the show by creator Larry David, none have provided an original source for the quote. Robert Hurd, "Taking *Seinfeld* Seriously: Modernism in Popular Culture". *New Literary History*, vol. 37, n. 4, Autumn 2006, *Attending to Media*, pp. 761-776.

27 J. Feuer, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

28 *Ivi*, p. 122.

29 Knut Hieckethier, "The Same Procedure. Wiederholung als Medienprinzip der Moderne", in Jürgen Felix et. al. (eds.), *Die Wiederholung*, Marburg, Schüren, 2001, p. 58 (my translation).

30 Mary-Ann Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe", in Patricia Mellencamp (ed.), *Logics of Television. Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 228.

31 J. Feuer, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

32 *Ibid.*

33 David Marc, *Demographic Vistas: Television in American Culture*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984, pp. 39-62.

34 Lorenz Engell, "Erinnern/ Vergessen: Serien als operatives Gedächtnis des Fernsehens", in Robert Blanchet et.al. (eds.), *Serielle Formen: Von den frühen Film-Serien zu aktuellen Quality-TV und Online-Serien*, Marburg, Schüren, 2011, p. 122 (my translation).

35 A. Zupančič, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

- SOTTO ANALISI** 36 Even this is not entirely true. In the first season there is indeed a situation that is “too big” for Larry. He should give a show as part of an HBO special in front of 3000 spectators. After he takes a look at the theatre he walks into the HBO office and cancels the show, with a made up excuse that his stepfather (who does not exist) is in a coma.
- 37 A. Zupančič, *op. cit.*, p. 158.
- 38 *Ivi*, p. 167.
- 39 *Ivi*, p. 171.
- 40 See Lacan’s chapter “Tyche and Automaton”, in Id., *Four Fundamental Concepts*, cit., pp. 53-67.
- 41 M. Dolar, *op. cit.*, p. 200.
- 42 *Ivi*, p. 167.
- 43 See “Tourette syndrome” page on Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tourette_syndrome). Last seen: February 5th, 2016.
- 44 B. Mills, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 38.
- 45 Andy Medhurst, Lucy Tuck, “The Gender Game”, in *BFI-Dossier*, n. 17, 1982, pp. 43-55.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 A. Zupančič, p. 129.
- 48 *Ivi*, p. 130.
- 49 *Ivi*, p. 132.
- 50 A. Zupančič, *op. cit.*, p. 132.
- 51 A. Zupančič, *op. cit.*, p. 176.
- 52 Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book X*, Cambridge/Malden, Polity Press, 2014, p. 20.
- 53 H. Bergson, *op. cit.*
- 54 Taine Duncan, “What Kind of Men Are Larry and Jeff?”, in Mark Ralkowski (ed.), *Curb Your Enthusiasm and Philosophy*, Chicago-La Salle, Open Court, 2012, p. 122.
- 55 *Ivi*, p. 135.
- 56 *Ibid.*
- 57 A. Zupančič, *op. cit.*, p. 66.
- 58 Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, London/Vienna, The International Psychoanalytical Press, 1922, p. 49.
- 59 Samuel Weber, “Drawing. The Single Trait”, in Hendrik Blumentrath, Katja Rothe, Sven Werkmeister, Barbara Wurm, Michaela Wunsch (eds.), *Techniken der Übereinkunft. Zur Medialität des Politischen*, Berlin, Kadmos, 2009, p. 92.
- 60 James Rocha argues that Larry only agrees to change his terminology when the biracial nurse corrects him, not when the white couple to whom he gave the doll correct him. James Rocha, “Do You Mind if My Caucasian Mentions the N-Word?,” in Mark Ralkowski (ed.), *Curb Your Enthusiasm and Philosophy*, Chicago, La Salle Open Court, 2012, p. 113.
- 61 A. Zupančič, *op. cit.*, 177.
- 62 *Ivi*, p. 177.
- 63 J. Rocha, *op. cit.*, p. 112.
- 64 *Ibid.*
- 65 Vincent Brook (ed.), *You Should See Yourself: Jewish Identity in Postmodern American Culture*, New Brunswick, (N.J.)-London, Rutgers University Press, 2003, p. 2.
- 66 *Ivi*, p. 15.
- 67 *Ivi*, p. 16.
- 68 Holly A. Pearse, “The Larry David Opus. Outing the Jewish Male”, *Jewish Quarterly*, n. 211, Autumn 2008 (<http://www.jewishquarterly.org/issuearchive/articlea794.html?articleid=401>). Last seen: February

SOTTO ANALISI 5th, 2016.

69 Michele Byers, Rosalin Krieger, "Something Old is New Again? Postmodern Jewishness in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Arrested Development* and *The O.C.*", in Vincent Brook (ed.), *You Should See Yourself: Jewish Identity in Postmodern American Culture*, New Brunswick/London, Rutgers University Press, 2006, p. 280.

70 Arye Dworken, "Anything for a laugh", *The Jerusalem Post* (<http://www.jpost.com/Arts-and-Culture/Entertainment/Anything-for-a-laugh>). Last seen: February 5th, 2016.

71 *Ibidem*.

72 Byers, Krieger, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

Abstract

The article explores the affinity of comedy for repetition, analyzing particularly the sitcom *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (Creator: Larry David, HBO 2000-2011), a comedy series on the life of the co-creator and writer of *Seinfeld*, Larry David, who plays himself. Sitcoms in general have been assessed as a conservative form of television in regard to its repetitive form, its contents, and stereotypes. Through an analysis of *Curb*, I will reevaluate this appraisal in regard to racial and especially to anti-Semitic stereotypes.