

Who laughs? A moment of laughter in *Shortbus*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

References

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