

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE

FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

The Mighty Boosh: Theatrical and Narrative Aspects of Julian Barratt and Noel
Fielding's Epic Comedy

The Mighty Boosh: Teatrální a narativní prvky v epické komedii Juliana
Barratta a Noela Fieldinga

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Praha, srpen 2012

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Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

Tímto bych chtěl poděkovat panu Mgr. Petru Christovovi, Ph.D. za jeho etné podněty a rady při vypracovávání bakalářské práce. Dále děkuji Mgr. Janu Kozákovi jr. za inspiraci a přínosné diskuze nad daným tématem.

Anotace:

Tato práce se zabývá podrobnou analýzou tvorby britské komediální skupiny *The Mighty Boosh* založené herci a komiky Julianem Barratem a Noelem Fieldingem. *The Boosh* je v našem kulturním prostředí relativně neznámým pojmem. Z tohoto důvodu slouží první část práce mimo jiné jako úvod: představuje kulturní pozadí herců a původ projektu samotného. Následně se zabývá technickými a fyzickými aspekty show, stejně jako užitými hereckými i teatrálními metodami. Druhá část je více praktická, soustředí se na narativní rámec a strategie, které mají tendenci se výrazně opakovat a iní tak z Barrattova a Fieldingova počinu epickou (hrdinskou) komedii. Analýza si klade za cíl vysvětlit tyto vypravěčské strategie mimo jiné poukazováním na autory jako Vladimír Propp, Joseph Campbell a další, a představit *The Mighty Boosh* ve své celistvosti a komplexnosti.

Abstract:

This thesis is concerned with a detailed analysis of the work of the British comedic troupe *The Mighty Boosh* created by actors and comedians Julian Barratt and Noel Fielding. *The Boosh* phenomenon is relatively unknown in our cultural environment. Accordingly, the first part of the thesis aims to serve partly as an introduction: it presents the authors' cultural background and the origins of the project itself. Subsequently, technical and physical aspects of the show as well as the acting/theatrical methods used are inquired into. The second part is more practical as it focuses on the narrative framework and strategies, which tend to be highly repetitive and make Barratt and Fielding's project an epic (heroic) comedy. The analysis seeks to explain these narrative strategies by referring to authors such as Vladimir Propp, Joseph Campbell and others, and to reveal *The Mighty Boosh* in its entirety and complexity.

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1. THE MIGHTY BOOSH: THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

Since roughly the 1950s, after the development of what is generally known as the New Comedy represented markedly for instance by the famous *Goon Show*,¹ there has emerged a great number of comedic projects, series and troupes more or less maintaining, modifying and improving upon this tradition established in the Great Britain. The foundations of *The Boosh*, which indirectly continues in this new stream of entertainment, were laid around the year of 1998 when Julian Barratt and Noel Fielding, two British comedians whose artistic co-operation reaches yet further back into past, created the characters of Howard Moon and Vince Noir, two mutually contrasting personages, who were later to become the central heroes of the comedic series. The development of style and form continued, until there finally emerged a concept, fixedly establishing itself (at least in Britain) as a surrealist and in many ways absurd psychedelic phenomenon with strong features of magical realism called *The Mighty Boosh*.

There were two motives for choosing the abovementioned series as the topic of the following thesis. The first one was that whereas many other subjects, whether these of theatre or literature, has been treated dozens of times by numerous authors and scholars, in case of *The Mighty Boosh* there is not to my knowledge any scholarly study that would attempt to describe its unique style and form or try to classify or analyse it in any other way. What has been, on the other hand, discussed more than often, and what is to be discusses as one of the two major topics of this thesis, is the so-called morphology of the traditional narrative, i.e. the original structures of myth and the archetypal journey of the hero that shows little alternation in form throughout history and cultures (see below). This brings me directly to the second reason: I am more than ready to agree what I have already mentioned at the beginning. The modern era has produced numerous TV-series, stand-up comedies and projects superficially similar to *The Mighty Boosh* - this fact, I know, could possibly be used as an argument against writing a thesis on a topic that is merely one among many - nowhere, however, have I encountered a project that would so remarkably approach and re-use the aforementioned traditional structure of the storytelling as *The Boosh*.

¹ The *Goon Show* is mentioned not only because it is one of the most famous/influential comedic projects of the period, but also because it has certain traits similar to *The Mighty Boosh*. As Jakub Škorpil claims, the *Goon Show* for instance included a plot or a story which kept developing throughout the whole length of the programme. However, this was true only about its third and later series; until then the show, just like *The Boosh* at its beginnings (see later), was of a widely variety nature. (Jakub Škorpil, "Tajemní vrha i z Goon Show," *SAD: Sv t a divadlo*, Jan 2001, 93).

Instead of directly offering the spectator immediately familiar situations that we often encounter in comedies, e.g. daily problems at work, a complicated love relationship, unexpected arrival of one's parents and so on, the authors decided to go another way. They wrapped most of their plots, whose subtext, however, can sometimes be exactly of the aforementioned banal kind, as a *heroic quest*. Thus, for instance, the common anxiety of growing old results in an exotic journey to the otherworld for the legendary elixir of youth,² during which the hero must face many ordeals and finally encounter his adversary (the villain) before obtaining the boon and returning home.³ Even if this narrative situation, unlike these mentioned above, does not seem to represent anything we could ever physically face in our life, it still feels peculiarly familiar. In truth, technically it is nothing else than a mission of a prince fighting against a dragon or an evil sorcerer, who eventually wins his prize (the princess, the realm etc.) – a story we have all heard so often and know so well in many different variations. In fact, this all points to the Jungian concept of the collective unconscious.⁴

In accordance with that, in their otherwise modern stories the authors use and repeat certain primordial narrative archetypes (and I am sure that their choice of certain characters/plots is likewise unconscious) we all share. This agrees well with the words of Mark Ravenhill, one of the chief representatives of the so-called “In-yer-face” theatre.⁵ Despite his belonging to the heart of new British playwriting in the 1990s and 2000s, he is very respectful of historical theatre. He says that “there are huge dangers in cutting ourselves from the historical continuum that the canon offers,” and that instead of “/expanding/ of the canon and seeking out work from different civilisations and backgrounds, we seem to have narrowed the range of work we produce in our theatres, until we're trapped in an eternal

² *The Mighty Boosh*, “The Fountain of Youth,” dir. Paul King, prod. A Baby Cow Production, BBC, 2008.

³ The often tri-partial nature of such quest, that is 1) departure, 2) stay in the foreign lands and 3) subsequent return home, will be discussed later.

⁴ “...in addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature /.../, there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents.” [Karl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 1996) 43.]

⁵ For a fuller description of the “In-yer-face” theatre, see “What is in-yer-face theatre?,” *In-yer-face theatre*, Aleks Sierz, 5 Oct 2010, 3 Jul 2012 < <http://www.inyerface-theatre.com/what.html>>.

present. /.../. The great thing about a really good play /.../ is that it allows us /.../ to think and feel differently.”⁶

That *The Mighty Boosh* indeed developed a modern comedic narrative of an ancient heroic nature is well illustrated by the following comment taken from an interview with the protagonists:⁷

“We were always obsessed with epic journeys, like *Sinbad* and *Arabian Nights*. So that’s something we always thought would be nice, to take two idiots who just live in London — one thinks he’s trendy and the other thinks he’s intellectually supreme — and then they go out and actually get involved in *quests*.”⁸

In his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, perhaps one of the most ground-breaking works in the comparative mythology, Joseph Campbell uses the term *monomyth*, which seems essential for our following study. The *monomyth* (also referred to as the “hero’s journey,” during which the hero must face tasks and trials) can be defined as a certain universal scheme that serves as basis for any heroic narrative. This means that some archetypal patterns tend to repeat themselves regularly in different tales, thus pointing to the one original myth or story.⁹

“Whether we listen with aloof amusement to the dreamlike mumbo jumbo of some red-eyed witch-doctor of the Congo, or read with cultivated rapture thin translations from the sonnets of the mystic Lao-tse /.../ it will always be the one, shape shifting yet marvellously constant story that we find...”¹⁰

However, the scheme’s validity, as rightly stated by Fiona Bowie in her book “*The Anthropology of Religion*,” reaches far beyond the sphere of the heroic tales:

⁶ Mark Ravenhill, “Theatres must stop producing so many new plays and focus more on the classics,” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media Limited, Oct 17 2005, July 3 2012 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/oct/17/theatre1>>.

⁷ Mark Graham, “The Mighty Boosh on Why They Waited So Long to Conquer America: “We weren’t Invited!,”” *Vulture*, New York Media LLC, 28 July 2009, 18 June 2011 <http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2009/07/mighty_boosh_ivu.html>.

⁸ This perfectly agrees with Joseph Campbell’s (see later) account: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.” [Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968) 30.]

⁹ Campbell had the highest praise for the psychoanalysts (C.G Jung, Mary-Louise von Franz); he saw “symbols of mythology as spontaneous productions of the psyche.” (Campbell, 4).

¹⁰ Campbell, 3.

“Campbell proved that the heroic myths of numerous cultures contains the said basic scheme; this is, however, true about novels, films and other kinds of art.”^{11 12}

Facts in many ways similar to these of Campbell are claimed by Russian formalist Vladimir Propp in his famous *Morphology of the Folktale*.¹³ Here the author states that whereas there can be endless variations in content, the form of the narrative remains surprisingly constant.^{14 15} Considering many different narrative schemes,¹⁶ *The Mighty Boosh* seems to be closest to the Proppian typology of the narrative structure, which contains thirty-one functions in total. Not all of these functions have to appear within each tale, nor must they always repeat themselves in the same order: thus the narrative may start with an *absentation* from home or a *lack* (state of missing something, be it the abovementioned youth, a princess or some magical object) affecting the hero, continue with the hero's departure on mission and the following ordeals, and is concluded by his returning home or a wedding.¹⁷

Whereas other scholars like Lord Raglan¹⁸ or J.G. von Hahn with his “Aryan Expulsion and Return Formula,”¹⁹ tend to include into their patterns events such as the hero's birth and its circumstances, his maturing etc., Propp avoids these and focuses solely on the hero's journey, a phase I personally see as the most important. Logically, *The Mighty Boosh* integrates a similar extension of functions; the series of this kind are not, and cannot be, based on a story that would develop in a chronological sense and start with a protagonist's birth. Each of *The Boosh's* episodes, which, in fact, rarely refer to one another, rather embodies an individual heroic quest.

¹¹ Fiona Bowie, *Antropologie náboženství*, trans. Vladimír Petkevič, (Prague: Portál, 2008) 291. *modified translation of the Czech text

¹² In her *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales* Marie-Louise von Franz says that fairy tales “are the purest and simplest expression of collective unconscious psychic processes.” [Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1970) 1.]

¹³ Vladimir Propp, *Morfologie pohádky a jiné studie*, trans. Miroslav Červenka, Marcela Pittermanová, Hana Šmahelová, (Prague: H&H, 2008).

¹⁴ “Whereas names (and attributes) of the acting characters change, their acts or *functions* do not. /.../ ... we find that fairy-tale characters, however varied they are, frequently *do* one and the same,” (Propp, 25). *modified translation of the Czech text

¹⁵ This basically means that whereas in one fairy tale we encounter a prince fighting against an evil sorceress and in another a knight slaying a dragon, in both narratives these characters equally represent the functions of the *hero* and the *villain*.

¹⁶ For instance Joseph Campbell's. For others, see below.

¹⁷ The complete list of functions is to be found in the abovementioned *Morfologie pohádky*, (Propp, 29-56).

¹⁸ Lord Raglan, *The Hero, A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama*, (New York: Dover Publications, 2003). In the chapter “The Hero” Raglan outlines 22 common traits of (god)-heroes; (Raglan, 173-186.)

¹⁹ J.G. von Hahn, “The Aryan Expulsion-And-Return Formula in the Folk and Hero Tales of the Celts,” *The Folk-Lore Record*, Vol. 4 (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Ltd., 1881) 1-44.

It is, I think, quite remarkable to see this archetypal structure hold in the modern age when as Nietzsche said: “Gott ist tot,” when there is no meaning in the great anonymous forms of co-ordinating mythologies and when everything is individual.²⁰ At the same time *The Mighty Boosh* integrates various modern aspect and influences, including the “impertinent” feature of comedy. As Mikhail Bakhtin points out, “the element of laughter was accorded the least place of all in the vast literature devoted to myth, to folk lyrics and to epics;”²¹ however, *The Boosh* visibly goes against this tendency.²² It is in some way similar to Bakhtin’s “Ritual Spectacles”²³ where “constant participants /.../ mimicked serious rituals” (i.e. the serious mythological narrative) and “offered a completely different, nonofficial /.../ aspect of the world.”²⁴ At the same time *The Boosh* introduces a radical mixing of genres (the project having, for instance, an extended, entirely authorial musical layer involving many different styles):²⁵

“We put in all sorts of different elements – music, animation, characters. We’ve never stopped ourselves doing anything on *The Boosh*.”²⁶

In other words *The Mighty Boosh*, whose indisputably epic stories take place (or initiate) in the present day London,²⁷ focuses on contemporary issues and often absurd problems (thus belittling the “greatness” of myth) and greatly modifies the character of the traditional epic hero.^{28 29} In fact, it manages to intertwine two seemingly opposing concepts; it gives them a

²⁰ Campbell, 388.

²¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 4.

²² We of course know that the concept of myth and heroic epic was problematized much earlier. As Martin Procházka points out, in the time of Milton and his *Paradise Lost* the nature of the epic started to change, the character of the hero was no longer so distinct (i.e. it was not directly obvious who was the hero); and there later emerged many mock-heroic epics (*The Rape of the Lock*, *Don Juan*), which somewhat belittled the original myth, but on the other hand meant a largely interesting inquiry into the genre. [Martin Procházka, *Literary Theory and Historical Introduction*, (Prague: Charles University in Prague – Karolinum, 2008) 166].

²³ Bakhtin, 5.

²⁴ Bakhtin, 5-6.

²⁵ Thus the spoken word alternates with the song form. Most of the music and songs were composed by Julian Barratt.

²⁶ Vicky Anderson, “The Mighty Boosh: Surreal Mayhem is Mighty Fun,” *Liverpool Daily Post*, Trinity Mirror North West & North Wales Limited, 3 Oct 2008, 17 June 2012 < <http://www.liverpooldailypost.co.uk/liverpool-culture/liverpool-arts/2008/10/03/the-mighty-boosh-surreal-mayhem-is-mighty-fun-64375-21955384/2/>>.

²⁷ In many ways it is very real: there is, for instance, no truly “mythological past” unreachable for the spectator.

²⁸ As director Paul King puts it: “/These are/ very epic stories not taken seriously, a new top hat is just as important as whether one of these is going to get raped by a Yeti.” (*The Mighty Boosh Live*, “DVD 2 – The Culture Show,” dir. Nick Morris, prod. Celia Blaker, 2006, 2 min. 4 sec).

²⁹ As Robert A. Segal states in his *Myth: A Short Introduction*, the one condition required by a large amount of mainly religious theories about myth is that the heroes must be gods or near-gods. Obviously, *The Boosh* does not fulfil this condition (in fact, one of the speaking characters in the series is a gorilla). Segal himself is not so rigid in this matter and says that myths should simply involve “divine, human or even an animal” as protagonists. [Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 5.]

slight touch of pop culture, without, however, becoming mass-oriented or clichéd. Moreover, the authors were exceptionally successful in adapting this synthesis to various different media of modern cultural communication - radio, theatre and television.

In consequence, our work will be divided into two parts. The first one, whose primary goal is to establish a certain understanding about the functioning of the project before proceeding to more concrete details, will mainly attempt to define *The Mighty Boosh* as a modern concept occupying a specific place in the historical-cultural context. We will closely analyse its dramatic features, paying special attention to the relationship between the main protagonists and the means of communication with the audience. A focus will be put on the abovementioned process of transmission through different media, the resulting alternations in form and the necessarily changing approach towards the spectator or the listener.

This opening section, largely important and independent in itself, is essential for the second part of our thesis, which will present a meticulous investigation into the specific narrative structures of *The Boosh*. Here we will endeavour to dissect the individual stories into stable functions typical for the traditional narrative (Vladimir Propp). Thus, often by direct comparison, we will concretely demonstrate the constant presence of the ever reiterating archetypal situations, figures and so on; these will be further classified according to their narrative space-span, focus on characters etc. Our hope, above all, is to create a meaningful connection between the two parts and with the broader cultural context, and in doing so to present *The Mighty Boosh* as a concept both respecting and considerably drawing from the traditional and simultaneously establishing itself as a modern, distinctively independent form of (not only) a theatre performance.

2. THE MIGHTY BOOSH: DEFINING THE PHENOMENON

2.1

ORIGINS AND SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

- “Vince, we do not need the words of reviewers to tell us what we are about.”
- “Well, that’s lucky because there are no words in this one. It’s just a picture of some sick with our names underneath it.”³⁰

This is the way in which the protagonists discuss the character of their performance, and the essential question indeed seems to be – what *is*, then, *The Boosh*? The answer usually being silence, even from people maintaining rather an intimate contact with the show,³¹ it is obvious that to precisely classify the said concept may be nearly impossible. As Julian Barratt puts it, “it does not really fit to any template...” His acting partner Noel Fielding appears to be of the same opinion: “It’s not really only a comedy,” he says. “It has music in it, stories in it...;”³² in other words, the show seems to be rather a multi-facet project where numerous interventions from different artistic fields play an important role. Many facts actually point to the carnival aspects of Mikhail Bakhtin and particularly to the *cabaret* genre (see later): the duo’s work, especially at the beginning of their professional co-operation, can certainly be defined in these terms.³³

The comedians met after one of Barratt’s one man shows³⁴ in the Hellfire Comedy Club.³⁵ Barratt had then a certain experience as a jazz musician (jazz music still considerably appears in the show; some people, in fact, tried to describe *The Mighty Boosh* duo as the “kings of Miles Davis and John Coltrane comedy”);³⁶ however, he started doing stand-ups

³⁰*The Mighty Boosh*, “The Legend of Old Gregg,” dir. Paul King, 2008, prod. A Baby Cow Production, BBC, 1 min. 27 sec.

³¹ Both producer Spencer Millman and director Paul King seem to have some trouble answering the question. (*The Mighty Boosh*, CD 7 “A Journey Trough Time and Space,” dir. Paul King, prod. A Baby Cow Production, BBC, 2008, 1 min. 58 sec).

³² *The Mighty Boosh Live*, “The Culture Show,” dir. Nick Morris, prod. Cecilia Blaker, 2006, 1 min. 35 sec.

³³ See note 1.

³⁴ This famous “I have been seeing other audiences” gig is downloadable from YouTube. (“Julian Barrat, Open Mic Awards, Edinburgh,” *Youtube*, YouTube, LLC, 19 Sep 2008, 16 June 2012 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbWodun7TUA.>>). This meeting naturally sped up the events and quickly led to the mutual co-operation between the two comedians.

³⁵ A club in High Wycombe, United Kingdom, attached to the Wycombe Swan Theatre, whose program includes an interesting mixture of various genres such as comedy, classical music but also pantomime or dance. (*Wycombe Swan Theatre*, Wycombe Swan Theatre, 23 Apr 2012 <<https://wycombeswan.co.uk/Online/>>).

³⁶*The Mighty Boosh*, CD 7 “A Journey Trough Time and Space,” dir. Paul King, prod. A Baby Cow Production, BBC, 2008, 12 min. 36 sec.

because he enjoyed the feeling of “not knowing how to do it.”³⁷ This, I believe, is one of the key features of *The Mighty Boosh*, which eventually makes the performance natural and truthful: the feeling of entering a magical world where the protagonists are not really any wiser than the spectator can be quite powerful. Fielding and Barratt’s first performance together took place in the De Hems club.³⁸ In 1998, they created their famous characters of the zookeepers for the *Unnatural Acts* sketch comedy series; these later appeared in the first series of *The Mighty Boosh* and were also used during their double stand-ups in the theatre called Hen and Chickens. There, as Fielding says, they “used to /.../ do little songs, bits of cabaret, bits of sketches and really warm /the spectators/ up,”³⁹ before actually bringing in the type of relatively coherent show they intended to present during festivals like the Edinburgh Fringe. This is particularly noticeable in *The Mighty Boosh Live* show,⁴⁰ where the first part consists of dialogues more or less directed to the audience and of separate multi-genre sketches, whereas the second part is a relatively fixed theatrical performance. The first half is greatly inconsistent and marked by improvisation - precisely as it would be with a classical cabaret performance. There is a moment in the show when Rich Fulcher⁴¹ improvises so much that his co-actors are almost unable to follow.

Although the cabaret genre alone never appeared on the British Isles and only found a certain substitute in the so-called “music-hall,”⁴² *The Mighty Boosh* has always kept this fragmented cabaret-like nature, including the indispensable atmosphere of physical proximity between the spectator and the performer.⁴³ Their acts were successful because they partly went the same way as the most famous cabarets of all time:⁴⁴ they “took poetry⁴⁵ and music

³⁷ *The Mighty Boosh*, CD 7 “A Journey Trough Time and Space,” 6 min. 37 sec.

³⁸ De Hem is a café and pub in London, Soho; at the turn of the century it hosted a comedy club the *Oranje Boom-Boom Cabaret* where *The Mighty Boosh* had their debut. Barratt and Fielding said that “they have very similar vision of what to do, but very different personalities, which was good.” (*The Mighty Boosh*, CD 7 “A Journey Trough Time and Space,” 13 min). See also the chapter “The Central Duo.”

³⁹ *The Mighty Boosh*, CD 7 “A Journey Trough Time and Space,” 22 min. 14 sec.

⁴⁰ This *The Mighty Boosh Live* show was first performed in Brixton in April 2006 and was released on DVD in November of the same year. (*The Mighty Boosh Live*, dir. Nick Morris, prod. Celia Blaker, 2006, 1min. 35 sec).

⁴¹ One of the co-actors in the project.

⁴² This was partly due to the 1737 Licensing Act issued by the Lord Chamberlain, which was a landmark act of censorship of the British stage. It basically meant that a performance was strictly bound to a regular stage; any kind of folk theatre (usually cabarets operating in public houses) was forbidden for fear that it may draw away the spectators. Nevertheless, these public house performances eventually gave rise to the music-hall genre. (Jiří Hanák, “Comedy Store: Procházka novodobými d jiny britské komediální scény – 1. část,” SAD: Sv t a divadlo, Jan 2001, 86-87). *paraphrase and modified translation of the Czech text

⁴³ Bakhtin, for instance, also stresses that “carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators.” (Bakhtin, 7).

⁴⁴ The most famous classical cabaret was probably Le Chat Noir in Paris owned and operated by Rodolphe Salis.

⁴⁵ In our case we may rather talk about storytelling or epic narrative, but we already know that *The Mighty Boosh* is a multi-genre project, i.e. poetry or songs (Julian Barratt) are also included in its repertory.

back to its original purpose: to be means of direct communication between the author and the receptor.”⁴⁶ This among other things meant a modest space dedicated to the performance; the contact between the performer and the spectator is almost physical: there is no clear distinction between the stage and the audience. This and the strategy of a “commoner” entering the stage as one of the crowd greatly add to the familiarity of the environment. Some of these variety features presented on stage of the Hen and Chickens⁴⁷ and elsewhere were actually kept in the first TV series of *The Mighty Boosh*. Here Barratt and Fielding attached a short humorous introductory part to the show, in which they directly addressed the spectator and invited him to the following performance; the same technique would of course be used by any MC⁴⁸ introducing individual artistic numbers of a program. Even though this feature was abandoned in the following series, there are still numerous instances in the show where the protagonists, as if leaving the frame of the story for a while, speak directly to the spectator (or make references out of the story framework).⁴⁹

With its reputation being sealed by the *Auto-Boosh*⁵⁰ live performance, there came further offers which, however, did not lead straight to television. As many people could not imagine how the sort of spectacle Fielding and Barratt were performing on stage could possibly be transformed into a TV-show, there was a radio broadcast first.⁵¹ Paradoxically, when the duo ended filming the third series for the BBC 3 and went up touring again, the same people were asking whether the TV episodes could be turned back into a live performance.⁵²

Let us now return to the original question of the show’s identity. We already know that the series simply does not fit within any concrete boundary; it was clearly stated not only by the actors themselves but also by their alter-egos in the show: “If I see a boundary, I eat a boundary,”⁵³ says Barratt’s character Howard Moon.⁵⁴ However, if we take the matter seriously, we quickly understand that the thing truly important for *The Boosh* is the perfect

⁴⁶ Ji í Pokorný, *Kniha o kabaretu*, (Praha: Mladá fronta, 1988), 72. *modified translation of the Czech text

⁴⁷ Hen and Chickens Theatre is a venue for theatre and comedy located in London, Islington. For more details see “Hen and Chickens,” *Unrestricted View*, 2007 Unrestricted View, June 19 2012 <<http://www.henandchickens.com/>>.

⁴⁸ An abbreviation for “master of ceremonies.”

⁴⁹ This is visible in the episode “Eels.” (*The Mighty Boosh*, “Eels,” dir. Paul King, prod. A Baby Cow Production, BBC, 2008, 18 min. 28 sec).

⁵⁰ Also performed at the Edinburgh Fringe.

⁵¹ *The Mighty Boosh*, CD 7 “A Journey Trough Time and Space,” 23 min. 47 sec.

⁵² As Henry Normal puts it: “Many people could not understand how to put on TV what they were doing on stage and vice versa.” (*The Mighty Boosh*, CD 7 “A Journey Trough Time and Space,” 28 min. 45 sec).

⁵³ *The Mighty Boosh*, “Kileroo,” dir. Paul King, prod. A Baby Cow Production, BBC 2008, 3 min. 34 sec.

⁵⁴ See more about the characters in the chapter “The Central Duo.”

interaction and co-operation between the central couple. Indeed, Barratt and Fielding have been often described as continuing the tradition of such notoriously known comedic duos as “Flanagan and Allen,” “Morecambe and Wise” or “Terry and June,” (Flanagan and Allen, for instance, were music hall comedians whose successful stage performances eventually led them to recording for TV and film). They embody a perfect Jing Jang harmony⁵⁵ that must always, no matter how outstanding or unusual the narrative structure is, create the core of any functioning comedic unit. Barratt and Fielding also talk about *Monty Python* having an immense influence on them, but simultaneously presenting them with some difficulty of finding their own individual way: “/The Pythons/ covered, worked with and parodied such a large scale of issues”⁵⁶ that it was hard to avoid repetition. It could be exactly this desire for independent expression that made the actors search for and eventually find another, unique form.

Moreover, if not about genre (which is a conventional category anyway) people seem to be quite sure about what *feelings* *The Boosh* is able to awaken in them: “There’s nothing at the moment, that I am aware of, that feels so uncynical, so organic, so joyous, so joyful as *The Boosh*,” says Bob Mortimer, himself being part of successful double act with Vic Reeves.⁵⁷ He also talks about the relationship between the performers and the spectator: “It is a bit difficult just to know exactly where you are /with the *Boosh*/. And then of course once you know where you are, it’s ever so simple: it really is just two men bickering.”⁵⁸ It is obvious that the success of the comedy lies in the complete understanding between the actor and the audience. We know that *The Mighty Boosh* created their personal mythology and symbology, giving us the possibility to recognize in them principles seemingly distant from what we know and yet more deeply rooted in our unconscious than anything else. They invite the spectator into this old-new world, and of course, during the very first contact he or she cannot enjoy the comedy completely: besides the specific imagery and narrative, *The Boosh* also uses personal idiolect (and vernacular), private symbols, jokes and references to which the new recipient needs to get accustomed in order to enjoy the humour in its entirety. But once the

⁵⁵ *The Mighty Boosh*, CD 7 “A Journey Trough Time and Space,” 12 min. 46 sec.

⁵⁶ “The Mighty Boosh on Monty Python,” *BBC 2 Radio*, BBC, 8 Dec 2009, 14 Mar 2012 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00p718t>>.

⁵⁷ *The Mighty Boosh*, CD 7 “A Journey Trough Time and Space,” 3 min. 28 sec.

⁵⁸ *The Mighty Boosh*, CD 7 “A Journey Trough Time and Space,” 5 min.

spectatorship accepts this communication method and acquires familiarity⁵⁹ with the issue, the magic starts working fully.

This is a typical bipartite model of “production” and “perception,” or, more concretely, the “encoding” and “decoding”⁶⁰ of the message: as soon as we start to share the common “code,”⁶¹ the initiation process is finished (understanding the code means becoming a part of the code). The “code” does not have to be realized by words only; costumes (highly visual and descriptive in *The Boosh*) and other stage properties play a significant role in communicating a piece of information (Chandler calls this a “bodily code,”)⁶² sometimes these may also be the only source of characteristics. This may occur in theatre or generally on stage where there may either be a lack of space or authorial intention favouring extensive descriptions, or, especially with stand-ups like *The Boosh*, where long speeches could, if not used intentionally, considerably slow down the comedic pace. Vince and Howard’s costumes (Howard’s old-fashioned clothes vs. Vince’s hyper-modern outfit) are used to immediately characterize the dramatic persona if the actual description is for some reason lacking (brief sketches). During the short stand-ups with limited space/stage possibilities, the purpose of some theatrical “tools” present on the scene is revealed only when these are used by the actors (the space can also be determined by using sound or light);⁶³ thus an ordinary wooden desk suddenly becomes a rock or a wall the characters are hiding behind.⁶⁴

2.2

THE CENTRAL DUO

First let us remember the already mentioned fact that *The Boosh* protagonists are *not* equal to the traditional concept of the epic hero (note 16), who generally keeps an unceasing prominence throughout the story. In our case the actual significance of the main characters

⁵⁹ The humour is often based on this familiarity; it is most prominently visible in live performances where the actor-spectator relationship necessarily becomes more immediate: frequently it is a mere gesture from the actor, a glimpse of indication or the slightest reference to the created world which sets off the comedy but usually cannot work with “uninitiated” spectatorship. (See for example *The Mighty Boosh Live*.)

⁶⁰ For these basic linguistic terms and for further reference see, for instance: Daniel Chandler, “Encoding/Decoding,” *Semiotics for Beginners*, Aberystwyth University, 10 Nov 2011, 12 Dec 2011 <<http://users.aber.ac.uk/dgc/Documents/S4B/>>.

⁶¹ A code is, in fact, the social part of the semiotics: “A code is a set of practices familiar to the users of the medium operating within large cultural framework.” [Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics*, (New York: Routledge, 2002) 148.] In our case, we speak of the “cultural framework.”

⁶² Chandler, 148.

⁶³ This is discussed in great detail by theatre and film director Jindřich Honzík for whom this variability is a distinctive mark of theatricality. (Jindřich Honzík, “Pohyb divadelního znaku,” *Slovo a slovesnost*, Ústav pro jazyk český Akademie v.d.R., v. v. i., 2011, 3 July 2012 <<http://sas.ujc.cas.cz/archiv.php?art=353>>).

⁶⁴ See *The Mighty Boosh*, CD 7 “A Journey Through Time and Space,” 22 min. 32 sec.

can change; in some episodes their roles temporally stop to be the most important ones and the perspective shifts to another previously supporting character, who may for a time become the protagonist, acquiring the Proppian function of the hero.⁶⁵ Despite all this, most of the time Barratt and Fielding's characters indisputably enjoy a relative prominence and generally create the acting nucleus of the series.

Whereas the environment and narrative strategies of *The Boosh* were described as traditionally fairy-talish or mythological, the central duo is quite different. What we are faced with are not the black-white heroic archetypes but much rather characteristically original heroes. Together they become Jing and Jang⁶⁶ (while simultaneously lacking the female aspect):⁶⁷ whereas Howard Moon (Barratt) portrays a cosmic loser, conservative self-appointed intellectual and "brains" of the central couple, Vince Noir (Fielding) can best be described as the ultimate chaotic king of fashion with "nothing inside." The self-evaluation of the central couple often encountered in the series, is sufficiently illustrative: in the episode "The Power of the Crimp," Vince, in response to Howard's objection that it is what is inside that counts, says "I haven't got anything inside, I'm like a beach ball" (employing a suitably "Noirian" metaphor); and again Howard counters him by claiming to himself have "a rich and fertile inner life, charisma" and to be a "raconteur" with "legendary stories."⁶⁸ He does not hesitate to call his friend "a shallow mate, who dresses like a futuristic prostitute," to which Vince, apparently pleased, answers: "Thanks, Howard." The suggested Jing-Jang relationship is then completed in the following citations: on the one hand we encounter Howard's "dark fractured broken paranoid sort of side," on the other Vince's "light sunny simpleton feel."⁶⁹

The characters' surnames alone (implying the black-white relationship: Noir/black versus Moon/white) clearly indicate the complementation that the protagonists fulfil for one another, thus creating major comedic conflicts and climaxes. One must realize that they are static characters; the spectatorship is presented with a certain *type* that does not change or

⁶⁵ In *The Mighty Boosh* series there are other characters whose importance often goes beyond that of a supporting role. The characters of Naboo the Enigma (Michael Fielding) and Bollo (Dave Brown) even create a sort of "quaternary" with the central Barratt-Fielding couple. Other prominent character is for instance that of Bob Fossil played by American actor Rich Fulcher. For a concrete example see the "The Narrative" chapter.

⁶⁶ See earlier.

⁶⁷ A grown female protagonist is not typical for the epic/mythic narrative. As Fiona Bowie puts it, if the hero function is taken up by a woman, it is almost always a pre-adolescent girl (Alice in Wonderland); Bowie, 294.

⁶⁸ *The Mighty Boosh*, "The Power of the Crimp," dir. Paul King, prod. A Baby Cow Production, BBC, 2008, 3 min. 4 sec.

⁶⁹ *The Mighty Boosh*, "The Power of the Crimp," 6 min. 31 sec.

develop apart from certain number of exceptions,⁷⁰ which are, nevertheless, only valid within a range of one episode.⁷¹ This is inevitable in cases like ours; the comedy stands mainly on the chemistry between the two actors, and any interventions, however realistic, into this clashing bipolarity would throw it off balance and destroy the effect. Same could be said about the uniformly used storytelling technique or narrative structure where the plot always ends exactly where it started. All the protagonists' grand plans are always doomed to fail: Vince will never become a respectable citizen (a possibility suggested in "The Power of the Crimp") or a real rock star, and Howard is never going to succeed as an actor ("The Chokes")⁷² or a writer, lover etc.⁷³ There are often certain consciously generated indications pointing that way, the positive climax is reached (e.g. Howard is chosen by Jurgen Haabemaaster⁷⁴ for his next project) but then it breaks down. The hero finds himself where he was at the beginning and is doomed to strive and fail endlessly in his attempts to rise above his situation.⁷⁵ This constant unsuccessfulness, reminding us in a way of the absurd nature of Beckett's and Adamov's "Circular plays,"⁷⁶ is totally bound to happen: in the absurd drama it is used in order to generate feelings of being lost and these of desperation, meaninglessness and so on, in comedy it turns into a tool of ridicule and humour⁷⁷ (exponentiated by spectators inevitable sympathizing with the "likeable losers"). Martin Esslin talks about "returning to the initial situation or to its equivalent, a zero point from which the preceding action seen to be futile, so that it would have made no difference if it had never happened."⁷⁸ This is crucial: it equally invokes the never ending circularly shaped story line which is accompanied by the cosy motto "home is best" ensuring the eternal return of the characters to the spectator⁷⁹ (the series as a whole does not really have an initial/conclusive point) as well as the feelings of absurdity.

⁷⁰ Here we see another similarity with the aforementioned *Goon Show*: "All of the characters appearing in "The Dreaded Batter-Pudding Hurler" belong to the traditional figures that go from one show to another while remaining practically *unchanged* all the time." (Škorpil, 92). Another similarity is that the actors usually play more than just one role: in *The Boosh*, both Barratt and Fielding (and especially Fielding) appear in a great number of supporting roles, e.g. The Hitcher, Old Gregg – Fielding; a fisherman, the Head Shaman – Barratt.

⁷¹ We are, however, occasionally given some hints about the "off-stage realities" (i.e. what happens with the characters off-stage); therefore, the characters and their backgrounds are quite detailed.

⁷² *The Mighty Boosh*, "The Chokes," dir. Paul King, prod. A Baby Cow Production, BBC, 2008.

⁷³ In fact, they are very successful at being anti-heroes.

⁷⁴ *The Mighty Boosh*, "The Chokes," 15 min. 50 sec. Jurgen Haabemaaster is an obvious parody on the Norse experimental existential cinema.

⁷⁵ This circular pattern likewise points to the circular concept of *monomyth*.

⁷⁶ Martin Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, (London: Penguin Books, 1968) 185.

⁷⁷ As Bakhtin points out, this ridiculing or degradation of an object "does not imply merely hurling it into the void of non-existence. /.../. It is always conceiving." (Bakhtin, 21).

⁷⁸ Esslin, 185.

⁷⁹ As far as chronology is concerned, there are no first or last episodes in the series. The spectator may enter the narrative wherever he pleases (not necessarily at the beginning).

2.2.1

EGO AND ALTER-EGO, STORYTELLING AND ACTING

One must realize that the central duo characteristic is actually based on truth.⁸⁰ Similarly to Bakhtin's carnival where "there is no other life outside it,"⁸¹ *The Boosh* presents a mirror, even if distorted, of a real life. According to Barratt and Fielding, in *The Boosh* they merely portray "the exaggerated versions of themselves."⁸² As producer Spencer Millman puts it: "it's not really an acting, *it's just them* with some make-up and some clothes on."⁸³ In fact, at times the authors seem to imply that even the term "alter ego" may occasionally be too weak to describe the intimacy they feel towards their "roles." For example, during the recording of *The Mighty Boosh Live* show, the whole crew underwent a journey to Brixton dressed and behaving like their characters, and throughout the unofficial breaks between and after the performances they also stylized themselves in this way.⁸⁴ The comedy works so well because Barratt and Fielding were not afraid to take what was dysfunctional⁸⁵ about them in reality and use it in fiction, employing the hyperbole. They were not afraid to overcome the frame of a satire and, instead of placing themselves above the object of their mockery, to laugh at themselves at the same time: to be included in the wholeness of their own comedic world.⁸⁶ Consequently the result is not only funny and entertaining but also exceptionally truthful.

Keeping the phrase "exaggerated version of themselves"⁸⁷ in mind, let us make some further observations concerning the authors' identities. As is stated in *Storytelling and Theatre* by Michael Wilson, theatrical performance or acting are usually "character-based,"

⁸⁰ For example in "Journey to the Centre of the Punk," Howard (Julian Barratt) says: "My dad's a geography teacher in Leeds," which is actually true. In "The Power of the Crimp," the duo mentions they have gig in "The Velvet Onion," which is a place Barratt and Fielding have really been having gigs. [See (*The Mighty Boosh*, "Journey to the Centre of the Punk," dir. Paul King, prod. A Baby Cow Production, BBC, 2008, 24 min. 23 sec). and (*The Mighty Boosh*, "The Power of the Crimp," 9 min 34 sec).] These are of course very concrete examples; the point is that the actors put their real personalities into their characters in the show.

⁸¹ Bakhtin, 7.

⁸² Vicky Anderson, "The Mighty Boosh: Surreal Mayhem is Mighty Fun," *Liverpool Daily Post*, Trinity Mirror North West & North Wales Limited, 3 Oct 2008, 17 June 2012 <<http://www.liverpooldailypost.co.uk/liverpool-culture/liverpool-arts/2008/10/03/the-mighty-boosh-surreal-mayhem-is-mighty-fun-64375-21955384/2/>>.

⁸³ *The Mighty Boosh*, CD 7 "A Journey Trough Time and Space," 13 min. 48 sec.

⁸⁴ *The Mighty Boosh Live*, "Back Stage," dir. Nick Morris, prod. Celia Blaker, 2006, 0 min. – 1 min. 36 sec., 30 min. 17 sec.

⁸⁵ In this way they follow the original purpose of the comedy – to portray the distorted, "ugly" (as opposed to "noble") aspect of human nature.

⁸⁶ This, Bakhtin says, is one of the key traits of the people's festive laughter; (Bakhtin, 12).

⁸⁷ Vicky Anderson's article, see note 70.

whereas storytelling, as he puts it, is “self-based”⁸⁸ (which seems more fitting for *The Boosh*).⁸⁹ Another point about theatre, i.e. that it is usually about fixed and learned text,⁹⁰ is also partly inapplicable in our case. Noel Fielding says about one of the radio shows:

“A lot of it was improvised /.../. Like maybe seventy percent /.../. There’s a lot of mistakes on that radio show but they’re fine /.../. Just cos’ the take’s much better and it got much better energy and stuff. Me and Julian were never bothered about that /.../.”⁹¹

Since Barratt and Fielding to a great extent play themselves, they also speak like themselves, being their own directors. Their discourse and dialogues are of course written down in some form for (especially) the TV show (it was far less radical with the preceding stand-ups, and the theatre does not require an unconditionally fixed text either), but originally they are not something artificial or learned; they are a natural expression of the speakers and may be at any moment modified by a momentous inspiration, that is to say improvised.

“I always use to say to people, it’s like directing smoke, you can’t do anything with it. /.../ Actually, smoke is easier to direct than Noel and Julian. It’s more likely to go where you want.”⁹²

The precise degree of the “not acting but being oneself” problematic is impossible to estimate (also due to *The Mighty Boosh* being a constantly developing phenomenon) but it is not important. The point is that it illustrates, I think, one of the principal features of stand-up comedies (or one man shows) but *not* that of the classic theatre: the true identity of the performer always remains visible and the line between what can yet be considered theatre and what is already a storytelling described by Wilson grows thinner. In cases such as these, it is unnecessary for the audience to accept the illusion on stage to be real (otherwise the usual process in perceiving the traditional drama)⁹³ because there really is no illusion. This perhaps reminds us of Bertolt Brecht’s distancing *Verfremdungseffekt* (or simply the “V-effect”), which is achieved by the way “the artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the

⁸⁸ Michael Wilson, *Storytelling and Theatre: Contemporary Storytellers and Their Art*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 46. There are of course playwrights who experiments with this distinction. Bertolt Brecht, for example, asked his actors not to pretend they are not acting but remain detached from their roles; (Wilson, 50).

⁸⁹ Noel Fielding stresses that they are not from an actor background. (*The Mighty Boosh*, CD 7 “A Journey Trough Time and Space,” 26 min. 52 sec).

⁹⁰ Wilson, 46.

⁹¹ *The Mighty Boosh*, CD 7 “A Journey Trough Time and Space,” 26 min. 30 sec.

⁹² Stewart Lee, stage director. (*The Mighty Boosh*, CD 7 “A Journey Trough Time and Space,” 22 min. 51 sec).

⁹³ Procházka, 156.

three surrounding him /.../ The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place.”⁹⁴

This concept is naturally applicable to *The Boosh* but it becomes problematized once the authors start moving from the basic concept of the stand-ups and begin to include and to *act* in what quickly becomes the already discussed epic narrative. This means that a new fictional layer is added, and the presence of a dramatic story now used to communicate the message through a performer (Fielding, Barratt) who has become a “character” (Noir, Moon), instead of addressing the spectator directly as an “actor” (Fielding, Barratt), may create a certain distance.

This distance could not appear before as there was no overtly fictitious level above the reality shared by the actor and his audience. The comedian would merely tell anecdotes relevant for the actual context, and his stories would either be an account of personal mishaps or funny tales, but they would always be (as if) retold by the actor (not *showed*) and (as if) a part of the real world (our reality), not some fictional constructed space. This naturally changes with the steadily growing emphasis on the complex epic narrative. As I see it, there consequently emerged a peculiar synthesis of a very individualistic stand-up comedy and a more classical form of drama (the dramatic illusion is at least partly introduced): a concept which perhaps best defines *The Boosh* as it is today. The former reality-based characters, i.e. the authors’ identities, remained almost equally visible, and the audience gradually learns to perceive the actors’ alter-egos (the above “character”) and the actors as identical.⁹⁵

However, how the characters appear to us and what is their relationship to the spectator does not depend only on the change in form (i.e. going from stand-up to drama). Another important aspect is the medium through which the message is presented. The significance of the media type as being responsible for the alternations in the message’s rendition and potential modification of its content as well as the character’s orientation towards the audience is obvious. The next chapter is dedicated to this problem.

⁹⁴ John Willett, “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting,” *Brecht on Theatre*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964) 91.

⁹⁵I think same may be said for instance about Woody Allen. Spectators learned to perceive his film characters’ melancholic, social awkward and clumsy but nevertheless witty persona as his real self; they make no distinction between Woody Allen-actor and Woody Allen-man. However, Allen probably decided to “play along” and he deliberately stylizes himself in this way also in his real life.

2.3

DIFFERENT KINDS OF MEDIA

There are indeed different means of mediating the message. In connection with *The Mighty Boosh* we have previously mentioned three of them - theatre, radio and television. The media are obviously permeable in the sense that some strategies of mediating the message can be used by all of them; however, more usually, due to each medium's availability of certain functions, we meet with differences. These concern for example the audience's position within the system of communication as well as the means by which the spectator is addressed or reached. We will start by comparing the medium of theatre and television because they are in many principles very close to one another. The analysis will continue and conclude with an inquiry into the remaining medium of radio.

2.3.1

THEATRE VS. TELEVISION

When the authors of *The Boosh* began to move towards more epic narratives, they simultaneously started to prefer the so-called method of "showing" to that of "telling."⁹⁶ Through the principle of telling the audience receive only a second-hand experience while the mediation by showing means to be a direct witness. The former of the two was abundantly used at the troupe's beginnings when it worked as a stand-up, favouring the speech over the action, i.e. (re)telling funny real or unreal incidents rather than showing them. This mediation still appears in *The Boosh* projects, but usually as a secondary device: it is used during the opening introductory sequences in theatre⁹⁷ where the actors talk to the audience in order to warm them up, or within the actual performed (showed) story, both in TV and in theatre. There the characters (re)tell a tale or a piece of information⁹⁸ which is important for the fabula but cannot directly appear in it due to a time limit or problems it would pose to the consistency of the narrative.

⁹⁶ This distinction was made by Percy Lubbock in his *The Craft of Fiction*. In one of the passages he says: "...the art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of the story as a matter to be shown, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself. To hand over to the reader the facts of the story merely as so much information- this is no more than to state the 'argument' of the book. The book is not a row of facts, it is a single image; the facts have no validity in themselves." (Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction*, David Clarke, Sankar Viswanathan and Project Gutenberg, eds., *KSU Faculty Members' websites*, The Project Gutenberg, 60, 1 August 2006, 20 June 2012 <http://faculty.ksu.edu.sa/hujailan/Fulltext/The_Craft_of_Fiction.pdf>.) The principle of showing of course means immediate mediation and is typical for drama.

⁹⁷ But also on television (the first series), see section 2.1.

⁹⁸ A good example of this (re)telling is to be found in "The Chokes." There the character of Monty talks about his past acting experience. (*The Mighty Boosh*, "The Chokes," 11 min. 51 sec).

Sometimes there may appear a certain synthesis of the two methods when characters, physically remaining in the present, narrate a story from the past; this story is simultaneously accompanied by images,⁹⁹ animated or fixed (here possibly generates another medium of communication - comics), and thus showed. This usually happens through the technologically supreme medium of television, but is also possible elsewhere. The mediation by showing as described by Percy Lubbock is primarily connected with drama. Although it seems to work just as adequately in the TV series and to a certain disputable extent even in the radio (see below), television, despite its having the technological advantage, lacks the immediate contact and response from the audience ensured by the shared theatrical space. Sometimes in the fictional world of the TV series, *Noir* and *Moon* give a live performance; i.e. they repeat exactly what Fielding and Barratt are doing on the realistic level. Suddenly there emerge two audiences: apart from us who are the indirect observers *here*, they have their own audience *there*.¹⁰⁰ The audience *there* of course *get* the direct experience, but for us outside the screen this is impossible. What we, detached by the medium of television, experience is merely “a play within a play.”

There are techniques used in television apparently seeking to reduce this distance between the channel and the spectator to minimum: I believe that one of the most marked ones is the concept of the so-called “canned laughter.”¹⁰¹ It consists, as one may imagine, of the artificial implantation of synthetic laughter produced by an unseen, imaginative non-existent audience apparently sitting somewhere in the invisible background.¹⁰² This insertion of the canned laughter into TV projects is perceived by me as an attempt to substitute for the lost theatrical feature of the “living element,” as a story mediated by television is no longer shared by a larger audience but enjoyed privately. Personally, I see the canned laughter as distracting, alien and even violent: something that gnaws at the spectator’s individual impression of the comedy, weakens his urge to laugh and turns him into a passive element since the function he should be having as an audience is already being occupied by a laughing

⁹⁹In “The Chokes” Naboo talk about his experience. But unlike that of Monty’s (see note 85), his telling is accompanied by a visual flashback scene; therefore, here we experience the aforementioned synthesis. (*The Mighty Boosh*, “The Chokes,” 9 min. 18 sec). Other relevant episodes: “The Legend of Old Gregg,” “The Strange Tale of the Crack Fox.” (*The Mighty Boosh*, “The Strange Tale of the Crack Fox,” dir. Paul King, prod. A Baby Cow Production, BBC, 2008).

¹⁰⁰ Relevant episodes: “The Power of the Crimp.” *The Mighty Boosh*, “The Power of the Crimp,” 24 min. 50 sec.

¹⁰¹ The concept itself was first introduced and put into practice by Charles R. Douglas; philosopher Slavoj Žižek talks about it in one of his articles. (Slavoj Žižek, “Will You Laugh For Me, Please?,” *Lacan Dot Com*, Lacan.com, 23 June 2011 <<http://www.lacan.com/zizeklaugh.htm>>).

¹⁰² Some of the comedic troupes that employed the “canned laughter” in their shows: *Monty Python*, *Goon Show*, *Terry and June*; from the contemporary productions we may name *The Black Books* or *IT Crowd* etc.

machine in the background.¹⁰³ *The Mighty Boosh* originally employed the canned laughter in the first episode of the first TV series¹⁰⁴ but eventually decided to dismiss it. They perhaps wished to get rid of all unrealistic elements that would constantly remind everyone of watching a show and widen the distance between the actor and the spectator instead of eliminating it.

Putting aside the different levels of remoteness from the spectator, it is necessary to accept the dramatic illusion in order to enjoy the performance (note 71); i.e. to let oneself to believe that what is happening in front of him is real. In *The Mighty Boosh*, the warming up of the audience for the play is sometimes made easier by including a specific cabaret feature: a short introductory part at the very beginning carried out by the MC,¹⁰⁵ who as Slavoj Žižek puts it “talk about the story” that we are about to witness, “giving us all the clues.” He also adds that the spectator “know/s/ very well it’s a fake, but nonetheless ... let/s/ /himself/ to be emotionally affected.”¹⁰⁶ Whereas Žižek describes this MC person as “a hidden master who controls all the events,” (i.e. someone omniscient standing above the plot, the actors etc.) in *The Boosh* Barratt and Fielding are usually making no distinction between him (them as the MCs) and their characters. The openings of the first TV series are actually small independent sketches; they always take place in front of a red curtain, in order to evoke the sensation of a variety theatre, and they are structured in a following way: “I am Howard Moon, this is Vince Noir ... enjoy the show.”¹⁰⁷ The same is true about the live performances. When Barratt and Fielding make the introduction, they already acquire the identities of their characters; from the very start they speak to the spectator as their alter-egos, they virtually introduce themselves in the sense of “here comes *me!*”

This can be very effective because the spectator is not given even a glimpse of some other reality, though in truth there would be at least three different levels of mediation: *author/real person – presenter/1st fictional sphere – character/2nd fictional sphere*. However, due to the methods used, these distinctions often merge completely. Thus the “disappearance

¹⁰³ Žižek says: “there is /.../ a brief period of uneasiness (about the canned laughter): the first reaction to it is one of a shock, since it is difficult to accept that the machine out there can “laugh for me.” (Slavoj Žižek, “Will You Laugh For Me, Please?,” *Lacan Dot Com*, Lacan.com, 23 June 2011 <<http://www.lacan.com/zizeklaugh.htm>>).

¹⁰⁴ The episode where *The Boosh* used the canned laughter was “Tundra.” (*The Mighty Boosh*, CD 7 “A Journey Trough Time and Space,” 28 min. 48 sec). In the second version of the episode the artificial laughter was no longer used.

¹⁰⁵ See note 36. This function is of course occupied by Barratt and Fielding.

¹⁰⁶ This means he is willing to momentarily accept the illusion. (*The Pervert’s Guide to the Cinema*, written by Slavoj Žižek, prod. and dir. Sophie Fiennes, 2009, 1 h. 42 min. 2 sec).

¹⁰⁷ See for example the opening of *The Mighty Boosh*, “Tundra.” (“Tundra,” dir. Paul King, 2008. prod. A Baby Cow Production, BBC).

of the dramatist” that should result from the acceptance of the dramatic illusion, is paradoxically complete, because the dramatist, the actor and the character are one practically from the start. Sometimes, as was pointed out by Keith Sanger, the purpose of this introductory part is to substitute for the exposition and allows skipping it later in the actual story.¹⁰⁸ This function is, nevertheless, almost missing in *The Boosh* as the openings are usually rather vague in sharing concrete information about the plot and serve primarily as individual sketches designed in order to warm up the audience before the beginning of the actual show.

2.3.2

RADIO

Let us now turn our attention towards the last of the three selected media - the radio. The most apparent and distinctive thing about it is of course its entire lack of the visual aspect. The fact that receiving a message through this mediation is seemingly based only on one sense out of five (i.e. the auditory aspect), does not make things simpler for us. On the contrary: to grasp and describe how this particular rendition works might actually prove to be the most difficult and complex of the three. As Tim Crook pointed out in his *Radio Drama*,¹⁰⁹ the Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan was right “in the sense that only the ear as a sense is engaged” in receiving information through the radio medium; Crook, however, believes that he may be wrong in “the limit he places on the participation of the listener as audience.”¹¹⁰ This simply means that the audience, like readers of a novel, by picturing for themselves the physical side of the narrated situation (e.g. the characters, the environment) take part and are considerably involved in the narrative creating process.¹¹¹ Similarly one may initially think that the radio can never establish a contact equally intimate to that of the television or theatre production. However, Barratt and Fielding themselves claim the opposite; i.e. that it is exactly this lack of other senses, this “medium of sound” (the question of course remains if it is the seeing or hearing which comes first in the experiencing of, for instance, a film) that makes the audience concentrate fully and to be drawn into the plot. Fielding summarizes it accordingly:

¹⁰⁸ Sanger says that the actors “make their intentions known and give the audience some idea of what the audience may expect over the next two hours...” [Keith Sanger, *Language of Drama*, (Florence, KY, USA: Routledge, 2000) 12.]

¹⁰⁹ Tim, Crook, *Radio Drama*, (Florence, KY, USA: Routledge, 1999).

¹¹⁰ Crook, *Radio Drama*, 9.

¹¹¹ That means that there perhaps is the visual aspect after all, pictured by the audience in their minds.

“It’s very intimate, with television it is slightly different...people will come in and out...but when you listen to something like a comedy album, you listen much more closely.”¹¹²

Moreover, he points out that, since the visual aspect of the thing is dependent only on the human imagination, radio can take the audience to places where television never could, and can likewise bear to work with much more bizarre imagery.¹¹³ Quite paradoxically, this initial lack can lead to the missing image being more powerfully recreated in our minds.¹¹⁴ To reinforce this process of imagination, different sounds, for example, are used to indicate the change of environment; these can range from the sound of steps on the pavement to the sound of people chatting, sounds of television to suggest we are in an open/habitation space, sound of insects in the forest etc.¹¹⁵ This audio track would probably appear in the visual drama as well, but here it is made purposely more distinctive in order to give the audience more hints to reflect upon.¹¹⁶ Tim Crook aptly describes this process:

“The audio drama moreover shares the imaginative function which is recognized as off-stage in the physical drama. /.../ I believe this is what Marshall McLuhan meant by ‘I live right inside radio when I listen /.../ The Medium is the Message. ”¹¹⁷

Once more the showing technique is experienced instead that of telling; the characters of Barratt and Fielding in the radio show are merely talking to one another in their brilliantly comic dialogues, they do not talk or pay any attention to the listener and the direct address of the audience known from the theatre or television is also lacking. We are virtually thrown right into the middle of the action without any introductory phase or narrated explanation but it does not seem to matter at all. The epic line is already relatively strong¹¹⁸ owing to the ability of the authors to evoke images in the listener. Let us conclude this chapter with the words of Noel Fielding:

¹¹² “The Mighty Boosh on Monty Python,” 2 min. 54 sec.

¹¹³ “The Mighty Boosh on Monty Python,” 3 min. 35 sec.

¹¹⁴ As Jind ich Honzl points out in his study, if the dramatic persona is well characterized by a voice only, then the voice is the actor. In the radio plays, the voice stands not only for the dramatic persona but also for all the other aspects of the theatre: scene, decoration, stage proprieties and lighting. (See Jind ich Honzl, “Pohyb divadelního znaku,” *Slovo a slovesnost*) *modified translation of the Czech text

¹¹⁵ Honzl calls this “acoustic background” (akustická kulisa). See note 110 for reference.

¹¹⁶ For *The Mighty Boosh* radio show see for instance the BBC Audiobooks sample on Youtube. (“The Mighty Boosh Radio Show,” *YouTube*, YouTube, LLC, 23 June 2007, 27 Dec 2011 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s85y5KiZZe4>>).

¹¹⁷ This notion is later restated by Crook as “The Theatre of the Mind;” (Crook, 8).

¹¹⁸ Already in the radio show there is a certain indication of the aforementioned “epic journey” narrative, and some of these early motives are later extended and re-used in the concrete TV episodes.

“If you come away from a show thinking of an image, that’s as good as remembering a joke. A lot of those shows, like *The Office*, they are brilliant but they’re not visually interesting.”¹¹⁹

Experimenting with genres leads to gradual concretization of the form. The already emphasized recurring archetypal “images,” i.e. more generally the archetypal (narrative) situations as well as the strong and original visual feature (in theatre and television) are indeed one of the most important and distinctive marks of *The Mighty Boosh*. The following chapters will attempt to examine these narrative aspects more fully and to offer a closer view of the form as well as of its concrete realization, the content.

¹¹⁹Joy Press, “Deep Inside The Boosh,” *Salon*, Salon Media Group, Inc., 27 July 2009, 15 Aug 2010 <http://www.salon.com/2009/07/27/mighty_boosh_interview/singleton/>.

3. THE MIGHTY BOOSH: THE NARRATIVE

3.1

INTRODUCTION

Before proceeding any further, I must stress again what was briefly mentioned in the introductory chapter: to explain these resemblances by supposing the authors to be particularly familiar with the ancient lore would be totally wrong; I believe that on the conscious level these similarities are almost accidental. If a parallel is drawn with some mythical motive, it is not to prove some direct connection between the two but to bring attention to these ever-present, ever-recurring themes, images and structures which lasted through ages but are apparently still perfectly relevant and familiar. I am sure hundreds of such unconsciously made parallels, motives and symbols could be traced within *The Mighty Boosh*; however, in the following chapters we can discuss and analyse only the most prominent ones.

3.2

DETERMINING THE NARRATIVE:

STRUCTURE OF THE HEROIC JOURNEY, HEROIC JOURNEY AS INITIATION

In her *Fairy Tales and Alchemy*,¹²⁰ Carsten Høgh points out that according to the Aarne and Thomson's classification¹²¹ there are two main types of (fairy) tales - jesting tales and fairy tales (i.e. tales of magic). In *The Mighty Boosh* these types seem to mingle and create a new updated form: an epic journey with humorous moments, the mock heroic epic.¹²² Whereas the jesting tales (i.e. the comedic layer) are described as taking place on the realistic level,¹²³ the magic tales, as most of the myths, take place "in the inner unconscious universe."¹²⁴ Both Kierkegaard's statement that "myths let the internal happen externally" and the Freudian claim that "myth is a dream of the masses of the people"¹²⁵ can be useful here. According to Høgh, opening of this second level can only be achieved by means of mythical/symbolic

¹²⁰ Carsten Høgh, *Fairytales and Alchemy: The Psychological Functions of Folktales in the Middle Ages and Nowadays*, (Arv: Nordic Yearbook of Folklore, 1990) 141-142.

¹²¹ Hans-Jörg Uther, "The Third Revision of the Aarne-Thompson Tale Type Index," *Folklore Fellows*, Folklore Fellows, 2011, 24 May 2011 <http://www.folklorefellows.fi/?page_id=915>.

¹²² See note 16.

¹²³ They could happen in our "rational" world. "The things that happen in these stories are possible – although not always likely – in the outer, concrete world." (Høgh, 141-142).

¹²⁴ Høgh, 142.

¹²⁵ The people's collective dream. [Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, trans. Gregory C. Richter, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1913) 6.]

language¹²⁶ or imagery (that we know *The Boosh* uses), and she also talks about hero/heroine setting out for the world in pursuit of some mission or quest.

This brings us back to the Proppian scheme of different functions¹²⁷ that regularly occur within the epic narrative. However, we must bear in mind that *The Mighty Boosh* contains the comedic aspect as well: it realizes itself in something I called the + function (this function is naturally lacking in Propp). This extra function serves to overthrow the re-established balance and the happily ever after¹²⁸ at the end of the narrative and successfully re-ascertain the genre of comedy. The example of this function is, for instance, the final moment in the episode “The Legend of Old Gregg,”¹²⁹ where the hero believes that he has escaped from the clutches of a marriage-greedy sea monster, Old Gregg, and is on the road away with the booty, when the camera eye suddenly moves up only to reveal Gregg standing on the roof of the car in his wedding dress.

In her article, Høgh further claims that the hero goes to the world not so much in order to gain fortune or fame, but to find *himself*.¹³⁰ This is very important, because even if in *The Boosh* there are numerous cases where fortune and fame are the drivers of the heroes’ actions (and it is an absolutely understandable demonstration of the realistic level, the reinforcing of the mock-heroic epic feature in the middle of a sublime heroic journey as our world seems to be ridiculously driven exactly by these ambitions), there are frequent instances where the hero’s mission, the central story, realizes itself as the so-called initiation journey. The initiation journey, a term notoriously known to the religious studies, but equally applicable for traditional myth and narrative, is often described as a process dividable into three parts. Arnold van Gennep,¹³¹ for instance, talks about the *separation* or the moment where the hero leaves his traditional environment for some other (e.g. the underworld, the otherworld, the sacred space), the *liminality* or the time of the hero’s stay in the other world where he is faced with trials (this often goes hand in hand with altered states of mind, e.g. dreams, death) or is forced to make some sort of a personal sacrifice, and finally the *reintegration* when the hero, having passed the tests, returns back to our world and his social statute is upgraded.¹³² This

¹²⁶ Høgh, 142.

¹²⁷ Propp; function XI. Departure: Hero leaves home; (Propp, 38).

¹²⁸ In Propp the narrative generally ends with the function XXXI. Wedding: Hero marries and ascends the throne; (Propp, 55).

¹²⁹ *The Mighty Boosh*, “The Legend of Old Gregg,” 26 min. 46 sec.

¹³⁰ Høgh, 142.

¹³¹ Other relevant author is for example Victor Turner. [Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (New Jersey: Aldine Transaction, 1995).]

¹³² Van Gennep’s division is very aptly summarized by Fionna Bowie; (Bowie, 157-161).

upgrade¹³³ can demonstrate itself in many ways; it means increase in power or knowledge, discovery of some precious artefact etc. In general, the process is a bettering of one's *self* (Høgh's "to find oneself"), i.e. very much turning to the "inner unconscious" described by Høgh as central for the "tales of magic." Sigmund Freud's conviction that the driving power of the majority of our actions (e.g. setting off for a journey) does not come from the rational thinking but from our desires, anxieties and instincts¹³⁴ perfectly fits in here.

The Mighty Boosh is a magical realism amalgam of the real (the "tales of jest" feature/ the + function which at the end annuls the potential upgrades gained during the initiation) and unreal, as well as of the two (eventually almost identical) modes of the Proppian physical heroic journey and the more ostentatiously inner-oriented quests of the *self* connected with the unconscious of Carsten Høgh. *The Boosh*'s narratives are partly dreams and surrealism leaking from the unconscious into the "rational" world; some of the stories, usually when they enter the liminal phase, are presented as dreams; i.e. they happen in the character's unconscious ("The Nightmare of Milky Joe"),¹³⁵ or the character is dead¹³⁶ (Bollo).¹³⁷ This narrative, taking place in the otherworld, sometime becomes compensation for the actual reality the hero is not satisfied with (alias for the Proppian lack).¹³⁸ Probably the best example of this in *The Boosh*, which seems worth mentioning, is the episode "The Priest and the Beast,"¹³⁹ which is at the same time constructed as the initiation journey. On the real world level, the heroes, Vince and Howard, find themselves unable to come up with an original sound necessary for obtaining a contract with a recording company; subsequently by means of a story told by another character (Naboo), who thus embodies the Proppian function of the *helper*,¹⁴⁰ they move from the familiar spaces of their house to a desert (the sacral/liminal sphere). Here we meet with their alter-egos (i.e. the alter-egos of the authors' alter-egos),¹⁴¹ Rudi (Howard) and Spider (Vince), who are as well on mission to find a "new sound." On this second narrative level, which is here to compensate for the failures on the first level and which in some way takes the airs of the traditional heroic journey (although the comedy is

¹³³ In *The Boosh* it is always overthrown with coming of the + function.

¹³⁴ Bowie, 171.

¹³⁵ *The Mighty Boosh*, "The Nightmare of Milky Joe," dir. Paul King, prod. A Baby Cow Production, BBC, 2008.

¹³⁶ Or "as if dead," this accounts for a sleep/dream and always depends on the interpretation.

¹³⁷ *The Mighty Boosh*, "Bollo," dir. Paul King, prod. A Baby Cow Production, BBC, 2008.

¹³⁸ Propp: function VIII. Villainy or Lack; (Propp 36).

¹³⁹ *The Mighty Boosh*, "The Priest and the Beast," dir. Paul King, prod. A Baby Cow Production, BBC, 2008.

¹⁴⁰ See Propp: functions XII-XIV.; (Propp, 39-43).

¹⁴¹ This concerns the above described complex system of the authors' identities. It is important to say that these second level alter-egos are still similar to the alter-egos and the authors themselves.

ever-present), the heroes are of course successful: Rudi passes the ordeals and by sacrificing his career to help a friend passes the initiation. Consequently his status is upgraded when he receives a mark of great wisdom and importance - a door, similar to that of his companion who has already been initiated, appears in the middle of his brow. However, on the reality level, as we would expect, Howard and Vince are about to meet with another failure. By hearing the story, they learn that “you can only find a new sound at the end of a long journey”¹⁴² (the inner truth a classical hero would yearn to discover), but they, sticking to the mock-heroic aspect, after a few moments of disenchanted silence, rebuff this newly acquired wisdom with the practical “how does that help us, you berk?”¹⁴³ The narrative ends with the function presenting itself and with Naboo giving them a magical potion of inspiration¹⁴⁴ which is later revealed to be an ordinary orange juice. The heroes subsequently depart for the concurs, and even if the story remains unresolved on this level, it is rather obvious that no update in status is going to happen, and the heroes will once more experience the said eternal return to their initial position.

Before proceeding further let us make a few more remarks. Unlike Howard and Vince, we only encounter Rudi and Spider in the midst of the desert, without any knowledge of their “home-space,” yet for both of the heroic pairs, this desert is the liminal sphere of the sacred, the dangerous otherworld where the villain must be destroyed and the quest fulfilled. One undergoes it physically, while the other experiences it as a compensatory fantasy generated by the unconscious. Also on the second level a desert village, appearing later in the story, temporally serves as the familiar world, the “home” where the heroes are partly protected against the danger of the otherworld.

3.2.1

NARRATIVE PARALLEL

In *The Boosh*, one may find numerous motives that appear regularly in myths and fairy-tales. For instance, the magical potion which endows those who drink it with unusual wisdom is a very frequent motive. This theme, whose most obvious parallel in the ancient

¹⁴² *The Mighty Boosh*, “The Priest and the Beast,” 27 min. 19 sec.

¹⁴³ *The Mighty Boosh*, “The Priest and the Beast,” 27 min. 23 sec.

¹⁴⁴ Propp: function XIV. Receipt of a Magical Agent ; (Propp 41).

writings is the inspiration bestowing “mead of poetry” deceitfully obtained by god Odin,¹⁴⁵ appears several times in *The Boosh* series. In “The Legend of Old Gregg,” there is a creature called “Funk,” a talking head with numerous sticking-out bulbs, milked for a peculiar black juice which is a source of a musical genius, while in “The Fountain of Youth,” there is an elixir that makes one younger. But it is the motive and even the narrative structure of “The Legend of Old Gregg,” whose resemblance with the Eddic myth is simply striking. The location, where the magic fluid is hidden and out of which it is eventually stolen, is in both cases a cave (i.e. the underworld-otherworld). Entering it means to pass into the sacral sphere and into the liminal state where ordeals must be faced and overcome. Moreover, both heroes (Howard and Odin) meet there with a love interest and subsequently act with deceit. Finally, as has been shown earlier, the power/effect of the aspired for magic substance is in fact identical: it inspires either poets or singers (the same). Gunlod, who guards the sacred mead, promises Odin one gulp for every night he spends with her, whereas Howard is promised the “Funk” by a sea-creature Gregg if he agrees to marry him. Odin gradually empties all of the three pots and flies away leaving Gunlod in tears, and Howard in an unguarded moment steals the “Funk” and escapes in a submarine, abandoning Gregg. The phase of liminality is ended, the reintegration follows.

3.3

NARRATIVE SPACE

The abovementioned inner-outer perspective, i.e. the safe familiar space “within walls” (prior to hero’s departure on mission) versus the dangerous space beyond the border (the time of quest) or the “no man’s land” is natural to most of the mythologies and the ancient ways of thinking: a castle or a mead hall would be considered secure while the space surrounding or lying next to them, the outside world (Utgard), is bleak, desolate and full of death and unknown danger.¹⁴⁶ *The Boosh* works with this schema in abundance. The otherworld space, as opposed to the protected environment “within walls” (e.g. houses, cottages, tents etc.) is typically represented by wild or desolate places such as deep forests or

¹⁴⁵ For the particular narrative see pages 94-96 in Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. Arthur Gilchrist Bodeur, *New York: The American Scandinavian Foundation*, Evinity Publishing INC, July 2011, 23 June 2012 <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/pre/>>.

¹⁴⁶ In the Norse mythology Asgard and Midgard are the worlds of Gods and Men, whereas Utgard is a home to frost giants, generally the inhospitable ice-cold realm full of danger and hostility; (Sturluson, 61). In *Béowulf*, the contrast between the mead-hall Heorot and the marshes (the otherworld) where Grendel lives is immediately obvious too.

a jungle (“Call of the Yeti”),¹⁴⁷ a deserted island (“The Nightmare of Milky Joe”), a desert (“The Fountain of Youth,” “The Priest and the Beast”), a lake/sea or a space below the water’s surface (“The Legend of Old Gregg”), a realm of the dead (“Bollo”) or merely a rainy night in contrast to the sheltered space (“Nanagedon”).¹⁴⁸ Crossing over the boundary or entering the villain’s territory is sometimes followed by a sudden change in weather, e.g. mist appears (“Old Gregg”), a sand storm strikes (“The Fountain of Youth,” “The Priest and the Beast”) etc.

The scheme is, however, often not so straightforward nor it consists of merely one layer. In “The Legend of Old Gregg,” the heroes move from the city (shelter) to the country (otherworld); once they got there, however, the local public house takes the role of the shelter, and the liminal sphere is represented first by the lake’s surface and then the underwater cave below. Eventually, the quest being accomplished, the heroes return to the original shelter - the city. Practically identical structure is present in *The Call of Yeti*. Again, we encounter a departure from the city (shelter) into the wilderness (otherworld). There is a cottage in the middle of the forest and it becomes the temporal shelter while the otherworld is first represented by the surrounding woods and later by a place deep within them (a double descent as in the previous case) called the Piney ridge. A flight¹⁴⁹ through these multiple spheres follows, leading first to the cottage (temporal shelter) and then to the city (original shelter). Similar structure was noticeable already in “The Priest and the Beast,” where, as we may remember, the temporal shelter was represented by the village in the middle of the desert.

3.4

EPISODES ANALYSIS

It is always good to remember that not all of the episodes unfold exactly according to the basic Proppian scheme, although the core remains the same.¹⁵⁰ As has been mentioned earlier, the authors of *The Mighty Boosh* do not occupy themselves (and neither does Propp) with the hero’s origin or birth. The narrative, apart from an introductory part at the beginning of each episode, starts directly with the conflict or the *lack* which immediately leads to the

¹⁴⁷ *The Mighty Boosh*, “Call of the Yeti,” dir. Paul King, prod. A Baby Cow Production, BBC, 2008.

¹⁴⁸ *The Mighty Boosh*, “Nanagedon,” dir. Paul King, prod. A Baby Cow Production, BBC, 2008.

¹⁴⁹ Propp: function XXI. Pursuit; (Propp, 50).

¹⁵⁰ Propp himself says that “by far not all fairy tales include all the functions...;” (Propp, 27). *modified translation of the Czech text

adventure; i.e. it approximately begins at the stage which Joseph Campbell fittingly calls “The Call to Adventure.”¹⁵¹

Nevertheless, one may come across many variations and deviations. For example having two main protagonists in the series (Noir, Moon), we may encounter many instances where the hero function is represented by both of them at the same time (working as a unit). Sometimes, however, the characters eventually split up, each following their own way, which significantly complicates the narrative since one must decide whose point of view is going to be considered as that of the hero. Sometimes only one of the pair provably acquires the hero’s function while the other operates as the helper or even a variant of the well-known “damsel in distress”¹⁵² aspect. Furthermore, the so-called “boon” (i.e. the valuable item/object the hero strives for) does not have to be always represented by an immediately obvious concrete object. Very often it is rather an abstract concept like for instance reaching the same harmonious state as before the arrival of the villain/problems (lack), or something connected to the hero’s personality (the augmentation in status, [re]obtaining personal harmony etc.).¹⁵³ The lack itself may be represented in a similar way (i.e. not as something material). This resembles the concept of the abovementioned initiation (which is of course in one way or another necessarily included in the Propp’s system as well).

In some of the later episodes of the third series one may encounter natural development in form. The established genre of the (mock)-heroic narrative seems to reach its peak and it starts dissolving into something new. As will be shown subsequently, in these later instances (concretely we talk about two episodes: “The Chokes” and “The Party”¹⁵⁴), the Proppian/heroic scheme is no longer clearly recognizable and the third episode’s narrative structures seem to be getting more complex.

Despite all these discrepancies some sort of a logical classification of *The Mighty Boosh* can be achieved for example by dividing the individual episode according to a *type* of the journey undergone. There are basically three relatively fixed categories: 1) the hero enters the otherworld, 2) the otherworld (represented by the villain or possibly by some other

¹⁵¹ Campbell, 45.

¹⁵²This damsel in distress is usually Howard. He is abducted by the Yeti (“Call of the Yeti”) and by Old Gregg (“The Legend of Old Gregg”). Paradoxically, sometimes even when he thinks he is saving Vince, it is really him who needs to be saved in the end (“Tundra”). Another interesting observation is that whereas Vince would be potentially classifiable as the “female” aspect of the central pair, having certain transsexual qualities, it is Howard who regularly ends up being abducted by some marriage/sexual intercourse craving creature (Gregg).

¹⁵³ See before.

¹⁵⁴ *The Mighty Boosh*, “The Party,” dir. Paul King, prod. A Baby Cow Production, BBC, 2008.

supernatural being) enters our world, 3) a combination of 1) and 2). In the next part of our work we will focus only on the second and third series of *The Mighty Boosh*: for the sake of a pertinent demonstration of our previous claims, we will skip the first series, which naturally embodies some of the described archetypal narrative but the concept is not yet fully and clearly developed there.

Due to the limited span of this work we cannot afford to inspect every story separately and in detail. Therefore, a very meticulous analysis of a selected episode (“The Fountain of Youth”) which seems to best represent the most important aspects and features of the Proppian fairy-tale will be followed by somewhat briefer (open to other interpretations) overview of the individual episodes and their structure. In this first detailed examination we will try to observe the story from different points of view (shifting the function of the hero to different characters). Such details, however, must be omitted from the following, mostly summarizing investigation into the other episodes.

3.4.1

“THE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH”

Here follows a detailed analysis of the selected episode, “The Fountain of Youth.” After presenting a brief synopsis of the story, different characters’ points of view will be inspected (b1, b2).

a) Synopsis:

The whole episode starts with a flashback scene on a different planet, where Naboo receives a magical amulet from the King, swears to protect it and departs to the planet Earth. Apparently thousands of years later, Vince and Howard return home from their unsuccessful concert. Howard feels desperate and old. By interrogating Bollo, the two discover that Naboo has the access to the Fountain of Youth. They steal Naboo’s amulet and travel to another world to find it. In the Desert of Nightmares they encounter a hostile blue midget with his company. Naboo and Bollo go in search of Vince and Howard. Vince who has the amulet is, however, worshipped as the “Chosen One,” whereas Howard is merely kept as a slave. The villain, likewise desiring the amulet, is introduced. Vince passes his first test by resisting the terrible Sandstorm (character), gains a magical horn from him as a reward, and his success is celebrated. The villain in disguise approaches Howard. He tricks him into stealing the amulet from Vince and violently takes it afterwards. Since the amulet is gone, the midget

buries Vince and Howard to the sand and leaves them to die. They are rescued by Naboo and set off in pursuit of the villain. The final struggle takes place in the whereabouts of the Fountain. Vince blows his magic horn and calls Sandstorm to their aid. The villain is defeated. Naboo's quest of protecting the amulet is fulfilled; the King appears and presents his thanks. The comedic twist follows.

b) Structural analysis

Almost every narrative can naturally be observed from unidentical perspectives of different characters, but the general context usually states quite explicitly (unless the author consciously wishes otherwise) who is to be taken as the hero, who as the villain, the helper and so on. In *The Mighty Boosh*, these roles are obviously given by the background of the entire series: Howard and Vince will always carry the label of the protagonist (the hero).¹⁵⁵ And yet, if this very particular episode should be detached from the contextual lookout, there would be other narrative angles available. Naboo, for instance, embodies strong characteristics of the hero type: it is he who is initially presented with a quest, he encounters the villainy in having his property stolen, he sets for a journey etc. We are far from delving into such theories, as the efficacy of the following analysis lies rather in brevity and concreteness; nevertheless, in order to demonstrate the Proppian system more fully and to show how certain structures match one another, we will present this alternative perspective as well.

b1) Howard and Vince (the hero function represented by two inseparable characters)

1.¹⁵⁶ The opening situation results in the *lack*: lack of youth, creative inspiration etc.

2. *Violation of Interdiction*.¹⁵⁷ The *violation* is naturally preceded by the *interdiction*, but not all the functions have to be virtually present in the story. In *the Mighty Boosh* series, this prohibition is hinted at elsewhere (outside of this particular storyline) by Naboo's: "Have you been through my stuff again?"¹⁵⁸ Moreover, even if the interdiction had not been stated physically, breaking into a private property would

¹⁵⁵ The two characters have separate hero storylines for example in "The Chokes." Both of these lines are of the same prominence and it is difficult to determine the actual hero.

¹⁵⁶ Because of the story's complexity and the multiple narrative levels, the *succession* of the individual steps does not exactly match the Proppian scheme. However, some inseparable pairs stay always together; for instance II. Interdiction (Propp, 30) is always followed by III. Violation (Propp, 31).

¹⁵⁷ Propp, 31.

¹⁵⁸ *The Mighty Boosh*, "Nanaggedon," 9 min. 45 sec. It is a fact generally acknowledged that one should not touch Naboo's things.

have been a sufficient violation of any conventional order. Howard and Vince steal the *magical agent* – the amulet.

3. *Departure*: the hero leaves home (because of 1. *lack*) by means of the *magical agent* (which is more usually received as a gift, but not on this occasion). He enters the otherworld.

4. The hero encounters the *donor* (the blue midget) who presents him with a *test*¹⁵⁹ (facing the Sandstorm). Sandstorm himself is then a doubling of both the *donor* and the *tester*.

5. The hero *passes the test*: Vince survives the encounter with Sandstorm and befriends him. At this point, the hero makes a good choice as far as Sandstorm in his function of the *donor* is concerned. He decides not to fight him but to help him: only thus he can pass the test and consequently receive his reward.¹⁶⁰

6. Hero receives a *magical agent* as a reward: Vince receives a magical horn (the *donor* offering his services to the hero by saying the typical: “Blow the horn and I will come.”).

7. *Reconnaissance*: At this point the villain disguised¹⁶¹ as a young beautiful woman enters the narrative, approaches Howard and seeks information about the desired object (the amulet). Interestingly, the villain and the hero share the same lack (lack of youth), and the villain tries to get the amulet for identical purposes.¹⁶² This is an important notion because both the villain and the hero must undergo the same journey in order to reach the Fountain of Youth; therefore, the following narrative has subsequently characteristic of a race, and the final encounter then logically takes place away from the villain’s lair.¹⁶³

8. *Delivery*: The villain gains the desired information by means of flattery and seduction. He makes Howard to steal the amulet from Vince, and to bring it to him.

¹⁵⁹ Propp: function XII. First Function of the Donor: Hero is tested, interrogated, attacked; (Propp, 39).

¹⁶⁰ See, Propp: function XIII. Hero’s Reaction: Hero reacts to actions of future donor; function XIII. subtype 1,7; (Propp, 40-41).

¹⁶¹ Propp: function IV. The villain (often in disguise) makes an active attempt at seeking information; (Propp 31).

¹⁶² An interesting debate could take place as to what then makes a villain a villain apart from the story’s perspective/ point of view.

¹⁶³ The final encounter typically takes place in the villain’s keep/castle, where the villain has the advantage of knowing the environment.

9. Trickery: once the desired object is within his reach, the villain uses violence in order to obtain it. He knocks Howard unconscious (without using magic). Howard is taken by deception and thus unwittingly helps the enemy. The villain escapes with the amulet and establishes the second *lack* (in this case generally labelled as *villainy*).¹⁶⁴ As a result of this *villainy*, Vince fails (as if another *test*) by his inability to keep the amulet in his possession.

Punishment takes place (heroes are buried up to their necks into sand) and the rescue by Naboo and Bollo follows. Naboo and Bollo can be seen as a) another occurrence of *helper*; b) extension of the heroic pair.

10. Guidance¹⁶⁵ and *Pursuit*:¹⁶⁶ heroes are transferred to the whereabouts of the object of the search (the fountain) by using a magic carpet. They are in pursuit of the villain.

11. Struggle: the hero and the villain enter into an open combat. They do not attack directly one another: the villain sends a large walking tree in his stead and Vince blows the horn calling Sandstorm (the helper, **6.** comes to its fulfilment). These two can be seen as momentary substitutes for the hero/villain roles.

12. Victory: Once the *helper* eliminates the primary obstacle, the villain is defeated by the hero.

13. Liquidation: initial *lack* is resolved. In our case this function manifests itself almost at the very end¹⁶⁷ of the narrative. Howard and Vince secretly took some of the youth juice (which in a way is another case of *violation of interdiction* and a possible start for a new narrative).

14. Return: Heroes return home (using the same means by which they entered the whereabouts of the sought object - the magic carpet).

This is where the traditional narrative would end.¹⁶⁸ However, *The Mighty Boosh*, naturally combining these archetypal narrative strategies with innovative features, almost always presents us with a final comedic postlude (+ function, **15.**). In “The Fountain of

¹⁶⁴ Propp: function VIII. Lack or Villainy; (Propp, 33).

¹⁶⁵ Propp: function XV; (Propp, 46). Here Naboo, who knows the location of the Fountain, serves as a guide.

¹⁶⁶ Usually it is the villain who pursues the hero; here it is the other way round. Propp: function XXI. Pursuit: Hero is pursued; (Propp, 50).

¹⁶⁷ Propp continues with more functions, hero meets with new difficulties etc.; (Propp, 49-56).

¹⁶⁸ In addition to that there would appear the function XXXI. Wedding; (Propp, 56). The hero does not necessarily have to marry anyone; sometimes this function only stands for the general happily-ever-after.

Youth,” Howard and Vince eventually end up as toddlers after having drunk too much of the youth juice.

b2) Naboo¹⁶⁹

Here follows the comparison with the hero perspective of another character.

Naboo’s encounter with the King on planet Xooberon serves as a contextual background to the following narrative. Naboo is charged¹⁷⁰ to protect the amulet and departs for Earth. Then the time scale apparently moves thousands of years forward and we find ourselves in present-day London.

1. *Reconnaissance*: the villain (in this case, again collectively, represented by Howard and Vince)¹⁷¹ seeks information about the magical item (the amulet) from Bollo.
2. *Delivery*: Howard and Vince gain the information by merely asking about it. Bollo unwittingly reveals Naboo’s secret concerning the Fountain of Youth.
3. *Trickery*: villain does not apply any violence or magic to obtain the magical item. Howard and Vince merely use the received information that clearly indicates that there has to be something among Naboo’s property which leads to the Fountain, and subsequently steal it. This can be perceived as trickery: the information mentioned in a casual conversation was not given to help the two rummage Naboo’s things.
4. *Lack*: the hero experiences a *lack*. Naboo finds out about his amulet being stolen and begins the *counter-action*.¹⁷²
5. *Departure*: Naboo (hero) leaves home in a pursuit of Vince and Howard (villain).
6. The hero *passes the test*. Vince and Howard, whose role now shifts to that of *donor/helper*,¹⁷³ are rescued by Naboo and subsequently give him the information

¹⁶⁹ Here, unlike for example “The Strange Tale of the Crack Fox,” Naboo can be considered as a hero figure because he is an active element in the story. He himself acts and sets out on a journey. In the “Crack Fox” he merely represents the already encountered “damsel in distress,” a figure whose imprisonment creates the lack, but other characters (Vince, Howard) must set out to eliminate it.

¹⁷⁰ In a way, the + function presents itself already in the beginning: the King, having confounded Naboo’s name with that of Banoo, chose Naboo for the noble quest by mistake. Also the King’s response to the following situation when he realizes his mistake is very realistic and very non-heroic: he merely says “shit.” (*The Mighty Boosh*, “The Fountain of Youth,” 9 min. 35 sec).

¹⁷¹ It must be pointed out that this new division of roles is merely theoretical: the hero of a fairy tale story can never be thought of as a villain, even though it is surprisingly often that his actions speak otherwise (see note 148): for instance, after receiving the magical item he frequently wickedly uses it against the *donor* (Propp, 41). He also steals from the villain and so on.

¹⁷² Propp considers this as a separate function; (Propp, 38).

¹⁷³ Again, the hero (Naboo) is presented with a bipolar choice: a) to help the future donor (Vince, Howard) b) to refuse him and let them die. Only the first choice naturally leads to the hero’s future success: the surviving donor gives him information about the desired object’s (the amulet) location and current whereabouts of the villain.

about the amulet which has been stolen: here the bearer of the villain's role becomes identical with its representative in the previous analysis. Structurally, however, nothing changes; hero is still in pursuit of villain (the outer form and function remains constant, only the concrete representation changes).

10., 11., 12. These are identical with the previous analysis. In this case, Vince keeps the role of the *helper* in a way. He is the one who possesses the ability of conjuring Sandman; how he managed to obtain his services is not of the essence (from the current point of view).

13. Liquidation: the initial lack is resolved. The missing object is successfully regained. Naboo fulfilled his initial mission and managed to protect the amulet.

+ function **14. Reward:** In our case, this function again bears the comedic quality. The King reappears on the scene and offers Naboo a royal reward. However, since this reward is not exactly to the hero's liking ("We will reign together and listen to folk music all day"),¹⁷⁴ he refuses it with: "Let's get out of here!" and quits the scene. The somewhat astonished King is left behind.

15. Identical with **14.** of the previous analysis.

+ function **16.** Identical with the previous +function **15.** Instead of enjoying royal rewards, Naboo is left to take care of two helpless infants.

As we have seen, the schema works well but there are also some discrepancies in the narrative. For example the Proppian function XIV. Receipt of Magical Agent¹⁷⁵ is greatly multiplied and the hero receives a reward for passing tests more than once within the same narrative. This happens primarily in the b1 narrative (Howard and Vince represent the hero), Naboo's storyline (b2) is much more straightforward. The situation in b1 is more complicated because we have two heroes instead of one; and even though they generally function as a unit, they (and their roles) temporally split at the time when Vince becomes the Chosen One. This poses problems. For example it is difficult to say which one of these instances of meeting the *donor* (helper) and *donation* is the genuine one; it all depends on the current perspective. The central one for the whole narrative, however, would probably be number 6. (Vince receives the horn, which is used later in the story).

The b1 storyline could be of course dissected to yet smaller narratives and analysed on different levels. It is obvious that "The Fountain of Youth" contains the double descend

¹⁷⁴ *The Mighty Boosh*, "The Fountain of Youth," 26 min. 49 sec.

¹⁷⁵ Propp, 41. As we may have noticed, there are other multiplications in the narrative's structure (e.g. the *lack*).

encountered and described earlier in “The Legend of Old Gregg” or “Call of the Yeti.” The first level after leaving the real world is the Desert of Nightmares, the second one is the place where the elixir is hidden. On both of these levels donations/actions of the *donor/helper* take place, but even on the same level there are complications. In the Desert of Nightmares (first descend), the midget gives Vince a test: to defeat Sandstorm.¹⁷⁶ After that Vince’s position as the Chosen One is re-ascertained, he is given gifts etc. Nobody cares *how* he dealt with Sandstorm (and that he received the horn) as long as Sandstorm is gotten rid of; nothing else is relevant for this part of the narrative. However, when dealing with Sandstorm alone, it *is* of vast importance that Vince decided not to fight him but to help him, as by that action he received the magic horn: the magical agent crucial at the later stages of the narrative.

3.4.2

THE SECOND SERIES

I am of course aware of the fact that for the readers completely unacquainted with *The Mighty Boosh* the following analyses, lacking synopses of the individual stories, might be a little confusing. I presume that people interested in the topic will watch at least some of the episodes; otherwise, I must ask them to look into the previous chapter for reference and to use indications and material given to them in the course of this work: most of the episodes were (or will be) described to a certain extent. However, as this work primarily wants to draw attention to the repetitive functions (already described above in detail) and not to the concrete content, this lack of spectator’s experience may not be such a disadvantage after all. At the end of the analyses I will also provide a summarizing text to once more point out the most important facts about the narrative.

It is in the second series where the above described concept of the heroic narrative and the general impression of a “Sinbad journey” culminate. As you will notice, most of the hero’s journeys are to the underworld (journey type 1). The chief purpose of the following table is to give a clear overview of the most important aspects of the story analysis. However, in order to understand the bellow classification more fully, the reader should go back to some previously provided facts about the individual episodes. Other additional information, in case they are needed or the episode has not been yet spoken of, will be given bellow the table.

¹⁷⁶ Propp, XIII. function’s subtype 7 (the hero does the donor a favour); Propp,41.

Some of the abbreviations: T. 1-3 - narrative type 1-3; H – Howard; V – Vince, N – Naboo, B – Bollo; (-) when the letter appears in the brackets like for example in the “Call of the Yeti” -> *Hero + other functions* [concrete pattern H=> (V)], it means that the function is uncertain/not represented clearly enough OR it is uncertain whether the heroic function shifts from one character to the other (H=>V) and it depends solely on the spectator’s personal point of view. In the other possible interpretation the function does not shift, and although the major focus is put on Vince in the other half of the narrative, he retains his role of the helper together with Naboo and Bollo. A similar situation is observable in “The Legend of Old Gregg.”

Episode	Call of the Yeti	The Priest and the Beast	Nanageddon	The Fountain of Youth	The Legend of Old Gregg	The Nightmare of Milky Joe
Type	T. 1, mainly physical journey	T.1 psychical and physical journey	Mainly T.2, physical journey	-	T.1 Physical Journey	T1, partly T.2, mostly psychical journey (dream)
Hero + other function	Hero: H =>(V) Helper: Jack; V+N+B Villain: Yeti	Hero: 1 st :H+V 2 nd :Rudi+Spider Helper: 1 st : N 2 nd : a village girl Villain: Betamax	Hero: H+V Helper: (N) Villain: old lady demon Nanattoo	-	Hero: H =>(V) Helper: V, N, B Villain: The Old Gregg	Hero: V+H Helper: (V) Villain: (?) time, nature, Milky Joe
Lack	H: Desiring fame, recognition; V: H missing => rescuing H	Looking for the "new sound"	The magic book stolen, N stripped of his powers, danger of Nanageddon	-	Lack of creative inspiration	Voyage to America (seeking fame); finding a way out of/way to live on the island (?)
Descend	Triple descend, city=>cabin cabin=>woods woods=>alternative state of mind	1 st :reality=>story 2 nd : (?) =>desert village (temporal shelter)=>desert	Villain Nanattoo: book=>our world V+H: our world => Nanattoo's lair (the Bingo club)	-	Triple descend, city=>country country=>lake lake => underwater cave	Double descend, continent=> sea/island; reality island => island in a dream
Magical item	none	1 st : magic juice 2 nd :magic door ("the third eye")	The magic book: A) Causing the trouble The hair spray: B) Saving the situation	-	The Funk	-
Comedic twist (+function)	V becomes famous instead of H	1 st :the juice is fake, contract will not be signed	Triumphantly returned heroes refused by the girls (the potential reward)	-	Gregg appearing on the top of the car in his wedding dress	The dream world entering into our reality, Milky Joe appearing on TV
Notes					Howard who can catch no fish ends up catching the biggest one (Gregg).	First episode with a very untypical narrative, difficult to classify

Call of the Yeti

The *lack* is not so strong here as in some other episodes; the reason for departure is a weekend trip in woods and Howard's ambition to appear on the cover of a magazine called *Global Explorer*. Interesting aspect is the triple descend into the liminal sphere; in addition to the already described double physical descend (see chapter 2.3), there is the third phase when the heroes experience a trance-like state¹⁷⁷ (at this stage, Howard even receives a new name, Parsley, which generally signifies a change of status, personality etc.) from which they are finally awakened by Kodiak Jack. At the first liminal level, Jack appears to be an intruder from the outside but eventually becomes the *helper*, being familiar with the world outside the cabin. Thus they return back to the physical journey level and to the second liminal level. This is followed by escape and a subsequent return to civilization (the city). Vince appears on the cover of the magazine instead of Howard.

Nanageddon

The frame story and the initial lack are in fact created by the central couple's interest in two Goth girls. Wanting to impress the girls, Vince and Howard steal Naboo's book in order to perform magic but the experiment goes wrong and the unimportant quest (not really included in the analysis) to win the girls shifts to the radically important quest to save the world. However, the original frame story serves as a base for the comedic twist; the girls, even after Vince and Howard's brave recovery of the book, start dating Naboo and Bollo. Before Vince and Howard may enter the place of the villain in our world (i.e. the Bingo lottery club) they have to take on themselves certain *marks* of the villain, a disguise (here an old lady costume), in order to pass unobserved into the villain's realm (the Bingo club).

The Nightmare of Milky Joe

"The Nightmare of Milky Joe" is an episode with an untypical narrative that is very hard to analyse according to the Proppian scheme. Initially there is the characters' desire to go to America, (the desire of progress, new beginning, fame, i.e. quite typical motivations), which may already represent the "otherworld" in itself; later the lack is represented by being shipwrecked on a desert island. However, there is no really tangible hero's journey to begin with and it is also hard to state who is the villain: it might potentially be Milky Joe or indeed the nature and the island's harsh surroundings. Moreover, even on the dream level, which

¹⁷⁷ The Mighty Boosh, "Call of the Yeti," 21 min. 40 sec.

could potentially serve as a background for the compensatory fantasies (compare with “The Priest and the Beast”), the ambitions remain unfulfilled this time. Vince is just as popular as ever and Howard constantly represents the loser type he is. There is no movement forward and even the dream narrative in fact ends badly.¹⁷⁸

3.4.3

THE THIRD SERIES

As was stated above, in the third series one may expect greater complexness of the narrative. One often experiences reversal of the T.1 narrative (i.e. T.2) quite typical for the second series or a combination of the two (T.3). The form develops but on the other hand it dissolves: some of the episodes drop the purely heroic structure of the narrative (although there are still some that follow the structure with precision, e.g. “The Strange Tale of the Crack Fox”). Also new untypical environments or “foreign worlds” are added, one is for instance represented by the insides of a human body.

¹⁷⁸ We know that in “The Priest and the Beast” the compensatory level narrative ends successfully.

Episode	Eels	Journey to the Centre of the Punk	The Power of the Crimp	The Strange Tale of the Crack Fox	The Party	The Chokes
Type	T.2 physical journey	T.2 physical journey	-	T.3 physical journey	(T.2)	T.1
Hero + other functions	Hero: H=>H+(V) Helper: V, Eleanor Villain: the Hitcher	Hero: H, saving damsel in distr.; V Helper: Lester, white cells Villain: Jazz	Hero: H+V Helper: N+B Villain: the doppelgangers Lance Dior, Harold Boon ¹⁷⁹	Hero: V Helper: H, the bin men (or) Hero: (N) Helper: (V)	H: (the head shaman)	Hero: H, (V) Villain: Sammy the Crab Helper: Monty
Lack	Hero's life threatened => the need to avert the threat	Vince is infected by a "jazz cell" (Jazz)	Doppelgangers steal heroes' lives/identity	Theft of the magic potion, N faces death sentence	?	H suffers from chokes, the show needs an actor (Monty seeking revenge)
Descend	Villain: otherworld => our world	Hero: our world=>being kidnapped/ submarine =>otherworld	? – (the underground club's stage where the final battle occurs, the heroes unmask the doppelgangers and regain their identities)	Villain builds his abode in our world => hero enters; villain enters hero's home (our world) hero enters the underworld (sewers)	The head Shaman coming to the party (otherworld=> our world)	H (our world) =>Monty's dwelling place (otherworld)
Magical item	-	-	Abstract concept: the crimping (?)	The magic potion (the stolen item)	-	-
Comedic twist (+ function)	Student loans officers appear on scene, the hero's triumph ends	Not specifically connected to the narrative	Triumph over the villain followed by realization: "Where can you go with crimping? Nowhere."	Not specifically connected to the narrative	- Nothing to twist	Hero's triumph turns to loss, villain's loss turns to triumph
Notes	The villain travels; the hero undergoes a psychical "journey" (vision), entranced by the villain.	Specific journey into the insides of the human body	First of the episodes lacking the typical heroic narrative, the heroic journey etc.	We observe 3 different storylines (H, V, N+B) that merge at certain stages. Episode's complexity.	The most untypical episode	-

¹⁷⁹ This is an apparent variation on Vince Noir and Howard Moon.

Eels

In addition to the main story of Howard and Vince, there is another less important storyline represented by Naboo and the shamans. It has nothing to do with the main story in itself but it creates the primary lack: once Naboo, the protective force, is gone from the scene and the hero “stays alone at home,”¹⁸⁰ bad things start to happen. The villain then enters the scene and asks to be delivered money “by midnight.” Similarly to “Nanageddon,” the arrival of the supernatural element is signified by a sudden change in weather (heavy rain, storm) and the comedic twist is represented by an event that has practically nothing to do with the main storyline (student loans officers).

Journey to the Centre of the Punk

Interestingly enough, despite the hero’s descend into the otherworld, this unknown world is neither the hero’s nor the villain’s natural environment.¹⁸¹ Moreover, we encounter a double descend again, although it is not so prominent this time: its first level is manifested by belittled Howard entering Vince’s body in a submarine, the next one by his leaving the submarine (the last protection and relic of the familiar world) and venturing into the strange world unprotected. The final fight with the villain takes place in the real world.

Lester Corncrake (the *helper*) can actually be seen as an “anti-helper” rather than the regular Proppian *helper*: he is there by the hero’s side but all his actions only lead to yet greater problems. There comes quite an unexpected twist when it is him who finally destroys the villain and fulfils his *helper* role properly. This sudden change, however, is only temporal; in the next scene the character falls back into his comic role. It is perhaps relevant to stress that, obviously, all of the abovementioned functions are more “anti-functions” than anything else. The heroes have the characteristic of an antihero: they are cowards and they are not fit for the tasks they are supposed to carry out. This is of course due to the ever present comedic layer in the narrative.

The Strange Tale of the Crack Fox

The “Crack Fox” is a good example of a very complex narrative, which consists of multiple travels between the two worlds. It culminates for the first time when the villain (the

¹⁸⁰ This may remind us of many fairy tales like “The Wolf and Seven Little Kids” by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. See for instance Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “The Wolf and Seven Little Kids,” *Grimms Fairy Tales at All Family Resources*, All Family Resources, 1999, 13 June, 2012

<<http://www.familymanagement.com/literacy/grimms/grimms04.html>>.

¹⁸¹ Similar to the final struggle in “The Fountain of Youth,” see note 149.

Fox) asks the hero's (Vince) permission to enter the house. Once this permission is granted, the villain gains power over the hero. This inevitably reminds us of vampires crossing thresholds only when invited in by the owner of the place. Obviously, the threshold is the ultimate border, the place between the inside and the outside, between our world and the dangerous unknown otherworld. Moreover, the underworld is depicted very specifically: first it is the inside of a "dark tower" made of bin liners (the filth, waste), later the sewers (literally the "underworld"). In many ways, this episode sticks perfectly to the Proppian scheme, it includes a very concrete descend, escape and boon (the elixir). The story unfolds in many layers, one of them being a flashback sequence narrated by means of illustrated comics.

The Party

Whereas "The Chokes" still contains some of the heroic narrative (the episode includes a mission and a certain kind of a journey), "The Party" is an absolutely untypical episode and it does not fit into any of the prescribed categories. The main event is simply the party alone; there is no spatial development, no tangible task the hero would be asked to fulfil. The head shaman Dennis (Julian Barratt) undergoes a journey into our world and he is shortly involved in a "mission" to find out about his wife's infidelities, but these brief events hardly seem central and cannot be seen as sufficient for establishing a heroic narrative.

The Chokes

This episode embodies the initiation process. Howards follows his teacher Monty into the latter's secret dwelling in woods (the sacral sphere). There he subsequently undergoes the "training" resulting in the upgraded status (see earlier): he no longer suffers from "chokes" and is now a true actor. Also, the typical element of a pupil achieving what his master failed to achieve many years ago (beating Sammy the Crab) and avenging him at the same time is present in the storyline. Howard functions as the general saviour too: he arrives at the very last moment and saves the show by appearing on stage. His triumph is indeed almost complete and closest ever to completion in the series; the following inevitable fall to the initial position (see earlier) is, therefore, especially contrasting.

As we might have noticed, whereas the representation of the *hero* function remains stable (H, V, [N, B]) and the *descend* always takes place in one of the two directions (T.1; T.2), the *lack* realizes itself in many ways. One type is represented by an abstract desire: very often it is an absence of inspiration or the hero's desire for fame/improvement/recognition.

The other type is physical; one of the characters gets into trouble or goes missing and the other needs to rescue him. Sometimes this character in distress is the hero himself, in which case the situation often results in a split of the heroic pair (“The Legend of Old Gregg”). Specific case of the *lack* is, for example, the stolen identity in “The Power of the Crimp.” Other greatly variable entity is the magical item (or agent). Sometimes the object (the function) is missing (or there is no object of prominence) but when present, it usually is some fluid/juice (potion) or a book (amulet), i.e. highly typical magical items. The exception is again “The Power of the Crimp” where the agent (if we accept it as such) is abstract. The *comedic twist* varies as well and it always means degradation of the newly acquired (heroic) status.

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In the three previous chapters we tried to describe, analyse and inquire into the phenomenon called *The Mighty Boosh*. Both the theoretical and the practical side of the thing was examined; we started by introducing the general overview and the nature of the project and continued by describing Fielding and Barratt's artistic background as well as the origins of *The Boosh* itself: its connection to other genres and its belonging to (and naturally potential deviations from) the general cultural framework. From a meticulous inquiring into the technical and physical aspects of the show, i.e. the acting/theatrical methods used, the actual physical expression on stage or in radio/television, we proceeded further and briefly looked at different kinds of media and resulting mediations. Having acquired the background knowledge we moved forward in order to use it in practice. The main goal of the practical part was to reveal the world of *The Mighty Boosh* in its entirety to the reader and the potential spectator, to make him understand it fully and in detail. Its aim also was to make certain suggestions and hints as from which angles and points of view the phenomenon could be observed and to offer connections to other works or studies, which would not have perhaps been expected. It hopefully revealed *The Boosh*'s structure and complex narrative aspects, digging further into the individual stories (a process, as we know, by no means finished, the analysis could go on forever, getting deeper and more detailed, taking other characters' points of view into consideration etc.) On the other hand, it left a reasonable amount of space for readers to make their own interpretations and conclusions.

As we already know, *The Mighty Boosh* comes out of this analysis as a mixture of a traditional heroic narrative, the archetypal great epic journey described by Campbell and Propp, and a playful comedy of the absurd: the ultimate combination of Carsten Høgh's "jesting tales" and "tales of magic." Considering this once more, one must again wonder at how queer, unique and almost paradoxical this outcome is: an artistic attempt firmly bound with the traditional while simultaneously fiercely fighting against it. Barratt and Fielding rejoice in unconventionality and "breaking of laws," they doubtlessly enjoy creating this personal mythic world of absurdity, paradoxes and madness. However, despite these indisputably present buoyant aspects of phantasmagoria, the one fact remains crystal clear and must be emphasized again: *The Boosh* works on a much more traditional basis than it would perhaps be instantaneously apparent. Even as a project which would potentially aspire to become some sort of a completely detached personal vision of this world, it could not come to

existence without first acknowledging certain “traditional” previous-generational aspects as a core. This again does not mean that the artists would systematically look for and copy the “standard” models of their predecessors; they would rather very much struggle to avoid them. However, they, as well as any individual, belong in some way to the common long-established and constantly developing cultural “code.”¹⁸² Being brought up in it, they are naturally influenced by it, and its (the code’s) ever-presence must subsequently manifest itself, more or less markedly, in any creative action they may execute.

This perhaps reminds us of T.S. Eliot’s famous essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”¹⁸³ where the author among other things claims that writing of any kind of successful and innovative work of art lays in accepting “the old” (the traditional), and can only later employ the “individual new.” The individual “essence of the man,” as Eliot calls it, is a feature by which we tend to measure the quality of the author’s work; i.e. we are obsessed by how much he or she differs from the old authors, forgetting that this isolated “individualism” cannot exist on its own at all.¹⁸⁴ There is the wider “historical sense” which includes the past *and* the present, and is everything but a blind copying of works of our predecessors. This kind of timeless tradition means “belonging” and it shows how closely and inseparably a new and seemingly independent “in-itself” work can be closely bound with the old. “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists,” Eliot says.¹⁸⁵ “We shouldn’t look to this from just the new work, or just the classics. The best actors and directors have always worked in both,”¹⁸⁶ adds Mark Ravenhill. That is, I think, where *The Mighty Boosh* approximately stands and what it is trying to achieve.

However, even with its position thus anchored among the other works of art, *The Boosh* is far from being stable or unchanging. Its growth most certainly did not end with the TV series, just as the appealing facts and fascinating secrets it yet has to give did not end with our analysis. It developed, as we know, from a simple cabaret-like performance, from individual, brief and rather occasional sketches performed for a small audience, which were only later brought together and improved, and continued maturing over the years until it acquired its unique form now unmistakably recognizable by the spectators. Along with the

¹⁸² Or call it the collective consciousness, or a “dream of the masses of the people,” see note 110.

¹⁸³ T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921) 42-54.

¹⁸⁴ Eliot, 43.

¹⁸⁵ Eliot, 44.

¹⁸⁶ Ravenhill (for a complete reference see note 6).

familiar narrative pattern (showing its prime in “The Fountain of Youth”) a kind of original mythology was coined as well, an idiolect was invented: it became a pop-culture style even, a sort of art that went far beyond a simple theatrical performance. It included strong visual and musical features too.

The phenomenon keeps developing still; on 26 January 2012 Noel Fielding came with a sketch television series called *Noel Fielding’s Luxurious Comedy*. It is described on the Channel 4 website as “a psychedelic character based comedy show half filmed and half animated.”¹⁸⁷ The show clearly includes many features known from *The Mighty Boosh* and it continues in *The Boosh* tradition. However, it takes it to yet another level. Julian Barratt is no longer a part of this new project and it shows rather noticeably. While Fielding generally stood for the vivid but simultaneously crazy and chaotic in *The Boosh* series, Barratt had always been the little boring but nevertheless amiably controversial aspect that kept it all safely anchored to the ground, giving it some sense of order. With him gone this certainty and order disappears entirely. As a consequence, I am ready to say that the new show suffers from his absence rather than otherwise.

Where there was a playful absurd comedy easy to follow now remains only pure madness; the predominant aspects of “phantasmagoria” are simply too much. The story is gone: it has been shattered and dissolved into a number of crazy sketches without any real tangible mutual interconnection. The magic and irresistible humour provided by the interaction of the central duo is naturally no longer there. Suddenly Noel Fielding (and his Vince Noir-like persona) does not have anyone with drastically opposing qualities to define himself against and he becomes much less distinct as a character. The humour is still there, and it is a good one too, but occasionally it feels somewhat constrained. This markedly shows how important the two actors/characters together were: Fielding’s “Chaos” and Barratt’s “Cosmos,” the perfect whole. They both profited from the mutual co-operation and made the most of it, even though these differences probably eventually led to their separation as well.

What will be the next step in the ongoing development (if there is any at all) and whether Julian Barratt and Noel Fielding ever get back together to take up roles that brought them international fame and recognition is a question we cannot answer here, neither was our intention to trace their further artistic work and development in this thesis. Our task is done:

¹⁸⁷ “Noel Fielding’s Luxury Comedy,” *Channel 4*, Channel 4 @ 2012, 16 June 2012, <<http://www.channel4.com/programmes/noel-fieldings-luxury-comedy/4od>>.

we have ventured to inquire into a project in our country relatively unknown, and there in front of the reader and potential spectator lays the phenomenon of *The Mighty Boosh* in its prime, its main aspects uncovered and explained but a lot of magic still waiting to be discovered by the individual mind. As has been said, *The Boosh*'s individual narratives always end in ridicule and *degradation*. However, the degradation is that of Mikhail Bakhtin: it "digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect but also a regenerative one."¹⁸⁸ The hero gets over his failure, the actor wipes sweat off his brow, the spectator finishes laughing asking for more, and it goes on: the eternal heroic quest of comedy.

¹⁸⁸ Bakhtin, 21.

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