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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/esa/4421>
ISSN: 2650-2623

Publisher

Société de stylistique anglaise

Electronic reference

Lynn Blin, « “Killing Ourselves Laughing” — Why We Laugh Anyway, Even When We Know We Shouldn’t », *Études de stylistique anglaise* [Online], 15 | 2019, Online since 27 November 2019, connection on 09 December 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/esa/4421>

This text was automatically generated on 9 December 2019.

Études de Stylistique Anglaise

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- 1 In his book on the ethics of laughter, *The Pleasure of Fools* (2005), Jure Gantar introduces his discussion with the polemic created by Wayne Booth in his 1992 book, *The Company We Keep: The Ethics of Fiction*. Freshly awakened to the injustice endured by women throughout the ages, Booth modified some of his literary critiques to take this new feminist stance into account. Though Booth had previously appreciated Rabelais’ ribald humor, he took to task both Bakhtin (2009) who in *Rabelais and His World* had analyzed Rabelais’ work as “the epitome of the carnival spirit”, and Rabelais himself, whose constant ridiculing of women could not help but be offensive, and thus deemed that there was something wrong with the quality of the laughter (Gantar 2005, 3-4). Booth went on to cast a critical eye on Jane Austen because of her “complicity with male authority”, and he further reviewed the inconsiderate fashion with which he and his colleagues at the University of Chicago in the 1960s ignored the plight of an African-American professor, Paul Moses, who refused to teach *Huckleberry Finn* because of what he considered an offensive portrayal of Jim.
- 2 In regards to the question of ethical laughter, the interrogations posited above are still pertinent today. Is it enough of an argument to say, that since I do not consider myself to be racist, sexist, fascist, perverted, I am therefore permitted to laugh at humor that makes fun of minorities and women? And even if I do, in fact laugh, am I ethically permitted to do so?
- 3 The complexity of this question will be examined through the study of the 2001-2003 British series *The Office*, and that of the American humorist Louis Székely, better known by his stage name, Louis C.K. I will begin by a review of the content and characteristics of my two examples to illustrate what is offensive about them and how the four main theories of humor outlined below can explain in part why they are funny. I will conclude with a closer examination of the specific mechanics, techniques, and talent

that have gone into what I consider examples of masterpieces of comedy. Not only are they invitations to uproarious laughter, they also solicit deeper interrogations as to what, in fact, is offensive in their performances and the place of the Other in performances that are as complex as they are funny. I will take as my definition of ethical the broad concept of that which is morally correct or acceptable.

I. Two Different Genres, Four Exceptional Humorists, Various Shades of Humiliation

- 4 In the 2001-2003 BBC series *The Office*, creators and directors Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant tell the story of the Werner and Hogg paper company in Slough, which is under the inept general management of the insufferable David Brent, the racist, homophobic, sexist company manager who thinks himself foremost as an entertainer, played by Gervais himself. Using a format conceived of for the documentary, filmed with a single camera to which the actors respond, *The Office* brought to the sitcom category an altogether new genre, called the mockumentary. The "talking heads" sequences, where the characters confide to the camera directly, as well as the lingering of the camera on the characters' bored faces and slouching bodies enabled them to share their reactions with the viewers, thus making the camera not only a participant in the show but also one of the main characters. The sequences are often vulgar but since vulgarity has been one of the ingredients of comedy since the Greeks, the exceptionality does not come from that. What is exceptional is the way in which humiliation humor, or cringe humor (Schwind 2015, 49-70) is negotiated, often leaving the TV viewers squirming in their seats. Another exceptional fact is, that though cultural criteria are generally those which decide the success of humor, *The Office* was sold to 80 countries, making it, at the time, the BBC's best-selling show ever. It was adapted, not only in the US, where it ran for 9 seasons, but also in Germany, France, Quebec, Chile, Israel, the Czech republic, Sweden, Finland, and India.¹
- 5 Though each country adapted the series to working conditions in their own particular culture, humiliation humor was conserved in each. This in itself proves that there was another level of narrative in the series that cut through the cultural boundaries that are often deterrents to laughter.
- 6 From 2011 to 2017, when he was accused of and admitted to sexual harassment, Louis C.K. was considered by the intellectual media to be the funniest comedian in the U.S. His stand-up routines include comparatively gentle stories about how boring parenthood can be, to very explicit demonstrations of sexual harassment, apologies to racism, and even little anecdotes about the neighborhood pedophile. Despite a vulgarity that is often over the top for even the hardest amongst us, Emily Nussbaum writing in the *New Yorker* cast Louis CK as a model (Nussbaum Nov. 9 2012):

C.K.'s standup is not merely confessional, it's also focused on sex and ethics, as well as on questions of decency, fatherhood, masculinity, and, at times, feminism. That's why, for many of C.K.'s fans, he's been more than a creative figure. He's been a role model, too, specifically because he tells the kinds of stories that are taboo and shameful — his brand was telling the stories you weren't supposed to tell.
- 7 In both *The Office* and Louis C.K. humiliation is a key ingredient — humiliation of others in the case of David Brent, and the humiliation of both self and others in the often shameful attitudes of Louis C.K.'s stand-up persona — a persona who is half-way

between a loser and an Everyman thus serving as a mirror to many unavowed shortcomings in each of us. But this dark side of humor is one of the basic givens of laughter in the first place – the language of humor theory is the obvious place to start.

II. Danger, Scorn, Violation, Conflict, Disparagement – the Language of Humor Theory

- 8 A rapid examination of the language used in traditional humor theory underlines the inherently aggressive nature of humor. For Thomas Hobbes, to whom we are indebted for what was to become the Superiority Theory, laughter was described as “those grimaces” resulting from a feeling of “sudden glory” and a tactic used by those with little power (Hobbes 1651, 27). For Bergson, this idea of superiority is explained by what he terms “a momentary anesthesia of the heart”, resulting in a deficit of empathy which explains why we laugh at the misfortune of someone who stumbles. Laughter, for Bergson had a social function because it corrects inelastic behavior (Bergson in Billig 2005, 156):

Laughter punishes certain failings somewhat as a disease punishes certain forms of excess, striking down some who are innocent, and sparing some who are guilty, aiming at a general result and incapable of dealing separately with each individual case. (Bergson 2008, 170)

- 9 The Incongruity Theory, which was initiated in 1776 by James Beattie, is much gentler:
- Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the particular manner in which the mind takes notice of them. (Beattie in Ritchie 2014, 47)
- 10 But as Ritchie explains, “the incongruity of [a] joke’s ending refers to how much the punchline violates the recipients’ expectations (Ritchie 92). If someone does not like having their expectations violated, they will not be able to enter into the spirit of joking.
- 11 Freud’s Comic Relief Theory explains the enjoyment we have at the laughter of naughty jokes as corresponding to the human need to momentarily evade the demands that society places on us. Laughter is inevitable, but since everyone’s laughter capital is not the same, nor is the need to escape society’s constraints, the urge to laugh will depend on personality, upbringing, culture.
- 12 John Morreall’s Play-Mode Theory takes an even more relaxed view of humor. For Morreall, laughter has nothing to do with emotions like hatred and fear which are instigators of action, where we either “fight or take flight”. Because amusement is idle, as it does not originate in beliefs that cause us to act, we experience a cognitive shift and switch from a serious to an unserious perspective – a “play-mode”, which allows us to regard things as unthreatening (Morreall 2009, 36-37; 50-54). But, this idea of a play-mode requires nuancing. As Robert Mankoff, cartoon editor of the *New Yorker* from 1997-2017, explains in a TED talk: “all humor contains a little frisson of danger – something that might happen wrong. And yet we like it when there’s protection. That’s what a zoo is” (Mankoff 2013). Mankoff also gives the analogy of a roller coaster. We like the danger, but we need the security that we’re not going to be thrown off.
- 13 As Martin (2017, 14) points out, there has been a definite evolution from the aggressive antipathy of the superiority theory through to the neutrality of the incongruity theory,

to the more relaxed positive sympathetic view of laughter in the comic relief theory, and finally, to the idea that sympathy is a necessary condition for laughter. However, even if the notion of sympathy comes into play, the starting point is inevitably someone else's misfortune. Even something as seemingly innocuous as a game of peek-a-boo with a baby only works because of the brief instant of panic, when Mama's face disappears behind her hands, creating tension, and subsequently evolves into mirth when her face magically appears again.

- 14 This rapid summary of humor theory is purposefully succinct because, although we can broadly apply them to my examples and to sitcom and stand-up in general, they were more specifically elaborated to be applied to jokes. As to whether the ethical dimension of humor is relevant to these theories, we might tentatively conclude that terms like "victim", "violation", "evading the demands of society", and "amusement being idle" all convey negative notions which invite ethical exploration. Even the term "punchline" can be perceived as a form of aggression. Obviously, if humor is targeted against a marginalized and vulnerable group by someone outside that group, ethical concerns are moved to centre stage. But for comedy and laughter, as opposed to jokes, because of the active participation of the recipient in not only receiving the humor but in their responsibility in creating it as well, other criteria must be applied and that is what we shall now examine.

III. Cue Theory, Comic Impetus, Humorous Intent

- 15 Though jokes appear in both sitcom and stand-up, with their presence planned and paced throughout, the interactional dimension for these two genres is greater than it is for jokes alone in that the audience is a textual element in both genres² (Mills 2009, 101-103). The audience's role as co-utterer is much greater than for jokes. Tsakona & Chovanec (2018, 4) explain:

It seems that interactional roles such as "humor producer" or "humorist" and "humor recipient /addressee" are not so easy to distinguish from one another and it may be difficult to assign those roles to specific interactants in real settings. After all, assigning the recipient "roles" arbitrarily to particular interlocutors may underestimate their active contribution to the co-construction of humor and its success.

- 16 The role of the audience involves applying other theoretical tools better adapted to the specificities of the genres, and examining how they respect and disrupt these theories.
- 17 For the sitcom genre, Mills (2009, 94) introduces a specific theory which he terms "cue theory". Cue theory argues that the way in which jokes work in sitcom is less important than the ways the genre signals its intention to be funny, creating a space in which audiences are permitted to laugh. Mills speaks of the notion of "comic impetus", wherein the sitcom must validate the humorous intention of the texts: "[I]t must not only signal that it is intended to be funny, but offer a discourse within which finding such acts funny is acceptable" (Mills 93).
- 18 Brock (2016, 59) further explains that humorous intent/comic impetus necessarily replace Grice's conversation maxims via a Neo-Gricean Humor Maxim, which translates simply as "Regard the ongoing communication as funny". But, he reminds us that sitcom is a negotiation between all the producers of comedy, which include everyone involved in the production – i.e. the scriptwriters, directors, actors, camera crew,

make-up artist, what Brock terms "the collective sender", and of course, the actors chosen to play the fictional characters (Brock 59)³.

19 The humorous intent will be signaled to the prospective audience via trailers, network announcements, the laugh track, and of course the live audience itself for standup shows and will in turn trigger the comic impetus. This, however, does not guarantee that the audience will find it funny and it does not explain why we laugh even when we may be personally shocked by the propos in the routine.

20 Though Grice's conversational maxims are to be exchanged for the Neo-Gricean humor maxim, the receiver must understand the cues which signal the text's comic intention (Mills 2009, 93). As Brock specifies, the audience must also be experienced with patterns of humorous discourse. This implies being at ease with the tension that necessarily belongs to the build-up of the jokes that go into a comic routine:

Pragmatic principles, maxims, heuristics – Gricean or otherwise – develop their communicative effects in time and in unique interpretation processes for each recipient, because abstract maxims necessarily interact with much more concrete knowledge patterns, such as national and group culture, as well as individual dispositions and general knowledge. So, if humor is expected and the Humor Maxim is activated, then any recipient sufficiently experienced with patterns of humorous discourse will know that patience is needed in order for the set-up or exposition of the humorous. (Brock 61)

21 In order for the recipient to be a co-producer of the comedy, she has to be at least metaphorically sharing the stage or the set with the performers. Tsakona & Chovenac (2018, 1-6) propose five different factors that are to be considered in the shaping of the form and functions of humor and underscore the specificities of comedy:

1. **The genre:** Tsakona and Chovenac explain that genres such as stand-up and the sitcom are cultural artifacts and as such they allow us to interpret and act within the specific contexts of stand-up and sitcom. We learn to use discourse in specific ways, but this does not mean that the genre (i.e. in the Bakhtinian sense of the word – "a relatively stable thematic compositional, and stylistic type of utterance") cannot evolve (Bakhtin 1986, 64 in Tsakona & Chovenac 2019, 6). As has been noted, both of my examples have taken their respective comic genres and pushed them further: the mockumentary form of *The Office* replacing the laugh track by the specific use of the camera; and in Louis C.K. the taking of vulgarity on stage to new heights, where, because of the complexity of his persona, the rendering of it, if not acceptable, at all times is coherent in its invitation to us to understand this behavior⁴.
2. **The reasons why the humor is employed:** Comedy is a shared moment. When we are part of an audience, we form a community of laughers bringing to the surface not only the cultural codes mentioned above, but also shared values and ideas. We become part of an in-group. But the creation of an in-group means exclusion of others who are not part of the group. Here, the ethical question looms large. "We laugh", Gantar surmises, "to separate ourselves from the Other" (Gantar 2005, 153). The way the other is laughed at determines the composition of both the in-group and the out-group and is primordial in the question of ethical laughter. When African-American comics such as Richard Pryor and Chris Rock use racial stereotypes in their routines, they are, in Kristeva's terms, seeing the Other as themselves (Kristeva 1991). With the sexist, racist, homophobic slurs David Brent proffers, he is obviously not seeing the Other as himself. This is not funny but David Brent making a fool of himself is. As I will demonstrate, the role the camera plays makes it clear that our laughter is on the side of Brent's victims. Louis C.K.'s Other was a little bit all of us in moments when the moral ideal we have of ourselves does not always correspond to the reality. Additionally, it was always clear that C.K.'s on-stage persona was a bit of a loser, and the victims clearly the Other.

3. **Sociocultural parameters of humor:** Other than the obvious cultural dimension in regards to what we find funny, or in addition to it, different sociocultural communities have different norms concerning the contexts in which humor is expected. Mills for example explains that when he showed a group of American students *The Office*, though they understood that it was not a documentary, they did not identify it as a sitcom (Mills 112). Also, the American version of *The Office*, though constantly playing with political incorrectness never plunges to the abysmal level of vulgarity that its British counterpart does.
 4. **Framing devices:** No text, explains Yus, (2003, 1335) is inherently funny, and humorous intention must be identified for the inferential work necessary for the processing of humor to be activated. These markers include laughter, smiling, prosodic and intonational features and patterns (i.e. pause, pitch, speed, body movement, facial expressions). Seewoester Cain (2018, 127-154) has analyzed the dimension of teasing the audience present in stand-up acts. For teasing to be accepted, there must be a relationship of mutual trust. The comedian can also use self-deprecation, thus reducing stage authority, or engage the audience with colloquial expressions, or even heckling – all in the effort to get the audience not only on their side, but to have them metaphorically present on stage with them.
 5. **Audience reaction:** Because the producers of humor in the elaboration of their script, will necessarily include their audience, the pauses for the expected (or at least hoped for) laughter, body gestures, the use of smiles, raised eyebrows that suggest doubt etc. are the invisible parts of the text. The humorist’s ear and his/her talent to be constantly attuned to their reaction, is one of the most vital parts of a successful comedy. And when this laughter does not occur the talented comedian will know how to negotiate the situation. Voice modulation, body movement, facial expressions and listening are intricate devices that go into the comedy. These framing devices combine with a preoccupation with audience reaction and help explain how 1) *The Office* produces laughter in spite of failed humor; 2) at least partial adhesion to Louis C.K. despite a routine that increases in vulgarity as it progresses.
- 22 Though the Neo-Gricean Humor Maxim enables us on the one hand to do away with a strict adherence to Grice’s maxims, if the audience does not have the impression of being in conversation with the humorist, and/or with the show, chances are, the show will not work. In the next part I will develop how this conversation with the audience emerges.

IV. Failed Humor in *The Office*

- 23 As explained above, viewers come to the sitcom with a culture and knowledge of the genre, as well as other laughter triggers – a laugh track, trailers, the network announcing the programme and the genre etc. But *The Office* multiplied the challenge to success by doing away with all that. Employing what Schwind (2015) termed “embarrassment humor” the documentary camera lingers not only on David Brent’s faux pas, but on language tics as well as body tics. These lingering camera shots highlight not only embarrassment, but also the slow moving, slouching bodies of the employees of the Wernham and Hogg paper company as they doggedly make their way through the endless workdays, where the only escape is playing infantile practical jokes – usually on the hapless Gareth, who, along with David Brent is incapable of reading the mental states of others. Evan Puschak explains the embarrassment humor in *The Office* through Mind Theory – i.e. our ability to attribute a mental state like desire, intention or feelings to someone else. David Brent’s problem is his incapacity of

reading mental states. Puschak states: "In David Brent we have a character so invested in himself that he's blocked his own access to others' feelings. What Brent can't see is that a weak theory of mind always makes for a weak performance"⁵.

24 Indeed, *The Office* starts at the abysmal, and works its way downwards. Yet despite all this, it manages to overcome cultural barriers that are one of the main deterrents to laughter and went on to become one of the BBC's best-selling shows ever.

25 Humiliation in *The Office* is characterized by two criteria (Schwind 2015):

26 (a) an on-screen character is either actively humiliated (by others or him, or herself), or

27 (b) the situation is presented as humiliating, degrading or unmasking through the mediation of the mockumentary discourse. This gives rise to failed humor for Brent's employees of which Schwind goes on to detail the instances in 14 episodes – two seasons of six episodes each, and two Christmas specials:

- I. Hubris/self-indulgence (38 occurrences)
- II. Humiliation (27 occurrences)
- III. Humor and jokes falling flat/general awkwardness (23 occurrences)
- IV. Sexual innuendo/inappropriate behavior (20 occurrences)
- V. Unbalanced power relations (18 occurrences)
- VI. Taboo subjects
- VII. Non Humor (7 occurrences)⁶

28 The sequence I have chosen, "Tim's Birthday Gift" (a huge inflatable penis), can be found in the link below. It is a prime example of what Brock might term a "border of humor", because the most accurate description of the type of laughter any audience could possibly muster is cringe laughter.

29 The framing devices chosen exploit six of the seven elements mentioned above. The sexual innuendo aspect (IV) is present throughout the first part and David's self-indulgence, (I) is present from beginning to end. I have placed in roman numerals the other devices found. The numbers in brackets correspond to the time on the video. The variations of emotion are expressed through nuanced changes in facial expression (a lifted eyebrow, a furrowed brow, a nervous biting of the lower lip), accompanied by modifications in posture all wordlessly expressing the added tension introduced into any space inhabited by David Brent.

Tim's Birthday Present (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBqL_tBCrDQ last accessed November 15, 2019>)

Subtle variations of facial expressions⁷:

- Tim and Dawn, alternately express degrees of bewilderment, perplexity, incredulity, disdain and even sadness (0.54; 1.17; 1.42; 1.43; 1.58; 2.00-2.01) and tension. (III)
- frozen smiles expressing no mirth (1.42; 1.58) (III + V)
- the body gestures – tics: i.e. Tim, playing with the collar of his shirt and the rubbing of the chin to express discomfort (0.58); Tim and Dawn folding their arms in a gesture that can be interpreted as both defiant and protective (0.51; 1.17-1.18; 1.37; 1.45; 1.58-2.00) (III+V)

Inane laughter, exaggerated and lengthy exposure of offensive gift, silence

- David's inane laughter accompanying his improvised "show". This can be compared to the way C.K. uses laughter and movement (see below). (V)
- Tactile manipulation of the toy first by Tim, then David using it as spring, then putting it on his head to become an "experminator", and next "Tim the Tanker" bouncing it on the floor

to become a “naked mini-me Austin Powers”, and finally on his nose to become Ringo Starr. (III+IV)

- Gareth touching the toy here and there, giving a few tentative tries at getting a hold of it, and when he finally does, has nothing to say (IV)
- Sheer physical space on the screen taken up by the inflatable penis: manipulation of it by Tim who doesn’t really know what to do with it (0.28- 0.44), alternately taken up by David who uses it as a prop for his tasteless comedy routine 0.48- 0.53); pointing it directly to the camera, thus the viewers (0.54 -1.04). (IV)
- In this 2.48-minute sequence, there are 30 seconds of silence which, combined with David’s inane laughter at his own jokes, is used to amplify David’s ineptness and, like the camera, is an ally to the viewer, clearly indicating that to cringe laugh is the only possibility.

Zoom shots amplifying the human tics associated with discomfort, bewilderment or David’s ineptness at reading his audience’s discomfort

- The surreptitious glances of Tim to the camera, notable at 2.01 when he flashes a look of incredulity to the camera.
- The zoom-in followed 2 seconds later by an even closer zoom in on Dawn, amplifying attention to her discomfort; idem for David at his final joke about “falling into a barrel of tits and coming up sucking your thumb”. There is a close-up and then a further zoom. These zooms on the expressions on David’s eyes, focus on a certain degree of disarray, as well as his brand-mark self-indulgence. (IV)

30 The talking-head sequence (2.09-2.47), when David in a hopeless attempt to explain the ethical limits of what he laughs at, turns this 38-second sequence into a politically incorrect, not to say offensive, revelation of David’s zero degree of a code of ethics. Of course, the mention of “the handicapped” is not offensive in itself. It is the way Brent negotiates his relationship to the Other that is. We can further take note of how the facial expressions – the blinking of the eyes, the head movement from the interviewer to the camera, the close-up unto David’s teeth – which accentuate a less than engaging smile. (VI)

Varying tones of voice

- David’s change of tone when he attempts to show his authority to Gareth, when the latter grabs the toy and has nothing to say, and when he derides him for stealing one of his lines. The only authority David tries to assert is that of an entertainer having the sole franchise on humor. David’s constant failed humor, and persistent self-indulgence usurp any authority he might have. (V)
- The banter session (i.e. when Dawn asks if he wouldn’t have preferred the money and Tim answers that he “would have only spent it in a huge inflatable cock”) marks the complicity between Tim and Dawn, as well as taking the edge off the offensive dimension of the gift-giving.

V. Why We Laugh Anyway: Foucault’s Docile Bodies or Laughter as Commiseration and Recognition

31 This failed humor nonetheless gives rise to laughter, and it does so through enabling the viewer to recognize a situation of (albeit exaggerated) professional ineptness as well as establishing the viewers’ complicity with Brent’s victims. The Wernham-Hogg working environment comes under close scrutiny and the actors are cast in the role of Michel Foucault’s docile bodies.

- 32 According to Foucault (1980, 139 in Pylpa 1998, 23): “The state brings all aspects of life in various institutions under scrutiny. Political order is maintained through the production of docile bodies”. It is these docile bodies that are the supporting cast of *The Office*. The institution has produced these bodies with slouching shoulders, slumped backs, and shuffling feet. Tara Barbazon explains : “The mock documentary allows the programme to engage with the postmodern, postcolonial, postindustrial nature of the contemporary workplace through lingering shots of office technology and characters performing mundane work activities” (in Mills 2009, 105). The grotesque rendering of the working world obviously touched a nerve for millions of viewers around the world and explains the laughter, which is that of comiseration and recognition. It is a laughter that leads to reflection.

V.1. Failed Humor, Flouting and Meta-humor

- 33 Brock explains that when the text does not produce mirth within known text patterns of human communication, the receiver decides whether it is failed humor or, on the contrary, whether it is a case of the producer flouting it. The receiver will then take into account various kinds of information including contextual cues. This, in turn, allows the recipient the possibility of arriving at a meta-humorous reading, particularly if other factors confirm this: “If the Humor Maxim appears to be unfulfilled, then this may be a case of flouting, and the Gricean implicature model allows for a particularized implicature in the direction of meta-humor” (Grice 1975, 56 in Brock 59). That is, a form of humor that is meant to comment on humor. The comic impetus/comic intent is thus understood but delayed until the viewer understands how the new genre works. David Brent’s failed humor triggers the embarrassed reactions of the employees, filmed in documentary detail. Of course, the viewer must be able suspend all moral judgment. Schwind explains that laughter is assured if the viewer
- can suspend their pre-existing moral judgements [...] temporarily put their feelings of empathy on hold, and willingly take pleasure in the acts of humiliation on the screen, but also enjoy the craftsmanship. (Schwind 66)
- 34 Additionally, the sheer amplification of the antics which trigger embarrassment suggests elements of the grotesque, which have always been a staple of humor. We shall now turn to the two standups and examine the framing devices for the humor therein.

VI. Louis CK – A Finely Orchestrated Script

- 35 Though the talent of the comedian may give the impression of improvised conversation, he/she is, in fact, working with a very specific script. Slightly elaborating on Jefferson’s (2004) transcription conventions, here below, I have expanded the C.K. script to include stage directions for the body. If you turn off the sound, you’ll discover that just the gestures, i.e. the open left hand, the hand to the heart, the head movement, the whole gamut of smiles, all invite the audience not only to laugh, but converse with the comedian. If you leave on just the sound, you can hear what he does with the pitch, the rhythm, and the intonation. Bodies are anything but docile here. They are seductive tools, luring the public onto the stage, and this, for certain members of the audience, at a certain point in the show may become unsatisfactory.

- 36 The framing devices for stand-up are obviously not the same as those for *The Office*, as the presence of a live audience is vital to the humorist. The success of any stand-up's show is greatly determined by the participation of the audience, who is not a passive receptor of the show but a veritable co-utterer. Below are the transcription conventions used to better explain how C.K.'s routine about how hard parenthood is "because it's boring" (below) is delivered.

Transcription conventions (Jefferson, 2004, and Ikeda & Bysouth 2013 in Seewoester Cain 151-153)⁸

(0.5) numbers in brackets indicate pause length
 (.) micro pause
 : elongation of previous vowel or consonant sound
 . falling or final intonation⁹
 ? rising intonation
 'continuing' intonation; **talk** stress/emphasis;
 ↑ ↓ sharp falling/rising intonation;
 CAPS markedly loud talk
 00 markedly soft talk
 < > speech which is slower than the surrounding talk
 > < speech which is faster than the surrounding talk
 (()) transcriptionist's environmental descriptions
 (#) creaky voice; (**) tremulous voice; <VOX> caricatured voice
 .h inhalation heard (each .h approximately 0.15 sec)
Laughter (on the part of the comedian)
 h hearable exhalation, possibly laughter; (h)within-talk plosive exhalation
 hahlaughter with voicing; ££ hearable smiling voice or suppressed laughter
Salient Gestures (Ikeda & Bysouth 2013)
 ----->

(I have shown intensity of audience laughter (**LAUGHTER, LAUGHTER, LAUGHTER + LAUGHTER**))

Louis CK Monopoly with My Kids (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOjl-4S6TUA>)

I ----->play ↑ Monopoly with my kids. (.)That's really fun. -----> My nine-year old (.) ↓ she can ↑ totally do Monopoly. -----> The ↑ six year old actually ↑ totally ↑ gets (.) how the game works but she's not -----> ((hand towards heart)) em emotionally developed enough (.5) (**laughter**) to -----> £ £ handle her (.5) -----> ↓ inevitable 00 loss (.5) (**Laughter**) in ↓ every game of ((more gleeful smile)) £ £ Monopoly (**Laughter**) (.5) ↑ be(h) ↑ cause)) a Monopoly loss is ((smile that sets off a warning)) ↓ dark. ((**Laughter+**)) ((facial expression for "dark" but with a complicit smile to audience.)) <VOX> It's ↓ he:avy. (**Laughter+**)) (((smile which becomes gleeful and a little sadistic because it implies mirth at the expense of his little girl)) (3.0) ((grimace starting out as slight sneer turning into a smile)) ----->It's n(h)ot like whe(hah)n you lose at, you know, -----> Candyland.-----> <VOX> 00 # "Oh you got ----->stuck in the fudgy-thing baby! -----> <VOX> **# Oh well you're in the gummy twirlyo's! ((**laughter**))

-----> <VOX> ----->***# You didn't get to win". ((laughter)) ((the child's voice he uses is high-pitched (head tilted up a lot to the side during the imitation of the little girl voice))
 (3.0) But when she loses at Monopoly, I gotta look at her little face and go, (head bends down to speak to imaginary little girl)) **<VOX> "Ok. sweetheart so here's what's going to happen now. °Ok? ** ↓ All: your property (.) ((Laughter)) ** ↓ everything you have, (.) ((Laughter))
 **all your ↓ railroads ((Laughter)) **your ↓ houses (((Laughter)) (5) **all your ↑ money
 ((Laughter)) that's) -----> ((hand to heart again)) mine now (2.0 ((LAUGHTER+))
 ((kind father voice explaining hard lesson to child accompanied by empathetic facial expressions and hand moving to the heart))>You gotta give it all to me. <(LAUGHTER))
 ----->Give it to me. (laughter)----->That's right. (2.0) (laughter)
 And ((sadistic smile))>no, ↑ no, < you, can't ↑ play any ↑ more, ↑ see? because (.5) ----->even though you're giving me ↑ all of that, it doesn't even touch how much you owe me. ((laughter))
 ----->Doesn't even touch it baby. ((large gleeful smile on face)) ((LAUGHTER)) (2.0)))
 ----->You're going down hard, it's really bad. ((LAUGHTER)) ((large almost sly smile on face)) (3.0) All >you've been working for < ↓ ((eyes close briefly)) all day, ((hand towards chest)) I'm going to take it now, (2.0) and I'm going to use it (.) to destroy: your sister". (Laughter+) (1.0) I mean I'm going to ru:in her! ((head turns stage right)) (Laughter +) SHIT (.) it's just MAYHEM on this board for her now. ((completely satisfied wide smile)) (4.0)

VII. Conversational Strategies – Getting the Public on Stage with the Comedian

- 37 Since humorists work with a written script, written strategies are obviously present in their routine, but conversational strategies are also at work and are vital for the participation of the audience on stage¹⁰. According to Ochs (1979 in McCabe & Peterson 1991, 189), in spontaneous oral production, as opposed to planned written texts, there is a tendency to show a dependence on morphosyntactic structures learned early in life as a basic oral strategy. Here is an outline of how these strategies are incorporated into the script and thus the routine to give the impression of spontaneous speech.

VII.1 Dependence on morphosyntactic structures learned early in life in Louis C.K.¹¹

• **Reliance on intermediate context to express relationships between propositions including referent deletion:**

- 38 The use of body language, smiles (notably all the nuances of smiles underlined in the transcriptions above, the expressions of doubt, impishness and expressions of real glee, sadistic glee, complicity.

• **Avoidance of relative clauses:**

39 Conversational syntax is structurally less complex than a written one. This is not to be likened to a "dumbing down" of the script, but rather rendering it more intimate, at times almost confessional. The stand-up is metaphorically down there with the audience, or alternatively the audience is on stage with the comedian. There are no relative clauses.

• **Preponderance of repair mechanisms:**

40 A repair mechanism is used when the speaker verbally stumbles or wants to clarify a propos. This can be interpreted as a purposeful means of adopting negative face in order to be non-threatening to the audience: "It's not like when you lose at **you know** Candyland"; "**I mean** I'm going to destroy her".

• **Use of parallelisms in phonemes (sound touch offs); lexical items (lexical touch offs); similar syntactic constructs:**

41 These devices are examples of literally playing with language thus establishing a play mode, which as Morreall explained in his theory explains why an audience does not feel threatened. Louis C.K.: "dark"; "heavy"; little girl voice; repetition of "all"; plus MAYHEM said louder.

• **Tendency to begin narrative in the past and switch to the present:**

42 Louis C.K. uses the present tense in the excerpt I have chosen.

• **Tendency to use deictic modifiers (here, there, this, that,):**

43 Louis C.K. (only proforms, no modifiers)

• **Verb voice active rather than passive; direct quotes:**

44 Script entirely in the active voice, Louis C.K.'s whole speech to his daughter is in direct speech.

45 These last three structures — the switching to the present, the use of deictics and proforms as well as the active voice establish the script in the here and now of the speaker of which the audience becomes an active participant.

VII.2 Body Movement, Smiles and Acoustic Effects

46 Because the prerogative for a comedian is to win the confidence of their audience, the script must strike a certain balance between the outrageous and the normal. For the audience to be able to laugh at the truly shocking parts, a sense of identity with the comedian must be established. It is for this reason I have chosen a less outrageous bit from Louis C.K.'s routine. It is thanks to the relative normalcy of parts of his routine and techniques described above that a complicity is solidly created between the humorist and their audience. Taking a closer look at the acoustic effects and body movement we note that C.K.'s deft use of smiles and voice correspond to the findings of Apple et al. (1979, 715-720) and Guyer et al. (2019) concerning the communicative effects of smiles and voice modulation. Dressed in an ordinary black t-shirt and jeans, C.K.'s 'just-a-normal-guy' character includes sweeping arm gestures and hip movements enabling his body to accompany the eye-movement from stage-left to stage-right and stage-center to ascertain contact with his audience¹². Affect is expressed by and through the body (Drahota et al. 2008, 270), and this eye contact is enhanced by his sweeping arm gestures (16 times in this short sequence) and by deftly

incorporating a gesture of his right hand coming to his heart 4 times, a gesture that more specifically heightens a relationship of affect with his audience.

47 These gestures are accompanied by 15 nuances of smiles. As Drahota et al. explain, "Smiles can express a large variety of meaning from embarrassment to amusement, triumph, bitterness and even anger" (279). The laughter signaled in the script can be explained by C.K.'s take on a normal father/child board game. The evolution of a normal Duchenne smile at the onset, into one more firmly inviting active complicity, steadily evolving to a grimace to gradually become a downright gleeful laugh at 0min25 on the recording: "because a Monopoly loss is dark. It's heavy", concludes the first part of the sequence. From then down to 1min29 on the recording, C.K.'s smile feigns innocence to evolve at 1min.50 : "Ok Sweetheart... You gotta give it all to me") into four different shades of seriousness (compassion, empathy, paternal authority, reassurance)¹³. The gleeful smile resumes at 1min.54, where C.K. is filmed in profile so we do not directly see the smile, but we experience what is signaled in the transcription as a smiling voice or suppressed laughter. The sequence concludes with a 5-second smile that expresses nuances of triumph, amusement, and complete satisfaction. These smiles all come across as spontaneous and are only a sampling of the different communication possibilities of smiling. Drahota et al. explain:

There are however, many more subtle types of smiles. Ekman (2001) claims that his Facial Action System (FACS) can distinguish more than 50 different smiles and at least some of them have been shown to involve different facial acts such as suppression and control. (Drahota et al. 279)

48 The transcriptions indicate four occasions of caricatured voice where a tremulous voice, a markedly soft voice, a creaky voice, a high-pitched child's combine to create a medley of voices on stage. They are joined by five occasions of a markedly falling intonation accumulated near the end, when C.K. is raking in all his riches from his young daughter. Additionally, the text is given a rhythm and a cadence thanks to the pauses, the stress placed on unexpected words, a speech flow that alternates between quickly moving clauses and slower ones.

49 The high-pitched voice employed to represent a child is according to Apple et al. (715) "less truthful, less emphatic, less 'potent' (smaller, thinner, faster) and more nervous". Gruyer et al. further explain that their studies provide:

evidence that increased speech rate and falling intonation [...] as well as lowered pitch produced enhanced speaker confidence. In the case of speech rate and vocal intonation these characteristics combined in an additive fashion to influence perceptions of confidence. (Gruyer et al 402)

50 We thus have the beginning of the explanation of how C.K. exerts his authority as a comedian and builds complicity with his audience. Once this complicity is firmly in place, the humorist can take their public to much darker places because a relationship of trust that has been created¹⁴. This is why that even at his smuttiest, most tasteless moments Louis C.K.'s fans remained faithful and because his stage persona in naming, describing, and performing the darker aspects of humankind allowed us to become better acquainted with it, tame it, and go forward.

51 This brings me to the more ambivalent aspect of being on stage with the humorist.

52 There may be a point, however, when, in the complicity established by the comedian, we are, as the saying goes, too close for comfort. That is, instead of the comfort offered by the release produced by the laughter, there is just the tension.

53 In 2015, Jonathan Malaisac writing¹⁵ in the Jesuit publication *America* described Louis C.K.'s persona as a tragi-comic loser, someone who "saw the moral order of things but cannot will himself to act on it". When in the midst of the #metoo movement C.K. admitted to asking permission of young women to masturbate in front of them – an action that was part of many of Louis' routines, he lost all comic authority. The persona and the person turned out to be one and the same and Louis C.K. himself became the (sick) joke. Until that time, his fans' acceptance of even the more unethical routines verging on the downright racist and the sexually disturbing were accepted because his persona was the tragicomic loser, thus the victims in his routines were clearly the winners. He was in short an avatar of David Brent – but a truly entertaining David Brent, where, as long as his character was a persona, audience members with a well-stocked laughter risk capital could continue laughing because the loser and the victim were firmly identified. It was when it was revealed that the persona and the person were the same, the cringe-worthy but funny humor, became humiliating, unfunny and unethical.

VIII. Conclusion

54 I will conclude with two vying opinions on questionable laughter. For Billig (2005) it is at all times inexcusable and unethical. A racist joke is a racist joke and that is all there is to it. Billig is uneasy with what he terms:

ideological positioning, responsible for the widespread positive evaluation of humor in today's popular and academic psychology which have [both] neglected to deal with ridicule. In the rush to sentimentalize the supposed goodness of humor, such theories overlook, even repress negatives". (Billig 2005, 5)

55 In contrast, Gantar offers, what is in my opinion, a more positive view, but which Billig would most certainly task as sentimentalizing:

As soon as laughter is reduced to its ethical dimension, efforts to judge it become both counterproductive and profoundly unfair. [...] Ethical criticism ends up either advocating the censoring of laughter in the interest of morality, or exhausting itself in a hopeless search for what does not exist: innocent laughter. By refusing to accept that the ability to distinguish between a joke and an insult is already the first step towards a critical validation of laughter, ethical criticism condemns itself to humorless limbo. When we laugh we should not care about offending. And when we investigate laughter, we should forget about ethics. (Gantar 158)

56 As this paper has attempted to show, we laugh because though it is a talent given, the comedian has, more importantly, crafted and honed this talent through trial and error and hours and hours of rehearsal, taking into full account at all times audience reaction. We laugh when we shouldn't because of our laughter risk capital produced by our own cultural background, our personality and even our mood at the given moment enable us to do so. Additionally, for both *The Office* and Louis C.K., the laughter capital required implies the possibility of identifying not only with the situation at hand but also with the capacity to laugh at the situation and oneself. More precisely, laughter is based on both the unsaid and recognition. On personal appreciation of humor based on implicit information Dolitsky explains:

when humor is based on the 'unsaid', listeners or readers will not find a story funny unless they can identify that which was not said, but was a necessary underlying element, or that which was said, but should not have been, [...] [H]umorists make use of their audience's unstated expectation. Only those members of the audience

that correspond to this model will find the story humorous. (Dolitsky,1983, 41 in Yus 2003, 1316)

- 57 The expectation for Gervais and Merchant is that the audience recognize a variation on Foucault's institutions and the devastating effects they can inflict on their victims. The expectation for Louis C.K is the recognition that as human beings we constantly struggle between an ideal we hold for ourselves and that we strive to attain, but which we will inevitably fail at because we are simply human. If this unsaid is not identified, and the empathy all three have with the victims not recognized, the audience will fail to find humor.
- 58 Laughers should not deny the fact that those having undergone personal trauma, or those who have suffered because they are part of a marginalized minority may be in need of a much wider, more solid security net before they can gain access to the multi-level construction and craft that goes into the humor of Gervais and Merchant and Louis C.K. Even the fact that audiences are laughing at what for the victims was a source of suffering and permanent trauma is undoubtedly for them a source of greater pain. To recognize the hidden sinner in each of us we have to first gain hindsight on pain suffered or inflicted. If this hindsight is intact, the quality of the humor and that of the laughter will also be intact.

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NOTES

1. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Office_\(British_TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Office_(British_TV_series))<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-43113390>.
2. By textual presence in the sitcom Mills is alluding more specifically to the laugh track. The laugh track is not necessarily canned laughter. In a successful sitcom it is the recorded laughter of a live audience and thus its aural embodiment on the screen, thereby enticing laughter in the home audience. *The Office* did away with the laugh track but, as we will see, instead used the camera to entice audience reaction, reaction that includes laughter but of a more complex nature.
3. For the stand-up comedian, the starting point is always a live show, but, now thanks to comedy specials and the Internet, many of the public discover these shows on a screen. The laugh track is

replaced by the live audience present at the show. This means that the same multiple producer of the comedy must be taken into account.

4. The case in point is the neighborhood pedophile routine in which Louis C.K. compares the pedophile's irresistible urge to his own urge for Mounds chocolate bars. Many viewers expressed outrage. But as a psychologist confirmed to me, C.K.'s reflection was accurate. A pedophile's irresistible urge is not unlike that for chocolate – so strong that he is willing to risk everything to satisfy the urge.

5. <http://www.openculture.com/2019/03/the-tinge-inducing-humor-of-the-office-explained-with-philosophical-theories-of-mind.html>.

6. By non-humor, Schwind is referring to moments when the series veers to the downright tragic, i.e. David pretending to fire Dawn, David begging for his job back and crying and when he is fired, i.e. those parts of the script that belong in a drama and trigger a cringing that is almost painful to the viewer.

7. Thanks to the zooming-in of the camera lingering on the facial expressions of each of the characters, the viewer has ample time to register even the slightest raising of an eyebrow, the frowning of the brow, the quizzical wide-eyed expression of surprise.

8. Jefferson's transcription conventions pertain only to voice modulation. Seewoester Cain includes Ikeda & Bysouth's transcription of Dubois' transcription for body gesture which is also included. I add more details on the gestures. I have also modified the tremulous voice and the markedly soft voice signs in compliance with printing constraint.

9. To distinguish between the punctuation of a period (12 pt.) and that of the falling or final intonation, the latter is 14 pt.

10. Stand-up comedians (unless performing improvisation) always work with a script, and a director. Though the art of the stand-up necessarily requires being able to work with the audience, thus a certain amount of spontaneity, the script is the comedian's rod and staff.

11. The expression "learned early in life" alludes basically to a less complexified syntax, and modes of expression other than language. It does not infer that the feelings and emotions which are expressed are childlike. It does explain a certain guileless mode of expression that makes for an easier contact with the public.

12. The eye contact is an illusion as stage lights blind the comedian, but at no time is the audience conscious of this.

13. The gleeful smile, technically termed the "Duchenne" smile – the true enjoyment smile – is characterized by "the skin above and below the eye is pulled in towards the eyeball, and this makes for the following changes in appearance: The cheeks are pulled up; the skin below the eye may bag or bulge; the lower eyelid moves up; crow's feet wrinkles may appear at the outer corner of the eye socket; the skin above the eye is pulled slightly down and inwards; and the eyebrows move slightly. A non-enjoyment smile, in contrast, features the same movement of the lip corners as the enjoyment smile but does not involve the changes due to the muscles around the eyes". (<https://www.paulekman.com/blog/fake-smile-or-genuine-smile/>).

14. The dark world of pedophilia, homophobia, sexual harassment and racism is not funny and never will be. But the success of Louis C.K. shows that comic routines and jokes about them can be. Before Louis C.K. admitted to sexual harassment, thus revealing that his stage persona was no longer a persona but C.K. himself, there was never any doubt that he was on the side of the victims.

15. <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2015/08/06/louis-ck-new-st-augustine>, accessed May 20 2019.

ABSTRACTS

Humans, as William Hazlitt (1819, 11) explains, "are the only animal that laughs and weeps; for [we are] the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be". In the case of unethical laughter – when we laugh even though the propos is better suited to anger or shock – we know that things are not what they should be. But spontaneous, tension-relieving laughter is such an exceptional experience, the pleasure afforded usually seems worth the risk. This dimension of risk is in fact central to the whole realm of laughter and humor. As Robert Mankoff, who was cartoon editor for the *New Yorker*, explains: humor is like a roller coaster ride. For it to work, there must be the element of danger that the roller coaster ride ensures, but at the same time the riders must be guaranteed that they won't fall off (Mankoff 2013). Without the assurance of this safety net, we are out of our zone of comfort, and we don't laugh.

This paper proposes to study two different aspects of humor: failed humor and the guilty laugh – laughing against our better judgment but laughing anyway.

I will examine why and how this is possible through the study of the 2001-2003 British sitcom, *The Office*, and the American stand-up comedian, Louis C.K. Working notably with recent theory specifically geared to sitcoms and standup, my paper will demonstrate the specificity of comedy and the role of the audience in the production of humor. I will show how voice, gesture and silence combine to provide at least some sort of safety net. This does not mean that there is nothing wrong in the quality of our laughter, but it helps to explain how we make exceptions to our own personal code of ethics.

Comme l'explique William Hazlitt, l'humain « est le seul animal qui rit et qui pleure ; puisqu'il est le seul animal qui est conscient de la différence entre les choses telles qu'elles sont et telles qu'elles devraient être. Dans le cas du rire déloyal – quand on rit même quand les propos devraient susciter plus naturellement la colère ou l'indignation – nous savons que les choses ne sont pas telles qu'elles devraient être. Toutefois, le rire spontané, celui qui nous soulage de toute tension est un rire si exceptionnel, que le plus souvent le plaisir accordé vaut la peine de courir le risque. La dimension du risque est, somme toute, centrale à tout questionnement autour du rire et de l'humour. Comme l'explique Robert Mankoff, rédacteur en chef des dessins humoristiques dans le *New Yorker*, l'humour est comme des montagnes russes. Pour y trouver du plaisir, il faut à la fois l'élément de danger que les montagnes russes procurent, mais aussi la certitude qu'il n'y aura pas d'accident (Mankoff 2013). Sans l'assurance d'un filet de sécurité, nous nous retrouvons trop éloignés de notre zone de sécurité.

Cet article propose une étude de deux aspects différents de l'humour : l'humour raté, et le rire coupable – le rire qui défie le bon sens, mais où nous rions quand même.

J'examinerai le pourquoi et le comment de ce rire déloyal à travers l'étude du sitcom Britannique *The Office* (2001-2003), et l'humoriste américain, Louis C.K. Je fais appel, notamment aux théories spécifiquement adaptées aux sitcoms et à la comédie standup afin de montrer ce qui est spécifique aux deux genres ainsi que le rôle du public dans la production de l'humour. Je démontre comment la voix, les gestes et le silence se combinent pour assurer, au moins en partie, le filet de sécurité. Ceci ne sous-entend pas que le rire procuré n'est pas sans reproche, mais il nous aide à comprendre pourquoi et comment nous dérogeons à notre propre code éthique.

INDEX

Keywords: ethics, laughter, recognition, humor, voice, gesture

Mots-clés: éthique, rire, reconnaissance, humour, voix, gestes

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Lynn Blin travaille sur le lien entre la grammaire et le style. Ses travaux approfondis sur les œuvres d'Alice Munro ont été suivis plus récemment par des études sur celles de Lydia Davis. Son intérêt pour l'humour et le rire date de son enfance. Avant de devenir universitaire, elle était comédienne professionnelle, se spécialisant dans les rôles comiques. Elle travaille actuellement sur l'humour de Lydia Davis.