

“In related news, Putin just ordered troops into Hogwarts”:
intertextuality in the jokes of network late-night talk show monologues

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1. Introduction

Late-night talk shows are at the very core of American popular culture. They are shows enjoyed by millions of viewers daily. Even though their viewership has declined since the 1980s and 1990s, the genre is very much alive with over 20 different shows on broadcast, cable and streaming services. The biggest shows of this genre are the ones broadcast over the three big networks: Late Night with Seth Meyers (NBC), The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon (NBC), The Late Show with Stephen Colbert (CBS) and Jimmy Kimmel Live! (ABC). While originally a very American genre, the late-night talk shows have become popular all over the world and all the major American shows release the episodes as clips online on YouTube.

Late-night talk shows follow a very recognizable formula. The show starts with a monologue from the host of the show, bringing the viewers and the studio audience up to speed with current events. This is a staple of the late night, and all the shows have one in one form or another. The monologue consists of brief introductions to news stories with jokes related to those stories. Jokes mostly follow a format where the host introduces a news story in one or two sentences and tells a joke. The hosts do showcase their personalities and sometimes change little things. For example, Seth Meyers, opts to do it from behind a desk instead of standing directly in front of the audience. However, the core idea of the monologue is very recognizable, and no one deviates from it.; The host sets up the joke by introducing a current event or a news story, then completes the joke with a punchline.

Texts are not in isolation. The postmodern idea of texts that borrow from other texts beyond the limits of time, genre or other conventional barriers is essential to post-World War II art (Barry, 2019, p. 84). Texts have always had a context as they are always presented in a time and at a place and they are surrounded by other texts. Postmodern art, however, plays with the context by taking styles, imagery, or language appropriate for one context and applying it to another. The audience of the most popular media has also grown, as some movies and TV shows today reach audiences wider than before the turn of the millenium. This allows references to those hugely popular media to be understood by more people than ever, making intertextuality a much more effective tool nowadays than it used to be when each town had their own media. Thus, intertextual referencing is common in popular culture, as the common pool of references has grown.

A network late-night show monologue aims to be appealing to as many people as possible in order to profit from the advertising. This means that the jokes need to be understood by a wider audience while remaining funny enough to please the audience. Intertextual references can be an effective tool in joke-making as long as the audience keeps up with them. The goal of this study is to inspect the

importance and the effect that an intertextual reference has on the jokes in the most popular late-night shows in the USA.

Humor comes in many different forms. It is always subjective, which things make people laugh. Thus, studying humor objectively is difficult. In the interest of proper research, the focus here is on jokes that have a clear structure; they contain a setup and a punchline. Setup is the part of the joke that builds the circumstances and tells the story before the punchline. The punchline then is the part of the joke that is supposed to evoke a humored reaction, typically laughter.

One theory to explain the semantics of humor is General Verbal Theory of Humor (GVTH) by Raskin and Attardo (Raskin, 1985, Attardo, 1994, p.197). The theory describes verbal humor as contrast of the expected, unfunny outcomes of the setup and an another, unexpected, outcome of the setup. This contrast is called 'script opposition' and it is important in defining what makes the joke work as a joke. The main goal of this study is to examine the anatomy of jokes with intertextuality: how the intertextual reference is set up before the punchline, how the reference is used to create script opposition, how important the reference is for the joke to work, and how visuals are used to enhance, complement, or replace the verbal reference.

2. Theory

Thus study aims to examine intertextuality's role in humor, so theories of both intertextuality and verbal are necessary. The theories intertwine, as the idea is to show how the understanding of the intertextual reference affects the joke by dissecting the part of the joke that makes it funny (the script opposition) and seek the interaction of the reference and the script opposition and then explain how the intertextuality is either aleatory or obligatory. The theories are both lenses to look at the joke from two different perspectives and this study aims to find the overlap of those two.

2.1. Intertextuality

The invention of the concept of intertextuality has been credited to Kristeva (1986) and their famous quote "any text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (p.37). While they do not yet define the term 'intertextuality', that is basically the idea. The term 'intertextuality' can mean any elements of a text that the reader interprets as similar to another text. It is never the question of whether there is intertextuality in a text, but in what ways it affects the reading of a text. The broadest interpretation of intertextuality would comprise all the language itself, as humans learn languages through listening, repeating, and following social responses, but the scientific definition of intertextuality, however, focuses on what connections the reader observes in the text.

Different theorists define intertextuality in different ways, and both the terms and their definitions vary. Even the basic terms for the texts that have intertextuality and the texts that are referred to vary between theorists. Kristeva (Allen, 2011 p. 49) talks about *genotexts* that are the texts that supply *phenotexts* with elements. This is a very scientific viewpoint and emphasises the nature of all text as inherently intertextual. Barthes uses the terms *doxa* and *para-doxa* about similar phenomena. Where Kristeva's idea is that genotexts give the ideas and the form to phenotexts, Barthes's theory focuses on ideas and how new ideas are always either pro- or antithetical to the ideas that were. Doxa is a shapeless mass of ideas the humankind has in a collective subconscious whereas genotext is all the writings as seeds that are sowed in a writer's head where then the new text takes the form and ideas that have been before, but never in that order. They both borrow from the idea of psychoanalysis and the common subconscious affecting all works, but they mean a bit different things. Doxa/para-doxa is more abstract and is used more about ideas whereas genotext/phenotext is more literally about texts. Saussure's theory of intertextuality rises from semiotics, which deals with *signs*. Signs are linguistic and non-linguistic parts of communication, and they are divided into *signifiers* and the *signified*.

Signifiers are the elements that people and texts use to contain meanings and the meanings are the signified. For example, “a dog” is a signifier in text that refers to the signified that is some sort of an individual of *canis lupus*. In intertextuality’s context, this means intertextual references are signifiers within one text whose signified lie in other texts. For example, if any text talks about a father, a son and a holy ghost, they can technically refer to any father, any son and any holy ghost, but most often the signifier “father, son and the holy ghost” signifies the three deities of the Christian faith, be it a direct reference to Christian literature or a conscious use of the same signifier to signify the Christian deities. Using ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’ is the most straightforward way to discuss the direct relation between a text and the other text or texts it references when the references are direct, single utterances that have a clear meaning in the other text. However, Genotext/doxa and fenotext/para-doxa are more suitable to use when the intertextuality is not as direct.

Still & Worton (1990, p.12) explain that reading is always a process where the reader makes the text available to them. This means that the reader always relates the text to their own experiences and gives it meaning during reading. Thus, intertextuality is not fully realized until the reader notices it and makes the connection between the text and genotext. This also means that the reader can make connections between the text and other texts even when it is not intended by the writer. Riffaterre (Still & Worton 1990 p.26) differentiates between aleatory and obligatory intertextuality. Aleatory intertextuality is intertextuality that enhances a text, giving it new meaning, complementing its interpretation, or offering alternative interpretation. It is not necessary for understanding the text, or at least the text is coherent or understandable even if the reader is not familiar with the text being referenced. Obligatory intertextuality means that it is imperative to know the intertext to understand the text. This division has been criticized (Allen, 2011 p 121-126) mostly on Riffaterre’s emphasis on what the writer means, because that is not how intertextuality is seen nowadays. However, the idea of there being intertextuality that is more essential to understanding the text and other intertextuality that is less so is still relevant and the main point of this study is to examine how important the understanding of the references is for the purposes of the monologue jokes.

2.2. Verbal humor and script opposition

GVTH evolved from the The Semantic Script Theory of Humor (Raskin, 1985; Attardo, 1994, p.197). The theory was originally conceived for textual or verbal humor, but the same principles can be applied to at least some other forms of humor, like in this study, visual humor. The theory assumes that the human mind and language work through scripts. It is a term borrowed from psychology. In short, scripts (also known as frames) are logical conclusions that are formed in people’s minds with

given assumptions. They help people to stay on top of the situation and expect what is coming. Humor, then, works through these scripts. A prerequisite of a joke is that the text before the punchline enables two or more different scripts. The setup builds overlap between the different scripts. For example, a classic short verbal joke:

Example (a):

“What is good about Switzerland? The flag is a big plus”.

It has the setup “What is good about Switzerland” that enables the answer to be many different things. For example, they could be related to such positive things about Switzerland as nature, people, or culture. These often come up when talking a country’s positives. The answer starts with “the flag” that might still be some hardened vexillologist’s answer, but the part “is a big plus” is finally the punchline, excluding all the other scripts, where the answer makes more sense outside of the context of a joke, and reinforcing the less obvious script. In order for the joke to be funny, the script the punchline follows through needs to have what is called ‘script opposition’ (Attardo, 2001 p.1) against the other scripts that would make more sense outside of the context of a joke. It means that the scripts deviate from one another hugely to create an element of surprise when the unexpected script is brought to the reader. There are a lot of dimensions of script opposition. In example (a), the script opposition comes from the difference between the abstract concept of positive features of a country contrasting with the very literal meaning of the flag being a big plus sign, signifying positivity in the sense that it is understood in mathematics; the most literal and logical of all sciences. Script opposition can be created in many ways. The main opposition in this example is **abstract/literal**. Some other kinds of script opposition is depicted in the following examples:

Example (b)

I went to the doctor’s recently
He said: “Don’t eat anything fatty”
I said: “What, like bacon and burgers?”
He said, “No, fatty. Don’t eat anything.”

In the example (b), the first script is something like “Visit to a medical doctor” where it is expected that the doctor behaves in a serious manner. This script is supported in the setup with a perfectly normal thing that a doctor would say to a patient in a situation like this. However, the setup is knowingly formulated so that the word ‘fatty’ can either be the adjective modifying the noun “anything” or it can be a separate noun, that is the object of the sentence. The first interpretation supports the script “professional doctor” but the second supports another script. This script is “an obscene doctor”, a situation where the doctor would behave in a manner so obscene, it is not generally expected from a medical professional. That is a big contrast to the other script, so the opposition would be **professional/obscene**.

Example (c):

“A Hispanic man goes to a vending machine and puts in 40 cents. The machine displays "DIME" on the screen. The man gets close to the machine and whispers, "Yo quiero Pepsi"

Example (c)’s setup relies on the identical orthography of the English word ‘dime’, meaning “a 10-cent coin” and the Spanish word ‘dime’, meaning “tell me”. The first script builds on the understanding that the word “dime” means ten cents and the vending machine requires a “dime” from the Hispanic man to get the drink. However, the second script enabled by the setup is the one the punchline resolves into, when the man says “Yo quiero Pepsi” (“I want Pepsi” in Spanish). The opposition between the two scripts thus is the language in which the word “dime” is to be understood i.e. **English/Spanish**.

Example (d):

“A man goes in for a physical exam and the doctor tells him "You need to stop smoking." "What? Why??" the man exclaims. The doctor responds "because I'm trying to examine you".”

The phrase in example (d) “You need to stop smoking” would in the setting of a normal doctor’s appointment refer to something a doctor would say to a patient as general advice, but the joke then follows a script where the patient is smoking right there in the office. It would be a very unusual situation and different from any ordinary visit to the doctor’s. Thus, the script opposition is **general/situational**.

2.3. Intertextuality and script opposition

The aim of this study is to link the two theories together by pointing out ways intertextuality affects script opposition in the context of late-night talk show monologues. Because script opposition is defined by both the scripts that the setup activates and the unexpected script that the punchline chooses, intertextuality can affect script opposition in two ways. For one, it can be used in the setup of the joke to establish the context for the joke; to both restrict and establish possible scripts. In another way, intertextuality can create script opposition in the punchline of the joke by unveiling an unexpected script.

An example of the former:

Example (e):

“Why was Cinderella so bad at Soccer?”

- She kept running away from the ball.”

An example of the latter:

Example (f):

“It has rained so much lately, I saw a guy loading two of each animal onto a wooden ship”

In the example (e), the setup establishes that this text happens in the universe of Cinderella the fairy tale. It also establishes an extra assumption that Cinderella the character wants to play soccer. It activates scripts related to the commonly known parts of the fairytale, like the fallen shoe, pumpkin carriages and, most importantly for this joke, the point in the story where Cinderella has to run away from the ball, meaning a big dance ball. The setup also sets up scripts related to soccer, like goalkeepers, midfielders and ball as in the object that the players try to control and score goals with. When the reference is a part of the setup, the punchline needs to create script opposition within the universe where the story of Cinderella is already given. Thus, the script opposition comes from the two meanings of the word “ball” and its connection to two scripts “Cinderella ran away from the Prince’s ball in the fairy tale” and “Cinderella runs away from the ball on a soccer field”. The joke would not make sense without the reference to Cinderella in the setup, as the script opposition **story universe/sports** requires the knowledge of the story universe.

Example (f) sets up with no more information than that there has been a lot of rain lately. Presumably, everything in the setup is happening in the same context as the teller of the joke is. The reference in the punchline, however, creates the script opposition **reality/Bible story** by surprisingly introducing

the listener that the universe this happens in is actually the same time and place as the biblical story of Noah, who in the story loaded two of every animal in to an ark after God decided to flood the earth with 40 days and nights of rain.

Like defined in the GVTH, script opposition is essential to any joke. Intertextuality can be a tool of creating script opposition in both the setup of the joke and the punchline. These two facts combined define the relevance of the intertextual references and whether they are obligatory or aleatory. This is the theoretical framework for this thesis and it is used to examine the ways in which intertextual references are used in the jokes of late-night talk show monologues.

3. Data, methodology and research ethics

The data for this thesis has been collected from the four most watched network late night talk shows: Late Night with Seth Meyers (airing on NBC), The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon (airing on NBC), The Late Show with Stephen Colbert (airing on CBS) and Jimmy Kimmel Live! (airing on ABC). The data comes from the monologues from shows between March and May of 2022, gathered from the shows' respective YouTube channels that house unedited clips from the shows.

Three months' worth of material comprised altogether about 30-40 monologues per show, ranging between 3 and 12 minutes. 15 jokes per show that best represent the variety of intertextuality in the monologues were chosen and transcribed. The host's words were written down as accurately as possible and notes were made on any visual elements, strong audience reactions, or gestures by the host. After that, the transcriptions were analysed according to what makes the references aleatory or obligatory. This consisted of answering these questions:

- How is the joke set up?
- Is the intertextual reference necessary for the script opposition?
 - How specific or unspecific do the references have to be in order for the script opposition to work?
- Is the reference explained within or after the joke?
 - How visual intertextuality is used in the jokes?

After this, the jokes were categorized based of the ways the intertextual reference and script opposition was visible in them and how the visual elements were used.

Regarding research ethics, this study does not have much to consider. There was no need to handle anyone's personal information and all the material has been broadcast and is publicly available. The biggest concern is with verifiability, as the material used is hosted on YouTube and can be taken down at any moment. This was a problem during the study, as, for example, NBC has a tendency to make Late Night videos private after about a year from airing. However, they could be recovered through Internet Archive's Wayback Machine and so if anything needs to be verified afterwards from the source, it is still available at least as long as Internet Archive functions.

4. Analysis

The analysis consists of the findings made in regards of how verbal and visual intertextual references affect script opposition, thus making said intertextuality either aleatory or obligatory. Deep analysis of every single joke in the data would be profound, but ultimately repetitive and beyond the scale of a bachelor's thesis, so all the material is not presented here. Joke categories were made on the basis of the following questions:

1. Does the setup contain an intertextual reference?
 - a) Setup does not contain signifiers.
 - b) Setup contains a signifier but the punchline refers to another text.
 - c) Setup contains a reference that the punchline uses in script opposition.
2. What is the significance of the reference in creating script opposition?
 - a) The signified is not exactly important.
 - b) The signified needs to be a certain text.
 - c) The signified is not directly to the signified, but an idea.
3. What is the significance of visual reference to the script opposition?
 - a) The visual reference is the punchline.
 - b) The visual reference is in the punchline, but as a secondary element.
 - c) The visual reference is an element of the setup.

In each example, the reference is opened as far as possible, subjectively. The reference's significance to the script opposition mostly defines its being either aleatory or obligatory, as a joke requires script opposition to work.

4.1. Setup of the joke

The setup is the part of the monologue joke that establishes all the background information necessary for the listener to understand the joke. Oftentimes, if something is not mentioned in the setup, it is either not important for the joke or it is intentionally left out to create script opposition later. Intertextual references in the monologue joke setups usually enable possible scripts by establishing the context of the genotext. The punchline, then, can rely on the viewer understanding that the host is talking in the context of the reference in the setup. If the reference only appears in the punchline, it is used to create script opposition through the sudden introduction of a context that differs from other possible scripts.

4.1.1 Setup has no reference, but the punchline has

Most often, the setup of the joke is not directly related to the intertextual reference of the punchline. In these cases, the setup needs to establish common elements of the scripts that comprise the joke while leaving the reference as the surprising element of the punchline. The host tells the news story and sets up a logical conclusion, but then redirects the story by introducing an intertextual reference. This could be a quotation from another text or a concept introduced in the text. Consider, for example, the following joke by Jimmy Fallon:

Extract 1: Tonight show with Jimmy Fallon; 2022 March 9; B5

Fallon: “President Biden made a major announcement that he’s banning imports on Russian oil, dealing a huge blow to Russia’s economy. Yeah, this is devastating. Now, their biggest export is bad guys in John Wick movies. ‘You’ll never get away with this, John Wick.’ (in a Russian accent).”

The setup does not refer to anything else than the news story at hand. It has its context in the ongoing war that Russia is fighting against Ukraine and the subsequent economic effects the war has had on Russia. Everything that comes before and including “their biggest export is” is written so that it could be followed by a script like “natural gas” or “grains” or something else that Russia exports in real life. However, there is an alternative script that is activated in the punchline “Russia mostly exports villains for the action movie series John Wick”. John Wick is a series of movies where an American agent, played by the generally favoured actor Keanu Reeves. The movies are overplayed crude stories where the Americans are good and Russians are bad. Likening the caricatures of Russian bad guys to actual exports of Russia is a ridiculous idea, but the setup supports it. It reminds the viewers of the real-life situation in Ukraine, where Russia started a war in 2022 and the general American opinion was on Ukraine’s side. The script opposition of **realism/fantasy** escalates the idea. The joke plays with the idea that Russian economy would be so bad that they cannot produce *anything* else that would make more money and could not be produced elsewhere.

In a joke like this, the setup happens in the setting and context of the real world and has no apparent relation to the genotext until the punchline comes. The punchline then has a signifier that activates a possible script where the reality is suddenly fantastic. In these jokes, intertextuality is dewfinitely obligatory, as the viewer has to understand the signifier immediately.

4.1.2 Setup refers to a text different than the punchline

Sometimes, the setup has an intertextual reference to a text, but it is not the same text that the punchline then refers to. This is a category of jokes that is in-between jokes that have the reference

in the setup and the jokes that do not. The punchline refers to genotext that is in some way connected to the genotext in the setup. The connection is not established in the setup, but for the joke to work, the viewer needs to know the connection. For example, there is the following joke from Jimmy Fallon:

Extract 2: Tonight show with Jimmy Fallon; 2022 March 11; B6

Fallon: “Disney just gave us a first look at Tom Hanks as Gepetto in the live-action remake of Pinocchio. Here he is *a picture of Hanks in Pinocchio*. You know, Wilson the volleyball saw that puppet and was like “Who. The hell. Is he?””

Here, the setup talks about the then upcoming Pinocchio movie, starring Tom Hanks as Gepetto, the adoptive father of Pinocchio, the wooden doll who comes to life. Tom Hanks also stars in the 2000 movie *Cast Away* where his character, Chuck Noland is stranded after an accident and creates a delusional relationship with a volleyball he names Wilson.

The punchline suggests that *Cast Away* happens in the same universe as Pinocchio. The two movies have in common that they both star Tom Hanks and both Gepetto and Noland have a lifeless object that they interact with. The connection is not mentioned explicitly in the setup, but only mentioning and showing Tom Hanks’ picture is presumed to be enough setup for the joke to work. The script opposition is not as clear to define as it is with other examples. One dimension of script opposition is “Tom Hanks is an actor in the new movie Pinocchio”/“Tom Hanks is both his characters from Pinocchio and Cast Away”, a version of the **realism/fantasy** script opposition earlier. Extra opposition also comes from Wilson being able to speak and be jealous of Pinocchio, because even in the context of the movie *Cast Away*, Wilson does not speak back to Hanks’ character, but exists only as a lifeless, emotionless object. This script opposition comes from breaking the implied rules of that movie.

These types of jokes require a clear connection between the two genotexts, because the possible script of the two genotexts existing requires the common ground for the joke to work. However, the connection also needs to be unexpected so that it creates script opposition. *Cast Away* is a very well-known movie, and it is famous for the character of Wilson the volleyball. This joke would not work at all if the audience did not know Tom Hanks played the main character. However, the connection is surprising enough to create script opposition, as the idea of a character being the same in two different movies just because the actor is the same is breaking the laws of storytelling. Gepetto and Noland are characters in their own stories that are like small universes not meant to cross with each other. In other jokes, the connecting element could be a story element, a place in the two movies or

an object. The connecting element just needs to be well-known, allowing people to recognize and understand the connection.

4.1.3 Setup establishes intertextuality

Sometimes there are references to other texts already within the setup. Usually the news story is about a certain piece of media or something that has happened around said piece. In these cases the intertextual reference is already made in the setup, so it will be a part of both the expected scripts and the unexpected script. This means that the general audience needs to be familiar with the genotext well enough to catch the reference. Consider the following example:

Extract 3: Tonight show with Jimmy Fallon; 2022 May 5; B14

Fallon: “Star Wars day is interesting, because it’s the one time of year when Tinder tries to match you with your sister.” *audience uproar* “You haven’t seen the movie? Don’t blame me, blame George Lucas, I didn’t write it.”

Here, the news story is that on the day of airing, it had just been May 4th, also known as the Star Wars Day. The setup already mentions Star Wars, activating the scripts related to the Star Wars franchise. This means that the reference to Star Wars is not going to be the enough of a surprise element to create script opposition. Thus, the script opposition is created keeping in mind the context of the intertextual reference.

One side plot of the first three Star Wars movies is that the characters Luke and Leia have a mildly romantic relationship in the first movie. In the third movie, however, they are revealed to be siblings. This is a work of fiction, and incest in the real life is a big taboo. This makes for an opportunity to introduce script opposition by contrasting the incestuous relationship happening in a story to finding a partner in real life through the dating app Tinder.

These kinds of a jokes are a contrast to jokes whose script opposition comes from real life suddenly happening in a fictional universe (Extract 1). Because the audience already knows that the host is talking about Star Wars, the script opposition needs to be created elsewhere. Here, it is in the form of a reverse referential joke, as the idea is that real life is affected by things that happened in the genotextual universe. In some other case, it could be bending the reality within the context of the genotext in an another way.

4.2. The specificity of the intertextual reference

The intertextual reference can be specific in the sense that the setup supports alternative scripts, but the punchline needs to refer to a specific text in order to both make sense as a script following the setup but also create script opposition. In other cases, the reference is not as important as the kind of reference it is.

4.2.1 The reference does not need to be specific

Extract 4: Late Night with Seth Meyers; 2022 March 2; C1

Meyers: “The New York Times published a report yesterday that U.S. officials are currently debating Russian president Vladimir Putin’s grip on reality. In related news, Putin just ordered troops into Hogwarts.”

Here, the script opposition is between what is expected to be a normal level of a person “losing grip on reality” and a completely insane person not having the grasp of what is real and what is not. Usually, when talking about a person of power losing their grip on reality, they are still pretty much grounded on what is and what is not true; there is just an aspect where the person has delusions like how good they are as leaders or how weak the other leaders are. Here, the idea is to exaggerate the level of delusion Putin has by placing him in the position to order troops into an imaginary place.

Hogwarts is a place in the fictional Harry Potter book and movie series. They are about wizards and other magical beings and the whole place exists in a magical place where people who are not wizards are not allowed. It is an inaccessible place in a fictional universe, creating a two-layer wall of impossibility, a place no sane person would think exists.

This is an example of the utilization of intertextuality to create script opposition where the specificity of the signified is not important. The same script opposition could have been achieved with any reference alluding to a similar level of delusion. On the other hand, there is no need to have a reference to any other text at all. From the view of script opposition, the joke would have worked similarly had the last line been “In related news, Putin just ordered troops into Mars”. It may not have as much script opposition due to Mars being a real, if inaccessible, place. The joke would also work with other fictional places, but Hogwarts is just a good example of a well-known reference to a universe that is completely different from the world in which Putin operates. It makes for an easy way to make a working joke.

4.2.2 The joke requires a specific reference to work

Extract 5: Jimmy Kimmel Live!; 2022 March 24; C1

Kimmel: “It was day 3 of the confirmation hearings for judge Ketanji Brown Jackson. 58% of Americans support Judge Jackson’s appointment to the supreme court. It is the most support a Jackson has had since Thriller came out.”

This joke builds the whole premise on the fact that the Supreme Court appointée’s last name is Jackson. The whole first sentence is just background information before the setup “It is the most support a Jackson has had since...”. The script opposition is then the two different, similarly named, but very differently supported Jacksons. Michael Jackson, the artist behind Thriller, comes from pop culture, where there are not many formal qualifications or institutional prestige associated. A hit album only needs to be good in itself whereas a Supreme Court judge needs to first study to be a lawyer and then earn merit in the courts enough to advance to the highest-ruling court in the United States. There is also a lot of power and prestige associated with that position.

Thriller is also the best reference to Michael Jackson’s popularity, as later in his career there has been a lot of controversy around him. The word ‘support’ is important here, because while Thriller is Jackson’s most popular album, his public image also became more controversial after Thriller was published. In 1993 (Tsioulcas, 2019), the Los Angeles Police started to investigate suspected sexual relations with minors and since then, Jackson has not been as universally loved as he is nowadays. From the viewpoint of the joke, Michael Jackson being associated with the Supreme Court nominee does create even more script opposition when taking into account the reason he is controversial for.

It is thus clear that the joke would not work with any other Jackson, let alone with any other name than Jackson. The setup is unique to Ketanji Brown Jackson because she was the only supreme court nominee at the time, no other person can replace Michael Jackson in the punchline, and Thriller is the best example of Jackson’s discography for the joke.

4.2.3 The reference is to an idea, not a text

Sometimes, the thing that is referred to is not in the original text, but has grown into something that is referred to in other texts. For example:

Extract 6: Late Night with Seth Meyers; 2022 May 4; C11

Meyers: “According to a new study, a dog’s personality has nothing to do with its breed. For example, a different collie pushed Timmy into the well. (Figure 1 appears in the top left quarter of the screen)”



Figure 1. Lassie the dog and Timmy from the TV series Lassie (Image: NBC)

Here, the script opposition is between the real-world study of dogs having different personalities in spite of their breed that was made in 2021 and the commonly held belief about how a storyline in the TV series Lassie from the 1950s goes. In the show, Lassie is a collie who helps and rescues his owner, a child named Timmy, from different troubles they had at the farm, but Tim falling down a well was never one. This is an example of a reference that exists only in the collective consciousness that it can be referenced in a joke to a wider audience just by mentioning “Timmy fell down the well.” Technically, its genotext is not the series Lassie, but the collective memory of there being an episode where Timmy did fall down a well.

Since the show Lassie has aired, numerous parodies and jokes about the show have created a collective memory of there being an episode or multiple episodes where the main character Timmy has fallen down a well, even though the original series did not have such an episode. The script opposition here is similar to the one in Extract 1, as the setup has no mention of Lassie at all, but the punchline works, as the script opposition **realism/fantasy** comes from recognizing the signifier “Timmy fell down the well” and connecting it to the signifier in the collective consciousness rather than the TV show.

4.3. Visual references

Oftentimes, the shows have the top left quarter of the screen area devoted to pictures pertaining to the stories. Sometimes, the whole screen cuts to an image related to what is talked about. The pictures are used to provide context and clarify the stories the host talks about. It is not clear whether a picture is shown on the television display is the same picture visible at all to the studio audience, or if the picture is added afterwards on the basis of the audience reaction. Sometimes the image is referenced

by the host but sometimes it could be that the effect of the joke without the image is tested in front of the studio audience and the decision to enhance the joke with a visual reference is made based on that. However, analysis can only be made based on what is shown in the final product and it can be presumed the pictures belong there.

In the data, the pictures are used in a variety of ways, including introducing or enhancing intertextual references for the purposes of the joke or explaining references further. GVTH is originally meant for verbal jokes only, but applying it to visual imagery is possible, as they semantically serve the same purposes as the spoken word, but in a concise form, allowing rhythms of expression that are impossible to achieve verbally.

Visual imagery works in a couple of ways. As with verbal references, they can either be a part of the setup or they can be in the punchline. As a part of the setup, they often provide a visual of the verbal reference, complementing the reference. As such, they are not very essential in creating script opposition. In the punchline, however, the images have a more important role in either further explaining the punchline or as punchlines themselves.

4.3.1 Visual reference as the punchline

Extract 7: Late Night with Seth Meyers; 2022 April 21; C9

Meyers: “An unnamed worker has filed a labor complaint that alleges Nintendo violated their right to unionize. Well it wouldn’t be the first time they tried to sow discord by pitting tradesmen against each other (Figure 2 appears in the top-left quarter of the screen).”



Figure 2: *Nintendo characters Mario and Luigi as presented in the episode in question (Image: NBC)*

Here, the joke relies heavily on the recognition of Mario and Luigi and that they are Nintendo characters. In the games, they are two plumber brothers who usually are on the same side, but in some games, they compete in, for example, kart racing and tennis. Their rivalry is usually depicted as friendly, so there is an extra layer of script opposition in the dissonance of these two friendly characters being “pitted against each other”.

The punchline is not in the spoken part of the joke. The last sentence does not yet have any script opposition. Nintendo having pitted tradesmen against each other is a pretty expected continuation on a story about labor complaints. The image is the actual punchline, because the script opposition **realism/fantasy** comes only through it. The real world employees fighting for their workers’ rights in contrast with happy colorfulness of a Super Mario game and their wacky plumber characters having their friendly rivalries is the script opposition. Video games are escapism from the real world troubles into a colorful fantasy and Mario and Luigi never do any plumbing, let alone face the realisms of labor abuse or unionizing.

What is notable is that this kind of a joke only works when the signifier is so universally known that only the picture is enough of a reference. This is rare in any medium, but in video games especially. As colorful and cartoony characters, they are designed to be recognizable, but video games are not used as much as genotext as other media.

4.3.2 Visual reference as an elaborative element

Extract 8: Tonight show with Jimmy Fallon; 2022 April 1; B10

Fallon: “Well, listen to this, the vacuum company Dyson is coming out with its own noise-cancelling headphones that have a built-in air purifier. Take a look at this thing (screen changes to figure 3). Dyson? Looks more like Beats by Bane” (screen changes back to Fallon). It’s kinda cool, you’re just one visor away from being in Daft Punk (screen changes to figure 4).”



Figures 3 and 4: *The two images appearing back to back during the joke in Extract 3 featuring the Dyson air purifying headphones and Daft Punk (Images: NBC)*

In this joke, there are at least two punchlines. The main punchline is both the words “you’re just one visor away from being Daft Punk” and the image accompanying it. Daft punk is a pop duo famous for wearing big futuristic motorcycle helmets that conceal their identities and give form to their alternate personae. The joke is set up with a picture of the new Dyson headphones with an air filter, and the script opposition **everyday/extraordinary** comes from the item that is supposedly something people would wear out in the streets, as in the first picture, being compared to the elaborate helmets being worn by the quirky artist duo in their elaborate performances.

In addition to the main joke, there is a smaller, offhand joke “Beats by Bane”. For such a small joke, it has layers of intertextuality. “Beats by Dre” is a line of headphones manufactured by the company Beats, owned by Apple. Bane is a villain from the comic book series Batman, best known for appearing in the 2012 movie *The Dark Knight Rises*.



Figure 5. *Tom Hardy as Bane in the movie The Dark Knight Rises (2012) (Image: Fanpop)*

The picture of the model with the Dyson headphones is still on the screen, but the joke works without a visual reference to Bane as a character, as only mentioning Bane is enough to make the connection. The script opposition, again is between the real product that is in the picture and a fictional villain. Picture of the Dyson headphones is necessary for this joke, too.

This extract is a good example to compare two jokes where the joke could technically work with just the first picture. If the audience remembers what the members of Daft Punk look like, using the image of the band would not be necessary, but the picture is still consciously used. Bane however, is deemed to be a reference people will get even without the visual reminder.

4.3.3 Visual reference in the setup

Sometimes, the visual reference helps set up the punchline by providing important information, but are not imperative in creating script opposition. However, the visuality might have other purposes even if they are not important for the reference.

Extract 9: Late Night with Seth Meyers; 2022 March 11; C4

Meyers: “Nintendo (figure 6 appears in the top-left quarter of the screen) announced yesterday that it will postpone the release of a new war game in light of recent world news. And, due to gas prices, the new Mario Kart (figure 6 changes to figure 7).”



Figures 6 and 7. *The two images appearing during the joke from extract 9 featuring promotional materials for the games Advance Wars 1+2 Re: Boot Camp and Mario Kart 8, respectively (Images: Nintendo)*

Figure 6 is a marketing picture of Advance Wars 1+2 Re: Boot Camp, the game in question in the news story. There is not very much focus on which game it is, because it is not important to the story and probably not a lot of the audience are aware of the game itself. It suffices to know that the game is cartoonish in nature of the game even when it is technically about war.

The image also sets up the punchline that is about Mario Kart, an another series that is visually very light and cartoony. The script opposition **fantasy/reality** comes from the absurdity of the release of a Mario Kart game being delayed because of something that is completely irrelevant to a game about imaginary karts that do not consume gasoline. This can also be a critique of the delay of the game, as the comparison makes it clearer that the postponed game is not a realistic depiction of war. This can be interpreted as poking fun at the idea that anything war-related should not be released at the time, no matter the context.

Here, neither of the pictures are obligatory to the joke. Especially the first image is just to visualize and give a hint of the upcoming punchline. The joke would work without either picture, but they are nice visuals and reinforce the idea of video games as the colorful, out of reality media that they are generally perceived to be.

5. Conclusions

In the genre of late-night talk show monologues, jokes containing intertextual references are common and the references almost always serve a huge role in how the joke works, because the knowledge of the reference is needed to make the script opposition work. Thus, intertextuality in the monologues is almost always quite obligatory. It does not mean that a viewer needs to have seen every piece of media that the jokes refer to. Rather, it means that the viewer has to have enough knowledge and that enough usually is a culturally relevant part of the the media that is referred to.

Intertextuality is a hard thing to study because it is not always straightforward. Important signifiers such as certain quotes or stylistics can easily go unnoticed if the reader is unfamiliar with the genotext and they fit the text's context otherwise. Even during this study, it is possible that some excellent examples were not taken into account just because the reference was subtle enough to go unnoticed. However, the genre is good for examining intertextuality, because of the wide audience of these shows and because jokes have a clear communicational objective; to make the viewer laugh. The shows are seldom made to confuse the audience by a reference to something that the audience would not know, so they stick to references that have a higher likelihood of being recognized by the general audiences.

Visual intertextuality is used a lot in the monologue jokes. They are often used in the setup as a visual reminder of the reference, especially when the setup contained a reference to something the audiences may not be very familiar with. In the punchline, the images can be used in two different ways. First and most often, they emphasize the punchline by providing a visual that makes the verbal reference clearer. In these cases it cannot be said that the visual reference is aleatory, as if the viewer does not understand it, they probably will not understand the spoken part of the joke, but they serve to remind the viewer what the spoken reference is about. In some jokes, the visual reference serves as a punchline, providing the script opposition necessary for the joke. In these cases, the visual reference needs to be so recognizable, it alone suffices to remind the audience of the reference, making them definitely obligatory.

It is also an important side note that most of the genotext for the references in the monologue jokes were to movies and TV shows. This has maybe to do with the fact that the shows are written for television, so the viewers are most likely to be acquainted with these media, but also because they are the most popular media in general. Books were somewhat common, but jokes referencing to video games were seldom in general. Even video game series with wide audiences, proper narratives and loads of content to be referenced to, like the Grand Theft Auto series, Witcher games or The Legend

of Zelda are excluded. Further investigation into what kinds of texts are used as genotext could be executed to examine what parts of culture are deemed general knowledge.

Studying the processes that decide which pieces of media are deemed as known enough to be referenced in a show like this could also enlighten some of the structures behind it. A Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) could reveal that, for example, movies with a male lead or male characters in movies are much more likely to be referenced or that movies with people of color in the cast of characters of color are less likely to be referenced. Even though some late night shows boast about having a diverse team of writers, they still might reference mostly media whose target audience is white straight males in their 30s to 50s. Late Night with Seth Meyers has been studied using textual analysis (Forthun, 2022) and a CDA combined with deeper analysis of the intertextuality could yield additional information about the structures these shows reproduce.

The intertextuality is a common device in the jokes on monologues. However, most of the jokes in the monologues did not have a specific intertextual reference. A lot of the jokes that instead rely on puns, exaggerations of personalities or other ways of creating script opposition. An interesting focus of future research could be to examine the relative proportions of different ways script opposition is created and also how it has changed over time. In the past, there were a lot fewer media outlets and thus, the pool of genotext has probably been smaller, but also people in general knew a bigger portion of the small amount of the media that was available back then. This makes it an interesting subject of study to compare how much intertextuality there was in these late night shows in, for example, the 1980s when there were only three television channels, no streaming services, and the viewership of the late night shows was in the tens of millions instead of billions it is nowadays.

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