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'GOOD COMEDY' AND THE LIMITS OF HUMOUR

'Dobra komedija' i granice humora

ABSTRACT: *The article includes an overview of theoretical approaches to comedy and its social function and outlines the results of an empirical research on television audience reception of it. Even though the tolerance for specific faux pas in comedy and humour is stretched due to its communicative amusement value, they often transgress this line and initiate debates on the limits of humour. This is why this area is useful when researching and detecting norms and values in a specific socio-historical context. More specifically, the article outlines the result of an empirical research on audience reception of Da Ali G Show, a television comedy, that provocatively triggers debate on the limits of humour in contemporary society. Semi-structured interviews were carried out in two different settings: London/ United Kingdom and Zagreb/Croatia in order to assess the way the audiences discursively construct 'good comedy' and the limits of humour. The article serves as a contribution to the understanding of the complex nature of comedy and its reception in different socio-cultural settings.*

KEYWORDS: comedy, theory of humour, limits of humour, audience reception

SAŽETAK: *U članku se daje pregled teorijskih pristupa komediji i njezine društvene funkcije, te prikazuju rezultati empirijskog istraživanja recepcije televizijskih publika. Kada je riječ o komediji i humoru, tolerancija na faux pas visoka je zbog njezinog zabavnog komunikativnog karaktera, ipak, komedija često prelazi liniju društveno prihvatljivog te, posljedično, inicira rasprave o granicama humora. Upravo je zato ovo područje korisno prilikom istraživanja i otkrivanja normi i vrijednosti u specifičnim društvenim i povijesnim kontekstima. Konkretnije, članak prikazuje rezultate empirijskog istraživanja publika i recepcije DA Ali G Show-a, televizijske komedije koja je izazvala debate o granicama humora u suvremenom društvu. Polustrukturirani intervjui provedeni su u dva različita okruženja: London/Velika Britanija i Zagreb/ Hrvatska, kako bi se istražili načini na koje publike diskurzivno konstruiraju "dobru komediju" i granice humora. Članak nastoji doprinijeti razumijevanju kompleksnog karaktera komedije i njezine recepcije u različitim sociokulturnim okruženjima.*

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: komedija, teorije humora, granice humora, recepcija publika

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Introduction

In the last few decades there has been a proliferation of cultural texts such as *Brass Eye, South Park* or *Da Ali G Show*, that are initiating debate on a broad scale. They are 'alternative', 'edgy', 'provocative'. Because they provoke, they balance on the border of the acceptable and unacceptable, initiating debates about its appropriateness. The debates evolve around the old mythical division between what is good or bad: their advocates claim that such texts open up debates and raise issues that would otherwise have not been talk about and that need to be discussed, while the opponents claim that they are offensive and make fun of matters that are important and should not be subjected to scorn. This is usually followed by accusations that they are sadistic, nonsensical, infantile and distasteful, promoting hatred, violence, cruelty and anti-social behaviour. This split in the evaluation of these types of texts contributes to their controversial status, further boosted by the communicative strategies employed that make them ambiguous and further complicate the processes of meaning-making.

I am interested in a specific type of comedy that is critically engaged. In my reading it attempts to make a 'serious' statement by using a form that is commonly referred to as trivial, banal or escapist and/or funny; it lies within the field of entertainment that supposedly suspends, or in the best case diminishes, the possibility to cope with 'serious' issues. I am also interested in this area because this type of 'edgy' comedy and its broader reception also reveals the boundaries of what can and should be uttered in public, as well as what counts as civilized and tasteful in contemporary society. Due to the fact that comedy and humour is a field within which the border of acceptable and unacceptable is utmost stretched, it provides a useful field of researching and detecting the norms and values of a society.

Even if the transgression of norms and values is expected in comedy, this type balances on the border between acceptable and unacceptable utterances, which is why they raise controversy. Limits to humour are by no means anything new: certain forms of censorship and self-censorship in comedic discourses are constant. The definition of what should or should not be joked about is quite complex because it draws on a variety of social rules of conduct that range from informal pressure to formal regulation. The control of this area is, in a broader sense, twofold: censorship is regulated through legal provisions, balancing between freedom of speech and the limits of this freedom, strictly confined by hate speech. The more 'soft' form is self-censorship achieved through informal social pressure that aims to control inappropriate utterances. This is conveyed through various negative evaluations and condemnation of such expressions in public discourses. In a broad institutional framework, liberal democracies cherish the freedom of speech as one of its postulates. Questions such as: What constitutes sensitive material? Who has the right to interfere? Should the state regulate this field or not? Are forms of self-censorship desirable? These are all interconnected issues and there is this constant polarized sway between freedom of expression and its limitation.

What complicates it more is that comedy is very culture specific. Jokes about other groups (in the case of nationalities usually the 'neighbouring other') are commonplace in defining ourselves in relation to others, constructing the 'us' and 'them', and for the creation of a sense of identity. In order to understand the subtleties of humour language is important as well as recognizing the cultural codes. In addition, themes and topics of ridicule are often linked to public persons, national politics, and other issues of public concern that require 'local' information in order to be understood, let alone appreciated as a successful joke.

This article explores comedy and the limits of humour in two socio-cultural settings, Croatia and the United Kingdom. It aims at the analysis of the social reception of a television comedy that attempts to be more than just amusement, and is provocative in that it bounces against the limits of what can be uttered in contemporary society. The specific focus is put on the ambiguous text I chose to concentrate on (*Da Ali G Show*) and the discourses that encompass its emergence and which reflect its controversial status. The audience – who regularly watches and likes it – presumably holds a more relaxed approach towards the limits of humour and what can and should be uttered in public compared to its opponents. In this article I attempt to pin down the meaning-making processes within the complex framework of texts, audience, and context, in order to answer the research question: How do socially situated audiences discursively constructs what 'good comedy' is and how do they mark out the limits of humour? With this research I hope to make a contribution to the understanding of comedy as a cultural text interwoven with the social fabric of everyday life.

Comedy as genre and its social function

Comedy has, due to its extremely complex nature been under-researched. It is usually referred to as a specific genre which appears in live performances as well as in mediated forms. Comedy is one of the oldest genres that developed as a category of drama, but as different from ancient times when the demarcation of comedy was clear (Stott, 2005), today the generic boundaries are more and more fuzzy. The debate is ongoing whether comedy is even a genre or a "pre-generic 'moods' of narrative" (Frye, 2000). The difficulty arises from the fact that comedy is so diverse: it can "entail an array of defining conventions (…) and is able in addition to combine with or to parody virtually every other genre or form" (Neale and Krutnik, 1990 in Neale, 2000: 66). Generic boundaries of comedy are particularly difficult to define in television: the texts are fictional but can also include non-fictional, reality elements; they can have various modes of address – both cinematic (ignoring the viewer) or rhetorical (addressing the viewer) (Allen 1992, 116), the main characters are stable, but the secondary characters vary; some texts have a narrative that dominates, while others are structured as "comic units" (Neale 2000) thus, if they have a narrative, they are likely to use it "As only a loose excuse for holding together moments of comic business" (Horton 1991 in Neale 2000: 66). These features points to the difficulty of constructing a distinctive genre relying on structural conventions.

The position of comedy in the social hierarchy of tastes is also unclear, because it is too diverse to be unequivocally situated within it. Jonathan Gray argues that comedy is a genre "almost universally liked, for while some hate romances, sci-fi, soaps or reality television, it is rare to find someone who does not enjoy laughing" (Gray, 2006: 86). It is certainly true that most people enjoy a laugh, however comedy as a specific cultural product "packed" and served in a mediated form is – in the reproduction of taste hierarchies – often considered to be vulgar, trivial, or simply stupid. It is more associated with the rural and local, related to lowbrow cultures, which is vividly worded in Frye's crude depiction "Comedy and satire should be kept in their proper place, like the moral standards and social classes which they symbolize" (Frye, 1990: 22 in Stott 2005, 25). David Marc (1997) argues that even though comedy in various mediated forms has:

> "...Never quite achieved the status of the epic or tragedy in western culture, comedy has certainly been valued and admired by critics when 'properly' presented as drama, satiric poetry, or (in recent times) the novel. But the bald-faced telling of jokes in public-divorced from these traditional contexts – has, like most mass culture phenomena, generally been considered a vulgarity no even worthy of back-row admission to the hierarchy of forms." (Marc, 1997: 114).

The reception of comedy largely depends of shard cultural codes. Comedy is quite specific in that it is "produced from the matter of dominant cultural assumptions and commonplaces" (Stott, 2005: 8) and relies on implicit understandings of cultural codes. For this reason it is more likely to be successful if locally produced. However, the 'success' does not necessarily imply laughter or amusement (this is much more complex) but it does imply that the communication codes are familiar, and that one understand the intention of a joke. Interestingly, there are comedy texts that transgress localities and successfully migrate on a global level since they manage to speak to the experience of diverse social groups from very different cultural backgrounds, even though their reception and appropriation on a local level can be completely different from case to case.

The distinctive feature of comedy is humour, even though humour is not confined to the genre of comedy only, but goes well beyond it. In this respect, there are different approaches to laughter, as a phenomenon closely associated to comedy as a genre. However there are, according to Stott (2005) two main ideas that unifies them all: the first is that laughter is essentially human, and the second that laughter is 'a manifestation of a perfectly serious urge, process or function' (Stott, 2005: 127). Friedman et al. (2011) point at three main ways to theorize laughter: Superiority Theory, "whereby jokes assert the laugher's superiority to whomever or whatever is being laughed at"; Incongruity Theory in which laughter is initiated as a result of unexpected turns; and the Relief Theory – an approach in which humour is seen a way to „express repressed ideas and desires" (Friedman et al., 2011:123).

Different social functions are attached to comedy as a genre. The social function of comedy, and in a broader sense, of carnival – in which 'rites of reversal'

or the anti-structure (in Turner's terminology) are at stake and "the poor could mock and laugh at the rich" (Turner in Barnard and Spencer, 1996: 489–490) – is viewed in different, often contrasting ways. It is seen as conservative and simply providing pleasure and escapism from reality – more a way to preserve the *status quo* which includes the reaffirmation of persisting hierarchical positions. Purdie argues that "all forms of comedy involve a recognition of the norms whose transgression they entail, and hence a claim to social membership at the expense not only of those who are comedy's butts, but also of those who don't get its jokes" (Purdie, 1993 in Neale, 2000: 71). In this respect, comedy is seen as a mode of distraction that is more disabling than enabling in subverting the established norms in a society.

The other position is one according to which comedy and humour plays with social norms and „carries the potential for reflection on, or even criticism of, those norms" and thus provides a relatively open space for critique (Gray, Jones and Thompson, 2009: 9).„Far from being solely light, frivolous, and wholly apolitical, humour is able to deal powerfully with serious issues of power and politics (Gray, Jones and Thompson, 2009: 11). It can be linked to political resistance, since it is a way to 'know reality' (Berger, 1992), to be critical to this "reality" and to attempt to 'improve' it by the usage of humour.

For Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) laughter and comedy have a subversive potential in that they bring distant, powerful elements in society closer to the viewers, by which existing hierarchical positions are diminished. As he claims:

> "As a distanced image a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical it must be brought close. Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand, all comical creativity works in a zone of maximal proximity. Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of creative contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically." (Bakhtin 1981: 23).

A moderate path is proposed by Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik who argue that "deviations from the norm are conventional in comedy and hence that 'subversion 'is a licensed and integral aspect of comedy's social and institutional existence (Neale and Krutnik, 1990: 83–94 in Neale, 2000: 71). For this reason, the social significance of comedy should, according to them, be analyzed and attached to the local level rather than to generalize its potential significance (Neale 2000, 71). The potential subversion that comedy can provoke is context specific: it can be subversive in one particular setting while reaffirming in another, which is why it is important to analyze the sociocultural and historical context within which it appears.

Social values and the limits of humour

The context is also important in respect to how far one can 'push the envelope' and use different events or people in order to produce comic material. What can be joked about and what not is negotiated and is determined by historical changes including a broader consensus about what counts as 'fundamental values' in a society. In addition to this broader macro-level, the specific situation on the micro-level is important because of the constant process of evaluation and estimation of the intents of the one involved in a comic situation – including both the speaker/author, the target and the bystanders.

In ancient Greece, Aristotle set the foundations of what 'good' comedy is, defined in relation (and in opposition) to tragedy. As he claimed, comedy includes representing men as worse while tragedy shows them as better than in actual life (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E., Part 2), it is "...an imitation of characters of a lower type – not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive." (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E., Part 3). Good comedy is "dramatizing the ludicrous instead of writing personal satire" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E., Part 4), and in its construction "...the poet first constructs the plot on the lines of probability, and then inserts characteristic names – unlike the lampooners who write about particular individuals." (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E., Part 9). In sum, according to Aristotle, the limits to 'good' comedy is that – even if it includes exaggeration of human traits, especially the ugly/bad ones – it should not be painful or destructive, nor should it include personal derision, that aims at particular individuals.

Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering tackle the distinction between serious and comic discourse, and in particular, between humour and offensiveness (Lockyer and Pickering, 2005), because they contest the argument that the quality of being funny is encompassed with the "commonplace notion that a joke is *sui generis* and shouldn't be registered within the same schema of understanding as serious discourse" (Lockyer and Pickering, 2005: 2). According to the authors, humour is not always well taken, especially when it touches upon social identities of people or when it is offensive. The usual backfire directed towards the offended is that they are accused of lacking a sense of humour, that they are moralistic or intolerant, or that they are 'politically correct' – something the authors claim to be an "uninspected term of condemnation" (Lockyer and Pickering, 2005: 3).

The approach to the limits of humour is two-sided: one approach argues that humour should be constrained, since it can destroy self-belief and have serious repercussions on self-esteem. Thus, the "...aesthetics of comedy, even if conceived only in terms of its intrinsic formal dynamics, cannot be cleaved off in that way from moral, ethical and political considerations associated with the 'real world' (Lockyer and Pickering, 2005: 13); In this respect Michael Billig calls for a critical approach to humour (Billig, 2005a) and argue against the predominantly positive evaluation in theorizing humour. In his writing about unambiguously

violent racist humour, he claims that it cannot be viewed as "just jokes" since they have serious repercussions in the exclusion and suppression of social groups: because they are racist – they are serious (Billig, 2005: 44). The other approach clings to the argument that "jokes can be made about anything and that the right to offend is paramount" paraphrasing Rowan Atkinson (Lockyer and Pickering, 2005: 10).

Jerry Palmer claims that "...excessive contentiousness produces offence instead of humour, [and] excessive politeness produces boredom; one of the arts demanded of the comedian is the ability to tread this dividing line (Palmer, 1987: 175 in Lockyer and Pickering, 2005: 12). Nevertheless, this line is obscure: in its most radical form, the crossing of the line results in legal penalties, swinging between freedom of speech regulation and open censorship (see Foerstel, 1998), while the more 'soft' version, visible in the form of social pressure circumscribed in the idea of political correctness[2] or the dominant definition of uncivilized and distasteful (Author removed, 2012), potentially results in self-censorship.

This line with comedy has been crossed many times. Frequently this gives rise not only to discussions regarding its appropriateness, but also censorship and/or legal actions taken either by social institutions or individuals[3]. The contentious issues dealt with by comedians change and develop depending on context, time and place: in a broad sense, they tackle the underlying assumptions and norms, the deep "fundamental" dogmatic beliefs and taboos in a society, ranging from religion, race, war, and political institutions to bodily functions / dysfunctions, sex and deviant behavior. As Stephen E. Kerchner argues in his writing about the 60ies in the USA (at a time when satire was broadly used as a mode of social critique) "...No matter how offensive these satirists may have appeared to their opponents, it was not until they uttered obscenities and addressed the subjects of sex and religion[4] on stage that they encountered truly

2   The concept of political correctness is related to the necessity to respect minorities, or the 'Other' – collectivities that have – in the course of history – been suppressed in a world dominated by white, Anglo-Saxon protestant, heterosexual, males. Contemporary western societies have, to a large extent, introduced the awareness of what 'appropriate' language is, and this is reflected in the changes in power relations to a certain degree. However, this awareness is often the subject of criticism because the attempt to accomplish equality in and through language re-invokes issues of freedom of expression, which ends up in a hypocritical collective silence through which prejudices towards the 'Other' are present but not discussed and brought into the arena of public discussion. For further discussions on the concept of political correctness see: Beckwith and Bauman (1993); Cameron (2006); Choi and Murphy (1992); Epstein (1992); Fairclough (2003); Author removed (2012); Suhr and Johnson (2003).

3   *South Park* have, on several occasions, been subjected to debate and even censorship by the broadcasting channel Comedy Central: for example the episode "Trapped in the Closet" was highly debated because it made fun of scientology and the actor Tom Cruise as a follower; the episode Cartoon Wars in which the scene with an image of Mohammed was prohibited.

4   In the contemporary global order religion is perhaps the most delicate and widely debated topic. The case with the publishing of the Islamic prophet Muhammad in an editorial cartoon in the Danish daily Jyllands-Posten, in September, 2005, triggered violent protests around the globe, and a huge division in the public, and in various media institutions, related to the issue of freedom of expression and self-censorship. One stream argued that freedom of expression is paramount, and that this cartoons were thought of as a critique of Islamic

bitter and angry resistance" (Kerchner, 2006: 390). Some topics are to a certain degree permanently causing outrage, others become more accepted while new ones continuously emerge. In contemporary debates a theme that seems to be particularly disturbing is the Holocaust, a historical event that has clearly set out limits in terms of comic potential where transgression of the same is inevitably going to be seen as unacceptable. As Stott (2005) puts it "Holocaust comedies exist within such a complicated terrain of history, representation, politics and prejudice, that they become instantly suspect..." (Stott, 2005: 126). Even if themes such as religion and sex (in contemporary debates most notably pedophilia) provoke reaction and constantly balance on the border of (un)acceptable discourse, it is true that comedy in the last two decades has changed (Slide, 2007) – it carries a more overt 'ruthlessness', perhaps as a negative reflection of the normative condescension that emerged as political correctness, which implies that it is 'not OK' to make fun of the subaltern identities that seek recognition in the 60ies such as women, Blacks, homosexuals (Author removed, 2012).

Regardless of the evident changes in contemporary comedy that can be identified by comparison with previous form, style and content, every period in history has limits in terms of what can be said; a border that is constantly negotiated. As Mary Douglas claims "humour needs to be both understood *and permitted* in order to be a joke" (Douglas, 1968 in Palmer, 2005). Today – as in the past – this 'permission', or the borderlines of what is deemed to be 'appropriate' and 'disputable' are reproduced or reconstructed through various discourses that reflect social relations of identity and power. Thus the analysis of comedy and humour (as a broader concept) is valuable in that it reveals hierarchies of discourses on what it means to be civilized as opposed to uncivilized, what good taste is as opposed to bad taste, and the mores of specific cultures placed in a historical context.

Methodology

Da Ali G Show – the television comedy that was in focus of my research – was selected due to its global success amidst controversy raised by its provocative, 'uncivilized' humour. It was created by Sasha Baron Cohen, and originated from the United Kingdom, where it was first broadcast on Channel Four in 2000. Needless to say, there are numerous other shows that carry similar characteristics; however there are not many television texts that have been broadcast in Croatia

terrorism (the advocates of this position in various media institutions reprinted the cartoon to show loyalty to the Danish Jyllands-Posten). They also claimed that other religions are continuously criticized in similar manners, and that Islam should not be an exception. The other stream claimed that it was Islamofobic and offensive to Muslims, and yet another indicator of western hegemony and imperialism. This event that occurred in 2005, had an impact on political processes in 2009 when Turkey blocked the appointment of the Danish prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen to the position of NATO Secretary General, due to his disrespectfulness to Islam. (http://www.dn.se/nyheter/varlden/turkisk-tvekan-till-dansk-natochef-1.832533). A more recent tragic case that provoked similar discussions is the French satirical weekly magazine Charlie Hebdo.

which would fit into this category. In terms of genre categorization it could be grouped within the category of 'alternative comedy' (Lockyer and Pickering, 2008) or something Gray, Jones and Thompson call 'satire TV' (2009).

Da Ali G Show, uses crude and dark humour which lacks conventional values, subverts authority, uses 'bad taste', and is against moral guardians that define the 'health' of a society; in other words, it is 'politically incorrect' It is also satirical, which implies that it carries a social commentary. However, since it employs irony and parody as communicative strategies, it clearly has a capacity for ambiguity. In terms of class, it is anti-establishment, and targets the elite, but it also targets society as a whole: the mainstream, the established and accepted social norms and values that are agreed upon, often taken for granted and unquestioned. It targets social norms that form the basis of what counts as 'civilized', and one of their targets is the quest for 'politically correct' language that permeates contemporary societies.

It cannot be claimed to be political in a narrow sense of being conservative or liberal, since it rise above these splits. Instead, it tackles the underlying assumptions and norms, the deep "fundamental" dogmatic beliefs and taboos in a society, ranging from topics such as religion, race, war, political institutions, bodily functions /dysfunctions, sex, deviant behaviour...Because it provokes, it balances on the border of the acceptable and unacceptable, initiating debates about its appropriateness.

Naturally, since this is a very specific type of television comedy, it addresses a specific type of audience. The 'audience' in this particular research was conceptualized as an interpretive community, defined by Stanley Fish as groups of people whose interpretative practices are guided by shared cultural codes (Fish, 1980). As Janice Radway (1987) further elaborates on the concept, the cultural competences that are acquired in order to 'read' these codes are a consequence of social location[5]. I used an expression of commitment to Da Ali G Show in two respective locations as my basis for identifying it. Specifically, the research included viewers who claimed that they used to watch this television comedy, and who also expressed a positive attitude towards the show and the type of humour it presented. This double criterion was important due to the fact that the text in question raised global controversies and generated polarized positions regarding the acceptability of its provocative humour.

My research was conducted in two separate settings in order to bring into view any shared cultural codes which would suggest the existence of distinct interpretive communities in the two national socio-cultural contexts. It was therefore comparative in perspective, aiming at disclosing any similarities and differences in the meaning-making process in the two settings: the UK (where the text originated), and Croatia (into which the text had been imported). By using a snow-balling method, eighteen interviews were carried out in 2009–2010, nine in London, UK, and nine in Zagreb, Croatia, diverse in terms of

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5   The concept of *interpretive communities* has, after Fish, been widely discussed by Radway, 1987; Fiske 1994; Schroeder, 1994; Barbatsis, 2005; Barker, 2006 etc. See: Author removed, 2012. for a short elaboration.

socio-demographics and structural position[6]. Even though the sample was small, I hope it is sufficient to provide a foundation from which it would be possible to build a more comprehensive study. The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. They were transcribed and analyzed through the technique of open coding. The topic covered in the interviews that will be outlined in this article concerns the audience understanding of 'good comedy' and the limits of humour in contemporary society.

What is 'good comedy'?

Firstly, there was unanimous agreement among all members of the interpretive communities that good comedy should offer a new experience to the audience in question. It had to be *original, unpredictable*, and *provocative*. During the course of discussions about comedy and humour, the interviewees discursively carved out what they liked through their expression of what they disliked. In this context, predictability, unoriginal conventions and framed scripted situations were some of the elements seen as ruining a good comedy:

James: „To be honest with you ... the only thing that starts to lose its appeal to me is when I feel that there is a set formula and predictability and you kind of know and you have heard it before in another interview or you sort of know what someone is going to say next or you know how they are going to react..."

Matija: "Personally, I feel dourness when I recognize something already seen, that is the end for me..."

Secondly, my analysis further showed that they generally felt *familiarity* was a necessary ingredient when it comes to good comedy –– i.e. either familiarity in terms of the characters or familiarity in terms of the settings so that viewers could identify with them – they had to be able to recognize specific cultural references.

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6   The UK interviewees:
     Anne – White, female, 26, no religious affiliation, full-time retail assistant manager, educated to secondary school level; Albert – Black, male, 23, Christian, part-time basketball coach, educated to secondary school level; George – White, male, 56, Protestant, full-time marketing consultant, educated to secondary school level; Henrietta – White, female, 39, atheist, Jewish background, part-time lecturer in education, has a PhD; James – White, male, 32, no religious affiliation, part –time research assistant, enrolled in a PhD program; Melvin – White, male, 35, no religious affiliation, part-time artist, has an M.A; Rose –White, female, 24, no religious affiliation, full-time librarian, has an M.A; Stephen – White, male, 26, no religious affiliation, full time DPhil student, has an M.A.; Sophia – White, female, 26, no religious affiliation, studying full time, enrolled in a B.A program;
     The Croatian interviewees:
     Domagoj – White, male, 37, Buddhist, part-time handyman, educated to primary school level; Dmitar – White, male, 33, no religious affiliation, full-time central heating installer, educated to secondary school level; Držislav – White, male, 40, Catholic, full-time private entrepreneur, educated to secondary school level; Ignjat – White, male, 32, Catholic, full-time wholesale correspondent, educated to secondary school level; Katarina – White, female, 38, no religious affiliation, full time marketing manager, educated to secondary school; Karlo– White, male, 34, no religious affiliation, full-time producer, educated to secondary school level; Marija – White, female, 35, new age, full-time journalist, has a M.A.; Matija – White, male, 39, Catholic, full-time clerk, educated to secondary school level; Tereza – White, female, 30, no religious affiliation, part-time translator, NGO, has an M.A.

Thirdly, comedy had to *reflect reality* so that one could relate the text to one's own everyday life experience. Reality also meant that there had to be a connection with real life as it evolves in all its complexity, a true reflection of all the burdens and troubles a human being goes through in a life cycle – in this respect, it was evident that the participants preferred reality to idealistic settings and that the latter tended to be dismissed as trivial.

Dmitar: „I tell you, Bibin svijet, to me it is just not real, it is not real....what can I say, a salesperson cannot be happy, cheerful, beautiful, having time for their family, having an understanding boss, everything is too perfect (...) My ex girlfriend was a salesperson and I know she worked long hours from morning until late at night, you know, every day, seven days a week, 30 days monthly, 362 days in the year..."

James: "I liked the reality aspect of it [Da Ali G Show], the fact that you were watching interviews with real people often people that you recognized".

Fourthly, in order for comedy to reach its full potential there was the presumption that it had to do more than simply just make us laugh, otherwise it would not have the depth required to be more than just a superficial laugh. In addition to making one laugh – although admittedly this is a core function of comedy – it had to inspire the audience to think about issues and discuss them, it had to have a certain depth, and it had to provide *food for thought*, working on multiple levels, as opposed to cheap one-dimensional, shallow and simple humour.

Melvin: " [humour needs to be] more in depth, it should be working on more levels than just the level of toilet humour, body parts or sexual orientation..."

Finally, as for who should be the subjects of comedy, there was a general agreement that *making fun of people in power* was a good thing (whether they were politicians, celebrities...). It was generally felt that politicians in particular constituted good subjects of comedy:

George: "...there is nothing we like to see more than people in authority being made fools of in a humourous and gentle way."

Stephen: „Mm... everyone likes taking the mick out of politicians ... they seem somehow justified [targets] "

Držislav: "In my view, one can always deride politicians, that is always welcomed!"

In addition to the similarities outlined above, a few differences were also identified in the respective sociocultural settings. In addition to the general understanding that laughing at people in power, was justifiable, the interviewees based in Croatia had a more generally negative attitude towards society and human kind in general. This critical view of society included positions in which mainstream, conventions and human weaknesses were seen as justifiable targets or subjects to scorn. Thus, good comedy includes:

Marija: ..." criticizing human stupidity which is endless."

Ignjat: ..."to provokes and ridicules in order to expose the world we live in (...) everything is artificial, we cherish the wrong values..."

Dmitar: ..."to laughs at human stupidity and shows just how far people are ready to go to protect their inherently conservative views."

One spoiler that was pointed out only in the UK interpretive community was popularity (versus marginality, the alternative). The process of mainstreaming made a text lose its appeal. (Stephen, Rose and Henrietta). When a text was viewed as exclusive, alternative, or on the fringes it was regarded more highly. The role of the media industry was also viewed negatively, in particular the way it would launch a product with only one goal in mind – that of maximising profit. Thus, moving from a fringe time slot to prime-time, moving from local media to national, moving from the original medium of transmission to other media (in this case from television to movies) tended to be perceived as negative.

Rose: „I feel there is a degree of saturation and I am quite cynical now 'cause there have been the movies, and I think it is a terrible thing when someone gets really big, you know, we tend to like the underdog and then when someone is really popular it pisses us off..."

Henrietta: "I think the trouble was that everyone knew Ali G so it didn't work and I think he kind of got...It must be hard when you suddenly get very famous...Suddenly get money...And then you feel the pressure of the network people telling you what to do ...them saying 'do it like this or do it like that. Have this guest come on the show'..."

There seemed to be a difference along gender lines in the evaluation of vulgarity and rudeness in comedy. Vulgarity was pointed out as a vital reason why a comedy might be classed as being of poor quality (Tereza, Marija), but some of the males expressed their preferences for sexual innuendoes and vulgar jokes (Domagoj, Držislav, George):

George: ..."it is possibly more male humour...possibly...there are certain scenes in Borat she [wife] just finds disgusting which I think are hilarious!"

Domagoj: "It is simple. He talks about the simplest things, you know – he throws one out about sex, and there you already have a joke that you can laugh at..."

The way in which the interpretive community based in the UK talked about comedy revealed that popularization had a destructive effect on the valuation of a comedy. This view was not as prominent in the Croatian interpretive community's discussions relating to *Da Ali G Show*; something that might be explained by the status of the television comedy which was marginal and alternative in the Croatian context and never made it to a larger audience (until the distribution of the movies). The idea that something is lost when a comedy becomes widely popular was however reiterated in relation to very popular Croatian comedies – there was clear contempt towards these texts. The interviewees based in Croatia were clearly critical of Croatian mediated humour. When asked to name a few comedies that they specifically disliked, most of them proceeded to dismiss Croatian products "domestic comedies" (Marija), or simply "Croatian comedy" (Domagoj) or "Croatian humour" (Ignjat). In this context they also mentioned specific quite popular Croatian comedies such as *Nad lipom 35*[7] (Tereza, Marija, Karlo, Držislav); *Lud, zbunjen, normalan* [8] (Marija); *Bibin*

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7   A Croatian sitcom on NOVA TV, featuring everyday problems set against the background of a local bar, with guest appearances from local singers (Wikipedia; IMDb).

8   A Bosnian comedy originated on FTV, broadcast in Croatia on NOVA TV (Wikipedia; IMDb).

svijet[9] (Dmitar); the Croatian remake of *Married with children*[10] (Dmitar). In addition to popularization or 'mainstreaming',

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The limits of humour in contemporary society

In the discussion about the possible limits of humour, different argument surfaced for or against its limitation. A split was visible *within* both the Croatian and UK interpretive community.

The advocates for unconditional *limitless humour* use a variety of arguments to support their position, and one of these arguments simply states that comedy is *a specific form* (as well as jokes and humour in general) – which should be set apart from other forms of expression.

A further example of argumentation in favor was that it was related to the *'only entertainment'* argument. This very fact makes it all right to utter a joke no matter how delicate it might be. Even if some topics were pointed out as problematic, they were only thought of as such if it was a matter of direct insult, but comedy as a form of expression nullified that possibility. This 'only comedy' position was taken by two interviewees (Anne, Albert) who did not articulate any possible wider social implications of it.

Another, but different, argument in favor of limitless humour was linked to the social role of comedy as a way to *discuss and debunk* important questions. From this perspective there is nothing that cannot be subject to humour because humour is a way to highlight important questions that are difficult to raise and discuss. It is precisely the taboo status of certain topics that needs to be de-mystified – and this is done through debate – humourous or other.

Melvin: „Yeah, yeah, absolutely! I think that if you can you should be able to take the piss out of everything (...) making fun of it brings it out of this place were nobody can talk about it, and it becomes bigger than it really should be..."

A different position that introduced a possible limitation to humour held that it should not be restricted in any way, but under one condition that the multiple-target approach applies. In this respect, any issues, topics, or groups

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9   A Croatian comedy on RTL TV, on everyday life humorous situations set within the context of a cash register work place (Wikipedia; IMDb).

10   The Croatian version of Married With Children broadcast on Nova TV about a dysfunctional family (Wikipedia; IMDb).

can be joked about as long as everyone is a potential target; limits should only be imposed if it is outright discrimination of particular groups:

James: „He steps close to the line in a lot of politically correct issues... But that kind of stuff never bothers me, as long as he's kind of taking the piss out of lots of different people and he treats them equally and not picking on a particular group, you know, whether it is like Jews, gays, or whatever...And I think he does seem to do that to be fair... there is certainly no one that escapes him (...) The more limitless the humour in terms of the more it kind of appears to cross boundaries, the more funny it is..."

The issue of setting boundaries to what can and cannot be joked about was also dealt with in terms of considering the entire communicative circle which includes the talker and the target, and includes issues such as identity and communicative intention in the context. This contextual approach was worded like this:

Tereza: „If I listen to a sexist joke it can be funny if I perceive the person telling it as someone who is attempting to criticize reality rather than reproduce it. So, I can tell a joke with a totally different intent than some guy who really thinks a women is [inferior to men]. If this is told by a man who has [a sexist view] then it becomes problematic, if it is told by someone who is emancipated and who thinks of it as a funny critique of stereotypes then it becomes funny and acceptable (...) In deciding on this you take into account why that person utters something."

In this respect a joke can only be evaluated properly by taking into consideration the identity of the talker and matching it to the identity of the target. This was closely related to the idea that laughing at one's own expense (whatever the identity base) was desirable and seen as a positive personal quality. This view was apparent more or less explicitly in both interpretive communities, but the prevailing attitude was that the comedian can make fun of his own 'kind' but when he crosses that line, then the whole thing starts to be questionable. If we apply this argument to Cohen's humour we note that his background was constantly referred to, Cambridge educated, from a middle class family, and what was most important for the limits of humour – he was Jewish, so that meant it was okay for him to play with the otherwise 'prohibited' topic of anti-Semitism.

Having a laugh at others, especially less empowered individuals or groups or at those of other identity (especially with regard to race, gender, sexual orientation) immediately puts the narrator into a problematic position. This perception was particularly pronounced discourse offered by members of the UK interpretive community (George, Stephen, Sophia).

Sophia: „I think it is okay to make fun of anything, i.e. any subject should be allowed but it all comes down to the context and who is doing it. For example, some racial groups... Not every person from that group has got the skills to poke fun of that group in a way that is okay, but I think there are very few people from outside of that, that can do it in an okay way. So, in general, you kind of got to have walked a mile in someone's shoes, really, before you have the right to be able to poke fun of those people..."

The only interviewee from the Croatian interpretive community who held a similar position was Tereza. However, even if she was aware of groups that were 'protected' through politically correct discursive practices, she was critical towards it and defined powerless groups differently: while the UK based interviewees frequently held racism (black), sexism (female), and to a lesser extent homophobia (gay/lesbian) in focus, the member of the Croatian based interpretive community referred to people that were stigmatized and excluded from society and who, for various reasons, did not have the capacity to realize that they were being laughed at – the mentally disabled, children, and people who were on the margins of society – poor people, prostitutes and uneducated people as well as the disabled.

All the interviewees shared one common view and that is that limits to humour should have regard to the level of individual insult and the existence or absence of malicious intentions (especially if not anonymous) and this in itself is seen as more problematic than the stereotyping of groups (whatever their characteristics) or society in general.

Borderline issues

The Croatian interviewees more frequently raised issues or events that they found problematic to joke about: recent historical events (in this case connected to the concept of nation) causing pain should not be ridiculed, because of the very real experiences that people might have from a traumatic event (this was clearly linked to the Croatian war and collective trauma caused by it). However, a historical distance opens up the possibilities because the wheel of fortune changes and the position of victims and perpetrators changes throughout history (Ignjat). Also, jokes made on account of forms of contemporary, real, collective, long term ethnical/religious conflicts which are volatile in terms of the possibility of triggering further escalation of violence should be avoided (Israel/Palestine) (Držislav); These topics, notably religious and ethnic conflicts – whilst they were raised in the Croatian interpretive community were not referred to at all in the UK interpretive community. This again points to issues of importance in the Croatian context in view of its relatively recent past permeated by ethnic war and the formation of the nation-state.

And last but not least, both the UK and Croatian interviewees isolated topics which required boundaries to be set, notably in reference to sensitive comic material such as sexual violence (paedophilia, associated with the vulnerability of children as social cohort, and pornography), Jews as the world's scapegoats (Holocaust) and extreme violence (child abuse).

The centrality of power relations

While the audience that favored this 'alternative' comedy was very diverse in terms of socio-demographics and structural position, they all, regardless of different sociocultural context held a similar position with regards to the

way 'good comedy' was defined: original, referring to reality, familiarity of codes, poking fun of powerful people and providing 'food for thought'. The depreciation of comedy as genre was clearly connected to growth in popularity and its transformation from fringe comedy to the mainstream. This was clearly visible in the way the interviewees talked about the Ali G Show that moved from an alternative status towards a highly popular one in the UK. While the popularization trend was not explicitly mentioned in the Croatian interpretive community, it was clear that popular and mainstream comedy nearly provoked disgust which was visible in the contempt for Croatian comedy in general. This was a position commonly held by everyone, and it also indicated an alternative self-positioning of the Croatian interpretive community. Disliking the mainstream was also visible in that the Croatian interpretive community had a quite critical view of the general population: this came up in the discussion of what is appropriate to joke about. The dominant view was that human kind is in general easily duped, narrow-minded and backward, which again confirmed the construction of an alternative status.

The different positions regarding the limits of humour outlined in the theoretical part (Lockyer and Pickering, 2005) both surfaced within the respective interpretive communities, even though, as expected, there was a leaning towards a more extensive view of what is acceptable and proper to joke about. The social function of comedy was implicitly linked to the way limits of humour were marked out. The idea that this type of comedy has an important social function, namely to expose contemporary imperfections in society was voiced in both sociocultural contexts. The satirical dimension was highlighted as positive, while the targeting of different groups was approved as long as everybody was targeted indiscriminately – saying that making a point is justified once everybody is treated equally – a position that obviously overlooks the power relations between different groups. The right to offend was predominantly viewed as less harmful than the right to define where the limits to humour should be set. In that context, it was maintained that the freedom of speech argument was more important than the protection of particular groups.

However, power relations came up as central in marking out the limits of humour. Both interpretive communities viewed politicians and celebrities as justifiable targets of scorn, but it was more frequently pointed out by the UK based interviewees. Comedy was, in accordance with the Superiority Theory (Friedman et al., 2011), linked to hierarchies and power relations in which, in Bakhtins (1981) terms, humour and laughter is a way to bring someone or something distant closer.

The definition of powerless social groups differed to a large extent. While the UK based interviewees frequently held racism (black), sexism (female), and to a lesser extent homophobia (gay/lesbian) in focus, the Croatian based did not refer to these groups as unacceptable targets of scorn. Rather, in the rare cases when powerless groups were mentioned, they were defined as people that were stigmatized and excluded from society (such as the mentally disabled, prostitutes, alcoholics etc). the majority of the Croatian interpretive community thought of

the powerless in terms of victims of violence that were mainly linked to war and ethnic conflicts, or different nation-states (Kazakhstan) compared to the West.

It was pointed out from both interpretive communities that the identity of the speaker is crucial when it comes to comedy, because whether something is offensive or not can only be assessed within a context. This was closely related to the idea that making fun of oneself (whatever the identity base) was desirable, while scorning others, especially individuals or groups with less power than the speaker was perceived as problematic – again perceived power relations seemed to be the most important in the process of defining the limits of humour.

Another commonality was that the limit of what can be joked about was drawn at the level of individual insult. It would seem that Aristotle's ancient postulate that comedy shouldn't be painful or destructive nor should it include personal derision still holds true (Aristotle, Part 9) – an individual attack on a 'real' person, where their name and their surname is known was commonly seen as being negative, even though politicians and celebrities obviously did not fall into the category of 'real persons' – this can perhaps be explained both with the perceived distance of these social actors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the social expectations about correct utterance usually imply a broader form of consensus about the definitions of what is 'correct' or 'appropriate' in a specific historical context. The line of acceptable and unacceptable utterance is in constant flux, a process of negotiation dominated by powerful social actors. What is moral and ethical is subject to historical change: in contemporary societies there seem to be a more ruthless way of expression in the public spheres, but on the other hand, there is also a form of subtle social pressure that is gaining the upper hand, circumscribed in the idea of political correctness, inducing a form of self-censorship mainly related to identity issues.

Power relations were crucial in assessing a joke, however the identification of power relations differed depending on the social context: in the UK, race, gender, sexual orientation were emphasized, which suggests that, in their view, identity politics were central to power relations. In Croatia, on the other hand, victims of violence related to war and ethnic conflict were important in identifying power relations.

What seemed to be widely agreed upon was that laughing at one's own expense (whatever the identity base) was desirable, while scorning others, especially individuals or groups with less power than the speaker was perceived as problematic. In addition, even though there was a split between the participants within the interpretive communities related to whether limits of humour were acceptable or not, some topics were persistently brought up as 'sacred' and thus not that easily converted into comic material which suggests that it is possible to talk about disturbing human experiences that are easily transferable across cultures. Another thing that seems to be an important commonality is the need

to engage in processes of setting boundaries which are based on 'measuring' the entire communicative circle and the communicative intention situated within dominant social norms, values and power relations.

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