

Editorial: “Anything goes?”

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1. The backstory

This special issue arises out of an annual conference of the Australasian Humour Studies Network (AHSN). These have been held for two decades, but despite that longevity and the fact that the word Australasian refers to Australia *and* New Zealand, it was not until 2014 that the first AHSN conference was held in New Zealand, with the theme “Anything Goes?”. As befits the study of humour, two meanings were intended. First, papers were welcomed on the limits of humour: does anything go in humour, and if not, what is too far and how do we know we have reached that point, and what happens thereafter? Second, partly because we wanted to guarantee good attendance, papers were welcomed on almost anything - participants were free to drop the question mark and present on their wide ranging interests in humour. There were many good papers amongst the latter; however, this special issue collects seven papers that did take the question mark seriously, addressing in varied ways the question of the limits of humour.

These papers will be introduced shortly, but firstly we can quickly establish why this question is such a common and important one for the study of humour. Obviously, the titles of many books and articles indicate concerted scholarly attention to this topic: *Laughter and Ridicule* (Billig 2005); *Jokes and Their Relations to Society* (Davies 1998); *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender and Cultural Critique* (Gilbert 2004); *Laughter Out of Place* (Goldstein 2003); *Serious Frolic* (de Groen & Kirkpatrick 2009); *Subversive Humour* (Jenkins, 1994); *Good Humour, Bad Taste* (Kuipers 2006); *Beyond the Joke* (Lockyer & Pickering 2005), *Laughter and Liberation* (Mindess 2010); *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Morreall 1983); *Seriously Funny* (Schmidt 2014). And, of course, there are many journal articles and book chapters in the same vein. No review of such work will be attempted here. This is partly because of space constraints, but also because there is a useful shortcut we can take on this issue of “Anything goes?” That is, we can consider the thoughts of comedians themselves, as these may be equally effective in establishing a quick consensus on the centrality of the question of humour’s limits. To take only two examples, consider John Cleese and Joan Rivers, two well-known figures from different backgrounds, with quite different styles of humour. In an interview John Cleese was asked “Have you ever reached a

point in a project where you thought ‘Maybe I’ve gone too far?’” (Raban 2008). In reply he makes some useful comments indicating the relativity of the question of humour’s limits:

No, I don’t think I’ve ever had that thought. I’ve often thought to myself, “Have I stepped over a line?” Or, “Is this particular line over the line?” ... Unless your comedy is completely bland there will always be someone who’s offended by it. You can’t really avoid some offense, so the question is not “Will you offend people?” but “What sort of proportions will you offend them in?”

(Raban 2008)

Joan Rivers makes basically the same point, if a little more bluntly:

I just say what a lot of other people think but won’t say ... Comedy should never be comfortable and safe. My sense of humour is all about just telling the truth, and always being politically incorrect. If I’m not offending a reasonable proportion of my audience, then I need to try harder.

(Collins cited in Smithies 2014)

Cleese seems more conservative than Rivers, perhaps tending to err on the side of caution regarding the “sort of proportions” who are offended or not. In contrast, Rivers is more confrontational, intentionally trying to go too far and offend or provoke many people with her comedy.

Regarding this difference in degree of bluntness, some well-known comments from Freud seem relevant. Amongst other things, in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1960) Freud argued that many jokes have a victim within the text of a joke, but that the hearer him or herself is often another victim. This particularly applies when a dirty joke is told by a man to a woman. This entanglement of the hearer and teller of the joke in sex-talk may occur in a context where traditional assumptions about sexuality and male activity/female passivity may apply, thus it could be seen as an attempt to overcome barriers and encourage sexual activity. This is partly why Freud argued that attempts at “wit” are so central to humour, that is, by working into humour the cleverness and subtlety of wordplay, any offense is lessened or more likely to be tolerated for the moment (note that another word for *joke* is *wisecrack*). Such an argument is theoretically appealing, if a little tendentious; moreover it ushers in the large question of what exactly is witty or clever when it comes to sexual humour, or conversely, what is merely “smut”?

To forestall inquiry into such a large topic, or other similarly large topics, it can be noted that we should never forget to provide good descriptions as a first step. We can justify this by adopting the terms of ethnomethodologists, and arguing that understanding is “scenic”, that is, it is visibly assembled from within everyday activities and materials - “the social structures of everyday activities [are] observable” (Garfinkel 1967: 75). Or, as Sacks (1992) put it, culture is an apparatus for both doing and seeing the doing of things. Hence, it is an important question to ask of any social phenomenon, “How is it that this observable feature has been produced such that it is recognisable for what it is?” (Francis & Hester 2004: 25). This is partly a theoretical argument, however, it is one best understood through examples. The first of which is serendipitously provided by my recent reading of *The Best of the Rejection Collection: 293 Cartoons That Were Too Dumb, Too Dark, or Too Naughty for The New Yorker* (Diffie 2011). The title is a good guide to what the book offers, but it is not just a collection of cartoons: each cartoonist is asked a standard set of questions before their rejected cartoons are showcased. Frequently, of course, the cartoonists attempt to make humour in their written answers, as this example shows:

And Now for a Few More Questions ...

What, do you hate drawing?

Sometimes, yes.

(Diffie 2011: 192)

Here the cartoonist –Nick Downes– has inserted a visibly hand-drawn comma after the *What*, the first word of a previously simple question. It is not hand-drawn above, and so the humour could be partly lost, serving to emphasise that hand-drawn alteration is distinctly observable. This playful alteration is easily done, and perhaps just as equally ignored by academic commentary. But here we might ask: Is it not in the simplicity of the alteration and the difference between the two questions that our smile or laughter is produced? Wit and cleverness, hence humour, can result from what is an incredibly small alteration. It is not difficult to think of other examples of how dependent humour is upon similarly minute changes.

Two examples involving pauses or changes in intonation come to mind. First, there is Peter Sellers' wonderful version of the Beatles' song *A Hard Day's Night*, where, talking through the song, he inserts a significant pause: "When I'm home feeling you .. holding me tight". Via the alteration of adding what is only a half-second pause, he takes the meaning of the original line from the frame of love *-feeling you holding me tight-* to the bodily activities that lead up to or may be part of sex – *feeling you*. Second, there is an old comic skit involving a male actor and female actress practising their lines where the woman says to the man, "What's this *thing* called love?" There may even be the slightest of pauses after *thing*, and an intonation to *What's*. Somehow the alterations, certainly the emphasis/intonation on *thing*, take the question from one about the nature of love, to genitalia, and thereby sex, that old staple of humour.

The point here is that irrespective of whether the humour depends on audibility (a pause, intonation) or visibility (an inserted comma), the humorous keying is accomplished by minute detail. This is the means by which humour is "scenically" available: we have to be able to hear a pause or intonation, or to see the drawn-in comma, for the humour to be possible in the first place. Without the detail there is no possibility of humorous effect. This is a point worth further discussion, for in the similarity of the words *alteration*, *alternation* and *alternate* we have some issues which bear upon the question of humour and its limits. I will do this shortly by drawing upon the sociologist Michael Mulkay's (1988) argument in *On Humour*, but firstly we can summarise the upshot of the examples above. The first appears to be a simple endogenous alteration that is designed for humorous effect. It does not seem to have the potential to go much further than the text itself; it is not offensive and it would be straining things to say it has any socio-political point, any attempt to change the world. Similarly, it is difficult to say that Sellers' insertion of the pause in the Beatles' song is much more than an example of a comedian's skill with comic timing. The third example, however, is more interesting. It contains a basic contrastive pairing of the discourse of *love* –the word is actually named– versus the discourse of genitalia and sex instantiated via the punning on *thing*. As such, it provides potential for speculative theorising: the joke is another example showing that the world is not as it seems, that despite the prevalence of talk of love, adult relations boil down to their "things" and what they do with them. As such, it could be seen to promote an alternative view of the world, or at least a corrective to naïve romantic scripts. This serious import of the joke, and the possibility that some people find it distasteful, could be argued to be useful, for it may stop adults from stumbling around in a dream-like state such as that suggested by romantic scripts. Of course, this is highly speculative, but that is part of the point: it is remarkable how often academic commentary is prepared to jump from

small observations and anecdotes to construct the most general of theories about humour, or to work in the reverse and reductively explain empirical instances. Now, by critically discussing Mulkay's argument we can see good reason for being cautious about such moves.

2. Mulkay on humour: Anything is possible?

Quite a few years ago -1988- Michael Mulkay wrote a whole sociological treatise on humour, which has been surprisingly little-discussed. It has useful components, however, its utility here is to show some pitfalls in understanding humour and the serious, particularly once the word *reality* enters the equation.

Mulkay begins with a binary model contrasting the *humorous mode* with the *serious mode*, arguing that "it is precisely the symbolic separation of humour from the realm of serious action that enables social actors to use humour for serious purposes" (Mulkay 1988: 1). He argues that the study of humour helps us better to understand the serious social world, this entailing two tasks: first, detail how the two realms are different, but secondly, show how they are related. He distinguishes the two realms via what he calls *plausibility requirements*. Within the humorous realm we supposedly use an interpretive procedure which differs from that applied in serious discourse. Events depicted in jokes do not have the same kind of interpretive consistency of serious conversation: the plausibility requirement of the humorous mode is "anything is possible" (Mulkay 1988: 19). He then uses Pollner's work (1974) on *mundane reason* to fix the core characteristic of the serious mode as the assumption of a unitary world. People assume that they inhabit a real social world, and assume that other people share that view. This is not to say that there are never disagreements or ambiguities, but whenever these occur there is ultimately a default reference to "what everyone knows", that is, the existence of an underlying, unitary, real world.

Mulkay argues that it is precisely this assumption of a unitary world that the humorous mode "temporarily abandons". Instead, within this mode people are "responding to, registering and celebrating a world of discourse where interpretative duality is the basic principle and understandable incongruity the overriding aim" (Mulkay 1988: 37). It is in this, he argues, that we can see the reason for the existence of humour. Ultimately, it is a functionalist argument, firstly built upon a caveat about the operation of "mundane reason". That is, despite the default reference to "what everyone knows", there are multiple formulations of the real world:

The basic structures of social differentiation that occur in all societies generate a potential babble of discrepant voices, each of which speaks as if its particular version of the world is the real world within which all other voices have their being

(Mulkay 1988: 214)

This leads to the crux of the matter: "humour occurs because mundane, serious discourse simply cannot cope with its own interpretative multiplicity" (Mulkay 1988: 214). Within such an "iron cage" of mundane reason, it is humour that allows us to go on:

Humour furnishes a realm of safety and release from these problems [of interpretative multiplicity] ... the onerous duty of maintaining a unitary world-view has been replaced by the joyous creation of multiple realities.

(Mulkay 1988: 214-215)

In this it might be seen that Mulkay's emphasis is not strictly on humour as resistance to societal inequality or varieties of power, for example; nevertheless, the upshot of his argument is not incompatible with such an approach. In other words, once we begin to talk of humour creating "multiple realities", subtly ushered in is the argument that resistance to the current socio-political reality is the prime reason for humour. Alteration quickly transmutes into alternatives and the alternate, consistent with his use of the term "multiple realities".

Mulkay's model of humour is quite rightly predicated upon a view of the human actor as an interpretive being, however, he gives a relatively broadbrush view of interpretation. He talks of frame shifts between the serious and humorous modes, without detailing how these are actually achieved, and underlying his argument is a cognitivism with its own logical problems. Talk of incongruity and implausibility is fair, but a problem begins when we realise that no matter how short humorous discourse is, it must contain some talk of plausible events. So, when Mulkay argues that "anything is possible" he omits to qualify that phrase with "amidst the normal". If somehow we recognise implausibility and let it pass in the humorous mode, somewhere before or after we also must recognise plausibilities. If this is accepted, we end up in an infinite regress, for to adapt McHoul (1983: 284), the consideration of plausibility/implausibility is itself an operation which can be more or less plausible, less or more implausible. If, for any operation to be plausibly executed, a prior theoretical operation had first to be performed plausibly, it would be a logical impossibility for anyone to break into the circle. In separating thought from language-in-use, Mulkay ultimately ends with a theoretical speculation that has an unknown relationship to the accomplishment of humour.

In terms of sociological explanation, like Mulkay's, we may be better to avoid any talk of multiple realities and place emphasis upon social sanctions. To talk of a "paramount reality", as for example Schutz (1962) famously did, is not to emphasise ontology, rather it is to place at the core of social life the socially sanctioned unity of the world; the mutual demand that we recognise the commonality of circumstance. There is some attraction in the argument that humour does allow us freedom from these sanctions, but this should not be caught up in talk of multiple or alternative realities. Mulkay's distinction between the serious and the humorous modes is unnecessary, for humour is not "a radical alternative to the way in which we create our ordinary social world" (Mulkay 1988: 222). Humour is marked off, but it is not as if it is operating *against* paramount reality, but in sequential relation to and within it. To suggest that humour, by itself, is a potentially liberatory force is a little like having a dream of winning a million dollars and then telling the bank manager you would like to clear your overdraft; or like informing the police that you have just seen the murder of Julius Caesar, but fortunately, you can name the murderers (Sharrock & Anderson 1991: 64).

As another kind of comedian – a cartoonist – puts it, "Funny isn't about beauty – it's about freedom. Sometimes, that freedom leads to disrespect, ridicule, and outright offensiveness" (Mankoff 2011: vii). In agreement with Mulkay, we may celebrate the freedom to have and make humour, but we need to see it as intimately sandwiched within the varieties of seriousness that our paramount reality provides. And that is where the social sanctions will arise in response to the possibilities of disrespect, ridicule and offensiveness. Goffman's work on "Fun in games" is insightful here, but needs a slight alteration. In a powerful passage he states:

To be awkward or unkempt, to talk or move wrongly, is to be a dangerous giant, a destroyer of worlds. As every psychotic and comic ought to know, any accurately improper move can poke through the thin sleeve of immediate reality.

(Goffman 1961: 72)

This is similar in tenor to Mulkay's argument, however, the pairing of "psychotic and comic" suggests an important implication. It is this: if the comic gets his or her improper move wrong it may be him or herself that is quickly relabelled "psychotic", and hence destroyed, rather than any wider world that perhaps their humour is targeted towards.

3. The contributions and the detail of alteration

The somewhat cautious tenor of my discussion above should not be taken as a hard-and-fast guide to what follows. That is, the authors whose papers appear below may well disagree with my views, and themselves emphasise the alternative/alternate rather than the work of alteration *per se*. Nevertheless, what they all share in common is a focus on detail. None of the papers offers a general theory of the limits of humour, though some may get a little closer than others; instead they offer very specific case studies of humour and its limits. Some of the papers have contextual background that is Australian- or New Zealand-centric, but contributors have provided enough elaboration so that European or readers from other nations will be able to understand the case studies.

This special issue begins with Bronwyn McGovern's fieldwork-based discussion of the life of a homeless man in Wellington, New Zealand, and the interesting way that humour revolves about him as he lives his life on the street. As a homeless man he is on the boundary of normal social life, yet in his sometimes skilled humorous interactions with passersby, and official authorities, he is able to disrupt everyday understandings of "normal" boundaries. Second, is another New Zealand based case study: Susan Foster's very detailed analysis of "When the quip hits the fan: What cartoon complaints reveal about changes in societal attitudes to race and ethnicity". Foster studies editorial cartoons that have been the subject of complaint to the New Zealand Press Council or the Race Relations Conciliator, showing that both the message and visual expression can be the subject of such complaint. Changes over time are highlighted, as is the growing problem of "immediacy" presented by social media and its dynamic role in any controversy. The third contribution, by Geniesa Tay, is specifically focused on social media and humour, describing "Political humour, internet memes, and play in the 2012 US presidential election (and beyond)". Often called "LOLitics", this highly visual mode of humour involves digital texts created by everyday people responding to political events or gaffes by politicians. The ease of spread of such memes and the growing influence of social media leads Tay to conclude that these viral texts do reveal the potential power that ordinary people have in setting the agenda for the news media, and in communicating political criticism.

The next two contributions have no direct connection in subject matter to Australasia. Ron Stewart presents a detailed analysis of "The birth of a local political cartoonist in post-3.11 Japan". The so-called 3.11 disaster involved the triple blow of earthquake, tsunami, and multiple nuclear reaction meltdowns in Japan in 2011. Stewart shows that, in general, cartoonists in the national daily newspapers neglected the disaster recovery measures and the connection with politics as material for political cartoons. This neglect was contrasted though with the political cartoons of one cartoonist in a regional newspaper, and the possible reasons for this departure are outlined. Next, Will Visconti presents an equally detailed discussion of "Too far West (dangerous curves ahead)", which is an account of Mae West's career and her ability to shock and transgress boundaries. West very much pushed the limits of acceptability, and was able, with some adaption, to continue her style even as she herself aged and the times changed around her.

The sixth contribution by Stephen Loveridge returns to cartoons, but of a very specific era. Loveridge, based on an historical approach, details "Trans-Tasman rivalry in New

Zealand's Great War cartoons". He shows that the general social and cultural closeness between Australia and New Zealand is an assumption that bears scrutiny, specifically showing that during the Great War New Zealand cartoonists produced very critical cartoons about their neighbour and ally. In the final contribution Moira Marsh presents perhaps the nearest thing to a general discussion of "Going too far", but even this centrally features empirical specifics, in this case discussion of practical jokes. Through these examples she argues that the acceptability of specific jokes is constructed in very context-specific ways; these cross boundaries without obliterating them.

So, to finally return to the phrase "Anything goes?", in many ways I have been suggesting that in our analyses of humour's limits, not anything should go. The generality of theorisation is potentially useful, but finely detailed empirical case studies, like those showcased here, may make a more useful contribution to the interdisciplinary field that is the study of humour. The overviews of theory often turn complex objects into simple ones, whose supposed function is often only to do one thing. That seems a wrong view of humour, for even if based on often very minute alterations, it is able to achieve a remarkable array of social outcomes.

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