

Sitcom: What It Is, How It Works
A Theory of Comedy

by

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Comedy is that which makes one laugh. This is the basis for any study of comedy. However, just what is it that makes one laugh?

Six elements are required for something to be humorous:

- 1) it must appeal to the intellect rather than the emotions;
- 2) it must be mechanical;
- 3) it must be inherently human, with the capability of reminding us of humanity;
- 4) there must be a set of established societal norms with which the observer is familiar, either through everyday life or through the author providing it in expository material, or both;
- 5) the situation and its component parts (the actions performed and the dialogue spoken) must be inconsistent or unsuitable to the surrounding or associations (i.e., the societal norms); and
- 6) it must be perceived by the observer as harmless or painless to the participants. When these criteria have been met, people will laugh. If any one is absent, then the attempt at humor will fail.

The first criterion, the *appeal to intellect rather than emotion*, is obvious when ethnic humor is used. Polish (Irish, whitey, gay, fraternity, sorority, etc.) jokes can be hilarious to everyone; everyone, that is, except to the Poles (Irish, whitey, gay, fraternity, sorority, etc.). To the group that is being made fun of, jokes at their expense are not funny -- they are insulting and rude. People respond to insults and rudeness subjectively, taking umbrage, or, in more simple terms, get angry, which is an emotion. To those who have no personal interest in the joke, i.e., everybody else, there is no insult and they take an objective, intellectual view of the joke and can respond to the other criteria for comedy if they are met. Thus, one can take the old joke, "How many Poles does it take to screw in a light bulb? Five: one to hold the bulb and four to turn the ladder.", substitute a different group for Poles in each retelling, and irritate a whole new set of people each time.

Lenny Bruce counted on the intellectual basis of comedy when, in one of his routines, he identified all the races and ethnic groups in his audience with insulting labels: "I see we have three niggers in the audience. And over there I see two wogs, and five spics, and four kikes," etc.. As he started the routine there were gasps of incredulity and even anger: the audience couldn't believe that Bruce would be so insulting and insensitive. But as Bruce continued and the list grew longer, and it became clear that he was listing everything he could think of, the words lost their connotative, emotional meaning as insulting terms and turned into just noises. In other words, they lost their emotive content and became an intellectual exercise in how words lose their meanings outside of context. At this point, the audience, all of whom had been appalled and angry at exactly the same words, started laughing at them: the audience was reacting intellectually, not emotionally.

The second two criteria for comedy, that it be *mechanical* and *inherently human*, are delineated by Henri Bergson in his essay "Laughter". His theory revolves around a basic axiom, that the laughable element consists of a mechanical inelasticity, just where one would expect adaptability and flexibility. It's humorous when a person acts in a manner that is inappropriate to a stimulus or situation, as in any slapstick comedy routine. It is funny when a chair is pulled out from under someone who is sitting down, because he doesn't adapt to the change in situation and continues to sit in a mechanical fashion. Dogberry, in Shakespeare's MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING, is funny because he continues blithely along, thinking he's in charge of the situation when in actuality he has no idea what's happening. Lucy on I LOVE LUCY is funny because she mechanically reacts to events without thinking about how events have changed the situation.

An extension of Bergson's theory is his idea that comedy is inherently human. Something is funny only insofar as it is or reminds the audience of humanity. The audience may laugh at the antics of an animal, such as chimpanzees or horses or bears, but only in direct proportion to the animal's capability of reminding the audience of something human. Thus, animals such as chimps and orangutans are often dressed in human clothing to heighten the reminder, and horses, such as Mr. Ed and Francis the Talking Mule, can talk and think better than the men they're around.

One major point that becomes apparent when one examines comedy is that it is based on **incongruity**: the unexpected with the expected, the unusual with the usual, the misfit in what has been established as a societal norm.

For there to be incongruity there must be something to be incongruous to. Therefore, for a comedy to work there must be an established set of cultural, human and societal norms, mores, idioms, idiosyncrasies, and terminologies against which incongruities may be found. Such norms may be internal or external. **Internal norms** are those which the author has provided in the script. **External norms** are those which exist in the society for which the script was written.

The major problem is to know what norms exist, and which have become out-of-date. Many times some people, upon hearing a joke, will respond with "I don't get it". This is because they don't know or understand the societal norms being violated in the joke. This is also why you can never explain a joke: to explain you must first expound on the norms, then show how they have been violated. Such an explanation removes any incongruity by illustrating how it works within the norms.

The need for norms also explains why humor can become passé. Stand-up comedians do very few jokes about President Eisenhower's administration because the norms have changed: no one understands topical references to fifty years ago.

Plays and jokes can also go out-of-date. Neil Simon's early plays often depended heavily on social attitudes of the time, particularly those about the relationships between men and women. However, sex roles and attitudes have changed considerably since 1961 and COME BLOW YOUR HORN, and the humor in the character Alan Baker's rather sexist approach to women and sex now evokes an emotional reaction in many people, distaste, rather than laughter. The humor that does work takes as its norms human attitudes and norms that are independent of society and culture.

Nonetheless, a funny play can remain funny, even when the norms change. Shakespeare's "breeches parts", such as Viola in TWELFTH NIGHT or Rosalind in AS YOU LIKE IT, evoked great laughter from Elizabethan audiences because their societal norms said that women do not wear men's clothing, and the sight of Viola and Rosalind in male attire was incongruous. Today, women wearing men's clothing is the norm, and therefore seeing Viola in pants is not funny. Nonetheless, there are many things in Shakespeare's plays that are incongruous to today's norms, and thus his comedies continue to be funny four hundred years later. We still laugh, perhaps not at what Elizabethan audiences did, but the plays are still funny because he gained most of his humor from human rather than societal norms.

Three aspects of incongruity are *literalization*, *reversal*, and *exaggeration*.

In literalization the joke comes from taking a figure of speech and then performing it literally. When Max Smart (GET SMART) asks the robot agent Hymie to "give me a hand", Hymie detaches a hand and gives it over, interpreting the instruction literally. On the situation comedy CHEERS, Coach, and later Woody, the bartenders, take everything that is said to them at face value, apparently incapable of recognizing innuendo, hyperbole, or figures of speech.

Reversal is simply reversing the normal, taking what is normal and expected and doing or saying the opposite. When Retief, in Keith Laumer's science fiction novel RETIEF AND THE WARLORDS, is subjected to what his captors think are the most horrendous tortures, he is assailed with modern art and smellovision renditions of overheated tires, burnt toast, chow mein, aged Gorgonzola, and the authentic odor of sanctity.

An exaggeration is taking what is normal and blowing it out of proportion. Events occur to which the characters will react beyond all proportion: the mountain out of a molehill syndrome. The jealous wife's discovery of a blonde hair on her husband's jacket leads her to build an entire scenario of mad trysts, trips to the Riviera, and a murder plot against her, until he points at the collie sitting at her feet. Such exaggeration is a standard in comedy.

The greatest incongruity is the violating of societal taboos. This violation can provoke the greatest laughter. In American society the greatest taboos are discussions of sex, death, and biological functions. These are all subjects which society has decreed should be discussed seriously, discreetly, and euphemistically, if discussed at all. It is from these taboos that much humor is derived.

The sixth and final criterion for humor is, as Aristotle states, that ". . . which causes no pain or destruction . . . is distorted but *painless*" (my emphasis). The comic action is perceived by the audience as causing the participants no actual harm: their physical, mental, and/or emotional well-being may be stretched, distorted, or crushed, but they recover quickly and by the end of the performance they are once again in their original state. A prime example are the Warner Brothers' Road Runner cartoons, in which Wile E. Coyote is dropped, crushed, pummeled, rolled, wrung, and otherwise punished for his attempts to catch the road runner, yet seconds later is putting together his next Acme widget to carry out his next plan. Wile is never damaged permanently, no matter how high the cliff he falls off or how big the rock that lands on him. The criterion applies to real life, as well. It is funny when someone slips on the ice and falls: people laugh--until they realize that the person broke his leg. At that moment the event is no longer humorous.

The six criteria must all be present for an attempt at humor to succeed: if only one is missing then the joke will fail. As long as the audience knows the norms and can thus see the incongruity, the participants act in an inflexible manner but are inherently human, no one appears to get hurt, and the audience doesn't take it personally, then an attempt at being funny will succeed.