

## Towards the work *Hilarious* – Former Cases of Dysfunctional Humor

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*Hilarious* is a standup monologue written for a woman comedian. The performance is meant to employ familiar comic devices, and sabotage them simultaneously. It consists of jokes deprived of their punch line, repetitions without an ironic resonance, mimetic gestures that do not imitate anything, meaningful expressions and gestures whose meaning is not clear, long pauses and cropped sentences that hinder the continuity, fermentation without juice. It ends with an epic joke that should be tragic rather than comic, but crassly insists on the latter.

I thought this experiment will have three manifest qualities. First, that on the formal level it should be a bodily and verbal performance that goes against itself, and thus its failure is prescribed. In that sense, it is directly related to the speech act in *The Confessions of Roe Rosen*, where the speakers recited in a language they did not understand. The second quality has to do with the way in which humor is understood to channel and cope with tough stuff: fear, horror, sexuality, pain, passion, xenophobia, death and so on. When humor is put to work without humor, these contents are left exposed and untamed in an odd, synthetic ways, whose impact cannot be fully known beforehand. The third quality was the intuitive feeling that successful delivery can work by itself, that is, in other words, that there is no reason to presuppose that the presence of humor will be funnier than its absence. Humorous failure will simultaneously be a comic success. But its disturbing residue will be different, and the viewer might feel implicated by this difference and its affect (improper laughter, for example).

The writing process yielded surprises and shifts in direction that I could not have foreseen, which are not the issue here. But the process led me to think of precursors wherein humor is premised on its own failure or on the negation of the comic mode's familiar patterns. These precedents have qualities others than those I described as manifest; in other words, not only humor but its negation as well goes in different directions. Three strong such cases are briefly discussed below.

### **1. The Anti-Humor of Andy Kaufman: Crumbling Comedy as a Sign of Difference.**

There are American comedians whose comedy is directly described as “Anti-Humor.” Andy Kaufman is likely the most renowned and probably one of the earliest examples.

Kaufman provides an effective experience of one of the most characteristic mechanisms negative humor enacts: a rendition of foreignness. The joke's content undergoes a displacement by the autistic-naive strangeness of its performer.

Seemingly what is funny is not that which was supposed to be funny, but an event of blunder, mistake, misunderstanding, mispronunciation, and slippage. This event can be described like this: “If the intention was not to be funny, the result is funny, and if the intention was to be funny, the result is not funny, and thus funny because of its own failure.” (In this, Kaufman is like a reversed mirror image of Nabokov's Pnin, whose jokes are made unfunny as much as his serious utterances can provoke laughter by his excessively ornate language, a profoundly moving over-compensation for his foreignness).

Accordingly, Kaufman's foreign accent does not abide the vulgar and simplistic ways of ethnic humor (the heated Italian, the pompous Frenchman, The stuffy German, the vulgar American or, in general, any reduction of the other that renders him or her as funny by reductively circumscribing otherness). In fact, Kaufman strives for the

very opposite: an unclassifiable foreigner that thus aspires to sustain an essential foreignness.

Kaufman's persona has two principle loci. The first is the eternal return of the nerd, the loser, the outsider. Kaufman's influence in this respect pertains to numerous later comedy situations and personae (from Wayne's suburban home TV show by Mike Myers, to Jack Blacks' musical humor in the heavy metal duo *Tenacious D*). But most of these performances, even though some have been called anti-humor, are not really cases of crumbling comedy, because the viewer is clear as to the concrete collective conditions they depict (the clear order of power in a suburban high school, where the athlete gets the girl and the nerd is abused; the chasm between suburban aspirations for glamour and fame and the world of professional commercial television; class association between heavy metal and "white-trash" and so on). Power relations are crystal clear, just as it is clear that Myers isn't, in fact, Wayne. The unique and disturbing power of Kaufman lies exactly in the deem line between himself and the character he portrays. In other words, he is never wholly typological, because he is a singular case. This singularity can also be called originality (he is his own source). And this points to Kaufman's second locus, and the less obvious one: Romanticism exaltation of the unmarred authenticity to be found in the other (the child, the criminal, the poet).

## **2. Seinfeld: Negative Humor as Vacuous Teleology**

The praise of this sitcom by its numerous fans is most often tied to the fit of constructing a full episode around nothing, and, correspondingly, jokes about nothing (that is, on the egotistic and vacuous world of the protagonists). Clearly, Seinfeld served as a voice to a particular social group at a particular time. If the 80s

Yuppie was marked by a relentless career drive, Seinfeld and his friends are a diluted, decaffeinated Yuppies: a crosshatch of generation X clichés with the Yuppie stereotype: greedy yet too spoiled, lazy and petty to care for the kill, wanting in values but hardly worried about it.

It seems that the admiration of Seinfeld has to do with the fact that, as in Kaufman's case, and in an even more pronounced manner, there is a dimension of self portraiture in the series, and thus, apparently, also a layer of self reflection and criticism. But from its inception the strong force at work in the sitcom is that of self congratulation and affirmation, if not self-infatuation: I am nothing, and proud of it. My nothing merits its privileges a-priori. In that sense, Seinfeld's self esteem has much in common with nationalist pride.

It seems, then, that the comical traits of his friends, encompassed in their minor flaws, are there first and foremost to offset Seinfeld's own normalcy and correctness, as if they are made ridiculous because they are not absolutely as vacuous as they should be: George is bald, chubby and nervous as the toll for being a working man, Eileen's measured neurosis as the price of her ticking biological clock, and Kramer seems to be the series' libidinal id, its Harpo Marx, with his 70s shirts and erect tuft of hair, but as it is never clear what drives him, his drives are nothing but a grotesque nothing-echo to the nothing that is Seinfeld himself.

What is humor without humor? The very question foretells self reflection. When humor presents itself as humorless, and obviously it is a false appearance, it is explicitly ars-poetic. In Greenbergian terms, it has the markings of avant-garde (and, after all, that is the rave of Seinfeld - put simply: popular and experimental both).

Beyond the wariness evoked by the notion of the avant-garde (and particularly in its Greenbergian version), it can hardly be denied that its horizon was dynamic and critical: formal discontent was always connected to cultural, social and spiritual one. Seinfeld's self-love has no such horizon. This is the humor of stasis not as the result of disillusion (there is no chance of arriving, there is no path to pursue), but stasis as a result of satisfaction (I'm perfect here. There is no reason to move).

### **3. Negative Fame and the Humorless: Rupert Pupkin**

In Martin Scorsese's *King of Comedy* (1982), Rupert Pupkin and Masha (Robert De Niro and Sandra Bernhard) are the obsessive fans of TV late night host Jerry Langford (Jerry Lewis). Pupkin and Masha reside in the twilight zone of the admirer turned stalker, between the pathetic and the threatening. This zone can be seen as a parallel to the delusion by which the viewer's identification with his hero is, in a way, becoming identical to him or her. I shall call this cognitive slip spectatorial delusion, and I believe it reverberates profoundly and in many ways in culture, but it shall be discussed in detail elsewhere. In relation to Pupkin, its strong impact is that Pupkin believes that given a chance, he can be a comic star, just like Jerry, his idol.

But the chance, of course, is not given, as the viewer can instantly figure out after watching Pupkin's hopeless comic act, rehearsed in his tiny room, in front of a crowd of cutout cardboard figures and as he exchanges shouts with his mother, in the other room. Once Pupkin and Masha realize that the chance will not be given, they kidnap the star and demand, as ransom, a live stand-up stint for Pupkin on Jerry's show.

Pupkin's absolute lack of comic talent and Masha's erotic aggressiveness emphasize the couple's complete detachment from any context through which to measure and

recognize how ludicrous their expectations are. It is a loss of context not only in terms of the machination of production, social hierarchies and codes of conduct, but an emotional and moral void as well: for them, there is no real distinction between conferring affection on their beloved star, and between assaulting him. Thus, the film is profoundly realistic in its depiction of the cannibalistic-consumptive nature of the entertainment industry.

But the ingenious move of *King of Comedy*'s script is in its total reversal of expectations, when Pupkin does indeed become an overnight star as a result of his deeds. This reversal erases nothing of the singular pathologies of its protagonists (both characters are unforgettable); it simply asserts that the fallacies they reflect are pertinent to the world of television and to the glamour industry as a whole. If in Andy Kaufman there is a longing for the return of the romantic individual subject, Pupkin echoes Warhol's prophecy on the future 15 minutes of glory everyone shall have, as a prophecy that is always already reality in television's cannibalistic being. This is why the film is the sharpest performance of crumbling humor: the 15 minutes fame needs no justification. It exists in and of itself, the result of the need to retail fame, which is why humor without humor is precisely cut to its measures.

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