The comedic base of black comedy: an analysis of black comedy as a unique contemporary film genre

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THE COMEDIC BASE OF BLACK COMEDY

An analysis of black comedy as a unique contemporary film genre.

by

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A thesis submitted (with a separate practical exercise) in fulfillment
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Master of Fine Arts

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Black comedy offers the film-maker a chance to make a strong statement about society. The subject matter of genre films (both story and theme) can be considered a mirror of society, its concerns and preoccupations. While genre film-makers artfully express their vision, they are in fact slaves to the audience and what it wants or needs to see. What the audience wants or needs to see is influenced by culture, politics, economics, morality – the "zeitgeist" of the age. The changing focus of subject and style is a reflection of the changing values and anxieties of our contemporary society.

Black comedy, more than any other genre, is a reflection of the shortcomings of society. Theme is a subtle didactic mechanism in other genres however in black comedy themes are much more evident and incisive. If traditional comedy is a mirror of society, black comedy is the distorted sideshow mirror that exaggerates our imperfections.

During the near century of genre film-making, traditional comedy, like most other genre films, has changed significantly in form but not in content. While contemporary traditional comedies often now embrace suffering, the types of stories and the characters within them are basically the same. They may question the status quo but they remain positive and reactionary stories about individuals successfully overcoming their character flaws, connecting with their fellow man and integrating themselves into society.

Black comedy, however, whose life is almost half that of traditional comedy, appears to have changed significantly in both form and content. It seems to have metamorphosed into a genre that is now very different from that at its inception.

The genre began in the late forties with amusing films about main characters trivializing death in their attempt to integrate themselves with society. Death or
murder was a pivotal part of the story spine\textsuperscript{1}. In these films nobody suffered, the protagonist got what he wanted and the endings were happy.

In contemporary black comedy, death plays somewhere in the film but it is not an essential part of the story spine. Stories now are more concerned with the individuals' suffering from lack of power, and about their inability to integrate themselves into the status quo. In the most recent films, separation with the world is in fact their goal.

If the genre of black comedy has changed so much it raises the question of whether it is still comedy. Should black comedy be considered its own self-determining genre?

Genre films have always been considered by both film practitioners and theorists to be rigid in form. Each genre has its own unique and steadfast conventions. Any malleability arises from their ability to be combined with other genres.

A cursory scrutiny of traditional and black comedy immediately reveals some differences. Traditional comedy is defined as a light and amusing film with a happy end. Every subgenre of comedy has this defining characteristic—except black comedy which is dark, where the audience often feels uncomfortable and the endings are often tragic.

This thesis examines the comedic base of black and white comedy and analyzes their similarities and differences. Because black comedy (as distinct from black humor) is a recent film phenomenon, the thesis draws mainly from contemporary film to illustrate its points. The approach for analysis is an examination of literature followed by practitioner based research into both white and black comedy.

Most of the findings support those found in literature, however research also reveals characteristics and themes in black comedy that have not been previously documented. Where necessary black comedy films have been screened to audiences to support these findings.

\textsuperscript{1} The story spine is the basic through line of the story. It describes the main character's goal, how he overcomes his or her obstacles and the resolution of that conflict. It usually can be expressed in a few sentences
The thesis concludes that black comedy could be considered a supra-genre (a genre that works with other genres), like the art film and musical. One observation is unquestionably evident – black comedy is so different from comedy it should not be considered comedy's sub-genre but rather a separate genre.

The intention of this thesis is to provide a better understanding of black comedy so film practitioners can approach this elusive genre with more confidence and produce more critically successful and popular films. The approach is therefore practitioner based.

Accompanying this thesis is an exercise component- the first draft a black comedy feature film screenplay titled SEXY MONEY which puts into practice all the findings of this thesis.
Chapter 2

COMEDY, BLACK COMEDY AND BLACK HUMOR

Introduction

The chapter first makes a distinction between "comedy" and "a comedy" and defines both these terms.

It then differentiates between the device of black humor and genre of black comedy and defines both.

The chapter examines the preoccupation of death in black humor and black comedy, the need for underplay to create black humor and black comedy's focus of suffering from transgressive behavior.

It also looks at the rhetoric and psychology of black humor and the mechanism of incongruity and underplay that produce the unique reaction of uneasy laughter or amusement.

The way that black comedy has segued into its own unique form, evolving from comedy, black humor and other artistic and philosophical influences is also examined.

Finally, it concludes with a summary of the differences between black humor and black comedy and identifies the points that might contribute to the goal of the thesis.

The approach to this chapter has been an examination of literature and an affirmation, qualification or revision of those ideas after scrutiny of all the black comedy films listed in the Filmography.
Terminology and definitions

Comedy

The term "comedy" can have two meanings. If a work is "comedy" it refers to an aesthetic quality which is similar to "comic". The Oxford Dictionary definition of comic is "causing, or mean to cause laughter." That can be an event, a person, a person's performance or a comedy i.e. a genre of film or theatre. A stand up routine is comedy but is not a comedy.

If a work is a comedy (i.e. with an article "the" or "a") it is a genre, usually referring to a film or theatre production.

The Oxford Dictionary defines a comedy as "a stage play of light, amusing and often satirical character, chiefly representing everyday life, and with a happy ending."

Neale and Krutnick in their POPULAR FILM AND TELEVISION COMEDY support this definition, but with qualifications. "A comedy is only 'chiefly' concerned with representations of everyday life" and happy endings are a "crucial but partial convention". They also maintain that because there is such diversity within film comedy any definition of comedy based upon a single criterion is limited and therefore insufficient. Andrew Horton in his COMEDY/CINEMA/THEORY avoids defining film comedy but notes "More than a dramatic or literary genre, comedy has been viewed in recent years as a particular quality".

The most common and widely accepted belief in the film production industry is that a comedy is a film (or play) that makes us laugh. This is, however, incorrect. Laughter can be the nervous reaction to danger and grief. Many films described as comedies barely make us laugh e.g. THE APARTMENT, and GET SHORTY. Other films that are not categorized as comedy films do make us laugh e.g. ELDORADO, STAKEOUT. Laugher alone doesn't make a film a comedy.

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2 Neale and Krutnick, p 11
3 Ditto, p 12
4 Andrew Horton, p 3
The Oxford definition however, is the one this thesis adopts.

The thesis sometimes uses the pronoun "his" when referring to a character. The word "her" could be equally used.

**Black comedy**

The labels of black comedy, black humor and tragi-comedy are often haphazardly used to describe comedy that is derived from suffering. There are however, very distinct and significant differences.

The term black comedy is a genre description that appears most often in film and theatre. The term is quite common in film and is used by many and varied film practitioners to describe a certain type of genre that, depending upon your school of thought, finds humor from suffering or from the transgression of taboos related to sacredly serious subjects, especially death.\(^5\)

In theatre, the term is used more casually. Martin Donagh's play, *THE LIEUTENANT OF INISHMORE*, is described as, and is, a true black comedy- the humor springs from the juxtaposition of misplaced sentiment and horror. However Peter Sheaffer's play, *BLACK COMEDY* \(^6\) has no black humor and is in fact a farce.\(^7\)

Wes Gehring in his informative *AMERICAN DARK COMEDY: BEYOND SATIRE*, does not specifically define black comedy in film but does call it a "genre of comic irreverence which flippantly attacks what are society's most sacredly serious subjects- especially death."\(^8\)

Death and murder has traditionally been at the top of black comedy's subject list. While death usually has some literal or metaphoric place in black comedy, death

\(^5\) Later we will see that many have in fact categorized such films incorrectly eg Ruthless People has often been described as a black comedy but it is in fact a farce.
\(^6\) The play was about the conditions of light and dark being reversed. The characters behave as if they are in the dark when the lights are on. The title BLACK COMEDY is probably more a play on the "darkness" of the environment however many have thought this a black comedy by genre.
\(^7\) A farce is a comedy based on ludicrously improbable events with absurdly futile proceedings or pretense.
\(^8\) Wes Gehring, p xiv
however does not have to drive the black comedy story. More contemporary films focus on kidnapping, extortion, suicide, torture, and cannibalism—transgressive activities that increase an individual’s power and undermine the conventions of the status quo. While death plays at the beginning and end of AMERICAN BEAUTY, the desire for taboo sex and the quest for life drives the story. Some black comedies like CITIZEN RUTH and SPANK THE MONKEY have no reference to death.

It is interesting to see that Wes Gehring makes no mention of suffering in his analysis of black comedy. His list of black comedy films include TO BE OR NOT TO BE, SOME LIKE IT HOT, THE PRODUCERS and SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE where there is almost no real suffering. Suffering for him is not a defining characteristic of black comedy. The criteria he adopts for his collection of black comedy films are themes—man as beast, the absurdity of the world and the omnipotence of death. While these themes certainly play in black comedy, a film’s genre is not defined by theme.

Voytilla and Petri in their book COMEDY FILM make no mention of suffering, however for Matrundola and O’Neale in their BLACK COMEDY GENRE REPORT, suffering is mandatory. In their UCLA research paper they define black comedy as "... a film that consistently finds humor in death, despair or suffering."9

While the genre began on a light and amusing tone it has metamorphosed into a form where suffering is a defining characteristic.

In some black comedies like SWIMMING WITH SHARKS, CITIZEN RUTH and LITTLE MURDERS characters suffer continuously. There is no possibility for laughter. In the OPPOSITE of SEX, some may be uncomfortably amused by Dede’s bigoted and selfish attitudes that cause so much despair and suffering, however the only laughter that occurs is from Lisa’s colorful comedic (exaggerated) dialogue.

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9 Matrundola and O’Neal, P 1
Humour is defined as the quality or content of something which elicits amusement or laughter. Amusement was part of our definition of comedy. Laughter was not. The inclusion of humor here does not logically indicate black comedy is comedy.
This thesis therefore adopts a definition that integrates the above two definitions – it includes suffering but avoids the world “humor” which implies laughter. **Black comedy is a film that creates uneasy amusement from the despair or suffering that accompanies a flippant or transgressive attitude to sacredly serious subjects and commonly held taboos.**

The omnipresence of despair or suffering raises an interesting point. In comedy, characters suffer only briefly, and audiences never suffer. In black comedy, characters’ suffering may be prolonged and audiences suffer with them.

This defining characteristic of suffering in black comedy is in stark contrast to the definition of comedy as being light and amusing.

**Black Humor**

The most widely held definition of black humor held by film practitioners is that black humor describes a type of humor that attaches itself to the grotesque, morbid or suffering.

Alan Prat in his BLACK HUMOR: CRITICAL ESSAYS supports this notion. He describes it as a "a type of humor that laughs at the blacker sides of life only- at grief, despair, evil, or death or a subjects specific taboo, such as rape, murder, suicide, mutilation or insanity." 10

Pratt notes that critics have been unable to reach a defining consensus as to what black humor is but states that “two points of agreement stand out: Black humor involves the humorous treatment of what is grotesque, morbid or terrifying. And while it bitterly ridicules institutions, value systems and traditions, black humor offers neither explicit or implicit proposals for improving or reforming the painful realities on which it focuses.” 11 Pratt later notes that “black humor occurs when a person who suffers pain or misfortune seems indifferent or even amused by the experience.” 12

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10 ditto, p 1  
11 Alan Prat, xix  
12 Alan Prat, xxiv
In defining black humor, Robert Bruce in his PhD dissertation THAT'S NOT FUNNY, THAT'S SICK, places more emphasis on the intellectual effect of black humor. "Black humor is a specific form of art that uses violent incongruities to break through and not only threaten, but smash our preconceived notions of the way things should be." Black humor requires a character to underplay the seriousness of the situation. His incongruous, nonchalant dialogue contradicts the gravity of the moment.

The incongruent, flippant reaction usually comes from the transgressor. In PULP FICTION it arises from Jules' and Vincent's nonchalant attitude to their impending violence actions. It may, however, also come from a witness to the event. In FARGO Marge is more concerned about her coffee than the gruesome bodies in the snow. In the opening scene of the author's SEXY MONEY, two socialites watch two shoppers fight to the death over a handbag that both want. The flippancy (and black humor) comes from both the witness' and perpetrator's trivialization of violence.

On an overt, immediate level, black humor creates uneasy or uncomfortable laughter or amusement. There is a synthesis of opposite emotions resulting from the juxtaposition of out-of-context and opposite behavior. This often leaves the audience with an uneasy afterthought that the world is impossibly absurd and any attempt to find meaning in life is impossible.

Surrealist Andre Breton in fact first coined the term black comedy to describe a sensibility that questioned and undermined societal norms. His notion was similar to the existentialism of Albert Camus, which shared this idea of absurdity and futility.

Alan Pratt in his CRITICAL ESSAYS finds absurdity a defining characteristic of black humor describing "... a world gone irreversibly wrong, where the logical is the illogical, where madness is a standard condition." 14

13 Robert Bruce, p iv
14 Alan Pratt, p 323
The presence of absurdist black humor in a film does not necessarily make that film a black comedy. PULP FICTION is often incorrectly categorized as a black comedy. It is in fact film-noir laced with black humor.\textsuperscript{15}

The black humor in PULP FICTION comes and goes without any influence on the story spine. In the second scene of PULP FICTION, Jules' and Vincent's uncomfortably humorous foreplay to the violent killing of the frat boys has no effect on the story segments that precede or follow it.

Like the device of slapstick, black humor is a self-standing, self-contained event. It is a mode\textsuperscript{16} of comedy, like satire, irony and parody. Black comedy can work in any film genre, and in theatre, literature, cartoons, comics and even stand-up comedy.

**Tragi-comedy**

Tragicomedy is drama in which the action moves towards catastrophe like a tragedy, but fortunate events or actions intervene to bring about a happy ending.

Many of Shakespeare's later plays e.g. THE TEMPEST, and THE WINTER'S TALE were tragicaludes. The latter has a tragicomic plot in which Queen Hermione is falsely suspected of adultery and condemned to death. She appears to die but in the last scene is reunited with her penitent husband. Samuel Beckett, Tom Stoppard, John Arden, Alan Ayckbourn and Harold Pinter also wrote in this genre. An example of tragic-comedy in film is LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL (1997), WHERE THE BOYS ARE (1960), THE ADJUSTER (1991).

\textsuperscript{15} Film noir is generally a story with a dark, self destructive hero is essentially someone born under a black cloud, who is drawn to a dark fate.

\textsuperscript{16} A mode describes the quality of a part of a larger work; thus a comedy can have passages that are tragic in mode, and a tragedy can have scenes that are in a comic mode (modern criticism often substitutes the more impressive-sounding "comedic," though no-one has yet found a passage "tragic.")
Rhetoric and psychology of black humor

In the previous section black humor was described as a juxtaposition of out-of-context and opposite behavior. It contrasts momentous events (like murder, death, suicide, rape, taboo sex) with incongruous sentimentality, trivial small talk or practical joking.

Like regular humor, the device of black humor is a product of incongruity—of out of context behavior. There is a disparity or gap between expectation and the presentation. We expect a type of behavior appropriate to the serious event but are presented with something completely different.

This disparity is facilitated by the use of figurative rhetorical devices. Understatement is the most common device but other rhetorical techniques may also be used. This dialectic, this contrast of disparate values or emotions is the fundamental mechanism working in black humor. The surprise response is uneasy amusement.

Black humor often arises from the rhetorical play of language in the face of violence. "Black humor uses the technique of language play in order to reverse our expectations and obfuscate our prediction."

The second scene in PULP FICTION provides illustration of the effect of rhetoric. The Travolta and Jackson characters are about to execute three student types who have wandered into their violent playing field. Jackson's character, Jules, begins mindless small talk about the Young Man's hamburger. His Socratic questioning about hamburgers becomes a humorous rhetorical device for dissipating the anticipated violence. The incongruous questioning subverts the audience's expectation and they think the hit men may spare the boys. The audience momentarily begins to relax and scrutinize the situation. They wonder what is happening and are amused or laugh uneasily. Then, when their guard is

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17 The rhetorical techniques for text and speech are numerous—hyperbole, intonation, inflection, repetition, exaggeration, distortion, understatement, innuendo, ambiguity, simile, metaphor, oxymoron, parable, and allegory.

18 Robert Grey Bruce p 153

19 The Socratic method of teaching or inquiry was based on questioning people on the positions they asserted and working them through further with carefully crafted questions into a sea of inevitable contradictions, thus proving that their original assertion had inconsistencies.
fully dropped, the displaced violence returns and the hit men kill the frat boys. The audience's amusement is shattered and they are pulled back into the story stream.

Walter Kerr in his TRAGEDY AND COMEDY notes how "A laugh begins because we see the contradiction between what is happening ... and what we hold to be true; then it falters... because we cannot be certain that what we hold IS true and because what [we see] is happening has the grim authority of a recorded event." 20

Alan Pratt believes the response is cathartic. "The incongruity between form and content [what is presented and what is happening] transforms the emotional energy of fear and pity into cathartic laughter." 21

Pratt also maintains that the juxtaposition of humor and horror can either suspend the extreme emotion or intensify it. As humor through dialogue stalls the expectation of violence, suspense of the inevitable is intensified. He believes that the suspension of both horror and humor emotions can create "a total emotional response." 22 This is the unique emotion of unsettling laughter that black humor (and black comedy) produces.

As the rhetoric of incongruous dialogue moves the audience towards a more detached, objective point of view, they make a reflective, intellectual analysis of the event before them on the screen (and the life in which they live). The rhetoric has in fact become a device for didacticism.

Pratt believes that this result, like the effect of absurdist humor, is a cleansing of man's ontological insecurity. Robert Bruce also posits this notion. He states that black humor affords no escape but offers, through laughter, a way of coexisting with our "absurd, pessimistic, unpredictable and tragic surroundings." 23

The rhetoric creates catharsis.

Rhetoric, however, does not explain the process that allows us to detach ourselves from the event, to intellectually process and respond with laughter or

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20 Walter Kerr, p 320
21 Pratt, P xxiv.
22 Alan Pratt, p 212
23 Robert Bruce, p 35
amusement to what is occurring before us. This is facilitated through "comic distance". The chapter on the Physics of Traditional Comedy explores this most important device, which is seen as one of three fundamental mechanisms operating in comedy.
Rhetoric in black comedy

In the previous section we have seen how the rhetoric of incongruous dialogue is a device for creating black humor which in turn facilitates self reflection. Rhetoric can also be a means for pushing a film-maker's or character's agenda, his particular transgressive point of view that attacks the status quo.

Rhetorical figures are regarded as mock violations of form- they break the norms of logic, morality, social rules and physical reality. Black comedy characters are themselves rhetorical figures. They mock and subvert norms and social rules. They have an agenda to push while they go about daily activity.

This agenda is evident in both their overt activity and their subtext. Subtext is the unspoken thoughts and motives of characters -what they really think and believe. Subtext influences a character's activity, mannerism and gestures.

Characters can create subtext by delivering speeches on two levels - the language “proper” which communicates the overt or superficial, or in acting terms their “outer action”, and the language “figurative” that communicates a covert meaning, or in acting terms their “inner action”. The superficial dialogue moves the action of the scene forward, progressing the narrative. It also may provide exposition and characterization. The figurative dialogue is the subtext- adding strength and impact to a character's statement, creating additional meaning to the language proper and reveal the true intentions of the character.

The black comedy character often uses the rhetoric of hyperbole, exaggeration and understatement. In AMERICAN BEAUTY, Carolyn's speech justifying why she cut down the sycamore tree uses exaggeration and subverted logic, reinforcing her inner action – her self approving character.

CAROLYN
Their sycamore. A substantial portion of the root structure was on our property. You know that. How can you call it their sycamore? I wouldn't have the heart to cut down something that was partially mine, which it wasn't. 24

24 AMERICAN BEAUTY screenplay, Robert Ball, P 8
Lester in AMERICAN BEAUTY often uses rhetoric to push his agenda of transgressive self-development.

LESTER

Janie, I quit my job today. And then I told my boss to fuck himself, and then I blackmailed him for almost sixty thousand dollars. Pass the asparagus.25

The last line about the asparagus completely trivializes the momentous and subversive actions he has just described. Here rhetoric pushes the character’s overt motive or “outer action.”

Visual rhetoric can also push the film-maker’s agenda. In AMERICAN BEAUTY, writer Alan Ball gets the audience to believe that Lester’s desire to have sex with teenage Angela is not a taboo desire but one of absolute beauty. (Beauty in the world is one theme running through the film.) His inclusion of surreal and striking rhetorical imagery, (the metaphoric red rose petals), imbues taboo sex with unquestionable beauty. The overall beautiful cinematic quality of the film also assists this.

The rhetoric of the black comedy film-makers even extends into the sound track. The juxtaposition of violence and the carefree lyrics of “Singing in the Rain” in CLOCKWORK ORANGE, and the nuclear mushroom cloud with the song “We’ll meet again” in DR STRANGELOVE are rhetorical techniques of incongruity that undermine and question our established ideas about violence and war.

As Wes Gehring notes, “Black comedy is one comedy genre where formalistic techniques, such as self consciously elaborating music, reinforce theme.”26

25 AMERICAN BEAUTY SCREENPLAY, Alan Ball, P 61
26 Wes Gehring, P 44
The development of black comedy

How did the fairly recent genre of black comedy come into being? Does black comedy's roots suggest any relationship with traditional comedy?

The genre of black comedy developed from the occasional appearance of dark humor in comedy and other genres. Dark humor first appeared in the anonymous play ARDEN OF FAVERSHAM (c1588-91). Two comic assassins, Black Will and Shakebag botch their attempts to murder Thomas Arden. The play juxtaposed grotesque comedy and murder - creating a sense of violent confusion and random malice in the world. Shakespeare married comedy and violence with two similar characters, Clarence's murderers, in Richard III.

Black humor's emergence as stylistic form was first recognized in literature, in the works of Jonathon Swift (1667-1745), Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), Herman Melville (1819-1891) and even from Mark Twain (1835-1910.)

In 1837, Darwin's naturalistic notion of man haphazardly evolving from a primitive beast questioned the established Christian beliefs of God centred rationalism. Man as beast would later become a theme of contemporary black comedy.

Freud also influenced the development of black humor. His work on theory of jokes and psychoanalysis posited that man was motivated by his dark side and this stimulated an interest in taboos. The surrealism of Bunuel and Dali expressed this subconscious dark side, adding the shock of incongruous juxtaposition. In films like THE ANDALUSION DOG (1928), humor was juxtaposed with graphic violence to produce no other reaction than shock. The shock of incongruity would later be seen as characteristic of contemporary black comedy.

The iconoclasm of American clowns such as Keaton and Chaplin saw an almost Dadaist strategy of subversion and provocation to create chaos, and this too would later become a characteristic of black comedy. In THE GOLD RUSH (1925) and
MODERN TIMES (1936) Chaplin sprinkled his happy ending comedies with an occasionally darkish view of the world which even included cannibalism.

The French developed their own iconoclasm with their tradition in irony that played with the incongruities and absurdities of life, human fallibility and blindness. While many of the French films such as ZERO DE CONDUITE (1933), BIZARRE, BIZARRE (1938), LA RONDE (1950) were farces, their satirical nature opened a door for audiences to self examination. Audience enlightenment would later be seen as a defining characteristic of black comedy.

Comedy in the Hollywood studio era of the 1930's was influenced by the hard economics of the time. The dominant characters in comedy were changing from the "cracker-barrel" heroes as Wes Gehring calls them, to child-like and naïve, urban anti-heroes, like Laurel and Hardy, The Three Stooges and especially the Marx Brothers. Their DUCK SOUP(1933) nihilistically attacked the absurdity of government. These comedic performers were also often fascinated with the world of the wealthy. Their characters were frustrated individuals with often anarchic tendencies who produced chaos at every turn. Man's inability to avoid chaos would later become a common theme in black comedy.

Chaplin's THE GREAT DICTATOR (1940) portrayed a beast-like Hitler and parodied German speech, and like its predecessors, suggested the chaos of an unordered world and the flaws of mortal men.

Lubistch's TO BE OR NOT TO BE was another dark and absurdly comical slant on the 2nd World War. The film was criticized for mixing genres. Wes Gehring notes that "Lubitsch recognized that a pivotal element of dark comedy was this on-the-edge quality- life never limits itself to one emotion." 27 Later black comedy would become known for its ability, and need, to provide mixed messages to the audience.

The emergence of film noir of the forties such as THE BIG SLEEP (1946), THE MALTESE FALCON (1941), THE POSTMAN RINGS TWICE (1946) reflected the

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27 Wes Gehring in Lawrence E Mintz P 78
social dislocation after the 2nd World War and the horror of Holocaust's inhumanity. Audiences were drawn to dark characters, story and settings.

Wes Gehring in his AMERICAN DARK COMEDY finds many similarities between early film noir such as MURDER MY SWEET (1944), KISS OF DEATH (1947), and the more recent CHINATOWN (1974), and black comedy. He finds that both are dark in story and setting, and feature sexuality and death. Both portray anti-heroes alone in a godless world, irrational world. Both share common themes of exposing the short-comings of society and the notion that “the American dream cannot be obtained by earnest and honest efforts.”

Purists however might hold that black comedy became a recognizable form and genre in the forties and fifties with the films ARSENIC AND OLD LACE (1944), MONSIEUR VERDOUX (1947), KIND HEARTS AND CORONETS (1949), THE LADY KILLERS (1955) and THE TROUBLE WITH HARRY (1955). These were all films with one simple premise- murder can be funny. They trivialized death by showing their murderous protagonists killing people with polite composure. Their manner was sympathetic and incongruous to their subversive act. The overall tone, however, was light and amusing. "The humor was derived from the "the contrast between bucolic or domestic setting and some most involuntary murder."

It was the cartoonists and standup comedians of the fifties and sixties, particularly Jules Feiffer and Lenny Bruce, who broadened the attack of black humor. Their anarchistic wit confronted audiences and sliced at every sacred cow from an underdog perspective. Nothing was spared- taboo sex, dysfunction in work, marriage, and racism.

The fifties also saw the personality comedian develop antihero characters which they mixed with their cool, egotistical wise guy personalities. Bob Hope was an example of this. His "comic duality complements modern humor's fascination with the schizophrenic." Woody Allen, Martin and Lewis developed antihero/wise guy comic characteristics. Jerry Lewis however, was the ultimate antihero. Lewis

28 Wes Gehring. P 135
29 Byron and Weiss, p 177
30 Wes Gehring in Lawrence E Mintz, p 75
transgressed social mores and values and subverted the notion of masculinity. His neurotic characters were the embodiment of bad taste and repression. Order collapsed as a result of excess. His slapstick was joyless and never funny. "It [the humor] always has a disturbing, faintly uncomfortable undertone... it involves a kind of spectatorial response that one is reluctant to admit even to oneself". 31 The suffering and search for true identity that characterized his films would be later seen as a defining characteristic and theme in black comedy.

At the same time as these personality comedians embraced anti-heroes, screwball comedy moved into the suburbs. Later black comedy would follow this path as the suburban anti-hero become the preoccupation of contemporary black comedies (such as in THE OPPOSITE OF SEX and AMERICAN BEAUTY.)

The genre films of the fifties and early sixties reflected the anxieties from the cold war, build up of nuclear arms and the specter of holocaust. It was Stanley Kubrick who really pushed black humor into the modern age and cemented the genre of black comedy in cinema with his DR STRANGELOVE (1964). His focus was not on death but apocalypse. His film played with the synthesis of opposites of private and institutional thought- the struggle for power failing from both technological and personal shortcomings. 32

THE LOVED ONE (1965) continued black comedy's original focus of the trivialization of death with incongruous behavior. Black humor appeared in Fellini's SATYRYCON (1969) when he trivialized grotesque corporeal behavior with incongruent, inappropriate behavior from gay, comic characters.

The genre found further exposure with its appearance in theatre. Joe Orton's LOOT (1966) and ENTERTAINING MR SLOAN (1964) were both black comedies that squeezed uncomfortable humor from corpses and body parts. Like the first black comedy films, death was part of the story spine.

The popularity of outlaw-couple/ gangster film BONNIE AND CLYDE (1967), BADLANDS (1973), SUGARLAND EXPRESS (1974), was a reaction to the sixties

31 The Cinematic Body, P219
32 This film has been incorrectly categorized by many as a black comedy. It is in fact black irony. The reasons will become evident from the chapter on Characteristics of Black Comedy.
and that decade’s preoccupation with love, youthfulness, and freedom. These films were a reflection of young people’s estrangement with the status quo and its manifestation, the Establishment. Good and evil were polarized in these films.

The sixties had seen idealism flourish. Drugs afforded a new way of viewing life - young society cried out for the world to be a better place. Then in the seventies, the world did not change and cynicism flourished.

In the films that followed, the delineation between good and evil became blurred. The focus of disaffection shifted to American politics. The preoccupation with outlaw-couple/ gangster films was replaced by a resurgence of political conspiracy films such as THE PARALLAX VIEW (1974), ALL THE PRESIDENTS MEN (1976). These films questioned the ethics and values of the establishment and figures of authority. This was also an emerging characteristic of contemporary black comedy.

Society’s cynicism with life reflected itself in disaster films THE TOWERING INFERNO (1974), EARTHQUAKE (1974). Through metaphor, these films shook the foundations of society and were a reaction to the trauma from the Nixon administration. As Barry Keith Grant notes in his EXPERIENCE AND MEANING IN GENRE FILMS, in contrast to the outlaw-couple/ gangster films, the good seem to perish along with the evil in these films. This decade saw the growing disaffection with society and an increasing questioning of the boundaries between normal and abnormal. Again these were characteristics of black comedy. It could be argued that society’s cynicism and anxiety about their individual powerlessness was instrumental in increasing the popularity of black comedy.

The seventies saw a number of films produced where black humor focused its iconoclastic charge to a wider range of subjects. Altman’s MASH (1970) trivialized the horror’s of war with incongruous dialogue. HAROLD AND MAUDE (1971) embraced a teenager’s dysfunctional attitude to sex and Kubrick's CLOCKWORK ORANGE (1971) trivialized violence with incongruous behavior and language. All these films were controversial at their time – films about the violation of these taboos had never been awarded such critical acclaim and commercial success. It appeared that black comedy was entering a period of relative popularity.
Carl Reiner's WHERE'S POPPA (1970) was significant in that it was the beginning of a shift in focus for black comedy towards the fertile playground of dysfunction within the family. Similarly, LITTLE MURDERS (1971) directed its acerbic black humor on a family's incongruous behavior when surrounded by a decaying society. NETWORK (1976) focused on family and work for the thrust of its satirical attack-the trivialization of suicide. Blake Edward's S.O.B. (1981) whose theme was sex as chaos was also set in the home.

The focus on domestic situations continued into the eighties. Murder and cannibalism were an acceptable and frivolous means to make money for a domestic couple in EATING RAOUl (1982). In RAISING ARIZONA (1987), a childless couple kidnaps a baby to satisfy their need for parenting. WAR of THE ROSES (1989) focused its subversive charge on the decay of decorum in marriage and divorce. HEATHERS (1989) directed its attack at status and competition in the schoolyard.

These two decades saw a significant shift of black comedy's focus towards domestic situations. Domestic drama is possibly the most accessible genre for audiences- because it is the most familiar. It was as if the sensibilities in black comedy were tapping into the deepest roots in society. Characters in these domestically based films felt powerless, unable to deal with their problems in an acceptable manner.

As consumerism flourished in 1980s, so did a new breed of status seekers. Hostile takeovers, leveraged buyouts, and mega-mergers spawned a new breed of billionaire. Many questioned the ethics involved. The trend continued into the 1990's.

The nineties saw the emergence of video and computer game culture. In the latter, violence and killing were popularized and normal emotions subverted. Two significant gangster films emerged from this milieu. PULP FICTION (1994) and NATURAL BORNE KILLERS (1994) were both violent films where the main characters subverted the normal reaction to violence with their inane incongruous reactions and dialogue. The blurring between right and wrong that characterized many films of the seventies, continued. One that runs
through PULP FICTION and NATURAL BORN KILLERS is “man as beast”, a theme common in black comedy. These films have in fact been labeled by some as black comedies.33

Black comedy changed again in these two decades. The stories broadened, embracing other taboos as a reaction to the individual’s impotence within society. Suffering and despair became more prevalent- very different to the early black comedies that were light and amusing, and initially focused their story spine on a single transgression- murder.

SWIMMING WITH SHARKS (1994), SPANKING THE MONKEY(1994), FARGO (1996), THE OPPOSITE of SEX (1998) and AMERICAN BEAUTY (1999) were all set in the work/ domestic environment and featured an average person who seemed to have lost his power and sort to regain it through transgressive means. The characters in these films were more widely subversive and anti-establishment than those in the early black comedies.

At the same time, the transgressive standup comedy from Lenny Bruce’s prodigies, Richard Prior, Eddie Murphy and Chris Rock often focused their attack on the black American underdog and his place of suffering, the ghetto.

Interestingly, comedy seemed also to change during this period and appeared to embrace some of the characteristics of black comedy. Some films billed as traditional comedies (eg MEET THE PARENTS) barely contained a laugh.

In 1999 black humor moved into mainstream television with THE SOPRANOS and the subversive, nihilistic SOUTH PARK. While not black comedies, both THE SIMPSONS and SOUTH PARK were instrumental in subversive, nihilistic humor - gaining a recognizable and commercial audience.

Daniel Clowes’ comics and graphic novels, such as DAVID BORING (2000), GHOST WORLD (2001), embraced themes characteristic of black comedy, such as the existential absurdity of life that Wes Gehring calls “the leaf in the wind

33 Wes Gehring in his AMERICAN DARK COMEDY calls them black comedies however his questionable criteria for a black comedy is theme.
syndrome”, and the omnipotence of death. His characters, however, are basically nice, with moral fibre under their tough exteriors. While his works could not be described as black comedy, they did, like John Callahan’s razor edged cartoons of human weirdness, push black humor into yet another medium.

In 2002 the series drama SIX FEET UNDER attracted significant television audiences. Set in a funeral parlor, death was always present, however the stories were not about death but domestic relationships. The black humor in this series had the same function as the device of slapstick in traditional comedy. It was a divergence, a self standing (black) comic punctuation that had no influence on the human drama story spine. Black humor had found a place in other genres and was now a device for creating laughter. It is probably only a matter of time before the genre of black comedy also appears in television series.

It could be argued that black comedy, having changed so much from its original form and style is currently mirroring the frustrations of society more than other film genres that seek more reactionary closures to society’s anxieties. This is an age where the individual's powerlessness is painfully apparent, where terrorism has shown that given the right situation man is capable of doing almost anything. Those are in fact characteristics of black comedy, characteristics very different from its parent- light and amusing comedy.
Chapter 3

CHARACTERISTICS of BLACK COMEDY

Introduction

The chapter articulates the fundamental and defining characteristics of the genre of black comedy.

There is limited literature written specifically on this genre - most of the work historically has been on black humor, satire and irony. In his book AMERICAN DARK COMEDY: BEYOND SATIRE Wes Gehring discusses black comedy from a thematic point of view but does not define black comedy. His approach is one of a film theorist. Voytilla and Petri's chapter on black comedy in COMEDY FILM is more practitioner based - the characteristics of black comedy are discussed but the themes are ignored. The most recent work comes from Matrundola and O'Neale's GENRE REPORT: BLACK COMEDY (2002), however that analysis, being only a report, is not in great depth. Furthermore, genre lists of black comedy films vary considerably.

My own practitioner based examination of this film genre weighs heavily in this chapter. The characteristics of a protagonist caught in an emotional prison caused by a lack of power, his negative goals, and audiences enlightenment appear in literature and I have substantiated these. Other characteristics, namely trivialization of antisocial behavior, subversion from false values, the character flaw of imprudence, and derision and dysfunction are either (more accurate) modifications from literature or new characteristics from my own research. Some of the themes appear in Wes Gehring's book AMERICAN DARK HUMOR, however my research reveals other themes previously undocumented.

Because black comedy has changed from light and amusing to a much darker genre where suffering is almost mandatory, I have focused my examination on contemporary black comedy films.
Lack of power

Film stories, particularly those based on the 3 Act structure, often begin with the protagonist in crisis, suffering from some “lack”, trapped in some physical or emotional prison.

Examination of the contemporary black comedies in the Filmography reveals most of the protagonists in crisis due to lack of power. They have no control over their lives, lovers or jobs. Their powerlessness may be caused by lack of money, beauty, knowledge, status or strength, or by someone withholding sex. (Sex may be a tool for job advancement or revenge on a lover.) The antagonist often has the desired power and blocks the protagonist’s efforts to get power.

The protagonist’s decision to rectify their lack of power by some transgressive action is the beginning of the black comedic story. It is the driving force behind the protagonist’s obsessive goal. Power itself may even be the desired end, the character’s ultimate goal.

Many of the most successful black comedies like AMERICAN BEAUTY and EATING RAOUL revolve around death, sex and power. “Death, sex, and power create the classic black comedy triad.” While murder has traditionally been the most common method for regaining power, analysis of contemporary black comedies reveal a wider range of transgressive actions, like extortion, torture, and cannibalism.

In AMERICAN BEAUTY, Lester’s powerlessness manifests itself as lack of esteem. He is trapped in an anaestheticizing prison of family and work. His transgressive desire to have sex with teenage Angela and blackmail his boss is a vehicle for increasing his power.

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34 Matrundola and O’Niele, p 3
35 The Central Dramatic Question raised from the Catalyst event is- Will Lester have sex with Angela? The Climax answers that question in the negative, i.e. he doesn’t have sex with her because of respect for her. Power is not part of his agenda with her but rather the agenda towards Carolyn, his wife and his boss. Note that while the immediate Dramatic Question is to have sex with (beautiful) Angela, his super objective is to experience the joy of life, of which she is a part.
Brad, in the author’s SEXY MONEY, is initially powerless, trapped in a cycle of working, spending and being burgled, and when he loses his job, trapped in a prison of financial insecurity.

Oliver and Barbara in WAR of THE ROSES are both trapped in a prison of divorce and competition. Their lives become a power struggle as they compete to retain the family home. Guy, the protagonist in SWIMMING WITH SHARKS, is trapped in a prison of subservience and is powerless under the Buddy’s tyranny. Guy resorts to murder and torture to restore his power. Likewise, in FARGO, Jerry is trapped in the prison of financial folly and has no power in the family business. Dede, in THE OPPOSITE of SEX, suffers from lack of sustainable power. She is trapped in a self made prison of selfishness.

These characters’ frustration and powerlessness at home and work can be seen as a reflection of a wider anxiety about the divisions or power and the struggle for identity in an increasingly controlled and alienating society.

The lack of power that drives black comedy characters sometimes also propels characters in traditional comedies. Comedy can spring from the nihilistic manner in which protagonists attempt to rectify their powerlessness.

What distinguishes black comedy from comedy (and other genres) is its characters’ ingrained transgressive attitude and manner. They refuse to belong. They are at war, fugitives forever at odds with the surrounding world. Like that world, their view of what is right and wrong has becomes blurred or of no consequence. The means justify the end.
Rebellion, Negative goals and false values

The notion of a protagonist pursuing false values and creating transgressive, anti-social goals is also a defining characteristic of black comedy.

Martrundola and O'Neale in the BLACK COMEDY: GENRE REPORT and Voytilla and Petri in WRITING THE FILM COMEDY support this notion. "Rebellion is a defining characteristic of the protagonist...the hero's goal is often negative."  

Analysis of the black comedy Filmography reveals that protagonists achieve their goals through murder, kidnapping, suicide, extortion, teenage sex, torture, cannibalism or even larceny. With the appropriate treatment, these actions could be subjects for thrillers, crime stories, or human dramas.

It is however, the subversive manner in which the character rebels, and his attitude behind the manner that characterizes black comedy.

Main characters have a nonchalant or transgressive attitude towards these significant human events- they are blind to the taboos associated with them. Taboos are part of society's value system but they do not figure in the emotional landscape of the black comedy protagonist. Black comedy characters have a different (skewed) perspective of the world compared to normal people. By normal standards their goals are negative, destructive, morally wrong, anti-social, anti-establishment ie transgressive. Voytilla and Petri support this motion. "The hero's desire in a black comedy is typically negative... [They] often want to destroy or change a system that society holds dear".

In AMERICAN BEAUTY, Lester's rebels against his anaesthetizing family life by developing his body through (narcissistic) weight training. His (negative) goal is to have sex with teenage Angela, his daughter's best friend. He also rebels against his stupefying work - seeking severance pay (his goal) by blackmailing his boss, and hanging out and smoking dope with a teenage neighbor.

36 Voytilla and Petri, p 165
37 Voytilla and Petri, p 165
Lester's actions are exaggerated and subversive. They are contrary to normal behavior and undermine the function of the family and work. Due to his warped value system, Lester fails to see any transgression. He sees his exaggerated actions as quite acceptable. There is a disparity or gap between how he sees the world and how the world actually is. In comedy it is called a "comic gap" and this is discussed at length in the next chapter.

This flippancy regarding resolving issues with antisocial acts permeates all black comedies. In THE OPPOSITE of SEX Dede considers her destructive pathological manipulation of people as quite normal. In WAR of THE ROSES, neither Oliver or Barbara question their disgusting, antagonistic and finally lethal subversive behavior. Howard Beale in NETWORK has a nonchalant attitude to his own suicide. In EATING RAOUl murdering sex fiends and selling their bodies to restaurants are simple solutions to Paul and Mary Bland's money problems.

In SEXY MONEY, Brad rebels against the cycle of buying and being burgled, and against his financial insecurity. His values are warped. He places so much importance on having being able to give Angela a lavish and memorable 18th birthday that it crushes the ethics he once had- so he burgles his acquaintances and friends.

These characters' subversive actions are an externalization of their internal feelings of powerlessness and loss of identity. Their attitudes are in contrast to comedy characters that do not hold such subversive attitudes. Comedy characters might create havoc with anarchic behavior, deride the status quo and mock institutions but their intention is always a restoration of the status quo. Their ultimate goal is reactionary. They seek and find integration with society, whereas black comedy characters, through their transgressive approach, are destined to separation.

38 In traditional comedy we will later see that laughter springs from the difference (gap) between a character's view of the world and our normal view. A similar gap (producing uncomfortable amusement) is operating in black comedy
39 As mentioned before, some of the films that Wes Gehring nominates as black comedies (e.g. TO BE OR NOT TO BE, SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE) are not true black comedies for their characters do not transgress social norms.
Walter Kerr, in his TRAGEDY AND COMEDY supports this notion. “Non black comedy looks at affirmation, or the pretense to it, and finds it faulty. Black comedy acknowledges the disappearance of affirmation altogether and... tries to work with the proposition that no motive is ever good and that no man would care to deceive himself into thinking one might be.”

In all the films discussed above, the black comedy protagonists are active characters who drive the story. In traditional comedy, antagonists often drive the story - with protagonists reacting from their actions. Jack Burns drives the story in MEET THE FOCKERS. A time warp is the antagonist in GROUNDHOG DAY and drives that story.

Black comedy protagonists cannot be too subversive or too black otherwise audiences will not empathize with them. One of the reasons that AMERICAN BEAUTY works so well is because we like Lester. While he has an unquestionably transgressive attitude there is also much about him that is familiar and this makes us want to root for him. We see his humanity and his personal honesty. His sexual desire towards a teenage Angela may well be taboo, but is a desire that many men privately have. (A character’s “secret wish” is discussed at length in the next chapter.) In addition, Alan Ball’s use of surreally beautiful visual rhetoric of rose petals colors taboo sex with such beauty that it is impossible not to want it.

40 Walter Kerr, p 317
Lack of perceptiveness

Matrundola and O'Neale in BLACK COMEDY: GENRE REPORT maintain ambition is the most active character flaw in black comedy - the driving force behind protagonists' short-term success, and their downfall.

Lester in AMERICAN BEAUTY, however, has no ambition. His long term goals are escaping desensitizing marriage, shaping up, having sex with Angela and finding the beauty of the world. Ambition doesn't figure at all in THE OPPOSITE of SEX. Dede will stop at nothing to get her way, but she has no long term goals, no ambition.

While ambition plays in many black comedy films, scrutiny of the protagonists in the black comedy Filmography reveals that the most common character flaw is lack of perceptiveness. Comedy protagonist are drawn naively into situations. Black comedy protagonists are aware of the immediate repercussions of their transgressive actions, but fail to see outside their narrow perspective.

What brings Lester down in AMERICAN BEAUTY is not his morally questionable goals and breaking of taboos, but rather his failure to see the repercussions of his behavior. Lester smokes pot and develops a close relationship with his neighbor's son, Ricky Fitts, knowing his father is ultra-conservative. This decision to develop a friendship with young Ricky, not his transgressive goals, leads to his death. He loses touch with reality. His flaw is his lack of awareness.

Brad in SEXY MONEY lacks perceptiveness. He fails to see the severity of his children's disgust with him and his wife Gaynor. He is blind to the festering abhorrence from his wife. He also fails to see that decorating his home from the spoils of burglary is inviting disaster.

In WAR OF THE ROSES Oliver and Barbara are too competitive to coexist together. They both cannot see the repercussions of their actions, the escalating war between them and the fatal direction they are heading. They both lack perceptiveness. Guy in SWIMMING WITH SHARKS fails to see the repercussions
of his torture and Dede in the OPPOSITE OF SEX cannot see beyond her immediate selfish, subversive, and disruptive behavior.

In black comedy this lack of perceptivity, this narrow awareness drives black comedy protagonists inexorably to their fate.

Walter Kerr in his COMEDY AND TRAGEDY maintains that tragedy occurs when a man uses his freedom without reservation. This is also what the black comedy protagonist does. Like the tragic hero, he also commands exceptional power, and his capacities remain undiminished. Like the tragic hero, the black comedy protagonist is often responsible for his own undoing.

The black comedy protagonist has more in common with protagonist in tragedy that his counterpart in traditional comedy.
Voytilla and Petri in their COMEDY FILM describe how black comedy derides the sacred and solid institutions that are traditionally at the foundation of our working society. "Excellent black comedy leaves a mark. It points out how our society falsely worships a set of systems, institutions, and values... The central conflict strives for institutional change." 41

Critical analysis of the black comedy films in the Filmography supports this notion, revealing a variety of institutions in a (sometimes comic) state of dysfunction. It finds that participants of these institutions are often supporting characters42 who behave in an exaggerated or incongruous manner however they themselves are blind to their ways. This in itself derides the institution.

When AMERICAN BEAUTY begins, the loveless, dysfunctional dynamics of the Burnham and neighboring Fitts families are immediately evident. There is not one normal person in sight. Family however, is supposed to be an environment of love and a safe haven from sexual dysfunction and aberration. Sex with your teenage daughter’s best friend is a taboo. Lester, however, does not see it that way but rather the means to a higher state. As he moves towards that goal, he becomes a more fulfilled person, something he could never achieve in his marriage. Angela breaks another taboo by wanting to sleep with Lester. While they fail in their goals, Lester and Angela eventually obtain fulfillment through communication. Attempting to break the taboo has temporarily had a positive effect on their lives and therefore questions the validity of the taboo and derides the notion of family being an environment of love and a safe haven from sexual aberration.

In the author’s SEXY MONEY, the police force as a crime fighting institution is derided when they display their awe for the celebrity thief who has been regularly burgling Brad’s home. When Brad gains material success and personal respect as a house breaker to celebrities, it mocks the notion that success is built on hard work and honesty. The inviolability of family and marriage is derided when the entire family wants to kill each other. In the end, the dysfunction focuses on

41 Voytilla and Petri, p 164
42 A supporting character is an essential character in the story spine but not the main character. Carolyn Burnham is the supporting character in AMERICAN BEAUTY.
Angela's party which slides inexorably in chaos, both parents dying in unexpected ways.

WAR OF THE ROSES similarly shows dysfunction in the family, and derides the sanctity of marriage by violating propriety. THE OPPOSITE OF SEX derides bigoted, moralizing conservatism, and also shows dysfunction within the family. SWIMMING WITH SHARKS shows dysfunction in the Hollywood film industry and by breaking the taboo of kidnapping and torture, derides the blind, power obsessed system on which it is structured. CITIZEN RUTH derides political moralizing by showing how bribery influences opinion.

These examples reveal that it is generally black comedy protagonists who create the most derision and dysfunction. They take a taboo within an institution, treat it as normal behavior and then pursue it without question. The taboo creates great change and initially increases the functionality of the protagonist, but creates more dysfunction in the institution, causing others to suffer.

If breaking the taboo immediately increases protagonists' functionality, it questions the value of the taboo and derides the institution that created it. As the thesis described in the last chapter, breaking the taboo and not being aware of the effect, causes the fall of the protagonist and the institution to slide further into literal or metaphoric dysfunction. 43

In black comedy order never exists from the beginning. Dysfunction rules, particularly in the film's resolution. Later this thesis reveals that comedy may temporarily create dysfunction, but in the end, functionality wins and order is restored. The resolutions of comedy and black comedy are quite the opposite.

43 One exception to this is EATING RAOUl. The transgressive acts of Paul and Mary cause no suffering. They succeed at their goal and integrate themselves into the world. Nevertheless EATING RAOUl is a black comedy. It contains some traditional comedy moments however it is predominantly black.
Blind, tragic failure and enlightenment

In black comedy protagonists invariably fail at their goal to realize themselves. Curiously, neither Voytilla and Petri, nor Matrundola and O'Neale state that black comedy characters fail, however critical analysis of the black comedies in this Filmography reveals that this is generally the case. In the exceptions, EATING RAOUL and HAROLD AND MAUDE, the protagonists' success is qualified, and at someone's expense.

Most however, like the tragic figures in Shakespeare, do not see their hopeless future, their impending fate or dangerous effect of their behavior. The climax for these protagonists is invariably tragic and generally involves a death (murder or suicide) or symbolic death (arrest, loss of love or self.) Often the entire system fails. Voytilla and Petri support this notion. "The climactic battle will destroy the system that the hero has targeted... In these battles, people may be killed, they may go crazy and communities may be destroyed." 44

Barbara and Oliver in WAR of THE ROSES both fail to achieve their goal of individual ownership of the house and through their lack of perceptivity, their inability to discern the collapsing world around them, they both eventually lose everything, even their own lives. Lester in AMERICAN BEAUTY fails to make his body building productive. He fails to have sex with Angela and he fails in his attempt to communicate with his daughter Jane. In the end he dies.

Dede in THE OPPOSITE of SEX fails to successfully integrate herself into any domestic situation. In DR STRANGELOVE, both the US and Russian systems of nuclear deterrent fail. The B52 pilot (absurdly) rides the bomb to its target and the world is presumably destroyed.

In SEXY MONEY, Brad thinks he has achieved both his goals- giving Angela a lavish party, and becoming a successful criminal. In the end, however, dysfunction rules. The party turns into chaos and, with his love interest Arlene, he kills himself- losing everything he valued.

44 Voytilla and Petri, P 167
If protagonists don’t fail, they continue their life as they did in the beginning. Ruth in CITIZEN RUTH fails to overcome her addiction and make something of her life. She fails in her attempt to make money from the warring abortion factions. The opposing abortion factions also fail, in the end fighting chaotically in the streets while Ruth, their focus, walks away, her addiction uncured. She leaves in exactly the same hopeless state of mind that she had in the beginning.

Despite the often tragic endings in black comedy, there usually appears a glimmer of hope. Occasionally it comes from the characters themselves, like the reflective voice of dead Lester in AMERICAN BEAUTY. However most often it comes from the audience. It is them, rather than the protagonist, who learns something from the journey. Voytilla and Petri support this notion. “The elixir in black comedy is what the protagonist refuses to learn... The elixir is transferred to the audience”.  

The audience hopes that Ruth in CITIZEN RUTH, Dede in THE OPPOSITE OF SEX, and Veronica in HEATHERS will go on to find something better. That hope comes from an understanding of what has happened to these characters and why. While witnessing their journey, or lack of journey, the audience learns something of the underlying anxiety that has caused their transgressive behavior.

More than any other genre, the black comedy protagonist can be seen as a cipher illuminating the shortcomings of the world. Witnessing failure from lack of foresight makes us more generous towards foolishness and transgressions endemic to our society.

Objectivity and reflection like this is facilitated when the audience detaches themselves from the story and distances themselves from the emotional pull of the character in action. This is discussed in depth in the next chapter.

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45 Voytilla and Petri, P 168

The notion of elixir grew from Joseph Campbell’s writings on myth and was developed by Chris Vogler in his book THE WRITERS’ S JOURNEY in which he applies the mythic journey and its archetypes to cinema. Most climaxes involve “a return of an elixir”. The elixir is something that the hero brings back to his original world that solves the problems of that world. It may be something that characters embrace which restores the original situation that was in crisis at the beginning of the film.
Audience enlightenment is often facilitated in black comedy through a voice of reason- a character or narrator who sees the blind transgression of the protagonist and verbalizes his concern. While the characters in the story do not hear or heed this voice, the audience is very aware of it.

Gavin, the lawyer is the voice of reason in WAR OF THE ROSES. In the final scene after the death of the main characters, Gavin reflects on the outcome. He encourages some objective thought from the audience- could any happy marriage become such a deadly nightmare of bickering and power play? In AMERICAN BEAUTY the voice of reason is "dead" Lester reflecting on his life. In THE OPPOSITE OF SEX it is Lisa who discerns and verbalizes the true nature of Bill's crumbling life. In HEATHERS the voice of reason is sometimes Veronica's internal thoughts expressed during her diary writing, other times from the dialogue of Paulene Fleming, the hippy teacher.

Black comedy and comedy are very different in the effect they have on audiences. The didacticism and enlightenment that characterizes black comedy does not appear in comedy. Comedy is far more superficial. As the previous chapter revealed, comedy seeks simplistic ending and integration of the character and society. The endings are positive. As Voytilla and Petri aptly state, "Thus we learn the value of black comedy: by saying something negative, the end result is positive." 46

46 Voytilla and Petri P 165
Themes

The themes in traditional comedy are as varied as their sub-genres. Romantic comedies like MEET THE PARENTS, and MEET THE FOCKERS often have a theme of love or sincerity conquering personal differences. Fish-out-of-water comedies like TOOTSIE, TRADING PLACES, often have themes like talent overcomes preconception, or sincerity overcomes prejudice. The themes are about a character moving, or being transformed, from a negative to a positive state.

The themes in black comedy are very different. They are not concerned about man’s movement to a positive state. They are assertive comments about man and the world in which he lives.

Wes Gehring in AMERICAN DARK COMEDY has written extensively on the themes in black comedy. He finds three themes running through American black comedy up to 1996 - man as beast, the absurdity of the world, and the omnipotence of death. These themes are intertwined and if there was ever one statement that encapsulated black comedy it is Gehring’s comment of “the genres trademark of undercutting any concept of man’s nobility”.47

Man as beast or man’s inhumanity to man is witnessed in many black comedies from a simple sympathetic portrayal of an endearing murderer in MONSIEUR VERDOUX, the terrifying violence of gangs and criminals in CLOCKWORK ORANGE, NATURAL BORN KILLERS, and PULP FICTION, to a frightening scenario of institutionalized mass destruction in DR STRANGELOVE. These films, which all graphically demonstrate the madness of senseless violence, which showed the individual as a absurd, self-centered, murderous being, were metaphors for a wider endemic social malady. In MONSIEUR VERDOUX, Chaplin portrays a sympathetic small-time murderer but his actions are a metaphor for the crushing power of big business. In CLOCKWORK ORANGE, NATURAL BORN KILLERS and PULP FICTION, directors Kubrick, Stone and Tarantino reveal their grim and cynical view of mankind as an animal that will always be attracted to violent and monstrous crimes.

47 Wes Gehring, p 29
While this theme of man's inhumanity to man may be found in other genres, black comedy, through trivialization, presents it in a much more digestible way. Without this treatment the grim and violent subject matter would be unacceptably confronting. The theme of man as beast could never be found in comedy which, by definition, seeks to be light and amusing.

Another theme, sometimes closely related to man as beast, is man's dysfunctional relationship with sex. Gehring does not differentiate this from man as beast, however there are instances where a dysfunctional relationship with sex is not necessarily beastly. This is evident in AMERICAN BEAUTY where Lester, sexually attracted to teenage Angela, contains his animalistic instinct and maintains decorum. In HAROLD and MAUDE, Harold's attraction to elderly Maude manifests itself in a charming, albeit unusual manner. In the author's SEXY MONEY, Justin and his sister Angela care so much about each other they share a bed together. (Their incestuous sexual relationship is never seen but rather inferred.) There is no sign in any of these films of protagonists behaving like beasts.

Gehring also notes that the absurdity of the world is another dominant theme playing in black comedy. "Black absurdity is presented through the chaos of an unordered universe and through the flaws of mortal men."48

In LITTLE MURDERS, the absurdity of man's behavior drives the story and is the predominant theme. Alfred's goal is photographing dog droppings. Absurd, ritualistic, everyday behavior dominates all the characters in the Newquist family. Absurdity is in fact part of the antagonist. Man here is cast as a powerless player, a spectator, alone in a godless world and victimized just because he exists. As Paul says in AFTER HOURS 49 "All I wanted to do was to go out and have a nice time. Do I have to die for it?" Gehring aptly calls it this "leaf in the wind" syndrome.

The absurdity of institutions is part of the bigger comment on society in LITTLE MURDERS and the author's SEXY MONEY. In both these films, the institution under question (the police) is supposed to provide security and protection for the

48 Wes Gering, p 36

49 Gehring nominates AFTER HOURS as a black comedy however using my definition it is not. The main character does not transgress society's values. Griffin Dunne's goal is merely to get home. AFTER HOURS is dark comedy which is different from (the genre of) black comedy.
protagonist. It is however, portrayed with comic ineffectuality and when the protagonist successfully transgressing the taboo which the institution guards, it renders the institution useless.

As Gehring comments, "This man-made absurdity is the result of both general species incompetence and its perpetuation in the human institutions."\(^{50}\) In Dr STRANGELOVE man is incapable of separating the personal from the institutional, and is incapable of controlling what he has created. His intellectual capacities have not kept up with his achievements. No matter how sophisticated the technology, man will always still be in control, and he will always mess it up.

Absurdity (and intellectual reflection) is also the end product of black humor. For example, in PULP FICTION, Jules' and Vincent's chat about hamburgers, when about to shoot the frat boys, is darkly absurd. In the author's SEXY MONEY, Jimmy's and Larry's discussion about barter after they have shot the Burglar is also absurd.

These different forms of absurdity are all forms of rhetoric – all calling attention to man's inescapable shortcomings; to man being a muddle of conflicting emotions who cannot free himself from life's absurdities and its random king hits.

Gehrings' "leaf in the wind" syndrome, a notion of powerlessness, is worth more scrutiny than he gives it, for it is a now a popular theme in contemporary black comedy. Many protagonists in contemporary black comedy suffer from lack of power. In these films the dialect of power, (freedom, influence and control), and powerless (submission, insignificance), plays out until the climatic end. The abortion factions in CITIZEN RUTH vie for power and control over Ruth, who, like the leaf in the wind, is blown from favoring one to another. Sometimes one faction succeeds, other times the other wins. Howard Beale is powerless in NETWORK until he gains control of the rating through his transgressive idea to suicide on stage. He epitomizes society's frustrations when he calls for people to stop what they are doing and shout "I'm angry as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore." In AMERICAN BEAUTY, once Lester overcomes his submissiveness he "rules". Carolyn, his wife loses power. He befriends Ricky who gains power over his father

\(^{50}\) Wes Gehring, P 39
who previously ruled in their house. And in SEXY MONEY, Brad begins subservient at work to James, and at home to Gaynor. He is also the victim of fate (constant burglary) and when the opportunity arises, he seizes power and from that moment on, he rules in the house. Transgression creating power is perhaps the most popular theme in contemporary black comedy.

The third theme that Gehring cites is the omnipotence and finality of death. He describes how the transitory nature of life makes death itself an absurdity. Man, an extraordinary functioning, thinking, entity becomes on death, a decaying mass of bone and watery sludge. This infers a denial of order, a denial of god. As Mary Bland in EATING RAOUL puts it, “He was a man, now he’s just a piece of garbage.”51 If life is insignificant, death is insignificant, and is therefore underplayed.

In black comedy, death strikes whenever and wherever it is unexpected. The Shopkeeper nonchalantly kills a robber during a discussion about wine in the opening of in EATING RAOUL. IN SEXY MONEY death comes unexpectedly and at the worst time possible. While robbing a mansion, lusty old Johno has (ironically) a heart attack and dies when he gets an eyeful of the elderly owner’s genitals. Jules kills a prep boy as if he was annoying bug in PULP FICTION.

The nonchalant attitude to life and death that characterizes black comedy is why characters are so ready to end their own lives. Suicide is the fast escape from despair. Harold in HAROLD AND MAUDE and Beth in CRIMES OF THE HEART don’t think twice about suicide to escape their mild suffering. In the latter Beth says her reason for attempted suicide was that she was just having a bad day. Suicide even becomes a fad in HEATHERS.

These violent solutions to interferences in life are the result of a character’s black comedy comic perspective. (This most important notion is discussed at length in the next chapter.)

Black comedy’s trivialization of death is perhaps a reason for the audience’s indifferent reaction to shock and horror. The underplaying of violence and taboo

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51 EATING RAOUL screenplay.
transgression, which we later see is part of the rhetorical style of black comedy, produces a similar subdued, spectator like reaction in audiences.

The themes described above are observable, in varying degrees, in all black comedies. Genre however is independent of themes - these themes alone do not make a black comedy. There are many films (such as SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE, THE PRODUCERS, NASHVILLE and CHINATOWN) that touch on these themes and contain dark humor however they are not true black comedies.

Themes however, like genres, are malleable. As the thesis shows later in the chapter on genres, they are a product of society and their concerns. As consumerism dominates our lives, as the individual feels powerless in the face of corporate and political control, more themes in genre films will reflect this. NETWORK and AMERICAN BEAUTY were significant because they focused on the powerlessness of the individual. In these films, man attempts to change his lot. He fails but there is still hope.52

The lack of power of the individual in society is still evident. As the desire to express it grows stronger, we can expect more black comedies with themes like this to be embraced by audiences.

Matrudola and O'Niel note how “the protagonist often gains and loses power through use of sex or death”53 and aptly state how sex, death and power are the classic triad in black comedy. (Sometimes death is metaphorical.) Certainly this triad appears in most of the black comedy films in the Filmography. Through the voice of his dead self, Lester reflects on the transient nature of life and on it's beauty. Death both kills his power and liberates him. Death does exactly the same for Brad in SEXY MONEY.

All these quite intellectual themes are about the retention of a negative state. They could never be found in traditional comedy which is more concerned with the superficial and the integration of the individual into society. The themes of traditional comedy may be a distorting mirror of the shortcomings of society, but

52 That may be why these two black comedy films were so commercially successful.
53 Mutrudola and O'Niel, p 2
that distortion is amusing. The reflection that black comedy creates is far less palatable and far more confronting than that from traditional comedy. It is also more intellectual. Black comedy themes are very different to those found in traditional comedy.
Chapter 3

THE PHYSICS of COMEDY

Introduction

While there is an abundance of literature on comedy there is only limited work on its physics, its working process. My approach for this chapter is an examination of that literature followed by a scrutiny of the comic processes operating in various comedy films. I then modify Vorhaus’ concepts of physics, and develop notions of my own in order to realize a more comprehensive theory of how comedy works.

The chapter then examines black comedy to determine whether the same physics that drive traditional comedy function in this genre. There is no literature on this subject. My approach therefore has been to scrutinize a number of contemporary black comedy films to see if these same physics exist and if so, how they work. In doing so, I make some new conclusions about the physics of black comedy that provide insight into its unique form.

Essential terms

The first two notions below were originally coined by John Vorhaus in his THE COMIC TOOLBOX. The last notion was created by Voytilla and Petri in their WRITING THE COMEDY FILM.

"Comic perspective is the unique way a comic character views his world which differs in a clear and substantial way from the normal world."^54

Comic gap is the gap between the comic reality and normal reality. "At anytime you have a comic voice or character or world or attitude that looks at things from a skewed point of view, you have a gap in realities. Comedy lives in this gap."^55

Comic distance is the degree of empathy (closeness) or detachment we have with a character. "It is the ability to separate ourselves from an event in order to laugh at it."^56

^54 Vorhaus, p 31
^55 Vorhaus, p 19
Premise is most often the starting point for the creation of original genre films. McKee in his book STORY calls it “the idea that inspires the writers desire to create a story”\(^57\). Premise, for Lajos Egri in his THE ART OF DRAMATIC WRITING, is a three part statement that generalizes the dramatic situation.\(^58\) The most common form of premise in the film industry is an open-ended question that describes a character and a disruptive action. The premise for SHREK would be “What happens when a reclusive, homely, ogre, ashamed of his appearance, must (in order to keep his home) find a beautiful princess who is secretly also an ogre.”

Traditional comedy

Vorhaus proposes the notion of a comic premise and comic gap in his book THE COMEDY TOOLBOX. However his statement “The comic premise is the gap between comic reality and real reality”\(^59\) is somewhat confusing. Rather, the comic premise, which describes a disruption to normality implies a gap between the comic reality and the real reality. Comedy lives in this gap.

Whenever a character sees things from a skewed, abnormal point of view, there is a gap in realities. This is his comic perspective. "A character’s comic perspective is his unique way of looking at his world which differs, in a clear and substantial way, from the normal view of the world.”\(^60\) Exaggerating the comic reality increases the size of the gap. (Exaggeration plays a pivotal role in comedy and will be discussed in detail in a later chapter.)

The comic gap is created by a clash of opposites- the clash of two diametrically opposed characters or states. The story evolves from the attempt by the protagonist to transform himself from one state to another, and from the conflict he

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\(^{56}\) Voytilla and Petri, p 15
\(^{57}\) McKee P
\(^{58}\) Egri’s concept of the premise for SHREK would be “love conquers lack of self esteem”. This however, as this thesis later notes, is now considered by filmmakers as a description of theme.
\(^{59}\) Vorhaus, p 19
\(^{60}\) Vorhaus, p 31
faces during that attempt. He is initially separated from society (or his goal) and seeks integration with it. This is his super-objective. Comedy arises from the character’s failure to transform himself into a person that can be integrated.

For example, the premise of MEET THE PARENTS is: What would happen if a naïve, clumsy, humble man (Greg Focker, the Ben Stiller character) stays with an anal retentive, suspicious, success driven potential father in law (Jack Byrnes, the De Nero character) so he can win his approval and marry his daughter? The premise immediately infers a comic gap, for the two characters are diametrically opposed in personality and traits. Greg Focker will never transform himself into a Jack Byrnes type character. Despite his good intentions Focker always produces inappropriate behavior for the situation he is in. We have an expectation of what Greg Focker should do to resolve the differences, but he presents us with something different, and fails. Surprise and laughter spring from this gap. Only at the climatic end of the film is Focker’s lack of transformation resolved i.e. Jack Byrnes accepts Focker for who he is, (and the love he has for his daughter) and Focker joins the Byrnes family i.e. is integrated with society.

Vorhaus notes that a gap can also work within a character’s private world. The stronger his perspective, the more it differs from normal, the greater the gap and the funnier this characters is.

In AMERICAN BEAUTY, when Carolyn has to clean the home she is selling, her comic perspective of herself is that of a fashionable, elegant, and successful realtor. However, she has to become something foreign to her, a cleaner, to prepare the house for inspection. There is a difference, a conflict and a gap, between her world and the unfamiliar cleaner’s world into which she must step. Comedy springs from this gap- so we find her exaggerated, elegant cleaning manner amusing.

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61 As he overcomes one obstacle, another appears and so another attempt, another goal is created. It’s this action and reaction, cause and effect that creates drives the narrative process.

62 Incongruity and out of context behavior are devices used in the creation of comedy and I will be examine these later in thesis.

63 This a good example of how a traditional comedy appears in a black comedy, lightening the tone and making it more appealing for the audience.
**Black comedy**

Examination of the films in the Filmography reveals that the physics that create comic premise, comic gap, and comic perspective also work in black comedy.

Like comedy, the premises of black comedy films all infer a disruption to normality. The premise of AMERICAN BEAUTY is what happens when a down trodden, bored, suburban father falls in love with a teenage girl and transforms himself into a liberated, sexually attractive man.

In black comedy the transformation is successful, but the integration is not. The premise here does not infer a gap. There is no impossible resolution of incompatible states like there is in comedy. It is very conceivable that Lester and Angela will hook up. They both have a similar black comic perspective.

The premise of AMERICAN BEAUTY could in fact infer a human drama. What makes this a black comedy is Lester’s transformed state, his abnormal and transgressive view of the world that embraces teenage sex and blackmail - his black comic perspective. Lester actively seeks separation from the status quo, his family and work. (The only integration he seeks is with abnormal figures like Ricky Fitts, who also seeks separation from family.) Through separation he transforms himself into a happy man, into a higher state.

Angela, in AMERICAN BEAUTY also has a black comic perspective. She candidly tells Jane how she would like to “fuck him [Lester] ‘til his eyes rolled back in his head”\(^{64}\). Angela (like Lester) has a challenging and generally socially unacceptable view of sex. What she thinks is normal is actually, by common standards, abnormal. This is her black comic perspective and this creates a black comic gap - the difference between our expectation of her and what she subversively presents to us.

Lester and Carolyn become diametrically opposed characters. In a black comedy this usually leads to literal or metaphoric death. WAR OF THE ROSES ends in

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\(^{64}\) Screenwriter, Alan Ball, P 37
death, however the conflict between Oliver and Barbara arises from competition, not from being comic opposites.

In comedy, the conflict comes from the protagonists’ failed attempt at transformation, from the impossible resolution of incompatible states. In black comedy, the transformation is successful. The conflict arises from separation from the world as a result of that transformation.

These differences in premise and super-objective of characters (integration and separation) indicate that comedy and black comedy have some significant fundamental differences and warrant further examination into genre.

Vorhaus notes that in all comedy, both the comic premise and comic perspective can create comic gaps, however we can only laugh if there is comic distance. (Comic distance is discussed in the next chapter.)
Comic distance and audience response

Traditional comedy

Mel Brooks once said "I cut my finger, that's tragedy. If you fall down a sewer, that's comedy."

Voytilla and Petri in WRITING THE COMEDY FILM state we cannot laugh at characters unless we have distanced ourselves from them - created or maintained comic distance. It is a condition of us, the audience" the ability to separate ourselves from an event in order to laugh at it". This occurs by distancing ourselves from the character so that when he suffers, or makes a fool of himself, we laugh instead of cry. We detach ourselves from the pain. It is a state of controlled disbelief.

Orson Scott Card in CHARACTERS AND VIEWPOINT puts more emphasis on permission. In comedy, "the characters must constantly give the audience permission to laugh at their misfortunes."

Examination of the films in the Filmography reveals that comic distance, permission to laugh, can be achieved in different ways. The filmmaker can facilitate comic distance and give us permission to laugh. Audiences know from the film publicity, its director, its title, its leading actor and even the opening credits (and graphics) that it is a comedy.

If the main character is known to play comedies then the audience expects him to be larger than life. When Jerry Lewis, Jim Carey, Chris Rock or Eddie Murphy appear on screen, comic distance is already in place and the audience is immediately read to laugh at them.

In THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY the actor Ben Stiller is known as a comic character. When he gets his genitals stuck in his zip we laugh at him because comic distance is already in place. That's also why we accept and laugh

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65 Voytilla and Petri, P15
66 Card, p 100
at the absurd arrival of the police and fire department. We have already detached ourselves from the event (comic distance) and we allow ourselves to laugh.

Comic distance can also be created by emotional distance. This notion is supported by Orson Scott Card. "The author can give the audience clues that something is wrong with the character so that we know we are not supposed to react with sympathy. Instead we're supposed to laugh."67

Examination of comedy films reveals that this can be achieved by showing characters visually different or an exaggeration of their true selves— with makeup, costumes and/or involved in some outrageous event or performing some outrageous action.

For example, Dr Strangelove in DR STRANGELOVE is immediately funny because Peter Sellers plays a paraplegic Nazi. Comic distance is achieved by knowing the actor plays comic roles and the emotional distance from seeing a character that doesn't look quite right.

As soon as the Matt Dillon character in THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY is established as an obsessed, rather simple, infatuated detective, the audience knows he is "not quite right" and laughs at him. Thereafter whatever he does, is funny and he becomes funnier because of the extremes he will go to get to Mary. Likewise the Jack Nicholson character, Melvin, in AS GOOD AS IT GETS, or the De Niro character, Jack Byrnes, in MEET THE PARENTS. They are all exaggerated characters and the audience laughs at them because they know this. There is a comic gap between their reality and normal reality.

Vorhaus also notes that "Exaggeration can widen a gap upon which the comic premise of the character is built. Exaggeration allows us to take a comic perspective, push and stretch and accelerate it until it is sufficiently far from our perspective that it starts to be funny."68 (Exaggeration is discussed at length in the next chapter.)

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67 Orson, Scott and Card, p 99
68 Vorhaus, p 34
The reverse of exaggeration or comic coolness, the downplaying of the importance of a problem can also create comic distance and laughter. Audiences empathize with Buster Keaton's heroic episodes yet can laugh at him through detachment from his dead-pan face. Then they are able to fill in his emotions.69

Comic distance can also be achieved with a character's attitude. In TOOTSIE, Michael Dorsey's arrogant and holier-than-thou attitude indicates that something is wrong with him and distances the audience from him. In AMELIE, Amelie's detached naiveté to life creates a similar detachment. The audience knows that no real person behaves like this. There is a gap between their reality and normal reality.

Vorhaus notes that oddness is another important device for creating comedy.70 Oddness can be achieved by giving a character an odd trait or putting a character in inappropriate dress. This immediately creates comic distance and allows us to laugh. (That is why there are so many comedies about men in drag.) Jerry Lewis, Jim Carey, Woody Allen, Keaton, Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy were all film comedians who used oddness as part of their character.

The Zucker Brother films (AIRPLANE, NAKED GUN, RUTHLESS PEOPLE) are full of odd characters. Likewise the films from the Farrelly Brothers (STUCK ON YOU, DUMB AND DUMBER, THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY and the Cohen Brothers (THE BIG LEBOWSKI, FARGO etc). THE ODD COUPLE's premise was built around incompatible oddness. Oddness is in fact a type of "clash of context" which is discussed in the next chapter.

Oddness and exaggerated attitude are in fact character flaws - traits that are assigned to characters to make them believable and facilitate their downfall. For every trait of humanity in a comic character there is usually an equal and opposite flaw. By varying and controlling a character's comic flaw, comic distance can be either maintained or broken. When the flaw becomes extreme, the audience thinks

69 That same device is observable in cartoons and comics when characters have little facial detail.
70 When oddness becomes amplified it becomes an obsession. See chapter on Conviction, Obsession, and Conflict.
"I'm not perfect but I am not that bad" they create comic distance, detach themselves from the character and laugh at him.

Comic distance can also be created when a character directly addresses the audience, shattering the film-to-audience suspension of belief. Empathy with the character is then lost which allows us to laugh at the character.

Breaking comic distance and feeling the truth and humanity in a character is essential for creating empathy and allowing the audience to care. Humanity allows us to forgive character flaws. We forgive Otto in A FISH CALLED WANDA and the Ben Stiller character in THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY because they are both hopeless romantics, and secretly so are we. If the character flaw is mild, like being a romantic, we break comic distance and empathize with him.

The alternating play of flaws and humanity, the movement in and out of empathy, maintaining and breaking comic distance are all delicately balanced in comedy.

**Black comedy**

Comic distance allows the audience to react with laughter in traditional comedy but the reaction of uncomfortable amusement does not come so easily in black comedy.

Our expectations in black comedy are very different. In traditional comedy we are given clues the character should not be taken seriously. No such clues exist in black comedy. The actors in black comedies are not comedians. We begin watching the film expecting to take the character seriously. We expect to suffer with characters therefore it takes a lot more to create (black) comic distance and laugh at them. In fact we rarely laugh.

However, the more extreme or exaggerated the behavior from black comedy characters, from their incongruous or transgressive actions, the bigger the gap and the easier it is to react.

71 Voytilla and Petri, P17
72 "Traditional comic characters suffer but if we believed in them with the same intensity as we do with straight characters, their pain would be unbearable."
In the chapter on Rhetoric and Psychology of Black Humor, the thesis notes how the rhetoric of incongruous dialogue moves the audience towards a more detached, objective point of view. It also notes how Alan Pratt maintains that the juxtaposition of the conflicting emotions of horror and humor suspends both emotions and creates the unique response of unsettling laughter. While the process of comic distance is the same as in traditional and black comedy, the intention is different. Comic distance in comedy allows the audience to laugh. Comic distance in black comedy not only allows the audience to react with its characteristic unsettling laughter or uneasy amusement, it also affords intellectual reflection.

This reflection is evident in many of the black comedies examined. For example, the incongruous dialogue from Jules and Vincent in PULP FICTION, when they are about to shoot the frat boys, suspends the expected reaction of horror and delivers humor. The audience detaches itself from the situation and wonders what is happening and why?

There are a number of scenes in the author's SEXY MONEY, where this occurs. In the screenplay's opening scene, two socialites discuss the fashion shoes on the twitching dead body of a shopper just bludgeoned to death. The audience expects a reaction of horror but gets a discussion about fashion brands. This detaches the audience from the event and allows them to reflect on the absurdity of status symbols.

The comic gap that black comedy creates is far more complex, intellectual and didactic than that found in comedy.
Chapter 6

COMEDIC DEVICES IN TRADITIONAL AND BLACK COMEDY

Introduction

In the last chapter the fundamental comedic mechanisms of traditional comedy were examined. Many secondary devices, however, work with these mechanisms to help create comedy.

This chapter reviews these secondary but well recognized and extremely productive comic devices. It examines their existence and applicability in black comedy and observes any outstanding differences.

For this I draw partly on literature but more so on my own analysis of both comedy and black comedy films.
Clash of context (incongruity) and exaggeration

Traditional comedy

Clash of context is the most fertile device for creating laughter in traditional comedy. It can appear in the premise, in situations, in behavior and in dialogue and wordplay.

Clash of context is the juxtaposition of opposite or incompatible ideas. "It works by moving a thing from where it belongs to where it doesn't".\(^73\) Exaggeration can be overstatement, understatement or distortion, and can be applied to a situation, character, mannerism, reaction or dialogue.

According to the comedy theorist Henri Bergson, a person laughs at incongruity when there is an unconventional pairing of actions or thoughts. Humor begins with an assumption which creates an anticipation, an expectation, a "should" – a way things are supposed to be. The paired action or thought must have applicability to the original "should". According to Dwight Swain in CREATING CHARACTERS: HOW TO BUILD STORY PEOPLE, "There is an implicit analogy between the assumption and the alternative."\(^74\) Swain also maintains that the alternative must also exhibit a notable difference. Exaggeration and incongruity (often creating a direct reversal of the "should") brings this disparity into focus, making it recognizable for the audience.

Examination of comedy films reveals that many are based on a clash of context, for example the "Fish Out of Water" sub-genre. The premise of BIG is how a boy is taken out of his normal childhood context and placed in a foreign world of adulthood. The audience assumes that when someone looks like a boy they should behave like a boy. When the boy looks like a man but still behaves like a boy, there is surprise and incongruity. CROCODILE DUNDEE takes a knife wielding bush character from the Australian outback and drops him in the city of New York. His behavior there is incongruous. TOOTSIE takes a man and puts him in a woman's clothing and woman's life.

\(^73\) Vorhaus, p 49
\(^74\) Dwight Swain P 109
A situational application of clash of context is a character's wildly inappropriate response. This is a juxtaposition of attitudes. "Any attitude can be played off against any circumstance provided they aren't naturally compatible. The more incompatible they are the funnier it is." 75

Clash of context behavior in traditional comedy is always executed in an off-hand, casual manner. The character is never aware of his incongruous behavior. He believes that his behavior is normal.

Consider this situation in the comedy, LIFE of BRIAN. Brain flees for his life from the Roman guards and hides in a shop. There, forgetting his danger, he haggles with the shopkeeper over the price of something. Brian's inappropriate response is the function of a characters' comic perspective. He reacts to a supremely serious (high stakes) event with trivial (low stakes) petty behavior. The response is exaggeration and also a surprise - two devices that amplify the effectiveness of the out of context and the wildly inappropriate response.

The process can also work in the reverse. A trivial or frivolous incidence can be given undue attention (and significance) such as a dire attitude in petty circumstance.

Woody Allen's' neurotic characters often use this device. The Zucker Brothers often play with incongruity and exaggeration in the background action of their films. In NAKED GUN 2.5, the main characters talk about the world going crazy. In the background we see a waiter who is naked under his apron.

These film-makers also use incongruity to play with logic. When the plane in NAKED GUN 2½ can't land because its computer doesn't work, the pilot says they are "on instruments", we cut to the plane cockpit and four musicians playing musical instruments. The audience laughs. When the plane lands the musicians have disappeared. The audience does not ask why they were there or what happened to them, but accept it as "comedy".

75 Vorhaus, p 50
Clash of context can also manifest itself in dialogue and verbal jokes. "Marry in haste, repent in Rio" are verbal jokes designed purely to produce an immediate laughter response. Oxymorons such as "honest larceny" or "television reality" are based on clash of context. Similarly visual jokes such as inappropriate use of props are based on clash of context and have no other function than laughter.

Which ever way it is created and applied, clash of context is one of the most common mechanism working in traditional comedy. It is a superficial device that immediately creates a comic gap. Its intention is simply to create laughter. The bigger the exaggeration, the greater the gap, and the louder the laughter.

Black comedy

When incongruous or out of context behavior drives the black comedy story the results are much more subversive and disturbing than traditional comedy. Incongruous behavior then is part of the protagonist’s transgressive master plan to gain power and realize himself by over-turning social mores and taking on society’s taboos.

In early black comedy, comedic situations were created by giving the power to murder to persons not usually associated with killing. The incongruity was between appearance and behavior. Little old ladies in ARSENIC AND OLD LACE and elegant, well-spoken gentlemen in KIND HEARTS AND CORONETS and MONSIEUR VERDOUX, were not normally associated with murder. While incongruous behavior drove the story, the tone was still light and amusing. The old ladies of ARSENIC AND OLD LACE in fact thought they were doing society (and their lonely victims) a service. No one, including their victims, suffered.

Examination of contemporary black comedy, particularly those from the last decade, reveals that incongruity is used in a much more confronting manner, creating grimmer situations that cause more distress and suffering for characters.

76 Obvious lies are also a wildly inappropriate response.
This is evident in the grim and uncomfortably amusing FARGO. Jerry's behavior, kidnapping the wife he loves and extorting her father is unquestionably incongruous. He causes great suffering for Jean, Scotty and Wade. Through complications (and fate), Jerry's incongruous and transgressive act leads to senseless and violent killings.

AMERICAN BEAUTY also uses transgressive incongruity in a much more confronting manner than the earlier black comedies. Lester's attraction to Angela awakens his master plan to embrace unconventional behavior like taboo sex, blackmail and pot smoking, in order to gain power over his life and find his place in the world. This behavior, incongruous for a family man, drives the story. It creates suffering for his daughter Jane and wife Carolyn, and eventually leads to his own death. The incongruous behavior from Angela is also quite confronting and creates suffering for Jane. We don't expect nice teenage girls to say things like "I would suck your Dad's big fat dick, and then I would fuck him 'til his eyes rolled back in his head". 77

In SEXY MONEY, Brad steals from his wealthy friends, invites criminals and a prostitute into his house, and then announces his engagement to another woman, even though he is still married. His behavior is incongruous for a loving family man who respects his friends and values their friendship.

In traditional comedy the inappropriate use of props, has no other function than to create laughter. In black comedy, visual jokes tend to be more subversive and derisive, and part of the author's master plan of questioning normality. For example, in WAR of THE ROSES, Carol and her lover are in bed with a battery operated hand vacuum - presumably a sex toy. Our reaction to it is unsure amusement as we wonder what sexual activity is enhanced with such an object. The prop is a rhetorical device of exaggeration that creates (uneasy) laughter. Its incongruity reflects the very essence of black comedy - the questioning of convention and the absurdity of the world.

77 Screenplay AMERICAN BEAUTY by Alan Ball, p 37
The use of incongruity in contemporary black comedy is not only very different from that found in traditional comedy, but also different from that found in early black comedy. It appears as if contemporary black comedy has segued into a different style of movie – into another genre.
Truth and pain

Traditional comedy

Comic distance, the degree of empathy or detachment with a character is closely related to truth and pain, two emotions that appear to be inextricably tied together.

Vorhaus feels that "comedy is truth and pain". While his statement may be a little simplistic and ignore the essential operation of comic gap, comic distance and point of view, truth and pain are at the foundation of building comedy.

Comedy is most often about everyday people. When the audience finds that the characters are familiar, they can readily empathize and identify with them. When those characters experience recognizable situations, audiences care about them - they feel there is truth. This breaks comic distance. Orson Scott Card in CHARACTERS AND VIEWPOINT agrees with this notion of comedy being about familiar events with familiar people. "We can say 'yes that is what happened to me' or 'I've known people like that'. It could be us who are experiencing this moment... There is truth to the character.

The pain comes from knowing that the truthful event that happened to someone else could have happened to me. We all have felt pain and humiliation and will feel it again. Pain comes from familiarity with feeling fallible.

When Ted, the Ben Stiller character in THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY gets his genitals caught in his zipper, there is truth, pain and suffering. The truth is that the act of zippering is familiar with all men who take great care not to do what Ted did. The pain is that he, like almost all men are fallible and will, sometime, make this mistake. He suffers, yet we laugh – only because we already know he is a comic character and not to be taken too seriously. Comic distance has already been created.

78 Vorhaus, p 1
79 Card p 100
The truth in romantic comedies is that the problematic nature of relationships is all too familiar. The pain is that life does not turn out as we expect it, that those nagging problems of the heart must be resolved, often with difficulty, to achieve romance.

Truth can be found in all subgenres of comedy. The truth in fish-out-of-water and special powers comedies is that we all want to be something we are not. The pain is that a transformation is never totally possible. The truth in slapstick is that we have all fallen over a chair or slid on the proverbial banana skin. The pain is that we will do it again. We are never perfect. Vorhaus agrees with this notion. "The truth is that the human will has limits, and the pain is that we can't always transcend those limits."\(^{80}\)

While traditional comedy's main characters are usually ordinary, familiar, and real people, caricatures often play a supporting role. Audiences know that caricatures are not real people and therefore do not take them seriously. It is impossible to empathize with caricatures for they are surrounded by comic distance – it is easy to laugh at them. For that reason caricatures can never be main characters because we cannot empathize and care about them. There is no truth.

Storytelling techniques, such as voice over of a character's intimate internal thoughts can also facilitate empathy. Sometimes it is via a diary such as in BRIDGET JONES' DIARY where Bridget confesses her deepest secrets.

Truth and pain are a fundamental mechanism for creating comedy. In fact any human experience can be made funny if its truth and pain are readily identifiable to its target audience.

It should be noted that the truth and pain that comic characters feel is always short lived. Characters in comedy never really get hurt, for laughter, hot on pain's heels, quickly dispels their suffering. Comedy is a repeated cycle of truth, pain, suffering and laugh.

In traditional comedy the audience also never feels a comic character's pain and never themselves suffer. Audiences know it is a comedy and any suffering will

\(^{80}\) Vorhaus, P 5
soon be over. They end up laughing at the character's discomfort. Once laughter is
done, empathy, through truth and pain, submerges the audience back into the
story, until the next comic moment.

**Black comedy**

Truth and pain are also critical ingredients in black comedy. Without truth,
audiences would easily reject a black comedy character's transgressive goals.

The truth in *American Beauty* arises from our empathy with Lester and from
an understanding his emotions. His problems are familiar to us. Marriage can be
stifling, attraction can evaporate. Work can be dehumanizing and we all would love
to shaft the boss. Lust for young flesh is taboo, nevertheless it is a real emotion.
For us, Lester is very real. Lester also shows genuine concern for his daughter
Jane and particularly his neighbor's son, Ricky. This and dead Lester's reflective
voice over, where he directly addresses us, also create empathy.

The pain in *American Beauty* is that we (like Lester) often don't resolve these
problems. We too (if you are a man) might masturbate in the shower, have
fantasies for teenage girls and have embarrassed ourselves ogling over young
flesh.

We empathize with Oliver and Barbara in *War of the Roses* because we see
the truth in their situation. Marriage can go off the boil. Love can turn to hate. The
pain is that we ourselves have failed to deal well with these familiar issues.

The truth in *Eating Raoul* and *Sexy Money* is that we all have money
problems about which we sometimes feel desperate. The pain is that sometimes
we fail to deal with those problems acceptably. Then we may compromise our
personal ethics.

Truth, pain and empathy are essential players in both comedy and black comedy.
This is the greatest similarity between these two genres. Empathy is however
more important in black comedy for without it audiences would not care about
characters and their pursuit of their questionable goals.
Conflict and Collision

Conflict is not only an important device in comedy it is the engine of all drama. It creates the central dramatic question of the film.

Conflict can appear in many forms, global (man against the environment), societal (man against man), or internal (man against himself). Vorhaus cites TRADING PLACES as a classic example of three levels of conflict in a comedy. Louis and Billy struggle to survive in new and foreign worlds (global conflict), they struggle to deal with others around them (interpersonal conflict), and they struggle to deal with their new identities (internal conflict).

While conflict is often a combination of these different forms, internal and societal conflict, the clash of character, is the most common in comedy. The stronger the conviction of both protagonist and antagonist, the stronger the clash of goal and obstacle.

When the protagonist collides with an obstacle, he must then create a new objective to overcome it- but the antagonist in turn then creates another obstacle.

This continuing action and reaction, cause and effect attack and counter-attack, creates dramatic narrative. Because characters, particularly protagonists, have to modify their behavior to overcome obstacles, they change and often end up very different from when they started.

Conflict can also be complex. The conflict that establishes the film's central dramatic question, might in turn create further conflict and a second dramatic question. Complications are a type of complex conflict.

In SHREK, the ogre's initial conflict is with the Fairytale Refugees and his original goal arises from societal conflict- will Shrek get his swamp back? This is the films 1st Act dramatic question.

Shrek's goal is complicated by Lord Faarquard who wants him to find and bring the Fairytale Princess to him. Shrek must now change his goal to finding the princess. In doing so, he falls in love with her but has no self confidence. The ugly
ogre must gain self-esteem to win her love - overcome internal conflict. This then raises the 2nd Act dramatic question- will Shrek gain confidence, reveal his true self and win the heart of the fairytale princess. The dramatic questions are answered in the climax and resolution of the film. SHREK is in fact a romantic comedy and many films of this genre are based on both societal and internal conflict.

In any genre, characters with opposite traits are often paired together to create conflict. The "character opposite" is a character who can potentially give the other the worst possible time.

**Traditional comedy**

Voytilla and Petri state "laugher arises from the collision of two very different ideas [or characters] presenting a surprise or incongruity." This is perhaps a simplistic assertion that ignores the requirements of comic gap, perspective and distance, but their statement demonstrates their conviction that collision is fundamental to creating laughter. (However, as Chapter 1 indicated, laughter does not make a film a comedy.)

Almost all traditional comedies, and especially romantic and buddy comedies, require conviction and collision from contrasting characters. These couples have opposing and incompatible comic perspectives and their collision is a great source of laughter. "The clash of conviction [in traditional comedy] offers opportunity for comedy fueled by mistaken identities, misdirection and slap stick embarrassment?" The greatest comic teams have always been comic opposites. Voytilla and Petri note "The greatest comedy as selected by the American Film Institute, SOME LIKE IT HOT, has a premise based upon the life or death conflict of a pair of musicians on the run from the mob." In THE ODD COUPLE, Felix, anal retentive and suicidal, collides with the down and out slob, Oscar. Laurel and Hardy, Martin and Lewis, Bart and Homer are couples in conflict, colliding as they pursue their individual and common goals.

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81 Voytilla and Petri, p 34
82 Voytilla and Petri, p 21
83 Voytilla and Petri, p 35
All of these characters may deal with conflict and collision in an unconventional, even anarchic way, but their behavior is justified, and acceptable.

**Black comedy**

Conflict, in all its forms, operates similarly in black comedy. However characters in black comedy deal with conflict in a much more seditious and confronting manner. They step outside the realm of acceptable behavior.

In SWIMMING WITH SHARKS Guy overcomes his conflict with Buddy by kidnapping and confronting him with prolonged torture. Dede, in THE OPPOSITE of SEX overcomes her conflict by seducing Bill's lover and relentlessly undermining Bill's character. Lester in AMERICAN BEAUTY overcomes the conflict he has with himself, his wife and society (his job) with black mail, smoking pot and preparing himself for teenage sex. Brad in SEXY MONEY has to overcome the environmental conflict of constant burglary of his possessions and the social conflict of losing his job. He turns to criminality to gain money and status- condoning prostitution in his house and repeatedly stealing from his friends.

The reason that the behavior from these characters is unacceptable is because of their transgressive attitude- their black comic perspective. Instead of resolving the conflict they face, they create other conflicts to overcome the first.

The ongoing and subversive manner in which black comedy protagonists generally deal with conflict is very different from comedy characters who by comparison are more casual and reactionary.
Conviction and Obsession

Conviction has sometimes been called the “hoot” factor, something that can wind up a story and get the audience at the edge of their seats. The will to risk (conviction of desire) is what drives a character. It controls the speed at which characters push through the ever-changing landscape of conflict that grows from characters, from environments and from their inner selves.

No character is more compelling than the one who will stop at nothing to achieve his or her goal. If the stakes are high, the conviction will become extreme and force characters out of their comfort zone. That conviction reveals deep character, an obsessive trait that has always been there but has lain beneath the surface of conscious character until this supreme moment.

Often that deep character is a special power, some surprising quality that was hitherto never seen.

Traditional comedy

Often, the most memorable moments in comedy are witnessing the power of conviction in characters and their entry into an uncomfortable zone. Obsession in comedy opens the doors for insanity and exaggeration and the greater the intensity of this mix, the funnier it can be. It’s the insane manner of the comedic character displaying conviction in uncomfortable situations, and the opportunity it opens up for other devices, that creates the comic climate.

There is insanity in THE GOLD RUSH when Charlie Chaplin is so hungry he eats his own boot, and in SOMETHING ABOUT MARY when Pat Healy, having wormed his way into Magda’s apartment, inadvertently kills Magda’s dog and tries to CPR it with a pair of electrical wires. One of the funniest comic moments is Dr Stangelove, the insane nuclear scientists, trying unsuccessfully to contain the fascist demon inside him manipulating his body. His insanity and exaggeration manifest in his speech and manner is a direct result of his obsession with creating the perfect race.
Black Comedy

Black comedy also works with conviction and obsession but again it's the manner in which it is executed that distinguishes it from comedy. If obsessed traditional comedy characters are insane, then black comedy characters are insanely subversive.

Like traditional comedy, their conviction is also unwavering. They never look back, or even around, at the possible repercussions of their behavior. They are so focused, so blinkered they lose their perceptivity. They take their behavior to the end, and like the tragic character, their blindness to or refusal to accept antagonistic behavior around them, is the reason for their downfall.

This is evident in any black comedy we care to look at. In WAR of THE ROSES, the convictions of both protagonist (Oliver) and antagonist (Barbara) are uncompromising and unidirectional. They never once question their chosen direction or the destructive path their lives have taken. They never see how the other is becoming increasingly dangerous. They fight to the end until they kill each other. In SEXY MONEY, Brad and Gaynor do nothing to repair the decay in their relationship with their children, Angela and Justin. When the children ask them to leave the house, they don't take their behavior seriously. Their conviction and obsession have made them blind to the gravity of the situation. This eventually leads to their downfall- the children have no choice but to kill them.

Both traditional and black comedy both use the device of conviction and obsession, however in comedy it never destroys the owner. In black comedy, conviction and obsession are so subversive they not only undermine the status quo but often eventually destroy its owner.
Deception

Traditional comedy

Deception fools the audience into one level of meaning (a setup) but when another level is revealed, the audience realizes it has been deceived, ("now I get it!"). Laughter from jokes and gags springs from this gap, this surprise between expectation and presentation.

Voytilla and Petri note how deception can work on a much larger scale in comic stories. "A character is lead to believe one level of reality, while another character, and the audience, is aware of all that deception." 84

Outlandish deception drives many of the stories in traditional comedy. MRS DOUBTFIRE, VICTOR/VICTORIA, TOOTSIE were all based on the deception of a man playing a woman. In THE PRODUCERS, Max and Leo attempt to deceive the financiers into investing in their play, knowing that it will be a flop. In THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY, Pat and Tucker both deceive Mary with false personas in order to get closer to her.

Deceptive characters often find that their disguise gets harder and harder to maintain, often because of complications from that deception. Suspense increases, for the audience knows that it is a comedy and that eventually, deception will be discovered. The more deceptions in a story, the greater the suspense. The higher the stakes, the greater the deception. The most satisfying moment is when the deception is discovered. The character must then be true to him and the world and normality returns.

The deception that is fabricated by comedy characters is generally not part of their normal makeup but often spontaneous behavior, they consciously take on to achieve their goal.

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84 Voytilla and Petri, p 56
Black Comedy

Black comedy characters are very different. They have no need to disguise their transgressive actions, for their conviction is so strong they believe their behavior is totally acceptable.

Lester in AMERICAN BEAUTY has no need to conceal sexual frustration from his wife Angela. He openly tells her that he is sexually frustrated and “chokes the chicken”. Lester has no need to conceal his dope smoking or the extortion of his severance pay from his family. Lester’s conviction is so strong that he feels no guilt. Angela has no need to deceive Jane about her desire to have sex with her best friend’s father.

Brad in SEXY MONEY does not feel he needs to hide his criminal activity from his children. In fact he tries to integrate his transgressive actions into the family – conducting meetings about the criminal activities in the house in front of the family, and inviting his love interest, the prostitute Arlene, to work out of their spare room in his house. The conviction he has is so strong it squashes any questioning or guilt he might have.

Paul and Mary in EATING RAOUl feel no need to keep the truth from Raoul when he discovers they are in fact murderers. Even the little old Ladies in KIND HEARTS AND CORONETS feel no need to keep the murderous truth from their nephew. In fact no main character from any film in the Filmography uses deception.

The absence of deception from black comedy characters is far more subversive than the conscious deception from traditional comedy characters.
Suspense and surprise

Suspense is created when an audience knows more that the characters on screen. Suspense is anticipation of the inevitable. Suspense and surprise are devices used in all films to varying degrees.

Traditional comedy

In traditional comedy, suspense and surprise are two of the most common devices for creating laughter. The payoff from suspense is surprise from the unexpected result- and subsequently laughter. This payoff is the final punch line of a gag or joke.

The "Magic 3", a series of repetitive events, actions, reactions or lines of dialogue is based on suspense and surprise and is a common device to create laughter. Vorhaus calls it introduction, validation and violation. The 1st beat sets up the act (dialogue, response, action). The 2nd beat is the same act which confirms the first and builds anticipation and suspense. "As the hero's disguise becomes more difficult to maintain because of growing complications, the suspense is heightened and the discovery of the deception becomes even more inevitable." The 3rd beat is the unexpected - a derailment of the logic and a payoff i.e. surprise.

Voytilla cites a piece of dialogue from FERRIS BUELLER'S DAY OFF which perfectly demonstrates this concept. Ferris Bueller takes his friend Cameron to the private "showroom" garage that houses the fated Ferrari.

CAMERON

1958 Ferrari 250 GTS California. Less than a hundred were made. My father spent years restoring it.

It is his love...(1st setup)...

It is his passion ..(2nd setup)

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85 Voytilla and Petri, p 21
86 In traditional comedy, sometimes a concluding visual action is added to a 3rd punch line. This, the last word or final comeback is called a Topper.
FERRIS
It's his fault he didn't lock the garage.

Suspense is also related to jeopardy. The more strife comedy characters are in, the funnier they become. "If you want to make your audiences laugh, make your characters sweat." Vorhaus cites a scene in LETHAL WEAPON 3 when Danny Glover is fearfully stuck in a runaway truck with a woman who is trying to (incongruously) seduce him. Glover sweats as he tries to extricate himself from her advances because he is in a life and death situation. This personal conflict has raised the stakes i.e. created more jeopardy. Like the threat of failure, the reward of success can equally raise the stakes for characters.

Black comedy

Black comedy relies on suspense no more than a non-comedy film where suspense is always related to a dramatic question- will the protagonist (or antagonist) achieve his goal?

The suspense in AMERICAN BEAUTY arises from the dramatic question -whether Lester will have sex with Angela. It also comes from the conflict from Carolyn and Jane. Suspense is increased when jeopardy starts to play, when Colonel Fitts starts to suspect Lester and Ricky of having a homosexual affair, and Barbara decides she must kill Lester.

The suspense in SEXY MONEY is created from the two dramatic questions- will Brad be able to give Angela the best 18th birthday, and will Brad become a successful criminal. Jeopardy starts to play when Justin and Angela, and then Gaynor, think of killing him. Suspense starts to play when the audience starts to wonder who will kill whom.

It should be notes that there is no place in black comedy for comedy's "magic 3" of set-up, anticipation, and surprise. This is a superficial device used for creating laughter and black comedy eschews the superficial.

87 Vorhaus, p 117
Wish fulfillment and Worst Fear

Wish fulfillment and worst fears are clandestine desires that characters harbor. Often they are familiar, secret feelings or attitudes that we the audience share, and therefore we quickly empathize with them.

A wish may be rational or irrational, conscious or subconscious. It could be a fantasy, burning need or ambition. Wish could be wealth, sexual attractiveness, physical strength, or power. It could even be serenity.

Worst fear may be also both conscious or subconscious, rational or irrational. It may be a physical threat like a tornado that has previously devastated life, an emotional memory like a drunken abusive father, or the fear of not having money.

Wish fulfillment or worst fear can be a character’s overall goal, or it can conflict with their goal. (Sometimes covert sexual desires create conflict with overt ones.) It might only exist in a subplot and be a device for deepening character.

The avoidance of worst fear can make the protagonist most resourceful.

Traditional comedy

In traditional comedy, that resourcefulness is often outlandish or absurd. It is often combined with obsession to create extreme or inappropriate behavior.

In THERE’S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY, Pat Hearly's greatest wish is to win Mary by pretending to be a philanthropic architect and he goes to outrageous extremes to maintain this deception. Pat Hearley’s worst fear in THERE’S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY is that he will get exposed as an insignificant fraud to Mary – so he goes to similar extremes to avoid this exposure.

In comedy a character's worst fear often collides with his greatest wish and this moment is often the climax of the film. Audiences delight in seeing a character's wish being fulfilled and the greatest fear vanquished, particularly when they have
previously seen the opposite - the wish unfulfilled and the fear consuming character. "We laugh at comic reversals where the wish-fulfillment is quickly abandoned in the face of our greatest fear.\textsuperscript{88}

The moment of collision between a character's greatest wish and worse fear is always a comic moment. There is such a moment when Pat is exposed as a fraud to Mary in THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY, or in SHREK, where Shrek is exposed as an ogre to his love interest, the Princess.

Sometimes the two appear simultaneously creating a powerful dialect. The character then is torn between two opposing and powerful forces often creating excruciating dilemmas. Shrek faces this at the midpoint when he desperately wants to show his love for the Princess but is fearful of rejection because he is an ogre.

\textsuperscript{88} Voytilla and Petri, p 63
Black Comedy

When wish fulfillment drives a character in black comedy, the wish or the manner in which the wish is fulfilled, is subversive, anti-social or abnormal. The greatest fear, however, is less an issue with black comedy characters.

In AMERICAN BEAUTY, Lester's greatest wish is to sleep with his teenager daughter's friend. It is a subversive, taboo wish but nevertheless something that privately, many men would feel. His greatest fear is to be anesthetized by work and family. However his negative goal is (temporarily) being fulfilled, his fear vanishes. - it does not figure in his emotional transgressive landscape.

The greatest wish for Howard Beale in NETWORK is immortality. He never has a doubt about his crusade. He is fearful of nothing, including death. In SEXY MONEY, Brad's greatest wish is remembrance, him giving Angela the memorable party he never got. While Brad would hate to fail at this, failure does not figure in his behavior. Once (temporarily) achieving his goal, he never questions his ability to achieve it. Dede in THE OPPOSITE OF SEX, Guy in SWIMMING WITH SHARKS are all not just fearless, but intrepid. There are no subconscious fears driving them.

WAR of THE ROSES provides an example of how the dialectic of greatest wish and worst fear can work in black comedy. The greatest wish both Oliver and Barbara have is to destroy each other and gain occupancy of the house. Their selfish game of humiliation has a dark fascination for us for we base our society on a cohabitation and propriety. In the end, the greatest wish destroys both of them. Both die and no-one gains the house. The climax is a chilling synthesis of the dialectic and when this is achieved, (particularly in the final scene or shot) audiences reflect on the events that have occurred before them.

One unusual play of greatest wish and worst fear from the complex Harold in HAROLD AND MAUDE presents an interesting take on this dialectic. Harold's greatest wish is death. His greatest fear appears to be women, or rather women who want to marry him. This is the reverse of what we would normally expect. The two collide when Harold stages suicides in front of visiting potential wives, who
naturally flee. We laugh at his antics. Harold, like the comedy character, is fear-
full. His worst fear affects his behavior.

Black comedy characters are usually not driven by worst fear in the same manner
that traditional comedy characters are. Black comedy characters are often
fearless. Their conviction is so strong, their actions so blinkered (because of their
character flaw of lack of perceptivity). They never doubt, question or worry about
their behavior. The fearlessness of black comedy characters is consistent with
their unwavering, singular, focused, determined nature. As such they are a far
more formidable opponent than that found in traditional comedy.
Chaos, Anarchy and Endings

Traditional comedy
The creation of disorder has been a characteristic of traditional comedy since its birth in the 1910's. The antics of Harold Lloyd, Max Sennett, Buster Keaton, and Charlie Chaplin all inadvertently ended in chaos. Their progeny, Laurel and Hardy, the Marx Brothers, and Jerry Lewis continued that tradition.

Even for contemporary comedians and comedy film-makers like Jim Carey, the Farrelly, Zucker, and Cohen Brothers, chaos in some form is an essential stop on their road to their characters' synthesis, their integration with the world. That chaos may not necessarily be physical but can also be a personal chaos - such as that in RUTHLESS PEOPLE, and MEET THE PARENTS. In the latter's climax, both physical and internal chaos rules as Greg's behavior and his world get increasingly out of control.

The focus of chaos is the status quo. Voytilla and Petri confirm this notion.
"Traditional comedy's prime target is authority and social mores. It disrupts the status quo to reveal society's problems. The ultimate revolt against social mores and authority is chaos and anarchy." 89

In traditional comedy, chaos and anarchy are funny and lighthearted. Chaos may reside in the environment, such as when Greg Focker upsets the party in MEET THE PARENTS, or it may be personal chaos, where characters may not be able to function normally, and revert to inappropriate behavior. Jerry Lewis' childish, self-deprecating behavior is the epitome of personal chaos.

Chaos in comedy is, however, short lived and quickly vanquished. The chaos changes the main character. They achieve their goals, normality is restored and character achieves integration with the world. That integration might be acceptance, or marriage or resolution of some internal conflict that previously produced anxiety, and the chaos.

89 Voytilla and Petri, 2003, p67
In the classic comedies from Lloyd, Keaton and Chaplin, endings were often ambiguous. Something always tainted the unqualified success. Sadly this is not the case with contemporary film comedy. Hollywood, so preoccupied with "dumbing-down" the content has eschewed the ambiguous, pregnant ending. Contemporary traditional film comedies have endings that are, in the main, a simplistic integration of the protagonist with society, of one-dimensional happiness.

**Black Comedy**

Not so in black comedy. Like traditional comedy, the target of black comedy is also authority, tradition, and social mores. Unlike comedy, chaos is more subversive, often lasting and the endings are either tragic or ambiguous or offer a glimmer of hope.

In black comedy once chaos strikes, it rules. Normality never returns. If chaos has not reared its head during the course of the film, it will at the climax, albeit in metaphorical form. The resolutions that follow are never simplistic.

Whenever chaos strikes, it has no serious affect on the black comedy character—they are indifferent to it. It does however, affect other characters, often pushing them further into chaos.

Chaos is evident early in LITTLE MURDERS—there is fighting in the street outside the Newquist apartment. That chaos remains, influencing the behavior of everyone, except irresolutely optimistic Patsy, the irresolutely indifferent Alfred, who is totally absorbed in his goal of photographing dog droppings. The chaos outside eats away at the family. Their behavior becomes increasingly apathetic, fragmented and bizarre. The only way to survive is by having no emotion and embracing insanity. In the end they take up arms and calmly start shooting at anyone in the street. Alfred remains indifferent and Patsy remains optimistic. They are the same at the end as they were at the beginning.

Chaos rules at the end of CITIZEN RUTH when the opposing abortion lobbies fight it out in the street, blind to Ruth calmly walking off. The audience reflects on her
journey, or lack of journey. Despite society's intervention, they are powerless to change Ruth's personal chaos.

In the OPPOSITE of SEX, While Bill gets his job and his life back, Lucia and Carl hook up, as do Jason and Randy, Dede leaves still cynical, lost and confused about life, still indifferent to the devastation she caused, and will continue to cause. Her life is still in chaos and we know her plight will continue.

And in SEXY MONEY, Angela's party descends into chaos- a product of Brad's transgressive criminal behavior and his inability to free himself of "affluenza". The audience recognizes the human folly, the institutional inadequacy and inescapable fate that has caused this chaos. With their parents dead, Justin and Angela are now free from their suffering, however they continue with their parent's same lifestyle and throw another party. The "affluenza", personified in the last shot with the talking, singing, voice activated BBQ Entertainment Centre, continues. Although Brad has died, his spirit lives on. The BBQ, his "child", still thinks he is there and sings a song for him.

Chaos in black comedy serves a higher purpose. The Kafka-esque detachment encourages reflection and comparison. Traditional comedy, by nature, does not have this ability to touch these higher considerations about the transient nature of life. As we noted in the opening chapter, black comedy's trademark of chaos undercutting man's nobility is a common theme in black comedy.
Chapter 6

GENRE AND SUB-GENRE IN TRADITIONAL COMEDY

Introduction

In Chapter 2 the thesis discussed the development of black comedy and noted how genre films were a reflection of society, a reaction from socio-political pressures on the individual.

From referring to literature and analyzing films, this chapter is expands that notion and examines the role and function of genre for film-makers. It defines film genre and investigates the different ways comedy has been categorized into sub-genres and plot types.

The intention in this chapter is to determine whether the accepted nomenclature works - whether black comedy fits into the traditional categories and whether it requires a different approach to categorization.
Genres (like sub-genres) are sets of rules for film-makers and audiences about narrative construction and its categorization. Karnick and Jenkins in CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD COMEDY define genre as "the historically attested codification of discursive properties." The concept is of such importance in film-making it has initiated extensive discussion in literature.

Rick Altman in FILM GENRE maintains that genres have clear, stable identities and borders. Each film displays a basic structure commonly identified with the genre. Within the genre, "films must both have a common topic, common structure and a common way of configuring that topic."91

Genres have, however, evolved from professional practice, not theory. Genres are a blueprint, a formula that precedes and patterns industry production. They provide a formal framework for stories.

In his FILM GENRE READER, Barry Keith Grant supports this notion. "Genre movies are commercial feature films which through repetition, and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations."92

McKee, being more practitioner based, states, "Genres impose a convention upon story design... the audience knows these conventions and expects them to be fulfilled... Each genre has its own unique conventions but in some they are pliable"93

As we saw in the chapter on its development, black comedy has changed considerably over the sixty years or so of its life. ARSENIC AND OLD LACE (1944), MONSIEUR VERDOUX (1947), KIND HEARTS AND CORONETS (1949), THE LADY KILLERS (1955) and THE TROUBLE WITH HARRY (1955) were all films with one simple premise- murder can be funny. These films trivialized death.
by showing their murderous protagonists killing people with polite composure. The overall tone was light and amusing. There was no suffering.

Contemporary black comedy now focuses on the trivialization of taboos associated with a much wider range of societal issues. It is no longer light and amusing and suffering is now a defining characteristic. As McKee notes, a genre may be pliable, but black comedy has changed in tone, type of story and theme, and has different characteristics to those at its inception. This raises the question of whether it is still what it was – whether it is still comedy? And why has it changed so much?

The content and style of genre films is determined by the filmmakers and their preoccupation, interests or message. While they artfully express their vision of the world, they are in fact slaves to the audience and what it wants, or needs to see.

There is a consensus amongst film historians and anthropologists that a connection exists between the content and style of feature films and the social and cultural preoccupations of the time. Claude Levi Straus has described both film genre, (a tradition of common works) and genre films (instances of that tradition) as “contemporary versions of social myths.”

John Dewey in his ART AS EXPERIENCE describes how the changing content of genre movies is a product of a continuous interaction between the world within the genre and the real world. “Genre films are directly related to lived experience, their traditions clearly connected to communal values.”

As such, genre films resolve conflicts in a traditional or reactionary way. They express the social and aesthetic sensibilities of the filmmakers, the audience and society. “They [genre films] encourage expectations and experiences similar to those of similar films we have already seen.”

This is also supported by Judith Wright in her GENRE FILMS AND THE STATUS QUO. She notes how genre films came into being and were financially

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94 Barry Keith Grant P 114
95 Barry Keith Grant P 115
96 ditto
97 Barry Grant's GENRE READER
successful because they temporarily relieved fears aroused by a recognition of social and political conflicts; they helped to discourage any action that might follow the pressure of living with these conflicts.\textsuperscript{98}

The focus of comedy has not changed much in the century of film-making. The subject matter is still man trying to coexist with man (or woman), be it in friendship, adventure, work or relationship. The tone however has changed a little. Suffering appears more prevalent in contemporary traditional comedy. Greg Focker suffers in both MEET THE PARENTS and MEET THE FOCKERS.

Black comedy's changing content and tone is a reflection of the changing values and anxieties of our contemporary society. More than any other genre, contemporary black comedy is a reflection of society's fears and as those fears change, so does the content. It appears to have segued into a genre with a new form and tone, very different from that at its inception, and very different from traditional comedy from which it came.

\textsuperscript{98} P 41, ART AS EXPERIENCE in Barry Grant's GENRE READER
The sub-genres of comedy

Traditional comedy spawns one the biggest ranges of sub-genres of any genre in film.99 "Historically comedy has included narrative poems, plays, novels and short stories, commedia dell'arte, slapstick, comedy of manners, the jig, the droll, the pantomime, the farce.100

No two recent authors on comedy have been able to agree on its subgenres. The difficulty in classifying black comedy is also compounded by genre mixing. While classical Hollywood filmmakers were purists and steadfastly held on recognizable single genres, Hollywood now likes mixing genres and producing new and innovative stories in a safe manner. "Producers attempt to combine the commercial qualities of previous successes by mixing genre to attract the widest catch of dedicated genre audience."101

Every genre is, to a degree malleable. This is necessary so that one genre can be combined with another genre. Audiences drive this mixing, for without it, genre films would become staid.

Neale and Krutnick further state "Comedy seems especially suited to hybridization, in part because the laughter can be inserted at some point into most other generic contexts without disturbing the convention."102 This is evident in the current Hollywood system where there is a continual search for a different take on old genres.

Wes Gehring in his 1996 AMERICAN DARK COMEDY: BEYOND SATIRE, designates five comedy genres: "the personality comedian, screwball comedy, cracker-barrel populist comedy, parody and black comedy."103

While the number and variety of sub-genres indicates that comedy works on a variety of stories there are certain plot structures that are inherently funny. Some argue that sub-genres of comedy should be classified according to the type of plot.

99 See Appendix for lists
100 Neale and Krutick, p 10
101 Altman, P 129
102 Neale and Krutnick, p 18
103 Wes Gehring in Lawtence E Mintz (Ed) P 75
MAST nominates "...eight comic film plots, eight basic structures by which film comedies have organized their human material." ¹⁰⁴

Mast's sub-genres of comedy.
1. Young lovers despite obstacles (BRINGING UP BABY)
2. Burlesque or Parody (BANANAS, AIRPLANE)
3. Absurd (THE NEW TENANT)
5. Picaresque (A CLOCK WORK ORANGE, Mr HULOUX' HOLIDAY)
6. Goofing (A HARD DAY'S NIGHT)
7. A central character forced to perform a difficult task (THE GENERAL, THE LAVENDER HILL MOB)
8. A central character discovers an error he has been committing (THE APARTMENT)

Neale and Krutnick identify three forms of comedy with different plot patterns as the basis for comic suspense - scheming, coincidence and competition.¹⁰⁵

Neale and Krutnick's plot patterns in comedy
1. Scheming (THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY, RUTHLESS PEOPLE)
2. Accident and Coincidence
   (THE GOLD RUSH, DISCRETE CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE)
3. Competition for the same object
   (THE GREAT RACE, IT'S A MAD, MAD WORLD)

VORHAUS also believes there are a number of inherently comic stories. He also suggests combinations of these story types are quite possible.

¹⁰⁴ Mast, P 4
¹⁰⁵ Neale and Krutnick, p 38
Vorhaus' story types in comedy.\footnote{Vorhaus, p 58}

1. Centre and Eccentric ie Everyman surrounded by comic characters (MONTY PYTHON LIFE OF BRIAN)
2. Fish Out of water (A FISH CALLED WANDA, TRADING PLACES)
3. Character comedy ie An emotional war between comic opposites (THE HONEYMOONERS)
4. Special Power (MY FAVORITE MARTIAN)
5. Ensemble comedy (THE BIG CHILL, PRISCILLA)
6. Slapstick (I LOVE LUCY)
7. Satire and Parody (DR STRANGELOVE, BLAZING SADDLES)

VOYTILLA AND PETRI's categorization of comedy sub genres is a combination of other film genres, and comedic treatments.\footnote{Voytilla and Petri p 78} Their categorization is probably the closest to the current industry definitions.

Voytilla and Petri's subgenres of comedy

1. Romantic (MOONSTRUCK, BRIDGET JONES' DIARY)
2. Sports (SLAPSHOT, CADDYSHACK)
3. Crime/Caper (THE STING, BUTCH CASSIDY)
4. Teen/coming of age (FERRIS BEULLER'S DAY OFF)
5. Military comedy (MASH, CATCH 22)
6. Farce (GROUNDHOG DAY, SOME LIKE IT HOT)
7. Black comedy (DR STRANGELOVE, AMERICAN BEAUTY)
8. Satire, Parody, (BLAZING SADDLES)
9. Mockumentary (TO DIE FOR, AIRPLANE, TRUMAN SHOW)
Neale and Krutnick however call slapstick, parody and satire modes of comedy with their own unique characteristic, techniques and devices. They work with any type of story and do not require any particular structure, except that the film be a comedy—light and amusing and with a happy end.

AMERICAN BEAUTY is a love story and could have easily become a romantic comedy or a satire with the same scenario of characters and the same story spine. It becomes a black comedy because of Lester's transgressive manner, which creates suffering and the tragic ending. WAR OF THE ROSES could have been a human drama and SWIMMING WITH SHARKS and THE OPPOSITE OF SEX maturation films.

The black treatment that arises from the character's transgressive point of view has changed the film into a black comedy. The black treatment has not changed the premise but has, nevertheless, produced a film with a different content and tone.

The notion is consistent with the more contemporary and practitioner based Robert McKee, who, in his book STORY believes that contemporary comedy is dictated by "subject, setting, role, event and values, and the subgenres of parody, satire, sitcom, romantic, screwball, farce and black comedy are all differentiated by their focus of comic attack i.e. bureaucratic folly, upper-class manners, teenage courtship etc) and the degree of ridicule,(gentle, caustic, lethal)." 110

The focus of attack of black comedy is social mores and tradition, the same for all comedies including satire and parody. Focus does not define sub-genre. The degree of ridicule is not the differentiator between a romantic-comedy and an action-comedy. McKee's approach to categorizing sub-genres does not seem definitive.

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108 Parody is humorous exaggeration or imitation of an author, artist work or style that mocks and attacks aesthetic conventions. See Appendix for more detailed description.
109 Satire is the use of ridicule or irony to expose folly. Satire mocks and attacks social conventions. See Appendix for more detailed description.
110 McKee, p 80 and Appendix 3 for full list
McKee does coin a term supra-genres\textsuperscript{111} - genres that work with other genres without changing their original story spine, and cites the art film and musicals as examples. McKee views supra-genres as a product of setting, and both performance and film making styles, and containing a host of autonomous genres. "They are like mansions of many rooms where one of the basic genres, sub genres or any other combination might find a home." \textsuperscript{112}

However, while the art film and the musical have no affect on story, black comedy does. The protagonist's goals have to be transgressive. The concept of supra-genre is also not applicable. It seems that contemporary black comedy is both a generic type and a treatment. That treatment comes from the way the writer or filmmaker views the world - his black comic perspective.

\textsuperscript{111} "supra" meaning "above"
\textsuperscript{112} McKee, page 83
Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

Film genres exist in order to classify and describe similar content in films. They impose convention, and within the one genre premises have similarities. Within a particular genre audiences have expectations of the type of characters and story, the way that story unfolds, and the films’ tone.

This thesis has shown that the premises of traditional comedy and black comedy are very different. The traditional comedy premise (story) implies conflict and a comic gap, from which laughter springs. The black comedy premise has a different structure and does not imply conflict. The transgressive attitude of the protagonist creates the black comic gap and in turn uncomfortable amusement.

The subject matter of comedy is most often normal, positive pursuits - like ambition, love, romance, and adventure. The goals of comedy protagonists are quite acceptable and often familiar. All subgenres of comedy have these characteristics except black comedy. Its subject matter is always abnormal pursuits. The story spine is about the breaking of taboos, the transgression of acceptable codes of behavior.

Most sub-genres of comedy have clear and identifiable plot structures, except black comedy (and parody) where there are no plot types that are characteristic of the genre. Any story can become a black comedy with the right black comic perspective. Black comedy works with any genre.

Within each genre, audiences expect that protagonists, while characterized differently, have similar overall goals. This thesis has shown that the goals of a comedy protagonist are positive and they seek integration with the world. Their behavior may be blind and obsessive, they may exhibit outlandish behavior, and they may deride the system and create chaos. No one, however, suffers. They may be anarchistic, satirical, or ironic, however, by definition, they do so in a light and amusing way. They seek transformation to a state that in society's eyes is normal. They seek integrated into the world, and in the end, they find it. Any
dysfunction eventually creates function. The status quo, temporarily questioned, is restored.

The protagonists in black comedy are very different. Their goals are negative, they worship false values, their behavior is transgressive and their immediate goal is separation with the world. Protagonists in black comedy never realize their goals and never learn from their failure. They never change - they remain dysfunctional, as does their world. In black comedy, dysfunction begets dysfunction. The climax is most often tragic.

Traditional comedy films (like other genre films) solve problems in a simplistic, superficial and eventually reactionary way. They "posit some movement back to a simpler world."\[^{113}\] Simplistic solutions inhibit social change. Traditional comedy, like many other genre films, is reactionary.

There are generally no simple solutions in black comedy – it eschews the superficial. It thrives on rhetorical devices to create subtext, and, like tragedy, it is enlightening. Theme in black comedy runs close to the surface. Audiences understand why characters fail and why their world is like it is. Black comedy is both transgressive and didactic.

The thesis has revealed an inordinate number of differences between comedy and black comedy. However the strongest argument to their disparate nature remains their definitions. A comedy is defined as a film or stage play of light, amusing and often satirical nature, chiefly representing everyday life, and with a happy ending. While not a defining characteristic, laughter is common in traditional comedy.

Black comedy is a film that creates uneasy amusement from the despair or suffering that accompanies a flippant or transgressive attitude to sacredly serious subjects and commonly held taboos. While in the early black comedy films people never suffered and the tone was light and amusing, contemporary black comedy is now almost the opposite. Now people suffer in a prolonged manner and the tone is a lot grimmer. The most common reaction is uncomfortable or uneasy amusement.

\[^{113}\] Judith Hess Wright in Barry Keith Grant, p 42
Occasionally there may be laughter, but this still does not make it comedy, for laughter is not a defining characteristic of comedy.

Contemporary black comedy is now so different from traditional comedy it can no longer be called a comedy. It should be considered a completely separate genre.
EPILOGUE

This thesis has exposed some similarities between tragedy and black comedy. The protagonists in both tend to live for the present and use their freedom without reservation. Both suffer from imperceptivity. Both make spectacular mistakes. They fail to see the true meaning of the antagonism around them, which prevents them realizing their goal, and in many stories, causes their downfall. In fact, black comedy protagonists have more in common with tragic heroes than their counterparts in traditional comedy.

Both black comedy and tragedy embrace fate as a major influence on our lives. The stories in both often end tragically. In both the audience is left wondering what went wrong. Black comedy is enlightening for audiences. Tragedy also shows this characteristic. Walter Kerr in his COMEDY AND TRAGEDY observes that “Tragedy seems to me to be an investigation of the possibility of human freedom.”

Black comedy affords similar reflection, particularly when the theme of powerless of individual is present. Both are didactic genres.

Black comedy, more than any other genre, is an investigation into, and a mirror of current society’s fears. Different (transgressive) reactions against the powerlessness of the individual seem to be increasingly popular driving forces in contemporary black comedy stories. They are a reflection of the changing values, psyche and anxieties of our contemporary society. As those fears change, so does the expression of those fears, and so does the content of black comedy. Black comedy is touching a new nerve, which is perhaps why it is becoming more popular in film and television.

While comedy and tragedy remain inexorably tied together, they are in fact polar opposites. Where does black comedy fit into this diametric? Like tragedy, black comedy is tied to comedy but it is not comedy.

Tragedy has found great popularity in theatre but never developed into a film genre. With the increase in black humor, black comedy and dark subject matters,
and indications that audiences now eschew the predictable and simplistic, for more ambivalent, even negative endings, perhaps tragedy will receive a renaissance.

Perhaps tragedy it is now being reborn as black comedy and in time, if it continues to change, it will become a sub-genre of tragedy.
APPENDIX 1
MODES OF COMEDY

Farce

Farce is described by the Oxford Dictionary as a "dramatic work (usually short) which has for its sole object to excite laughter." Comedy, as has been noted, is not dependant upon laughter.

Farce is a comedy of errors. Everything that can go wrong will go wrong. It plays with deception, oddities, improbable situations, misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and unexpected turns. Plots and characters are improbable, exaggerated and often obsessive. It is a world of coincidence and implausibility. The hero uses deception to achieve his goal but as complications develop, the weight he carries eventually exposes him. The trials and tribulations that he endures teach him how to find his true self.

Slapstick works well in farce because audiences know the target of abuse is getting what he deserves.

Examples of farce in film are ACE VENTURA: PET DETECTIVE, ALL OF ME, GROUND HOG DAY, SOME LIKE IT HOT, THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY.

Irony

Irony is a rhetorical device that can enhance meaning and create humor. Irony is the use of words or actions to express something different from, and often opposite to, their literal meaning. There is a deliberate, absurd incongruity or discrepancy between the current expression of the word or action, and the expected expression. This gap creates laughter or amusement.

115 Oxford English Dictionary s.v. "farce"
116 This is called a "comic gap" which is later cited as the part of the essential physics of comedy.
There are three kinds of irony. Verbal irony occurs when a person says or does something that means something else. When someone comments on the rain by saying "What a lovely day it is!", the speaker means the opposite of what he says. The ironic interpretation depends on understanding both what is said and what is not said. The listener or observer must be aware of the gap between these two. The speaker's attitude, tone of voice, intention, and the context within which he speaks can also create this gap.

Dramatic irony occurs when an audience perceives something that a character in the film does not know. Dramatic irony creates suspense. (Thrillers are based on this gap in knowledge.) The audience is able to see a discrepancy between characters' perception and the reality they face. Characters' beliefs become ironic when they are very different or opposite from the reality of their immediate situation.

Irony of situation is a discrepancy between the expected result and actual results. For instance, in the film SHREK (2001), the traditional Western fairytale, as exemplified in Disney's SLEEPING BEAUTY, is parodied by irony. Here conventions of this genre are inverted. Instead of the handsome prince the film's protagonist is an ugly ogre, and the actual prince in the film is very much not tall and handsome.

Irony often works with established attitudes and figures of authority. SHREK subverts values associated with fairytales, such as feminine beauty, eternal love, duty, and honor. Since irony involves the inversion of meaning, it is often used to express criticism of a state of affairs.

Satire

Satire is another mode of humor. It uses wit, especially irony, sarcasm, and ridicule, to attack the vices and follies of another.

The satirist tries to make the reader or listener have a negative opinion about someone or something. He aims to change the practices attacked at the same time being witty enough to allow the reader to laugh.
Satire is a paradoxical process that requires simultaneous criticism and empathy. The satirist packages his scorn in such a way that readers comprehend it, (through empathy), remember it and adopt it as their own. The satirist's goal is to point out the hypocrisy of his target in the hope that either the target or the audience will alter their view or attitudes. It relies on the audiences understanding of the moral code from which the hypocrisy deviates.

Many of the rhetorical techniques of satire are devices of comparison, to show the similarity or contrast between two things. "Rhetorical devices serve to win the reader and to soften the impact of the writer's destructive or vengeful sentiment." Ridicule, irony, exaggeration are almost always present. Other devices are distortion, understatement, innuendo, ambiguity, simile, metaphor, oxymoron, parable, and allegory.

Unlike farce where laughter is the end in itself, satire is similar to irony and black humor- laughter is directed towards a preconceived end.

Fellini's SATYRICON, THE LIFE OF BRIAN, THE SIMPSONS, ANIMAL FARM, are examples of satire.

\[117\] Ronald Paulson, P 116
APPENDICES 2-4

The following three approaches to categorizing comic stories indicate the lack of consensus about the genre and sub-genre of comedy. Each provides a different perspective and so offers valuable insight into the genre and the development of its categorization and subgenres.

APPENDIX 2

Vorhaus' types of comic stories

a. Center and Eccentrics

Vorhaus describes this type of story as “everyman surrounded by comic characters.... The comic premise is found in the gap between our central characters normal perspective and unusual comic perspective of the eccentric characters surrounding him.”

Situation comedy is about strong and enduring lines of conflict between such characters (e.g. in the LIFE OR BRIAN. Brian gets chased and harassed by one comic character after another.)

b. Fish out of Water

In a fish-out-of-water tale we find either a normal character in a comic world (TIME BANDITS, BACK TO THE FUTURE, SLEEPER) or a comic character in a normal world (ET, MANNEQUIN, MY FAVORITE MARTIAN). "All that matters is .. taking someone and sticking them in someplace he doesn't belong."

This change of worlds does not necessarily require a change of location. In TOOTSIE and BIG the character changes but the environment remains the same. In TRADING PLACES the environment remains the same but the character changes.

118 Vorhaus, p 59
119 Vorhaus, p 62
Who are the normal and who are the comic characters depends on whose perspective the world is seen by. One character may think he is normal but for others he is a comic character. Jerry Lewis, Jim Carey and many other film comedians often attempt to play serious characters but their comic perspective transforms them to a comic character.

c. Character comedy

In a character comedy story, the goals of the main characters are always opposing. Here two very different characters wage a war, often for control, power or personal gain. "Character comedy is direct emotional war between strong comic opposites".  

Sometimes they are romance stories where two people wage war on each other but later become lovers. In SHREK, Shrek and the Princess initially dislike each other but end up partners. Others times the antagonistic force comes from a non-human or non adult as in COP AND A HALF.

Character comedy doesn't always require diametrically opposite characters but rather someone who is a catalyst for misery. In THE ODD COUPLE Felix, anal retentive and suicidal collides with the down and out slob, Oscar.

Character comedy is often used in black comedy. WAR of THE ROSES, AMERICAN BEAUTY, SWIMMING WITH SHARKS, LITTLE MURDERS, RUTHLESS PEOPLE are all based on conflict between diametrically opposed characters operating in close proximity to each other.

d. Special Power comedy

This is comedy based upon some special power or magic. The comedy comes from the disparity between the world changed by the power and the ordinarily world. MY FAVORITE MARTIAN, and HONEY I SHRUNK THE KIDS are both special power and fish-out-of-water comedies.

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120 Vorhaus, p 63
121 ditto, p 64
e. Ensemble comedy

In ensemble comedy a group of people with a common goal, belief or enemy are in conflict with each other. Each is a strong comic character with an individual comic perspective. Each has his own story of which he is the hero.

In THE BIG CHILL, THIS IS SPINAL TAP and TV series such as THE GOLDEN GIRLS and CHEERS, all the characters engage us equally. Their conflict is layered so that despite their common goal they still have societal conflict and are at each other's throats.

Black comedy films such as MASH can work with ensemble comedy because of the extreme characterization required.

f. Slapstick

Slapstick characters never experience self doubt, nothing shakes their self confidence. Characters have delusions of grandeur and are put into situations that torment those delusions. Any character with no sense of self, and no self doubt, is the sort of character we want to see cut down.

Slapstick comedy is physical abuse comedy. The target character gets just what he deserves, however he never suffers much. The audience laughs and the action moves on.

If slapstick was to be used in black comedy, (and there is no reason why it could not) the target needs to suffer considerably more. Therefore, the physical act causing the suffering must be sustained. It must be funny enough (through context, exaggeration etc) to sustain laughter. By nature "black" slapstick becomes more subversive.

The slapstick would require comic distance for it to work. The audience would need to detach itself and wonder if there is another meaning to the act.
While Vorhaus states that slapstick is a type of story. This thesis disagrees with this. As Neale and Krutnick notes in POPULAR FILM AND TELEVISION COMEDY, slapstick is a self-standing, independent mode of comedy, like satire and parody.

g. Satire and parody

Satire comically attacks substance of a social or cultural icon, or phenomenon. By comically ridiculing the subject matter, it hopes to change the audience's point of view. Parody is a form of satire that comically attacks the style of an art form or movie genre.

Vorhaus maintains that satire and parody are types of stories. Like slapstick they do not imply a story and are in fact modes of comedy.

Satire and parody best operate on two levels at the same time. HOLLYWOOD OR BUST with Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin is a satirical buddy/ adventure movie about life in Hollywood. LIFE OF BRIAN however is not so easy to categorize. It is probably best described as a satirical, picaresque adventure.

AIRPLANE is a parody. It is also a disaster movie. BLAZING SADDLES is a parody, and a western. The terms satire and parody are usually used in combination with another genre. In these films there is a disparity between the world as the audience understands it and the world as it is presented.

Like comedy, satire and parody require the audience to briefly detach themselves from the action to understand the joke. The success of these modes of humour depends on how familiar the audience is with the world being attacked. It also depends on the degree of exaggeration. The bigger the comic gap the funnier it will be.
APPENDIX 3

Neale And Krutnick's comedy plot types

1. Scheming

In scheming plots one character tricks or deceives another (who may be gullible) so that they, and possibly other characters, remain in a state of ignorance.

Scheming is often used in TV comedies like THE HONEymoonERS, and THE ABBOT AND COSTELLO SHOW, or A PERFECT WORLD. Preston Sturgess' THE GREAT McGINTY and THE LADY EVE are based on scheming plot. The more contemporary farces like THE PRODUCERS, MRS DOUBTFIRE, A FISH CALLED WANDA all used deception to drive their story spine.

Often the characters are unaware of the scheme but the audience is. The audience however, never knows when and where the other characters will discover the scheme and therefore how it will turn out. (This creates suspense and surprise.) Often scheming is disguised identity as it is in TOOTSIE when Michael adopts the persona of a woman.

Black comedy has never used this type of plot structure. If, however, a character uses transgressive means to achieve the scheme, and others suffered along the way, there is no reason why this plot structure could not be used.

2. Accident and Coincidence

Most genre films, with the exception of comedy and black comedy, tolerate a single coincidence, usually as a story catalyst. In this type of plot, "misunderstanding and ignorance are the consequences not of deliberate planning, but of the disposition of events."

In the traditional comedy GROUNDHOG DAY, the satire DISCRETE CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE, and the black comedy AFTER HOURS, repeated
coincidences feature in the story spine. While the character believes that he is the cause of the coincidence, the audience knows otherwise. They know that coincidence is the absurd and indefatigable working of the universe and that it will always control man.

Films driven by coincidence have often been called black comedies. Wes Gehring believes AFTER HOURS is one. The thesis has previously shown that theme does not dictate genre. AFTER HOURS has some black humor and other characteristic of black comedy. However, according to this thesis' criteria of both transgression and suffering defining black comedy, AFTER HOURS is not a true black comedy. Nevertheless this plot structure lends itself to intellectual analysis from the audience and is potentially more didactic than other comic plot structures.

3. Ensemble. Who will succeed?

In this plot structure, characters all have a common goal and the central dramatic question is who will achieve it first. THE GREAT RACE and IT'S A MAD, MAD WORLD are based on this premise.

Characters in these film interact to ensure their goals fail or need to be modified. All characters have a limited awareness of, and influence on, the course of events. However, the audience never really knows who will succeed.

This type of plot structure has also never been used in black comedy. If, however, a character used transgressive means to achieve the common goal, and others suffered along the way, there is no reason why this plot structure could not be used.
APPENDIX 4

McKee's film genres and their sub-genres

The following list of genres and subgenres are from a writer's perspective. While there is no definitive categorization and another writer or producer may have a slightly different categorization, McKee's list is close to that used in professional practice.

McKee calls some genres mega-genres or supra-genres such as the Musical, Sports, Comedy and Art Film. They are genres so large they embrace other genres. No-one else, however, has ever coined this term.

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<tr>
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<th>Sub-genre</th>
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123 McKee p 80-86
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<td>Art Film</td>
<td>Minimalism and Anti-structure</td>
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124 Biography is close to historical drama but focuses more on the person than the event era.
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BLACK COMEDY FILMOGRAPHY

Items underlined are considered true black comedies by the definition described in this thesis.

The remainder appear in other lists of black comedy. These films contain black humor and/or have some of the characteristics of black comedy but do not satisfy the definition proposed by this thesis.

ARSENIC AND OLD LACE (1944)

KIND HEARTS AND CORONETS (1949)

MONSIEUR VERDOUX (1953)

THE LADY KILLERS (1955)

THE TROUBLE WITH HARRY (1955)

DR STRANGELOVE (1964)

THE PRODUCERS (1967)

CITIZEN RUTH (1969)

WHERE’S POPPA (1970)


CATCH 22 (1970)

A CLOCKWORK ORANGE (1971)

BANANAS (1971)
HAROLD AND MAUDE (1971)
LITTLE MURDERS (1971)
SLAUGHTERHOUSE 5 (1972)
NASHVILLE (1975)
NETWORK (1976)
THE STUNT MAN (1980)
NEIGHBOURS (1981)
AN AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON (1981)
S.O.B. (1981)
EATING RAOUl (1982)
THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GARP (1982)
THE KING OF COMEDY (1983)
PRIZZI'S HONOUR (1985)
AFTER HOURS (1985)
CRIMES OF THE HEART (1986)
RAISING ARIZONA (1987)
HEATHERS (1989)
WAR OF THE ROSES (1989)
THE PLAYER (1992)
DEATH BECOMES HER (1992)

SERIAL MOM (1993)
PULP FICTION (1994)

NATURAL BORNE KILLERS (1994)

SWIMMING WITH SHARKS (1994)

SPANK THE MONKEY (1994)

FARGO (1996)

THE OPPOSITE OF SEX (1998)

AMERICAN BEAUTY (2001)