



The comic organization

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Introduction

Humour and laughter have become prevalent themes in management and organization studies over the last few decades (Westwood and Rhodes, 2007; Bolton and Houlihan, 2009). This is perhaps unsurprising as joking is a part of all workplaces, not to mention everyday life. Studies have documented the prevalence of clowning, horseplay, pranks, satire, ridicule and lampooning in a variety of settings and at every level in the organizational hierarchy (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). But while joking is certainly pervasive, the meaning and significance of humour at work is by no means uncontested: humour is said to serve variously as a coping mechanism, a subversive strategy and a management tool in contemporary organizations. Starting from this basis, the special issue seeks to explore the 'inescapable ambiguity of humour' (Kenny and Euchler, 2012: 307) in culture, society and organizations.

The role of humour and laughter in organizations has undergone a considerable shift in recent years. For much of the twentieth century, employers attempted to restrict joking practices within industrial workplaces due to the negative impact on labour discipline (Collinson, 2002). Today, however, humour is coming to play a prominent role in ensuring compliance to corporate objectives. This is most evident in contemporary 'cultures of fun', which encourage employees to engage in light-hearted and enjoyable activities in order to secure commitment, improve motivation and ultimately boost productivity (Fleming, 2005). Examples of this have included hiring a 'corporate jester' to poke fun at managerial pretensions, integrating wacky 'dressing up days' into the working week or installing comic artefacts in the office such as novelty clocks or giant inflatable dolls (Warren and Fineman, 2007). The benefits of humour and laughter are

now widely recognized as an essential part of the managerial toolkit (Lyttle, 2007; Romero and Cruthirds, 2006).

In the face of such initiatives, employees might respond with mockery and ridicule as much as lively engagement or wholehearted participation. After all, there is probably nothing less likely to raise a smile than being compelled to have fun. From this perspective, humour – manifesting as parody or sarcasm – serves as a way of distancing oneself from the norms of good corporate citizenship (Kenny, 2009; Westwood, 2004). But while it might be tempting to view such behaviour as resistance against the managerial colonization of employees' thoughts, beliefs and emotions, another interpretation is possible. Cynical humour allows employees to cast scorn on packaged fun programmes at the same time as ensuring the unimpeded functioning of business-as-usual by reifying the notion of an 'authentic self' (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). Humour is therefore a complex and sometimes contradictory element in contemporary organizations (Butler, 2015; forthcoming; Westwood and Johnston, 2012). This explains why we chose Banksy's famous graffiti mural as the front cover for this special issue: the banana, a classic comedy motif, also serves as an instrument of violence and coercion¹.

This special issue aims to bring these complexities and contradictions to light via a series of analyses examining a range of comic phenomena: psychoanalytic approaches to humour in organizations (Karlsen and Villadsen, this issue), masculine joking practices in an IT firm (Plester, this issue), the cultural significance of slapstick in film and TV (Kasper, this issue), the relation between absurdity and heterotopia in *Twin Peaks* (Loacker and Peters, this issue), and several excursions into the world of stand-up comedy (Double, this issue; Kaupinnen and Daskalaki, this issue; Smith, this issue). But before we outline the contributions to this special issue, the editorial will present an overview of the philosophy of humour and laughter. As we will see, philosophy is ideally poised to analyze the ambiguities of comic phenomenon. After all, philosophy – unlike, say, sociology or anthropology – is geared towards reflecting upon paradoxes (Spoelstra, 2007). For Deleuze (1994), the very purpose of philosophy is to stimulate a mode of thought that is beyond (*para*) common sense (*doxa*), what he calls 'para-sense'². The philosophy of humour and laughter thus opens up the

1 Thanks to Stevphen Shukaitis for the cover design.

2 It should come as no surprise, perhaps, that Deleuze's (2006: 214) own description of para-sensical philosophy bears a remarkable similarity to classic definitions of comic incongruity: 'It groups under one concept things which you would have thought were very different, or it separates things you would have thought belonged together'.

possibility of moving beyond common sense assumptions about the comic dimensions of social and organizational life.

Laughter track

As Freud (2002) points out, humour is a distinctly social phenomenon³. This is not only the case because it relies on social and cultural context, but also because of the necessity of an other who laughs. The incidence of humour in a shared space and a concrete social situation has led to discussions about its effects – on both individuals as well as on more profoundly shared aspects of social life such as politics, sexual norms and ethnic identity. Since laughter provides an immediate clue that something funny has been encountered, it has typically served as the starting-point for analyses of humour.

It is often claimed that laughter and humour have a beneficial impact on health and well-being. As far back as Kant (1987: 203), laughter was seen to result in a ‘slackening in the body by an oscillation of the organs, which promotes the restoration of equilibrium and has a favourable influence upon health’. We find the same sentiments expressed today in positive psychology, the self-help literature and gelastic exercises such as ‘laughter yoga’ and ‘transcendental chuckling’ (Jacobson, 1997: 28-9). In effect, possessing a good sense of humour and seeing the funny side of things – even in difficult circumstances – is seen as a way of allowing us to live happier and healthier lives, putting into practice the well-worn cliché that laughter is the best medicine (see e.g. Cousins, 1979; Klein, 1989; 2000).

But humour and laughter are said by some to be not only physiologically and psychologically beneficial, but also socially and politically desirable. For Morreall (2010), comedy is characterized by the same kind of open-mindedness and freedom of thought that is vital for maintaining pluralistic democracies. Forms of humour such as satire and parody are said to have ‘kept a critical, democratic spirit alive in the United States’ by poking fun at the established order and keeping the government on its toes (*ibid.*: 114). Humour thus has the capacity to encourage irreverence towards authority and vigilance against hypocrisy. By the same token, the power of laughter is seen as a threat to more despotic regimes.

3 The term ‘humour’ is etymologically derived from ancient Greek theories of bodily humours, which relates to the different states of our moods (i.e. sanguine, choleric, melancholic, phlegmatic). In modern times, the term was associated with the exaggerated temperaments, or ‘humours’, of comic characters in 17th century theatre. For the purposes of this editorial, the term is used as a synonym for comic phenomena in general – that is, anything that is subjectively experienced as *funny* in some way.

We are reminded, for example, that Hitler set up special ‘joke courts’ to punish people who made fun of the Nazi regime, such as those who named their pets ‘Adolf’ or told indiscreet one-liners about Party bigwigs (Morreall, 1983). Such accounts attest to the political value of being able to ‘take a joke’ by aligning seriousness with authoritarianism, which finds a contemporary echo in comedian Lewis Black’s definition of a terrorist as ‘a person without humour at all’ (cited in Stott, 2005: 104). But while comic laughter can certainly be seen as a force that ‘purifies from dogmatism [and] liberates from fanaticism’ (Bakhtin, 1984: 123), we would do well to reflect on the fact that adopting a humorous attitude may also have the effect of making us ‘more accepting of the way things are’ (Morreall, 1983: 128) and so foreclose on the possibility of any radical political change.

Others have ascribed to humour a more subversive role in society. From this perspective, humour can be seen as a way of casting a new and surprising light on those aspects of our everyday lives that we take for granted, so estranging us – albeit temporarily – from conventional ways of thinking and acting (see Karlson and Villadsen, this issue). This is expressed most forcefully by Critchley (2002: 10), who suggests that a joke ‘suddenly and explosively lets us see the familiar defamiliarized, the ordinary made extraordinary and the real rendered surreal’. Humour reveals the contingency of the present state of things at the same time as pointing towards how they might be otherwise. For example, John Kenneth Galbraith’s quip about economic forecasting – namely, that its only function is to make astrology look respectable – takes aim at commonly held assumptions about the infallibility of economics by unfavourably comparing a supposedly scientific discipline to a system of superstitious belief. The joke thus compels us to imagine a world in which economists are not viewed as reliable experts but as esoteric charlatans. This tells us that comic ideas have the capacity to show that the existing order, based on a set of foundational assumptions, has no intrinsic necessity and is therefore open to contestation. However, it is important to note that there is no ultimate deliverance to be found in humour itself: ‘By showing us the folly of the world, humour does not *save* us from that folly...but calls on us to face the folly of the world and change the situation in which we find ourselves’ (Critchley, 2002: 17-8; emphasis in original). While a joke may suspend our reality for a brief instant, highlighting life’s absurdities, it cannot alone serve to bring about any lasting transformation. At most, comic laughter sensitizes us to the need to close the gap between how things are and how things should be.

While Critchley’s analysis is strictly anthropological rather than theological, other thinkers have sought to uncover the more explicitly redemptive qualities of comic laughter. For Berger (1997: 206), humour rises above ordinary reality at the same time as it puts forward an alternative reality that is ‘inserted like an island

into the ocean of everyday experience'. We might think here of the surprise and wonder that we momentarily feel whenever we hear an unexpected witticism or witness a comic scenario that causes us involuntarily to laugh out loud. To this extent, humour shares with religion its ability to transcend mundane experience and reach a state of near ecstasy. This is no doubt why Critchley (2002: 17) is happy to think of jokes as 'shared prayers'. But Berger goes one step further. If faith and comedy are combined, our laughter – prompted by the fundamental incongruity between the finitude of man and the limitlessness of God – ultimately results in salvation:

Empirically, the comic is a finite and temporary game within the serious world that is marked by our pain and that inexorably leads towards our death. Faith, however, puts the empirical in question and denies its ultimate seriousness... It presents, not an illusion, but a vision of a world infinitely more real than all the realities of *this* world. (Berger, 1997: 210-11; emphasis in original)

Laughter in a divine register brings into stark relief the disparity between earthly pretensions and heavenly splendour, so holding open the promise of a better world to come. The messianic power of humour goes some way in explaining the tradition of the 'holy fool', prominent in Eastern Orthodoxy, whereby devout individuals demonstrate their extreme piety and humility by inverting worldly values through a process of *kenosis* or self-abasement (Ivanov, 2006). For example, sixth-century monk St Symeon of Emesa would engage in outrageous and transgressive behaviour, such as dancing with prostitutes or roaming the streets naked, in order to turn existing social norms of decorum upside-down and expose hypocrisy. Such comical foolishness, which also found expression in the medieval fool and reached its literary apogee with Erasmus, is closely linked to spiritual revelation precisely because it reveals the folly of human propriety in the light of divine wisdom (Palmer, 1994). While it is certainly true that the early Christian church frowned upon excessive displays of mirth that signified a breach of bodily discipline and ascetic control, there is nonetheless a significant tradition of reconciling laughter with faith based on a theological mode of incongruity (Screech, 1997).

What all these approaches have in common is their belief in the positive power of laughter, whether political, social or religious. But humour is not universally viewed as a force for good; comic laughter is also said to have a darker, more problematic side.

That joke isn't funny anymore

It is not uncommon for thinkers to make a normative distinction between – crudely expressed – ‘good’ and ‘bad’ forms of humour. To wit: whereas the former is rebellious and challenges accepted norms of thinking and acting, the latter is oppressive and reinforces existing social relations. Critchley (2002: 11), for example, acknowledges that ‘reactionary humour’ has the potential to ‘reinforce consensus and in no way seeks to criticize the established order or change the situation in which we find ourselves’, unlike what he terms ‘true humour’. We might think, here, of traditional British club circuit comedians from the 1970s and 1980s such as Bernard Manning and Jim Davidson who told jokes about minority groups – such as black, Irish or gay people – that further consolidated negative stereotypes in contrast to innovative post-alternative UK comedians like Stewart Lee, Daniel Kitson or Tim Key who shatter our expectations about the form and content of comedy. Similar distinctions are made in studies of joking practices of work, which tend to draw a boundary between ‘repressive humour’ (usually employed by managers to exert control over workers) and ‘contestive humour’ (usually employed by workers to challenge organizational authority) (Holmes, 2000; see also Bolton and Houlihan, 2009; Warren and Fineman, 2007). In such accounts, the disciplinary effects of laughter on individual behaviour is criticized at the same time as the disruptive effects of laughter on the established order are valorized.

The problem with this approach is that humour has the potential to be both disruptive and disciplinary at one and the same time. An instance of comic laughter, in other words, can simultaneously serve to undermine power structures on one level while reinforcing the status quo on another (Butler, 2015; Karlsen and Villadsen, this issue; Westwood and Johnston, 2012). Sick humour or dirty jokes may be offensive to many, but they do break certain taboos and social conventions, not least those of taste and decorum (Dundes, 1987; Legman, 2006). To this extent, we cannot deny that such manifestations of humour may serve to ‘liberate’ us from established modes of thought. Similarly, if outright racism and sexism are no longer tolerated in modern British society, then it is not particularly difficult to imagine how blue comedians like Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown might be seen as challenging the perceived liberal hegemony in the name of comic subversion. Indeed, one of the songs Brown (2008) incorporates into his live act is a barbed attack on political correctness entitled ‘The right to offend’ that marks out all minority groups as legitimate targets of ridicule:

Midgets, dwarfs, spastics, handicapped, Thalidomide

Spics, wops, Pakis, chinks, Japs and retards

Asians, gays and lesbians, Rastas who smoke the grass

Political correctness – kiss my fucking hairy arse!
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aj43fgBrbQY>)

Having cultivated the image of a ‘rebellious truth-teller’ in his crude and carnivalesque shows (Medhurst, 2007: 193), Brown is seeking in this song to question the widely held social prohibition against making derogatory jokes about race, religion, gender, sexuality and disability. Whether such humour is viewed as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ – or, in Critchley’s terms, ‘true’ or ‘reactionary’ – depends very much on the set of political and ideological allegiances that one happens to hold. We should be cautious, therefore, in making any strict normative distinctions between different expressions of humour.

One response to this is to collapse the distinction between positive and negative forms of humour entirely and view all manifestations of laughter with equal suspicion. There is a long tradition of misogynistic thought, articulated most notably by the so-called ‘superiority theory’ of humour that sees laughter as inherently related to mockery. Although Plato and Aristotle are commonly considered as early proponents of this approach, it was Thomas Hobbes (1999: 54-5) who gave superiority theory its foundational definition by suggesting that ‘the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly’. In other words, laughter is a form of self-aggrandizement that occurs whenever we recognize the real or imagined deficiencies of others (or ourselves as we once were) – an incongruity based on the perceived high status of one group and the perceived low status of another. Consider, for example, the way the English tell jokes about the Irish, the French about the Belgians, the Germans about the Ostfriesians, etc. (Critchley, 2002: 12).

While this approach to humour has come under sustained critique in recent years (e.g. Morreall, 1983; 2010), French philosopher Henri Bergson persuasively extended the insights of superiority theory by highlighting the collective and corrective dimensions of comic laughter in modern society in his 1900 book *Laughter* (see Butler, 2015). For Bergson (2008), laughter is caused when individuals behave in a comically rigid or mechanical way, failing to adapt to the world around them. Think, for instance, of blooper reels where actors make a mistake during filming (e.g. stumbling over one’s lines, involuntarily passing wind, etc.). Or more extreme, the numerous ‘epic fail’ clips on social media sites where individuals, instead of performing an action according to expectations, end up in some calamitous situation or other. For Bergson, individuals who deviate from social norms in this way will be greeted with ridicule. By laughing at them,

we unwittingly partake in a social gesture of embarrassment that aims to readapt the individual to the natural flow of life. It also reminds all of us that, should we deviate from the shared customs of society, we too will be met with mockery. This view has serious implications for understanding the meaning and significance of humour in society: it suggests that while comic laughter may seem harmless and enjoyable, it in fact contains the hidden purpose of reforming attitudes and actions in line with social conventions as well as reminding individuals that any divergence from these standards will result in outright derision.

Taking these ideas to their logical conclusion, Billig (2005a: 236) argues that ‘humour in the form of ridicule lies at the heart of social life’ since the threat of embarrassment ensures overall conformity to established codes of behaviour in society. Billig’s conclusions, however, are not entirely satisfactory. By offering a robust defence of critical seriousness against the contemporary ‘don’t worry, be happy’ ideology found in positive psychology, Billig neglects to examine forms of humour that function outside of the purvey jokes, quips and witticisms. We might think, for example, of the absurd humour found in David Lynch’s *Twin Peaks* (see Loacker and Peters, this issue) or the dark comedy in Chris Morris’ *Blue jam* (Leggott and Sexton, 2013; Randall, 2010). Put simply, Billig focuses on ‘funny ha ha’ at the expense of ‘funny peculiar’: whereas the first involves a social mechanism of correction based on scorn and derision, the second prompts us to consider the relation between humour and heterotopia. To explore this further, it is useful to turn to the laughter that erupts at the beginning of Foucault’s *Order of things*.

...from a long way off look like flies

Foucault’s laughter has received little attention in organization studies (Jones, 2009). This is a shame, because his gelastic outburst at the beginning of the *Order of things* sheds light on a type of humour that falls outside the simplistic duality between ‘good’ (i.e. rebellious and subversive) and ‘bad’ (i.e. conservative and disciplinary) laughter found in the critical literature. Referring to the well-known example of Borges’ fictional Chinese encyclopaedia, which sorts animals into strange and inexplicable categories, Foucault (2002: xvi) discusses the genesis of his study on the human sciences:

This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought – *our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and

threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other.
(Emphasis in original)

By presenting an altogether different way of knowing the world, Borges' ludicrous taxonomy forces us to recognize the contingent nature of accepted systems of classification (Butler, forthcoming). How is it possible, for instance, for animals to be divided into a group that 'from a long way off look like flies'? Foucault goes on to describes the moment of comic intensity provoked by Borges' *Celestial emporium of benevolent knowledge*. He suggests (2002: xix) that this laughter is not reassuring or consoling, but in fact engenders a sense of 'uneasiness'; it offers no redemption from worldly order, only a critical break with its 'familiar landmarks'. This alerts us to the fact that such laughter is not located in the realm of the *incongruous*, that is 'the linking together of things that are inappropriate' (2002: xix) – for example, the surrealist image of an umbrella and a sewing machine on an operating table. Rather, this laughter is prompted by an altogether different kind of disorder, one that is based in the sphere of the *heteroclite*. In this dimension, 'things are "laid", "placed", "arranged" in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a *common locus* beneath them all' (2002: xix; emphasis in original). In other words, Borges' imaginary taxonomy is not undergirded by a classificatory scheme that would provide a shared point of reference for the animals contained within it (e.g. species, genus, family); there is no principle of unity to be found among the different creatures aside from an arbitrary alphabetization (a, b, c). Foucault's laughter is tied to the realization that Borges' fictional encyclopaedia does away with the implicit foundation on which formal systems of knowledge normally rest, so presenting 'an attack on our way of knowing [and] a direct assault upon our episteme' (Topinka, 2010: 64). Whereas the incongruous always relies on a residual degree of congruence – such as the operating table on which the umbrella and sewing machine happen to meet – the heteroclite does away with such structural support altogether and so presents, as Locker and Peters (this issue) put it, a site of 'alternate ordering'.

It is in this sense that Foucault associates the incongruous with utopias and the heteroclite with heterotopias, making explicit the political import of the shattering laughter that opens the *Order of things*. Utopias, Foucault (2002: xix) explains, 'afford consolation' by offering visions of perfection and order. In comic terms, we might think of the kind of humour that points towards an idealized counter-reality by contorting the present situation. This is illustrated most clearly by jokes told in Eastern bloc countries that focused on the harsh reality of life under Communism, for example:

Q. What is colder in Romania than the cold water?

A. The hot water (cited in Lewis, 2008: 3)

On one level, the joke makes us laugh because our expectations are pleasingly confounded: hot water is, by definition, warmer than cold water. But the joke, which ultimately targets the poor housing conditions of the population under Ceaușescu, also contains an implicit normative assumption about how things *should* be. It posits a utopian counter-reality in which hot running water from domestic taps indicates, by way of synecdoche, a higher standard of living in Communist Romania more generally. In the short distance between set-up and punch-line, we are never in any doubt about the wider social and political context that provides the necessary conditions for the joke to be articulated in the first place and without which there would simply be no humour at all. Lest we imagine such utopias are always unambiguous positive, the same point could also be made about the set of unspoken presuppositions about ethnicity that provide the background against which violent racist jokes are able to emerge (Billig, 2005b).

Heterotopias, by contrast, are ‘disturbing’ because they undermine the basis on which knowledge is formed. As Loacker and Peters note in their Foucauldian analysis of *Twin Peaks* (this issue), heterotopias ‘desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source’ (Foucault, 2002: xix). Unlike utopias, heterotopias destroy linkages between ideas and contexts rather than directly inverting the order of words and things. Heterotopias aim to establish an altogether different mode of thought that cannot become absorbed within dominant modes of knowledge. Elsewhere, Foucault (2000: 181) speaks of heterotopias in explicitly spatial terms, suggesting that they have ‘the ability to juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves’. He gives the example of a theatre or cinema in which other spaces and times are situated within the prevailing order of space and time, which – in a similar way to Borges’ fictional encyclopaedia – present a ‘space of illusion that denounces all real space...as being even more illusory’ (2000: 184), thus exposing the contingency of the present state of things.

We might detect such heterotopian humour in the performances of Cluub Zarathustra, the mid-1990s Dadaist comedy cabaret overseen by Simon Munnery that was eventually reimagined for television as *Attention scum!* in 2001 (see Wringham, 2012). Here, the combustible mix of sub-Nietzschean epigrams, deliberately pretentious poetry, nonsensical riddles, repetition of words and phrases, and aggressive opera bellowed at disruptive members of the audience point towards a comedy in which ‘fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the *heteroclite*’ (Foucault, 2002: xix; emphasis in original). Perhaps the most indicative aspect of

this heterotopian humour can be found in a one-liner that is archly intoned by Munnery's character, the League Against Tedium, apropos of nothing: 'I do not spyk lyk yow becok I um not lyk yow'. While the accepted standards of spelling and pronunciation are contorted here for comic effect, we are also forced to confront the fact that our way of speaking ('I do not spyk like yow') – and consequently our way of being ('I um not lyk yow') – is one of a number of possible alternatives. By desiccating speech and stopping words in their tracks, we might say that this one-liner acts as a 'kind of contestation, both mythical and real, of the space in which we live' (Foucault, 2000: 181) by drawing attention to the arbitrary nature of our common language: *mythical* because it is based on an imaginary set of linguistic rules and *real* because it is decipherable (if not quite explicable) as a sentence within our own grammatical system. While utopian humour points towards an ideal state yet to be realized by inverting the present reality, such as we find in Communist jokes, heterotopian humour seeks to unsettle the present from within precisely by deviating from the norm. This will no doubt provoke an uneasy laughter that, in the same way as Borges' fictional encyclopaedia, 'shatters and breaks and disturbs' those aspects of our lives that we otherwise take for granted (Parvulescu, 2010: 12).

These questions about the effects of humour are immediately relevant to organizational analysis. For example, as a site in which one's time is sold in exchange for a wage, and one's rights as a free citizen are temporarily suspended under the labour contract, capitalist organizations impose their own logic and order upon its members by appealing to the 'natural' order of life under capitalism. This underscores the potential for heterotopian humour to 'crack up' the reigning hegemony of managerial rule that is accomplished through dry bureaucratic routine or packaged fun initiatives. As Jones (2010: 218[n10]) suggests:

There are...many very different ways of laughing at organizations and at organization studies. The point here is to stress that the opposition should not be set between the high seriousness of organization studies, or the apparently humourless life inside organizations. Rather, the question is to learn from those who laugh at the insanities of the world, to learn how to laugh differently.

It is this capacity to 'laugh differently' that Foucault brings to the fore in the *Order of Things*, and which we have sought to explore in this editorial. With this in mind, the contributions to the special issue explore humour as something that captures the paradox between the mundane and the strange, between the law and its contestation, between – as Loacker and Peters (this issue: 635) put it – the 'order of the day' and the 'order of the night'.

The contributions

In the first article of this special issue, Mads Karlsen and Kaspar Villadsen (this issue) examine the radical potential of humour to contest or subvert management ideology. This is especially relevant given the recent turn within management discourse and practice to use humour as a way of influencing and governing employees within ‘post-authoritarian’ organizations. Karlsen and Villadsen examine the influential Žižekian argument that humour in organizations can be seen as a manifestation of cynical reason. On this view, laughing at managerial authority represents no more than a minor transgression of the dominant order and so ironically ends up reproducing that very order. Such pessimism is countered by the possibility of a truly critical humoristic practice within organizations – namely, to expose the fundamental non-closure of reality through comic incongruity.

In the next paper, Barbara Plester (this issue) shows the real-world implications of employing humour as an explicit management strategy. Based on an empirical study of a ‘fun culture’ in a New Zealand IT firm, Plester examines forms of organizationally-sanctioned hyper-masculine humour – with often shocking results. Drawing on Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity, Plester traces how hegemonic masculinity is enacted and reproduced by various organizational actors at the same time as other identities are marginalized or suppressed. Such collusion with the dominant corporate order – bordering at times on sexual harassment, bullying and intimidation – raises important questions about the ethics of transgressive joking practices in organizations.

Daniel Smith (this issue) provides the first of several perspectives on stand-up comedy, examining the work of UK comic Russell Kane. Smith argues that comedy is able to act as a mode of cultural criticism that provides sociological insight into lived experiences within specific social contexts. For Smith, Russell Kane’s comedy extends the insights found in Young and Wilmott’s classic study of embourgeoisment among the post-war British working class. Drawing on a range of thinkers such as Simmel, Bakhtin and Douglas, Smith proposes the concept of ‘comedic sociology’ to explore alternative modes of social-cultural analysis.

In the next contribution, Kevin Casper (this issue) considers the politics of humour in relation to contemporary cultural forms. In his thought-provoking article, Casper contrasts traditional slapstick (for example, the type of mock-violence in Marx Brothers films) and ‘simulacra slapstick’, exemplified by the TV and film series *Jackass*. With reference to Plato and Baudrillard’s philosophical distinction between the original and the copy, Casper argues that simulacra

slapstick – such as the self-harming pranks and hijinks of Johnny Knoxville and co. – problematizes the strict division between ‘real’ and ‘fake’. In this way, Casper draws attention to ‘moments where binary systems are short-circuited and social life is shown to be transformable’ (Casper, this issue: 581).

Antti Kauppinen and Maria Daskalaki (this issue) frame the work of stand-up comedy within the critical study of entrepreneurship, employing a process philosophy approach. Based on extensive interviews with Finnish comedy club organizers, Kauppinen and Daskalaki suggest that this form of work involves to a desire to interrupt established identities and social roles. As such, stand-up comedy represents a mode of subverting dominant institutional orders and professional norms.

In the penultimate contribution to the special issue, Bernadette Loacker and Luc Peters (this issue) explore heterotopian forms of humour in TV and film. Taking us on a guided tour of David Lynch’s *Twin Peaks*, Loacker and Peters (this issue: 621) conceive of organization as a space ‘in which heterogeneous orders, conventions and practices interrelate and collide’. To this extent, Loacker and Peters find a celebration of the peculiar and the absurd in a way that invites us to look at the mundane assemblages around us with new eyes.

Finally, Oliver Double (this issue) discusses the way that the theme of work is explored in stand-up comedy routines from the 1970s until the present day. Since comedians are perceived to be outside the conventional workplace (e.g. offices, factories), they inhabit a unique position from which they are able to view – and satirize – organizational life as well as comment on our attitudes towards work and employment. As Double (this issue: 667), a former stand-up comedian himself, writes: ‘The unusualness of comedy *as* work allows comedians to create a range of comedy *about* work’ (emphasis in original).

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