



Laughing for real? Humour, management power and subversion

Mads Peter Karlsen and Kaspar Villadsen

abstract

Management and humour are becoming more closely interlinked in contemporary organizational life. Whereas humour was conventionally viewed as a deleterious, alien element at the workplace, it is now increasingly viewed as a valuable management tool. This development raises the question of whether humour can still be regarded as having critical or subversive potential. This article discusses three research approaches to management and humour: the instrumental, the ideological critical, and contemporary critical organization studies, giving particular emphasis to extending the last tradition. Hence, the article situates itself in the critical debate on the function of humour in the workplace and on 'cynical reasoning' recently initiated in organization studies. It seeks to contribute to this debate by defining the features of a critical humoristic practice in a post-authoritarian management context. The point of departure is primarily Žižek's critique of ideology and its application in recent organization studies.

Introduction

In a comedy sketch broadcast on Danish television, employees of a company are called in for a meeting in the company canteen. 'Today I have good and bad news for you,' announces the well-dressed female manager to the anxious employees, 'The bad news is that, unfortunately, we have to reduce staff by 35 per cent'. The camera shows the fear in the employees' faces before the manager continues: 'The good news is that we have teamed up with the company clown from Companyclown.com, who is here to help us all through the difficult time'. Next to the manager enters a clown who uses over-dramatic body language, affected facial expressions and a yellow balloon to mime the manager's message of

dramatic decline in the company's earnings and the extremely unpleasant consequences for the staff, all while the employees look on incredulously.¹

Now why is this TV sketch funny? The immediate answer is that it is funny because, like any good comedy, it undermines the familiar by turning things upside down. The sketch depicts one of life's most serious situations (workers about to lose their jobs) in an unserious way (it's a clown who tells them). But perhaps the sketch is also funny because at another level it depicts and identifies something familiar, or something that is about to become part of the familiar. Perhaps it is not simply because of the sketch's unexpected, unrealistic nature (a clown present at a company crisis meeting) that it is funny, but also because it in fact contains aspects that are not completely unrealistic. In other words: the sketch may also be funny because it points to something recognizable in our contemporary context. It displays, in an exaggerated, distorted and parodic manner, how leadership has become interconnected with humour and a self-ironic attitude.

It is precisely this linkage between management, irony and humour that is being mocked by the Danish TV sketch.² And more specifically, a particular aspect of this linkage. The amusing aspect of the sketch is not only that the serious message is not communicated by a serious manager, but by a clown. That which we thought was serious, the layoff announcement, was in fact funny. Indeed,

1 Eschewing the dichotomy between 'lived reality' and more or less true 'representations' of it (as criticized by Derrida, 1978), we contend that popular culture such as films are just as much a part of our reality than anything else, and that they contribute to the symbolic coding of social reality like other discursive or material artefacts. Žižek justifies studying cultural products, including films, jokes and commercials by arguing that art is the site of cultural conceptions and symbolic coordinates 'expressed at their purest' (Žižek, 2000: 250). Broadly similarly, Foucault discarded the duality of the 'purity of the ideal' versus 'the disorderly impurity of the real' (Foucault, 1991: 80). We follow his assertion that the fact that a particular 'statement', however utopian or grotesque, could be uttered at a particular juncture inevitably takes part in diagnosing our culture. The sketch, broadcast on the comedy program *Krysters Kartel* (DR2), is available (in Danish) at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Xr4KfByT5g>.

2 The American comedy series *The Office* contains a similar sketch in the episode 'Halloween'. On the day of a long awaited Halloween celebration the local manager Michael Scott, played by Steve Carell, is called up by the main office who reminds him that he needs to dismiss an employee by the end of the day. Scott, who likes to think of his employees as 'his friends', strives hard to avoid taking the decision about who he has to dismiss – a struggle that culminates in him pretending that the extra head (his Halloween costume) on his shoulder is telling him to let go of his assistant regional manager. The latter refuses to resign, and now tragically comic games begin in which employees successfully pass on the dismissal to another person. See *The Office*; 2nd season; Episode 5 (2005/06).

what makes the sketch funny is that it shows us that something that we thought could only be just for fun, the clown, is in fact deadly serious. The sketch makes us laugh not (only) because it shows us a difference where we expected similarity (the clown appears instead of the manager), but (also) because it shows us likeness where we expected a difference (the clown, like the manager, communicates something serious).³ What is really funny, and which in our view gives the sketch a critical potential, is the humour that we normally associate with something provocative and subversive here appears on the same side as management. Management is not laughing 'at' the employees but in a way 'with' them. The sketch thus emphasizes that humour is not inherently opposed to power, as we might think, and as the literature on humour has so far tended to assume. On the contrary, there seem to be situations in which humour is quite well-suited as a tool for exercising power in the contemporary context.

As already indicated, it is of course not realistic to imagine a situation exactly like the Danish comedy sketch above, where a clown appears as part of a mass layoff announcement. Nevertheless, the intertwinement of leadership and humour, we shall argue, is quite realistic. Hence, over the last two decades, we can discern a new trend in not only the instrumental leadership literature, where humour has been promoted as a useful management tool (e.g. Malone, 1980; Caudron, 1992; Barsoux, 1996), but also discussed in critical management research, where humour at work has received increased attention (Kunda, 1991; Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995; Collinson, 2002; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Taylor and Bain, 2003; Bolton and Houlihan, 2009; Sørensen and Spoelstra, 2012; Westwood and Johnston, 2012; Butler, 2015). The interest in humour as a managerial instrument reflects a broader trend in which positive psychology and a new discourse on happiness is gaining a growing influence as a guideline for the organization of both our personal life and our work life. It promises to help us live in 'wealthier', 'healthier' and more 'productive' ways, and thus happiness functions as an ethical standard, if not a moral obligation (Zupančič, 2008; Ehrenreich, 2009; Cederström and Grassman, 2010; Binkley, 2011).

Considering the above developments we will raise two main arguments. First, we believe that the Danish comedy sketch reflects something significant about the relationship between power and humour in contemporary organizational life. Our starting point is that humour – as pointed out in the sketch – does not stand

3 A paradigmatic example of this point is the well-known joke by from the Marx Brothers: 'This man looks like an idiot and he acts like an idiot, but don't be fooled, he is an idiot'. See Žižek (2006: 109) for a discussion of this distinction between a form of humour which produces difference where one expects sameness, and a form for humour which produces sameness where one expects difference.

in an inherently critical opposition to management, but has begun to lend itself to management, including humour's ironic, cynical and subversive qualities. More precisely, our thesis is that the managerial use of humour in contemporary society not only seeks to instrumentalize humour's positive effects for management purposes, *but also its critical effects*. By this move, management humour very often takes on a self-critical character. Our suggestion is particularly inspired by Fleming and Spicer's pioneering work on resistance, irony and 'cynical reasoning' in organizational life (Fleming and Spicer, 2003; 2004), which we wish to contribute to here. In the first part of this article, we pursue our argument on the basis of examples from the management literature. We thus discuss and evaluate three major research approaches to the management-humour relationship: 1) the instrumental, 2) ideology critique, and 3) critical organization studies. Our goal is to assess the strengths and limitations of each approach in understanding the increasing use and reception of humour in contemporary management practices.

Second, we believe that sketches like the one above raise an important question regarding humour's potential for resistance: if management itself uses humour and actually benefits from its effects in its exercise of power, is it still possible to regard humour as critical, subversive or emancipatory? In the second part of this article, we address this problem and offer some theoretical reflections on how a critical, subversive humour can be conceptualized in these circumstances. We do this by drawing on concepts originating from Lacanian psychoanalysis and developed by Slavoj Žižek.

Hence, the object of this article is *not* to provide an empirical analysis, but to assess existing approaches and help expanding the framework for analysing the relationship between power and humour in contemporary management. Accordingly, our assessments and contributions are primarily situated at a theoretical and conceptual level. Furthermore, when we use the term 'management' here, we refer to the contemporary prevalent view of management as activities of facilitating, stimulating, coaching and sparring, or in Foucault's words to perform 'an action upon the actions of others' (Foucault, 1982: 790). This view of management contrasts with (the increasingly controversial) hierarchical management, which takes the form of instructions, commands or sanctions. In this light we may better understand the emergence of management humour that aims precisely to stimulate, inspire or promote 'team spirit' and organizational unity by mobilizing the employees' own cultures, attitudes and values.

Humour as gain, critique or uncontrollable surplus?

If – following Simon Critchley (2002) – we approach the matter ‘phenomenologically’, humour can be described in very broad terms as a specific social practice, and the easiest way to identify this practice is by its impact. On this view, the fundamental characteristics of humour are specific physiological effects such as laughing, giggling, grinning and smiling, and emotional affects including joy, relief, surprise, excitement and enthusiasm. Humour is not *per se* these effects and affects, but rather that which causes them. These apparently positive effects and affects are also invoked to ascribe to humour a certain therapeutic power. However, this is not the only thing that humour is supposed to cause. Sometimes, at least, humour is also believed to produce new perceptions of the surrounding world as well as of oneself (Critchley, 2002: 9-11); it makes creates a distance to the immediacy of things (including oneself), which implies a certain critical potential (Critchley, 2002: 18). Thus, in brief, humour can be defined as a social practice that produces certain bodily effects, emotional affects and psychological perceptions.

Within modern management, humour, irony and laughter have altered their status from having been perceived as fundamentally dysfunctional for management goals and organizational effectiveness to humour being increasingly viewed as a potential positive force (Malone, 1980; Barsoux, 1996). In traditional management discourse, humour in the workplace was principally viewed as undermining productivity and subverting the maintenance of authority. Humour had therefore to be restricted, as part of the necessary separation between job and leisure, work and pleasure. Within the last few decades, however, we have seen the emergence of management practices that explicitly seek to use humour as a tool for achieving various objectives. Humour is used to promote the integration of employees and groups, to break up fixed roles and hierarchies, contest prejudices, to get through crises such as budget cutbacks and layoffs, and it is assumed to promote creativity and innovation in the organization. Concrete examples of the use of humour in management include ‘ice-breakers’, organizational theatre, corporate clowns, dress-up games and recommendations to leaders to recognize (hidden) workplace humour as a source of non-acknowledged knowledge about the organization.

We divide the research on humour and management into three main groups, while recognizing that such a division can only be schematic and tentative considering the extensive literature on humour within and beyond work life (for a historical overview of theories of humour, see Bremmer and Roodenbrug, 1997). In the place of a detailed examination that pretends to exhaustive

categorization, we will offer brief readings of three examples that represent distinct approaches to humour in relation to management and work life.

Humour as gain

The first group is characterized by an instrumental, positive approach, which enthusiastically sees humour as a useful and not fully exploited management tool. This approach perceives humour solely from the management perspective: humour can be enrolled and used as part of an optimization and streamlining of management tasks. Here, our example is an early article by Paul Malone (1980: 357) in which he presents humour as a 'possible tool that could assist in getting people to get things done'. Malone recounts his own experience as a recruit in the US Army where, after a 60-hour exercise, he and his unit were completely exhausted. To their great frustration, however, the group received an order to prepare for another exercise, and at that moment, the commanding officer who had delivered the message appeared as their enemy, as a torturer. But when the commander added a joke to the order, the mood suddenly turned to one of hysterical laughter, creating an entirely new energy in the group, which forgot its fatigue and could get on with the task: 'Suddenly, the environment changed: the Ranger instructor became a fellow man, not a torturer, the men who had laughed together became a team with a revitalized common cause' (Malone, 1980: 357).

The article depicts several key features that characterize the instrumental approach to humour in management: humour is regarded as a means of releasing built-up tensions in a moment of redemptive energy discharge, 'a comic relief'; humour is a way to break down stifling roles and hierarchical positions; humour can soften the social conflicts; humour can even help managers and others to see the world in a clearer light, avoiding the rigid categories or simplifying performances. Most of these features echo the modern canonical literature on laughter and humour (see Spencer, 2005). Malone's article is paradigmatic for the instrumental approach, in that it bluntly considers how humour can best be appropriated by management. The principle questions for this approach include: which leaders can utilize humour, under which conditions can humour be used, and which forms of humour are most effective in a management context? Malone (1980: 360) says that

It is my contention that humour is a virtually undeveloped resource that can contribute to enhancing the satisfaction and productivity of human beings at work. The tool has been around for quite a while, but it is used as a toy because no one ever developed a set of instructions.

This request has been well received in the management literature. In the decades after Malone's article, numerous studies have appeared which provide precisely

these kinds of instructions for applying humour. They have focused on how humour can dissolve barriers between managers and employees to produce innovative ideas and learning (Barsoux, 1996); how theatre and play can break down rigid stereotyping among employees (Corsun, et al., 2006), and how 'cultures of fun' can be used to get people to produce more by binding their private life and entire identity to the workplace (Fleming and Spicer, 2004). In the instrumental approach, humour is perceived as a means of freeing up the energy and potential of managers and employees, while humour's potentially uncontrolled and subversive aspect is very seldom touched upon. Viewing humour as a 'tool to be appropriated' by management, the instrumental position generally ignores the ambiguities and critical potential that humorous practices may involve.

Humour as critique of power

The second group takes a critical approach to humour, insofar as humour is viewed as a potentially critical expressive form that employees can apply in relation to management. This interpretation of humour's role amounts to a critique of power, or an 'ideology critique', if we understand critique as uncovering and displaying the hierarchies, symbols and structures of domination in work life. We write 'potentially' critical because many of the contributions see humour as fundamentally subversive and difficult to control due to its informal, hidden and often metaphorical character. Yet they often demonstrate how humour in many cases is controlled by management or fails to achieve the critical effect in relation to existing power structures. An objection to this approach to humour is that it works with a too-rigid opposition between the 'malicious', dominant and exploitative management on the one side and a space of playful and rebellious creativity on the other (Fleming and Spicer, 2003: 304).

An illustrative study of humour's critical potential is a description of a union's satirical resistance strategies in a Brazilian telecommunications company (Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995). The authors express a general feature of critical studies of humour in work life: the assertion that humour can act as a resistance strategy because of its ability to reproduce real conflicts and contradictions in metaphorical terms. Metaphors and satire are typically ambiguous and identifying a precise author behind them is difficult; therefore, they are particularly useful when there is a risk of retaliation by management. The Brazilian telecommunications company, *Telecom*, had an autocratic and militaristic reputation, as illustrated by the sacking of the author of a satirical cartoon in the union members' magazine (Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995: 756). The magazine had for years operated as a medium for employees and trade union representatives' resistance strategies, especially through anonymous

cartoons. Here, the *Telecom* management was depicted as money-fixated, exploitative and militaristic. Real conflicts and events could be represented in the form of fictional characters and events that succeeded in highlighting contradictions and paradoxes in the organization's management practices and caused momentary breakdowns in the managerial authority structures (Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995: 757). In this case, the employees, through relatively organized humour, obtained a platform to exercise leadership criticism and gained some gradual improvements in their own working conditions.

Other contributions within this humour-as-critique approach stress that humour as a medium (e.g. anti-authoritarian, able to display contradictions, spontaneous and uncontrollable) does not guarantee its progressive effects. These features do not prevent humour from being able to support or be incorporated into management strategies. Kunda's (1992) oft-cited study of middle managers' ironic role-distancing in an American computer company shows just how such behaviour can easily be appropriated by managers. The ironic attitude was unorganized, and its occurrence was easily redefined as a demonstration of management's tolerance, openness and commitment to freedom of expression (Kunda, 1992). Other critical contributions argue that humour, such as coarse jokes, can serve to sustain hierarchies of power or subordination between the sexes (Collinson, 2002).

In summary, this approach is critical in two ways: first, by maintaining humour's *intrinsic* subversive potential in relation to exposing power-holders and domination; second, by considering how humour in practice is often instrumentalized as a management technology or partakes in more or less explicit strategies of domination. While this ideology critique perspective provides a powerful view into the managerial appropriation of humour, it has limitations conceptualizing in more detail the inherent ambiguities of humoristic practices.

Humour as an indefinite surplus

The third group is subsumed under the term critical organization studies. This group draws on post-structuralist, neo-functionalist and neo-Marxist theories in examining humour and management (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Sørensen and Spoelstra, 2012). The studies in this group acknowledge the difficulty of making a clear distinction between critical-subversive and instrumentalized humour. They do not start from a clear verdict as to whether humour is by nature essentially subversive; instead, they problematize the dichotomous thinking that positions the 'good' humour against a 'bad' management that seeks to appropriate it. Hence, critical organizational

scholars often emphasize forms of interplay, reversibility and circularity between power and humour. These studies recognize that the norms informing management in modern organizations are not irrevocably fixed but under continuous contestation and reconstruction. In this context, provocative and immediately subversive behaviours may be assigned – at least momentarily – a productive role in managerial practices.

Critical organizational scholars generally share an assumption of a circular, co-productive relationship between management and humour, although they explore it in different ways. Some studies highlight play as a ‘doubling’ of reality. In play, a virtual world is created where identities, relationships and values can be put at risk and be redefined. Our example is a recent study by Sørensen and Spoelstra (2012) who are interested in the production of virtual reality by play and humour, yet they seek to retain humour’s autonomous character. They argue that humour has its own logic, its own telos and its own performances that prevent it from being appropriated completely for functional purposes (Sørensen and Spoelstra, 2012: 2). Humour can indeed operate functionally for organizations, exhibiting organizational difficulties, shortcomings and paradoxes, which can then be mitigated. But Sørensen and Spoelstra (2012: 12) highlight – on the basis of empirical evidence – that humour’s auto-logical nature makes it fundamentally uncontrollable, in that it produces a residual surplus that breaks with organizational needs and narrow managerial interest. In fact, humour can become such a strong self-propelling power that it ‘usurps’, i.e. saturates the processes and relationships of working life.

Sørensen and Spoelstra come close to our present concern, insofar as they precisely address the interlacing of humour, management and power. However, what is lacking in their contribution is more detailed clarification of when humour can be said to have critical, ‘usurping’ qualities and effects, since no precise normative or analytical criteria are given which would enable us to make such an assessment. The remainder of the article turns to this task.

Psychoanalysis and ideology

Seeking to expand the framework for studying the role of humour in contemporary organizations, we will offer some considerations on what subversive humour can consist of, mainly inspired by Žižek. Žižek’s central thesis concerning ideology – and his main contribution to the renewal of ideology critique – is that in order for ideology to work, it always requires a minimum degree of dis-identification in the interpellated subject: ‘An interpellation succeeds precisely when I perceive myself as “not only that”, but a

“complex person who, among other things, is also that” – in short, imaginary distance towards symbolic identification is the very sign of its success’ (Žižek, 1999a: 258-259). Zupančič (2008: 4) underscores this insight in relation to the relationship between humour and power:

Indeed, one can easily show that ironic distance and laughter often function as an internal condition of all true ideology, which is characterized by the fact that it tends to avoid direct ‘dogmatic’ repression, and has a firm hold on us precisely where we feel most free and autonomous in our actions.

The point is that any ideological identification, if it is to function, always involves a degree of dis-identification, since no mature, modern individual (who understands himself or herself as free and critical thinking) will completely submit to an ideological identity.⁴ As Žižek points out, ideology functions such that ‘we perform our symbolic mandates without assuming them and “taking them seriously”’ (2002: 70). This insight has consequences not only for our analysis of ideology, but also for our conception of resistance: ‘One has to abandon the idea that power operates in the mode of identification...A minimum of disidentification is a priori necessary if power is to function’ (Žižek, 2000: 218).

Žižek usually stresses the implicit self-distancing in the ideological interpellation by using the following formula: ‘I know very well, but still...’.⁵ Following this formula, he describes contemporary ideology – borrowing from Peter Sloterdijk – as a form of ‘cynical reason’ (Žižek, 1991: 29). The ‘cynical’ refers, first, to the ideological subject acting against better knowledge. Žižek likes to illustrate this point with the following anecdote about the Danish physicist Niels Bohr. Bohr was once visited at home by a famous scientist. The latter noticed a horseshoe hanging over the door and asked Bohr indignantly: ‘Well, my dear Niels Bohr, you don’t think that this kind of thing brings good luck, do you?’. ‘No, no, of course I don’t’, Bohr reassured him, ‘but I’ve heard that it also brings good luck

4 Whether Žižek understands the ‘cynical’ or ‘fetishist’ character of ideology as a historical specific (in contrast to for instance a ‘symptomatic’) mode of ideology or as a general feature of ideology as such remains unclear. However, he tends to relate ideology as form of cynicism that relies on dis-identification to a diagnosis of modernity as a ‘crisis of investiture’, most evident in the impasse of the paternal figure, which results in a general reluctance against identifying with received symbolic mandates (Žižek, 2004: 148).

5 Žižek borrows this formula from a famous article by the Lacanian psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni for whom it summarizes the logic of the perversion of fetishism, which, according to Freud, is precisely a simultaneous recognition and disavowal of the trauma of castration (the phallus is both renounced and kept in the form of a fetish object) (Mannoni, 2003; Freud, 1955c).

even if you don't believe in it' (Žižek, 2008: 300). Second, the cynical refers to ideology admitting to its ideological character, such as when an advertising executive shamelessly says, 'Yes, of course we try to manipulate you into buying our product'. However, ideology can only put its cards on the table in this way because it works – paradoxically, not in spite of but because of our critical distance to it and to that part of ourselves partaking in the ideology. One might say, then, that ideological interpellation only succeeds when it does not succeed completely.⁶

This self-distancing (dis-identification), which is the precondition for ideology, is reinforced by ideology's invitation to criticize, ridicule and create ironic distance to it. When we criticize the ideological interpellation and distance ourselves from it ironically, we thereby confirm the idea that we are in reality different – more valuable, authentic and free – than that very self who acts in accordance with the ideology (Žižek, 2001: 13-14). In other words, when Žižek asserts that it is not through our identification with ideology but precisely through our more or less conscious distancing from it that ideology is maintained, his point is that 'ideology' is itself the perception that there is a dividing line between reality (a true self) and ideology (our 'everyday self'); this dividing line reveals itself in our ironic and critical distancing from ideology.

'Ideology', therefore, is not an illusion that conceals reality from us. For Žižek, ideology is instead the very act of designating something as ideology, i.e. as an illusion, by adding 'critical distance', 'revealing', 'transgressing' and 'freeing ourselves' from it. Hence, as mentioned earlier, we maintain ideology precisely through perpetuating the notion that we can avoid, breach, eliminate, emancipate or separate ourselves from ideology. Žižek's point, therefore, is that it is this very procedure, of stepping out of ideology, i.e. the very distinguishing of ideology (illusion) from non-ideology (reality), that constitutes the fundamental mechanism of ideology (Žižek, 1999b: 71).

6 Readers familiar with Žižek's work might hear in this formulation an echo of his well-known description of the Lacanian subject in terms of the failure of subjectivation, the remainder or gap that resists symbolization. However, we must avoid such conflation. Žižek emphasizes: 'For Lacan the dimension of subjectivity that eludes symbolic identification is *not* the imaginary wealth/texture of experience which allows me to assume an illusory distance towards my symbolic identity: the Lacanian "barred subject" (s) is "empty" not in the sense of some psychologico-existential "experience of a void" but, rather, in the sense of a dimension of self-relating negativity, which a priori eludes the domain of lived experience' (Žižek, 1999a: 259; emphasis in original; see also Dolar, 1993).

Fantasy and cynicism

This distinguishing operation is based on fantasies, or more precisely unconscious fantasies, about the 'genuine thing'; 'the subject who is supposed to know' in contrast to the ignorant, 'the subject who is supposed to believe' in contrast to the enlightened, 'the subject who is supposed to loot and rape' in contrast to the good law abiding citizen. In other words, fantasies are fantasies of wholeness, completeness, fullness (e.g. of the omnipotent primordial father) covering up a basic impasse (in psychoanalytical terms: castration, sexual relationship, the desire of the Other, the Real, etc.). Or, as Žižek formulates it: 'Fantasy is basically a scenario filling out the empty space of a fundamental impossibility, a screen masking a void' (Žižek, 1989: 126). In fact, fantasies have a double function insofar as they both shape our desires and protect us against our desires: 'In this intermediated position lies the paradox of fantasy: it is the frame co-ordinating our desire, but at the same time a defence against 'Che vuoi?', a screen concealing the gap, the abyss of desire of the Other' (Žižek, 1989: 118). Fantasies structures our social reality (our desires) in a way that 'fills out its empty space', and this is what is concealed by ideology, not reality (Žižek, 1989: 32-33). In regard to cynicism, Žižek (1989: 33) asserts: 'Cynical distance is just one way – one of many – to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy'.

That Žižek's conception of ideology has consequences for the analysis of the relationship between power, humour and resistance can be illustrated with a short reference to Critchley's book *On humour*. Here, Critchley briefly touches upon the theme of humour as a management tool. Part of his account is an anecdote about a group of employees staying at the same hotel as him. He observes them one morning engaged in playing kick-ball, ping pong and Frisbee, or as he calls it 'structured fun'. After breakfast, he meets some of them outside for a cigarette exchanging a few words. He writes:

I was enormously reassured that they felt just as cynical about the whole business as I did, but one of them said that they did not want to appear to be a bad sport or a party pooper at work and that this was why they went along with it. (Critchley, 2002: 13)

In Critchley's (2002: 13-14) view, the cynical stance of the employees was an indication of their resistance, or as he puts it:

I think this incident is interesting for it reveals a vitally subversive feature of humour in the workplace. Namely, that as much as management consultants might try and formalize fun for the benefit of the company [...] such fun is always capable of being ridiculed by informal, unofficial relations amongst employees, by backchat and salacious gossip.

From a Žižekian perspective, Critchley's analysis is obviously problematic. Critchley completely misses that it is precisely the informal cynical (self-joking) attitude of the employees that makes up the basis of the formalized, structured fun of the management: 'We know very well (that this structured fun is the company's stupid attempt to manipulate us), but nonetheless (we go along with it not to appear as a bad sport)'.⁷ Surely Critchley (2002: 14) is right when he concludes that '[h]umour might well be a management tool but it is also a tool against the management'. However, his more or less explicit claim that a cynical distance – or as he points out later in the same book, humour as self-ridicule is in itself a kind of resistance – is highly questionable. The same goes for his distinction between (suppressive) formal and (subversive) informal humour. Žižek can thus supplement critical organizational research on humour in several regards, which we discuss in more detail below.

In this light, it is noteworthy that a number of recent critical organizational studies and studies in the sociology of work demonstrate empirically how power relations in work life are reproduced by employees by means of humour (Kunda, 1991; Willmott, 1993; Du Gay and Salaman, 1992). Kunda's (1991) aforementioned study describes how employees' humorous mocking of official business rituals were used as proof of the management's liberal openness, while at the same time employees actually performed their tasks to perfection. Du Gay and Salaman's (1992) article on 'entrepreneurialism' shows that even if individuals do not take entrepreneurial discourse and its ideal of excellence seriously and maintain an ironic distance towards it, they nevertheless practice it to the fullest in their daily life. And Willmott (1993) demonstrates that people interpret their possibilities to ironically challenge the corporate culture as proof of their self-determination, and that this promotes a frictionless exercise of organizational functions. Common to these studies is their demonstration that 'cynical' employees maintain the idea that they are autonomous agents who have a distance from the management ideology, but they nevertheless perform the company's rituals to the maximum. None of these studies, however, address the problem of which humorous strategies could transgress the demonstrated (ideological) reproduction.

7 Žižek criticizes Critchley's interpretation of Freud's 'humorous' superego, which in contrast to the classical 'cruel' superego that suppresses us by debasing our ego, liberates us by enabling the ego to laugh at its own shortcomings (Critchley, 2002: 93-111; 2007: 77-84). Žižek argues that '[w]hat Critchley strangely leaves out of consideration is the brutal "sadistic" aspect of humour itself: humour can be extremely cruel and denigrating' (2008: 341). The point is that the 'humorous superego' might indeed be as cruel as the (straightforward) 'cruel superego' exactly by exerting humour.

Subversive humour?

Fleming and Spicer are pioneers in introducing the concept of 'cynical reasoning' into critical organization studies (2003; 2004), which constitutes a key lynchpin for discussing how to conceptualize subversive practices of humour. Our initial example with the 'corporate clown' poses a question in terms of the degree to which cynicism fits into contemporary management: has it become legitimate to accompany difficult management decisions like layoffs with humour so that they may be more easily 'swallowed' by employees? (George Clooney's ironic performance in the film *Up in the air* is another example of accepted, blatant cynicism consisting in the routine of bringing in an outsider to do management's dirty work).

In this situation, it is obvious that adding elements of self-caricature and 'clowning' to the management role may be strategically useful, as the clown is a character against whom it is hard to exert serious critique: how do you mock a character who is already clowning around? Faced with this kind of 'fun-filled', self-ironic management, every form of irony and caricature seems destined to fail, as it is already incorporated within the manager's character, who can effortlessly embrace the very distancing that supposedly forms the backbone of humorous resistance. Management takes over the clowning around, and humour becomes a leadership quality.

The question, then, is what kind of humour can operate critically and subversively? Traditional forms of parody, irony and ridicule easily end up being co-productive and supporting contemporary management practices, according to the above research. With inspiration from Žižek and Zupančič, we will now propose two possible analytical strategies for indicating practices of subversive humour. These involve looking for:

- I. Humour that is directed towards undermining the symbolic order by targeting 'master signifiers' and practising 'over-identification'.
- II. Humour that exhibits and maintains incongruence.

Here, we follow Žižek's premise that any power structure generates an excess of resistance from within its inherent dynamics. The fact that resistance is thus immanent to power in no way implies that every act of resistance is co-opted in the structure, since 'the very inherent antagonism of a system may well set in motion a process which leads to its own ultimate downfall' (Žižek, 1999a: 256). Žižek asserts that our position becomes stronger if we claim that our resistance is grounded in the system itself, articulating inherent antagonisms which may undermine its unity and reproductive capacity. This is possible insofar as the

symbolic order is always by definition ‘decentred’ around a constitutive void or impossibility. Fundamentally, it is a matter of generating confrontations with ‘the real’, which we understand as naming the failure of the symbolic order in achieving its own closure. The real becomes the effects of the failure of symbolization, evident as irruptions, impasses and impossibilities inherent in the Symbolic itself (Laclau, 2000: 68).

Humour as over-identification

Our first suggestions concern humour that displays the inherent antagonisms of the symbolic order, particularly targeting postulates of unity, cohesion and homogeneity. Preventing full closure of the symbolic order, antagonisms are to be understood not as objective social relations, but rather as ‘the point where the limit of all objectivity is shown’ (Laclau, 2000: 72). Unifying concepts like ‘participatory management’, ‘cooperative values’, and ‘common rewards’ are proliferating in contemporary management discourse. ‘Diversity management’, on the contrary, invokes the idea that although our values and interests *are* indeed divergent, we nevertheless benefit from ‘cooperation in difference’. In both cases, the symbolic order is one in which all parties take their natural place in a harmonious whole. Such a hegemonic articulation depends upon a rallying of diverse identities to a reconciliatory representation of the organization or social positions. In this process of contingent, partial fixation, one particular signifier assumes the function of unifying representation. Developing Lacan’s notion of ‘Master Signifier’, Laclau (2000: 70-71) defines ‘the empty signifier’ as a discursive element which achieves its unifying function by cancelling out its specific content, thereby allowing diverse actors and groups to identify with it. Its signifying content depends not on any non-discursive substance but on its position within a chain of signifiers which endeavour to suture the empty signifier, fixating its meaning (Laclau, 2000: 71). Sustaining its privileged function requires that the signifier’s impossibility as a particular representing the universal is not effectively exposed.

Humour, which demonstrates the empty signifier’s fragility and fictive universality, has subversive potential because it reveals how a postulated wholeness covers primordial lack, antagonism and non-identity. More precisely, humour can generate a process of contamination of the empty signifier by infusing it with diverse, incongruent content, thereby ‘overburdening’ its universalizing function. Such contamination may undermine the chain of equivalences and open space for substitutions and whole new articulations: ‘a certain meaning which was fixated within the horizon of an ensemble of institutionalized practices is displaced towards new uses which subvert its literality’ (Laclau, 2000: 78). Imagine, for instance, an organization in which the

signifier ‘our corporate vision’ is equated with ‘team-spirit’, ‘individual performance’, ‘achieving sector bench marks’ and ‘our unique qualities’ that all endeavour to fill its void. Here, humorous interventions could insist on *simultaneously articulating* these particular and incommensurable representations of the organization. Such an insistence on incommensurable identities may overburden and contaminate the empty signifier and the entire hegemonic formation that finds support in it.

A humorous attack on empty signifiers can also be directed towards moments of irruption or collapse which are always inherent potentials of symbolic orders. Returning to our initial example of layoff announcements that operate with the help of a company clown, there is a momentary imbalance in the symbolic order, whose hegemonic representation is unity – that management and employees are part of a common, mutually rewarding project. However, the tragic-comedic moment arises when the clown pops up and displays the impossibility of the assertion of harmonious union and non-conflictuality.

Another possible strategy of humorous destabilization of the symbolic order consists of over-identifying with it (see Fleming and Spicer, 2003: 172-173). Rather than putting ironic distance to the positions and prescriptions directed at employees, an effective strategy could consist of completely embracing and overdoing them. Or, as Žižek asserts:

In so far as power relies on its ‘inherent transgression’, then – sometimes, at least – over-identifying with the explicit power discourse – ignoring this inherent obscene underside and simply taking the power discourse at its (public) word, acting as if it really means what it explicitly says (and promises) – can be the most effective way of disturbing its smooth functioning. (Žižek, 2000: 220)

The premise is that any power structure relies on its ‘inherent transgression’, exemplified by the rule of law which relies on its inherent and continual transgression without which it disintegrates (Žižek, in Contu, 2008: 368). The fact that these acts of resistance and transgression are integral to power does not make it untouchable, but renders it vulnerable to acts that simply take its claims and propositions literally. This may include humour that fully identifies with such claims, even excessively, and hence collapses the self-distance operative in symbolic positions: ‘we touch the Real when the efficiency of such symbolic markers of distance is suspended’ (Žižek, 2000: 223). Such over-identification can be very humorous and can reveal the antagonistic kernel of a specific social arrangement or position. For example, one might imagine that employees, in introducing ‘lean management’, which requires continuous generation of ideas from the rank and file, take advantage of this new position to drown management in an abundance of impossible and mutually contradictory

proposals for new work routines, technologies, customer care, etc. This practice is difficult to sanction, in that the employees are doing precisely what is officially expected of them, although in a *too* literal manner. In our example with the company clown, a strategy of over-identification could consist in the remaining employees' insistence on joking about the negative budget balance – a practice that was sanctioned by management when it hired a clown to help inform employees about this. By dissolving the distinction between humorous representation and harsh reality, the employees effectively display both managerial incompetence and the collapse of meaning. According to Žižek, no amount of disguising such misfortunes with a joke or irony can prevent it from having a hurtful effect: 'This collapse of the distinction between pretending and being is the unmistakable sign that my speech has touched some real' (Žižek, 2000: 223). Again, this underlines the uncontrollable and potentially subversive character of humour.

The minimal difference of humour

Our second proposal is based on a certain idea of humour, which in humour literature is usually described as 'the incongruence theory' (e.g. Moreall, 1981; Critchley, 2002; Billig, 2005). This humour theory has its roots in Kant and is further developed by Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard. Also, both Zupančič's and Žižek's reflections on humour, which we will rely on here, can be read as an example of incongruence theory. According to this theory, humour is perceived as misalignment or incongruity between the reality as we expect that it will look like, and the reality as it is expressed, for example in a sketch, a comic story or a practical joke (Critchley, 2002: 3). However, Morreall (1981: 245) emphasizes that not all incongruence is comical since incongruence can also cause negative emotions such as anger or fear. Freud (1955a: 246) remarked upon this aspect in his famous text on 'The uncanny', discussing the intrinsic connection between the comic and the uncanny:

Then the theme that achieves such an indubitably uncanny effect, the involuntary recurrence of the like, serves, too, other and quite different purposes in another class of cases. One case we have already heard about in which it is employed to call forth a feeling of the comic.

It is the repetition that, according to Freud, links the uncanny and the comic. More specifically, the repetition (of the same) may reveal that the same, i.e. the identical, perhaps does not totally accord with itself, is non-identical, and thereby create a situation where the repetition becomes comical (or uncanny).⁸ Here,

⁸ Another comic (and disturbing) aspect of repetition is the stubbornness or steadfastness which it entails (this becomes especially clear when repetition is related

humour exhibits, plays on and plays with this division in the heart of the same in the core of any identity. Zupančič (2008: 58) also formulates this point with reference to Lacan's concept of the real:

[T]he Real 'exposed' by comedy is [...] the structural Real (or impasse) the suppression of which constitutes the very coherence of our reality. [...] Comedy succeeds in displaying the crack in the midst of our most familiar realities.

One of the places where humour, according to Zupančič, makes its presence felt most clearly in this sense is in the question of 'reality'. There is something unrealistic about the reality of humour that creates an incongruence between the reality of humour (where the realistic and the unrealistic tend to coincide) and the realistic perception of reality, which we are presented with most of the time. This unrealistic – or 'real', in Lacanian terms – element of the reality of humour is for instance expressed partly in the form of a 'blind' insistence, such as when the cat in a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon keeps on chasing the mouse, even though Tom always ends up being beaten to a pulp. This insistence is unrealistic in the sense that it does not take into account what is dictated to be practical, convenient or realistic. Or, putting it differently, (good) humour involves a dimension that is 'beyond the pleasure and the reality principle'. Zupančič (2008: 217-218) often employs the psychoanalytic concept of (death) drive to illustrate this dimension.⁹ A key feature of the death drive, as is well-known, is that it involves an obsession to repetition (hence, Freud [1955b] describes it as 'conservative'). However, any repetition also entails a minimal displacement (and thus an element of novelty).

The concept of 'drive' encompasses a particular conception of the relationship and interplay between identity (repetition) and difference (displacement) which can be utilized in the analysis of humour. The theory of incongruence can thus be refined by the distinction (borrowed from Žižek) between, on the one hand, situations that are comical because they show us a difference where we expected similarity and, on the other, situations that are comical because they show us identity where we expected difference. Accordingly, we can distinguish between two types of incongruence. First, the form of incongruence that can arise when two fundamentally different things meet or are joined together (as in the initial

to failure) (see Zupančič, 2008: 29-20). Freud similarly pointed out that the neurotic's compulsion to repeat can have both a comic and a disturbing effect (Freud, 1955a: 236-238). See also Zupančič (2005).

9 Conversely, according to Zupančič (2008: 126), the comic constitutes a good introduction to the psychoanalytic concept of drives. There is an important interconnection between the (Freudian) concept of drive and the (Lacanian) concept of the real: 'drive involves the Real of compulsion to repeat that is by definition "beyond the pleasure principle"' (Žižek, 1999a: 295).

corporate clown example). And second, the kind of incongruence that may arise when two similar things are united (such as the Marx Brothers' 'idiot' joke mentioned in footnote 2). In the latter case, the incongruity arises in that the repetition of the same produces a 'minimal difference' between two identical things. In this way, it is shown that at the foundation of every identity lies an internal division. Or as Žižek explains: 'This very lack of difference between the two elements confronts us with the "pure" difference that separates an element from itself' (Žižek, 2006: 109). Hence, the difference and sameness on which humour plays is, as suggested, not a difference between the reality and a more or less unreal representation of reality, but rather a 'pure' or 'minimal' difference incarnated in reality itself. It is a minimal difference which, according to Zupančič, is expressed when humour displays that there is something in our life that lives its own life, i.e. the drive, the Real (Zupančič, 2008: 218).

Attempts to bring the subject into contact with himself, e.g. in the form of moments of 'comic relief', theatrical role transgression, or momentary openings of authentic speech (Karlsen and Villadsen, 2008) all attempt to conceal this unruliness, this fundamental lack of closure, and yet at the same time produce a potential self-undermining excess. In other words: there is something uncontrollable, something inherently disturbing, even self-sabotaging, about humour. Managers who try to exploit humour as a tool for managerial control will, paradoxically, always be introducing an element of something ambiguous and uncontrollable into the organization.

Concluding remarks

Some researchers have emphasized that workplace humour, parodies, irony and the like are easily absorbed by management and thus do not comprise any sort of fundamental threat to the dominant organization of work life (Kunda, 1991; Collinson, 1992; Du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Contu, 2008). Contu goes so far as to propose that researchers tend to seek out hidden or carnivalesque forms of resistance in order to convince ourselves that there are still pockets of resistance in the undergrowth of workplaces which escape the iron grip of discipline. In this way, hidden forms of everyday resistance are idealized. She relies on Žižek's assertion that inherent transgressions of the symbolic order in fact constitute the ultimate support of this order. Much of the resistance that organizational researchers observe is in fact 'decaf resistance', a resistance that threatens no one and which has no real social costs. Even if humoristic forms of resistance takes a carnivalesque or obscene character, they are 'decaf' insofar as they 'do not seriously challenge the economic reproduction of both producers and consumers' (Contu, 2008: 368). Instead, Contu seeks out genuine acts of

resistance, the 'impossible act of resistance', impossible because it is not based upon or contained within the official discourse and norms against which the act is being exercised (Contu, 2008: 370). It should be acts of resistance which fundamentally challenge and undermine the symbolic order (our meaning-attributing structures of language and symbols) and, in this sense, entail high costs.

We have attempted to demonstrate that humour (at least certain forms of humorous practice) contains such a potential for resistance. It does not, however, necessarily have to be forms of humour resistance that fundamentally alter the symbolic order of the organization. More modest forms of distortions, exposures and calling things into question can (also) open up spaces for confrontation with the failure of closure of the symbolic. Above, we have sought to call attention to the fact that while humour may be managerially useful, it always entails a form of evasive excess, an unavoidable, uncontrollable dimension that makes it risky for those in power to appropriate it, and which therefore endows humour strategies with a subversive, critical potential.

Contu (2008: 379) encourages us to abandon the belief that there is an ultimate authority that can justify the attitudes which guide our actions and take on the full and terrifying responsibility for them:

The real act of resistance, the act proper, is an act where one assumes fully the responsibility for the act itself, without 'if' and without 'but,' risking all and effectively choosing the impossible, in this sense, 'traversing the fantasy,' as Žižek put it.

While we sympathize with this idea of such a 'genuine' or 'real act of resistance', it seems unrealistic as an imperative for the vast majority of subordinate employees who find themselves in structures consisting of very real authorities, responsibilities, and risk of sanctions. Therefore, apart from the future work of theorizing a subversive humour, we need to begin investigating how humorous practices interact with entirely different forms of dominance, resistance and struggle (Fleming and Spicer, 2003: 171). It follows from our understanding of humour as highly ambiguous and difficult to control that its concrete effects must be studied in relation to other social practices and power relations and situated in the context of specific organizational cultures, identities, languages, and hierarchies. Hence, this contribution is an invitation to undertake both further theoretical elaborations and empirical studies of the interlacing of humour and managerial power in specific organizational contexts. In this way we can begin to better understand corporate clowns and other 'uncanny' instances of humour that allow management to negotiate (and re-negotiate) their relationship

with employees. And we can explore this game from the premise that its outcome is hardly ever completely controllable or determined in advance.

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the authors

Kaspar Villadsen is Professor at the Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy, Copenhagen Business School. He is the author of the books *Power and welfare: Citizens' encounters with state welfare* (co-authored with Nanna Mik-Meyer, 2013, Routledge) and *Statephobia and civil society* (co-authored with Mitchell Dean, forthcoming, Stanford University Press). Villadsen has published on Foucault, organizations, biopolitics and welfare policy in *Economy and Society*, *Theory, Culture and Society*, *Organization*, *Constellations*, *Social Theory and Health*, *Culture and Organization* and more. His current research is on governmental technologies, health promotion, and the problem of state and civil society.

Email: kv.mpp@cbs.dk

Mads Peter Karlsen is Assistant Professor at the Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy, Copenhagen Business School. He did his PhD thesis on Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. He is the author of the book *Pastoralmagt: Om velfærdssamfundets kristne arv* (2008) and the editor (with Lars Sandbeck) of the books *Religionskritik efter Guds død* (2009) and *Kristendom og engagement: Peter Kempes teologi til debat* (2014). Karlsen has published on Foucault, Badiou and Žižek in *New Political Science*, *Journal for Critical Research on Religion* and *International Journal of Žižek Studies*. His current research is on the interrelationship between theology and psychoanalysis.

Email: mk.mpp@cbs.dk