

HUMOR



AT THE HORINGBOOM OASIS

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Every joke is a tiny revolution — George Orwell

Most viewers of television advertisements would agree that humour has an impact in easing social conflicts, relieving tensions and promoting order in a society. An analysis of humour in popular culture shows that it deals with every aspect of a culture, including sex, violence, politics, social class distinctions, racial, ethnic and regional differences and the values, attitudes and dispositions that characterise such a culture (Mintz 1983). Humour proves invaluable in contributing to the sort of interpersonal rapport that accelerates resolution of social injustices and racial conflict. An individual's ability to see humour in certain events becomes a way of coping with the world, a personal growth experience. By stepping back from the seriousness of the situation, laughter serves as a tension-relief mechanism and leaves the person better able to deal with conflict.

Humour has also been used as a form of expression in particular historical periods where it is deployed to control or resist social pressures both by and against significant groups (ethnic, religious) in a society. A number of television advertisements for *Castrol Oil*, broadcast for the last ten years have humorously portrayed events happening in South Africa and abroad (for instance, the *Priscilla* advertisement featured drag queens and the 1994 election was followed by the inclusion of a black character as a member of the Horingboom Oasis team). Viewers approach a *Castrol Oil* advertisement with a certain set of expectations centered around their belief that it is going to

contain humorous associations with certain historical events. In the *Limousine* advertisement, the humorous event centres around the doubling of identities and the transformation of South African society.

However, humour (like beauty), is in the eye of the beholder. It exists in the mind and not in the real world. Viewers of television advertisements laugh at certain events portrayed, frown at others 'nothing is funny to everyone and anything seems potentially funny to someone' (La Fave et al. 1976:85).

HUMOUR IN ADVERTISING

Humour, like all interpretative behaviour, is socially situated. A humorous advertisement must be 'responsive to the immediate situation and be appropriate to the normative properties of the more general social circumstances' (Fine 1983:164).

Humorous advertising campaigns are aimed at selling products by amusing the audience and thus calling attention to the brand being advertised, but their success reveals cultural predilection as readily as do other sources of humour in popular culture. Humour in advertising does what media messages are supposed to do, namely attract large audiences and provide the consumer with relief from boredom.

Gail Dines (1995) suggests that the type of form used to convey humour requires its own particular analysis since messages are never unproblematically transmitted from the sender to the receiver. She identifies three areas of analysis, namely produc-

tion and distribution, textual analysis and reader reception. In this article attention is paid to the text in an analysis of the content, structure and complexity of a television advertisement.

An advertisement may be viewed as a symbolic construction which displays its own articulated meaning and whose images and text resonate in the viewer's mind. The problem, as Mintz (1983:141) sees it, lies in the 'decoding of visions of reality that are mythic, distorted by emotional needs, commercial dictates, aesthetic considerations, technical capabilities, and other interferences that obscure the motives and functions of the enterprise'.

ELEMENTS OF HUMOROUS EXPERIENCES

Koestler (1964) argues that humour is based on a characteristic called 'bisociation'. Bisociation causes an abrupt transfer of the train of thought from one matrix to another governed by a different logic or rule of the game. The one social condition necessary for a joke to be enjoyed is that a dominant set of relations is challenged by another. In the *Limousine* advertisement for *Castrol Oil*, the combination of humorous cues or signals and a verbal or visual text that allows for some element of bisociation, establishes the punchline.

Analysts agree that the underlying principle at the core of humorous experiences is the principle of incongruity (Shultz 1976; Rothbart 1976). Incongruity refers to something out of context, inappropriate, illogical and unexpected and serves as a necessary condition for humour. Incongruity indicates an event that breaks the ordinary codes, conventions and expectations, and is perceived as an acceptable solution for a conflict situation. 'The nonsense that results from the perception of incongruity makes sense when we see the unexpected meaning or "get the point"' (McGhee 1979:7).

Attardo (1988) postulates that two levels of analysis are necessary when interpreting humour. First, a cognitive level which defines the cognitive processes by which a particular kind of

text elicits a particular kind of reaction from the viewer and second, a linguistic or semiotic level which deals with the concrete practical means by which the humorous effect in texts is achieved.

In this article, the second level of analysis is applied to a visual text by using and adapting Raskin's (1985) and Attardo's (1989) approaches to the deconstruction of humorous texts.



The analysis also incorporated elements of the semiotic approach of Barthes (1967) which postulates denotative, connotative and ideological levels of signification in the production of meaning.

(Editor's note: Image quality due to sourcing from video screen captures)

Signification

Humour is play and contextual or presentational cues are given at the beginning of the *Limousine* advertisement that create a 'play frame' around the visual text. The frame is indicated by the music and a situation which shows that the events in the following scenes are unreal, part of a fantasy and not to be taken seriously (Fry 1963). In the opening sequence the black limousine moving from right to left is oppositional to the western convention of vectors moving from left to right, and serves as a symbolic sign suggesting a change in the normal course of events (perhaps alluding to the new integrated society). This nonverbal cue indicates that the viewer should no longer operate within the serious realm (commerce) and that the ensuing scenes should be interpreted as part of a humorous discourse.

On a denotative level the characters, props and setting in the advertisement serve to represent an event far removed from reality. The iconic signs reflected by the *riempiesbank*, khaki clothing, animal skins and pumpkin on the roof indexically portray a rustic setting somewhere in the bush, devoid of material encumbrances and evoking a nostalgic atmosphere of rural innocence. This calm atmosphere is disturbed by the entrance of the black limousine with its sophisticated occupants from another world, the city dwellers. Connotatively this visual dichotomy offers a symbolic pattern of a prevalent social pattern (unsophistication/naiveté and officialdom/bureaucracy)

The ideological meaning is constructed by the way in which a culture represents itself to itself. According to Burgin (1986:55), all cultural forms of representation in the mass media are ideologically grounded, they cannot avoid involvement with social and political relations. In the same sense all humorous texts are expressive of the social situations in which they occur.

In the advertisement the meeting between the three tranquil men sitting on the porch, passing the time and waiting for a customer and the three men in the limousine pausing for a short interval in their busy lives to buy a product, fulfills an

ideological function 'by exposing existing social relations and dominant ways of perceiving social reality' (Powell 1988:100).

The *Limousine* advertisement thus serves as a mirror of South African society which reflects the values and attitudes of the consumers using the product. The interplay between identities and characters serves as a metaphor for the current political, socio-economical and economic climate. Metaphors create



intimacy through mutual comprehension and in the advertisement, the background knowledge mobilised in the different levels of significance is part of the culture which the advertiser and the recipient share.

On an allegorical level (the moral message in figurative language) the idea expressed in this advertisement is that people are the same despite their skin colour. 'We are all brothers under the skin even if we do not recognise one another as such'. Two opposing value systems are shown simultaneously, the financially successful (black VIP in limousine) and the economically unsuccessful (white and black men on porch), articulating South African society's shifting social boundaries and moral ambiguities by employing humour to highlight the conflicts inherent in core values.

STEREOTYPES

Humour operates by setting apart the behaviour of those 'not like us' by creating stereotypes and thus there is always a target in a humorous text, be it actual or symbolic.



One of the targets in this advertisement seems to be a stereotypical depiction of the rural, naïve and backward *plattlander*. The stereotype plays against the background of other depictions of white *bekvelders* such as the films produced by Jamie Uys in the 1940s.

Later in the advertisement the target seems to change to an equally stereotypical portrayal of the black politician in the limousine which plays against the background of petty officialdom in the previous homelands and the shifting of political power from white to black in the so-called 'new' South Africa.

In any case, the identification of the target is complicated by the doubling of identities, not only on a personal identification level but also on a social identity level. Identity in a humorous text is mostly a matter of external signs such as behaviour and clothing. A character changes his identity merely by putting on a new costume and changing his behaviour. In this advertisement humour arises from an ironic transference of attitudes and remarks from one role to another. The erroneous belief that the identities of the two characters (black VIP and black layabout) are different is corrected by a recognition scene that proves their identities are the same.

An additional assumption that could be made is that the intended target also refers to the target market, that is the white and black male users of the product. The advertisement pokes gentle fun at deeply-held attitudes and value systems of the apartheid years and suggests that this way of categorising people is no longer applicable.

Humour may also be used to reinforce or undercut stereotypes. In the reinforcement of stereotypes, humour is used to exaggerate a category's negative social attributes (the language, appearance, possessions of the white mechanic in the advertisement). When humour is used to undercut the stereotype, the targeted group is used to reveal the superficiality of the prejudices found in society. In the *Limousine* advertisement certain social attributes are transferred from one social subcategory to its opposite, creating humour by incongruously juxtaposing traditional social attributes of the first subcategory: white, rich, urban with those of the second subcategory: black, poor, rural. What is achieved is 'a simultaneous bisociating of social integration and division' (Powell 1988:100).

Incongruity is also prevalent in the different roles played by the characters in the advertisement. Humour aborts expectations about a role by extracting traits from one role (being in power) and implanting them in another role (being subservient). Society regards one social category as more competent and having more status and power than the next (for instance,

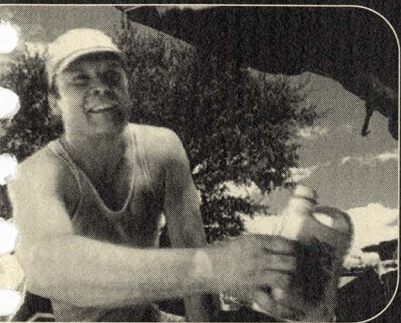
VIPs as opposed to mechanics). In the advertisement the status and power conventionally and traditionally linked to the white group is associated with the black group. The 'normal' views of reality are therefore challenged by the doubling of characters and the reversal of roles.

In their discussion of superiority, enhanced self-esteem and perceived incongruity, LaFave, Haddad and Maesen (1976:86) state that perceived incongruity is not sufficient and that in order for the event to amuse, the viewer must feel superior to the characters portrayed. In the *Limousine* advertisement the juxtapositioning of different situations results in the viewer feeling superior to the characters since they are portrayed as backward, dirty or ugly.

NARRATIVE

Narrative structure refers to the logical structure of the text, the sequence of events or actions that follow a specific storyline. A storyline can be defined as the raw materials of the narrative, the sum of the motifs in their causal-chronological order. In the *Limousine* advertisement the storyline is very simple. A black limousine draws up at a filling station in the bushveld, the mechanic leaves his friends on the porch to attend to the customer, the car is serviced with motor oil and the mechanic returns to the porch. The characters on the porch in the opening sequence are framed to present a unity. The closing sequence again shows the three characters framed as a unity, thus alluding to a kind of narrative closure and strengthening the concept of an integrated society.

Humorous narratives are, however, semiotically ambiguous. The incongruous structure of the humorous event makes the storyline at the same time plausible and implausible, real and unreal. The narrative framework of the advertisement is the narrative form of realism (the shack, limousine, setting look real) but the events portrayed are unreal. The characters are sites of emotional identification for the viewers who cluster around a name (*Castrol Oil*). The punchline interacts with other semiotic mechanisms on a denotative, symbolic and ideological



level. The meaning of the punchline is contained in this interaction and can only be funny in a South African context with its long involved history.

Palmer (1988) identifies two prevalent types of theories concerning humorous narratives. The first type uses traditional categories of literary analysis, such as character, plot and genre, but cannot account for the eliciting of a humorous response to a particular text. The second type of theory, which concentrates on the semantic properties of humour, treats the narrative as a structure embedded with a series of jokes but cannot explain 'the manner in which jokes and narrative are articulated together' (Palmer 1988:114). Holcomb (1992) tries to account for this dichotomy by postulating that the author (in this instance the advertising company) must create a context, a joke-like construction that allows a particular incident to be funny. Holcomb (1992:234) refers to 'nodal points of humour' which are locations in a narrative where humour is more concentrated than in other parts of the text. The nodal points of humour in the *Limousine* advertisement rely on visual, nonverbal cues such as the expressions on the face of the man being frisked, and the crossing of legs by the other men on the porch. Other nodal points include the frisking device with the emblem of a thunderbolt that resembles a cattle prod, and the nonrecognition of the two black men as being the same person by the two white protagonists.

Suls (1983) states that two stages characterise the cognitive activities required to comprehend visual humour. During the first stage the viewer uses the early parts of the joke to construct a storyline or narrative scheme and deduces how the story will evolve. The first part of the information processing is brought to an end by the recipient experiencing an incongruity and finding his expectations disconfirmed by the punchline. During the second stage the recipient engages in a form of problem solving to find a set of cognitive rules which resolves the incongruity and offers a resolution within one coherent framework. The humour derives from experiencing a sudden incongruity which is then made congruous (Suls 1983:82). In the advertisement the narrative strategy leads the viewer to

expect that the white mechanic will recognise the VIP. Instead the punchline (*they all look the same to me*) disconfirms the expectation. The viewer then has to find the cognitive rule (the doubling of identity) to enable resolution to take place. The disparagement of an unacceptable idea (all blacks look the same) should be enjoyed as humour by the viewer.

PUNCHLINE

Bateson (1953) stresses the fact that figure and ground are reversed when we get the point of a joke. The structure of the joke draws our attention to certain elements while de-emphasising others, forming a background for the apparent focal points of the joke. When the punchline (*they all look the same to me*) is delivered, the background materialises suddenly and is unexpectedly brought to the centre of attention. The specific content of the punchline must be unexpected in the light of what has gone before. An effective punchline introduces a new perspective which deviates from the rest of the text but still retains some kind of interpretative coherence (Mulkay 1988:29).

During the unfolding of humour, 'one is suddenly confronted by an explicit-implicit reversal when the punchline is delivered ... but the reversal also has the unique effect of forcing upon the humour participants an internal redefining of reality' (Fry 1963: 153). It is in this internal redefining of reality which makes the viewer look at the attitudes and prejudices harboured by himself/herself that the paradox of identity is solved and resolution takes place.

The punchline combines communication and metacommunication because it carries an implicit meaning about itself and about reality as exemplified by the humorous text. The viewer moves from a literal frame of reference (the consumption of a motor oil) to a metaphorical frame of reference which provides him/her with a combination of divergent frameworks.

MYTHS

The bisociation of sense and nonsense in the advertisement contrasts a more staid normatively controlled social reality with an alternative reality. According to Raskin (1985) a text is funny when it embodies two scripts which express within the semantic context created by that text a contrast between the real and unreal, between the actual and non-actual. It is this opposition which creates the joke.

The two scripts operating in the *Limousine* advertisement as a text are the factual reality of a limousine stopping at a petrol station in the bush for oil. The unreal script is the fantasy provided by the doubling of identities by the characters. If one looks at the obvious level of visual images, then the money versus non-money, urban versus rural, sophistication versus naiveté and clever versus dumb oppositions substantiate what Barthes (1975) refers to as the **symbolic** code. The symbolic code refers to the positions of the viewer within the text which guide him/her to a symbolic reading of the text. Aspects such as opposing values and forces and binary oppositions uncover the structure of values on which myths and ideologies are built.

Myths are built on previously learnt stereotypes and symbols. In this advertisement the cultural knowledge that people take for granted is opposed. The viewer is presented with a white worker (the mechanic) and a black boss (the man in the car). The white man is dressed in dirty and torn clothing, the black politician in a suit. The white man drives in a dirty truck, the black man is chauffeured in a limousine. In a symbolic reading of the text it would appear that the values and myths of the old apartheid regime are overthrown, the ideological hegemony exposed and a new structure of values exposed to the viewer.

The ability of the viewer to recognise and appreciate the interpretative oppositions and ambiguities contained in this advertisement means that the punchline is appreciated because it confronts the dominant social pattern and gives voice to its inconsistencies.



LANGUAGE

According to Dorfles (1968) humour consists of a process of alienation whereby a sign (word or action) is shifted from its context and changes its meaning. Humour is therefore seen as a specific kind of communication that is the result of a change in the relationship between the sign and the signified. Humour is 'a kind of language ... characterized by the negative or paradoxical value assumed by the sign' (Dorfles 1968:104).

The paradoxical value assumed by the sign is seen in the addressing of the white mechanic as 'chief' by the black VIP, although the object language (contained in props such as the limousine and chauffeur) spells out quite clearly that the black man in the car is the chief. A paradox is also apparent in the nonrecognition of the dual identity of the black protagonist. The absurd detaches itself from the language of rational discourse because such language suggests a rational world. The resultant breakdown of language is both funny as verbal play and threatening because it indicates an inability to comprehend the world.

In the *Limousine* advertisement the humour contained in the language focuses on word play. The mechanic says that the VIP needs protection and *Castrol Oil* promises double protection. (The slogan at the end of the advertisement reads: *A can of the best. A can of the best*).

A suggestive by-play on the meaning of the name *Horingboom Oasis* and the use of the electronic device to frisk the mechanic in his genital area provide a nice link between the linguistic colloquial meaning of *horing* and the visual connotative meaning of the penis as a horn. The Freudian pun is accentuated by the two men on the porch nervously crossing their legs to protect their genital areas when the security guard approaches, and provides a visual punchline to the association.

In the verbal punchline, amusement results from perceiving connotative sense in denotative nonsense *they all look the same to me*. This is not a politically correct statement to make, seen in the light of the new integrated South African society, but is an example of how humour is used to defuse racial tension. The use of humorous cues (for example the nonrecognition of the black VIP as the same man as the one sharing the porch) suggests that the utterance is not to be taken literally and that the recipient must formulate some counter-text of his own which contradicts the actual utterance and conveys the real meaning. The statement *they all look the same to me* is ironic and the implied countertext is the opposite of what is actually spoken.

CONCLUSION

The function of humour in the *Limousine* advertisement lies in the exercise of perception that enables the viewer to see things for the first time, to reconsider entrenched prejudices and to become a bit more flexible when dealing with the world in future. The punchline relates to social grouping at the heart of the political order, and humour is used as an expression of the anxieties engendered by the new political order and social organisation. At the same time, it also serves as a protest against the perceived irrationality of the dominant modes of political authority (Davies 1993:21). The otherwise publicly unthinkable belief (all blacks look the same) is touched upon and expressed in humorous form. The result of the laughter that accompanies this statement releases pent-up tensions and

facilitates the management of ambivalent feelings and trying circumstances.

Humour deconstructs the world by destroying rigid preconceptions and imposed order. It does not necessarily affirm dominant values but rather mocks them and denigrates them. If 'laughter is the mind sneezing' (Wyndham Lewis) then humour serves to detoxify the mind of negative entrenched beliefs and values which endanger the potential for mutual understanding in a transforming society.

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