Humour in Film as a Method of Expression

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Abstract

Living in a social world, we experience feelings and react to others' feelings as they appear to us. For instance, we have all smiled since we were babies. The first "genuine" social smile typically occurs sometime between weeks 6 and 8, as a response to recognizing someone very special: Mom or Dad (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2019). We see, we are happy, we smile. We are born with the desire to be happy.

Humankind has searched for different revelations of happiness, and this is how humour was born. From ancient times to the present day, humour has been an instrument of communication, a social behaviour that is an integral part of mass media and social interaction. Humour provides a reciprocal influence. It is a way to interpret information as well as a specific media that can be used to convey this information. What happens to the media once it is "infected" by humour? Does humour necessarily satisfy the need for entertainment? Can humour have a "serious face"? Is it true that "Humour is always a monopoly of the semi-literate" (McLuhan, 2016)?

This essay will explore the above-mentioned topics from the perspective of the humour applied in motion pictures, during the interwar era. It will specifically discuss the genre of satire using as a case study the humour found in Latin America during that time as evidenced in the movie *Tararira*, the film of Benjamin Fondane produced by Falma Film in Buenos Aires in 1936.

Keywords

Film Studies; Benjamin Fondane; Interwar Cinema; Tararira Film; Humour in Film; Lost Movie; Comedy; Argentinian Cinema; French Filmmaker

Юмор в киноискусстве как способ достижения выразительности

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Аннотация

Живя в социальном мире, мы испытываем разнообразные чувства и реагируем на чувства других так, как они нам открываются. Например, мы все улыбались с детства. Первая «подлинно» социальная улыбка обычно появляется где-то между 6 и 8 неделями в ответ на узнавание кого-то очень важного: мамы или папы (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2019). Мы видим, мы счастливы, мы улыбаемся. Мы рождаемся с желанием быть счастливыми.

Человечество искало разные способы проявления счастья, и так родился юмор. С древних времен до наших дней юмор был инструментом общения, социального поведения, что является неотъемлемой частью средств массовой информации и социального взаимодействия. Юмор оказывает взаимное влияние. Это способ интерпретации информации, а также конкретный носитель, который можно использовать для передачи этой информации. Что происходит со СМИ, когда они «заряжены» юмором? Обязательно ли юмор удовлетворяет потребность в развлечениях? Может ли юмор иметь «серьезное лицо»? Верно ли, что «юмор это всегда монополия полуграмотных» (McLuhan, 2016)?

Этот очерк исследует упомянутые темы с точки зрения юмора, примененного в киноискусстве в межвоенную эпоху. В нем будет конкретно обсуждаться жанр сатиры на примере юмора, который существовал в Латинской Америке в то время, о чем свидетельствует фильм Бенджамина Фондана «Tararira», снятый компанией Falma Film в Буэнос-Айресе в 1936 году.

Ключевые слова

Significance of humour during the interwar era and filmmaking

The interwar era was marked with much pain and trauma in communities, especially those that had actively participated in the war. There was thus a need to soothe and heal the traumatized souls if the varied members of society were to achieve a peaceful coexistence. One method used to heal the distorted and battered souls was humour (Avruch, 1998). Furthermore, the use of humour plays a significant role within communities in conflict as it can either escalate or de-escalate conflicts. According to Ray Hanania (Hanania, 2000) "If we can laugh together, we can live together". This is well illustrated in the film *No Man's Land*, shown during the Sarajevo film festival (Turan, 2002) which won the Academy Award for best foreign film for its satirically humorous account of the Bosnian War and ridiculed all parties including the international community (Horton, 2006).

Humour can be designed as comical or amusing in nature. It does not exist independently or by itself but has to be delivered through a chosen medium within an understandable context. Humour can be found in informal conversations, jokes by comedians, school plays, cartoon films and documentaries and music or visual arts. A social context, a cognitive perceptual process, an emotional response and the vocal expression of laughter are the four elements of humour (Martin, 2008). In normal communication, the humour process has a standard delivery which the recipient of the message must understand if the information is to be appropriately and accurately interpreted within the social and societal context (Partington, 2006).

Research shows that for humour to have a positive impact, it should happen within a context that provides further meaning within the cultural interpretation. Not only is the message important but also the context within which the humour process is carried out. Humour plays a major role in allowing ridicule or criticism of those in power or within a certain profession in a soft manner through songs or graphics so that even though its statements sound like jokes, the message is communicated to the targeted group or person. However, failing to put the humour process in a proper context may result in a negative impact on the members of a society and could even lead to conflict. For example, using the humour process to joke about war, traumatizing events and even violent graphics in a severely conflicted and affected society may be socially acceptable in some communities within a certain context and on a specific platform even though the same kind of jokes and humour might be seen as completely insensitive and wrong in societies that have not experienced the adverse effects of violence or war.

Humour is triggered by a cultural norm within a recognized social context including a family set up, professional organization, political setting or any other social conversation platform. The choice of content and tone are important in the humour process. This is expressed by the delivering party to the audience through speech, a joke or graphics. The recipients digest the message and respond

to it appropriately. The response might be a smile or laughter in circumstances where the recipients are impressed, or with a frowning face in circumstances where the audience is angered. The reason for the existence of humour in society and its role in plays and social interactions is well explained by several social, cognitive and emotional release theories (McCredie & Wiggins, 2009). Research shows that humour is sometimes a form of social superiority over a particular group but it can also be a form of self-disparagement (Swart, 2009). Beeny (2009) suggests that where there is a conflict between ideas, words, graphics or images, then humour may be used to harmonize the conflict. Humour also helps release awkward emotions such as when people are angry, nervous, or traumatized. In these situations, laughter can be the best medicine.

In a cultural environment, humour plays a vital role in a community to facilitate the integration and preservation of culture. Comic culture serves as a form of entertainment as well as a tool for educational purposes. In the contemporary world, there are many comedians, singers and actors who ensure that comic culture is kept alive within the society. Comic culture is basically how a specific community identifies and operationalizes the humour process (McGhee, 1979).

The purpose of humour in films

Between 1919 and 1939 the medium of cinema was subject to considerable change. The advent of sound in film had a profound effect upon cinema's ability to communicate with the audience (Biancorosso, 2008). In particular, sound yielded dialogue which, in turn, facilitated the creation of a non-theatrical form of cinema where the primary function of filmmaking was to disseminate knowledge and influence viewers (Andrews, 2015). Thus, where other art forms such as painting existed outside of the bounds of politics, cinema was transformed into "an instrument for governmental programmes of scientific, economic, political and cultural management" (Zimmerman, 2014, p. 202). Even after the onset of the Depression during the 1930s, cinema remained a profitable industry (Bakker, 2003). In France, for instance, film was the fastest growing industry during the interwar era, outstripping paper manufacture and electricity (Bakker, 2003). The popularity of cinema resided not in the application of high concept film but, rather, in cinema's unique capacity to captivate, entertain and enthral (Zimmerman, 2014). Thus, as Reich (2002) argues, the primary task of writers, directors, and stars was not to make spectators think but to make them forget. Consequently, cinema during the interwar era occupied an uneasy space between knowledge production and social amnesia (Andrews, 2013; Sexton, 2015).

Increased disposable income, decreased working hours and increased urbanisation after 1919 ensured that cinema became the first form of industrialised mass entertainment. However, films needed to make people laugh .

The inclusion of humour in a film or a comedy or any other artistic form is to ensure that such a work has a happy ending, amuses (comedy) or entertains

the audience, or even criticizes a certain societal behaviour in a friendly manner (satirical). However, humour can only be appreciated by the audience if it has the intellectual development that is required to grasp the contextual knowledge of the humorous connotation (McGhee, 1979). As a result, humour in films may be handled with great skill and ingenuity in order to appeal to a wide audience comprised of different cultures, ages or times.

The humour genre traces its origin to Roman times and ancient Greece (Ruggiero, 1999). Humour includes multiple subgenres such as: human comedy, manners comedy, sentimental comedy and even romantic comedy. The use of recorded laughter in comedy films facilitates happiness all through the comedy show, as David Niven stated: 'The laugh track is the single greatest affront to public intelligence I know' (Armstrong, 2016). Satirical comedy plays an important role in criticizing or critiquing certain unwanted morals within society. It has also been used to criticize leaders in government to ensure effective delivery even under repressive leaders. For example, in a country like Russia, political satire and music comedy played important roles in terms of defence during the revolutionary and oppression eras. Comedy films place more emphasis on humour and are always designed to make the audience laugh in amusement. Even dramatic works often include humour in the form of exaggerated characters added for their humour effect (Abel,1998). Comedy films usually have a happy ending, save for black comedy.

On the other side, satirical comedy and satirical songs that are not understood might offend the targeted audience in attendance since these types of comedy aim to communicate to the society through sarcasm, satire, parody, irony and other related techniques to reach a specific goal. Humour addresses uncomfortable and confrontational topics; it releases tension for characters and audience, keeps the reader more keenly engaged, makes specific characters sharp and multi-dimensional, makes a film memorable and also makes the story cohesive.

Humour in Benjamin Fondane's film

Benjamin Fondane (1896-1944) was among the earliest theorists and practitioners of avant-garde cinema in France. He was affiliated with the Dada movement which traces its origin to Romania and later gained worldwide recognition through performing arts events organized in Paris (Fondane, 1930). Through the Dada movement, Fondane embraced the subversive philosophical ideas fronted by Lev Shestov who was known for his critique of speculation coupled with an apology of chance and the idea of individual freedom (Fondane, 1930).

During his lifetime, Fondane, who was considered an essay writer, playwright and poet, was deeply involved in *avant garde* experiments, philosophy and film. He started as an independent artist and script writer and later had the chance, finally, to be a film Tadirector. In his first film, titled *Tararira* (1936), Fondane developed a concept of cinema that highlighted the role and the importance of montage, rhythm and short transitions. He clearly demonstrated the importance of trick

shots including super impositions, double exposure and dissolves, allowing the visual of film to beat the strictness of verbal and logical syntax used by many artists. In *Tararira*, Fondane demonstrated his poetics of cinema through cine-poems, his 3 scenarios, articles and other directorial technique debuts well featured within the movie. The humour applied by Fondane stressed freedom of expression and showed how different situations in life might call for the exercise of such freedom as demonstrated by the Dada movement. However, the message *Tararira* brought was considered too much for the era and the film was never commercially distributed.

Why *Tararira* was considered too much for that era? Well, Fondane's debut film was an absurd musical satire, a peculiar film genre combination. Comedy and satire were incredibly popular in the interwar period in Argentina. So much so, that the newspapers *La Nación*, *Crítica*, and *El Tony* (a publication devoted solely to comic writings) started publishing daily comics; theatres developed shows in this area, too.

Tararira is not a mere Argentinian film, but a novelty in film practice. It is an Argentinian film directed by a Romanian-French-Jewish filmmaker who had the courage to make a movie that was considered ahead of its time. How was this possible?

Argentina was a flourishing cultural centre between 1920-1940 because it welcomed many artists from around the world. The Argentinian government granted political asylum to some of these, adding to the perception that Argentina was a place where artists from all backgrounds were welcome. Many cultural figures in Argentina had a passion and respect for the French artistic movement. In 1929, Victoria Ocampo, a well-heeled writer and an influential person in the cultural world in Buenos Aires, travelled to Paris to visit Lev Shestov. Victoria had a genuine passion for French culture. Indeed, her first book was written in French, *De Francesca à Beatrice*, a commentary on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In Shestov's house, Victoria was introduced to Benjamin Fondane, Shestov's informal assistant. Lev encouraged Victoria to introduce Fondane to the cultural activities in Buenos Aires.

At that time, Fondane had just gotten a job at the prestigious Paramount Pictures as a scriptwriter and assistant director (after he twice applied for the job). He was already a renowned poet but was also well-known for his writings in philosophy and film criticism. Victoria Ocampo followed Lev's suggestion and took the initiative to invite Fondane to Buenos Aires to present talks about *avant-garde* films and participate in conferences on philosophical topics (Fondane, 1929). In the same year, 1929, Fondane went to Argentina and began working on several other projects (such as a collaboration with the *Sur* magazine). He participated in a talk at the Literature School at the University in Buenos Aires about Lev Shestov and the fight against evidence. Benjamin also held conferences on Germaine Dulac, Luis Bunuiel, and Man Ray's films (ibid). The text of the conference was published

as a study called *Presentacion de Filmos Puros* in *Sintesis lll* magazine (ibid). While Fondane was in Buenos Aires, Victoria introduced him to the city's cultural world. He met the Aguilar Brothers, who had recently moved to Argentina when seeking asylum from political pressures in Spain. Fondane opined that they were comic geniuses, favourably comparing them to the Marx brothers (Beray, 2006).

During the early 20th century, Argentina was proud to be considered a home for the burgeoning cinema industry. For example, on the 18th of July 1896, only one year after the Parisian debut of the Lumière film projection, Buenos Aires held the Lumière Cinématographe. Some artists were already experimenting with this new 'invention', resulting in several firsts for the country. In 1900, Argentina produced the first documentary film, *Viaje del Doctor Campos Salles a Buenos Aires*. In 1917, Argentina was the first to film a football match, and in 1930 Argentina developed its first film using sound (Finkielman, 1970). Argentina was a good place to develop as a filmmaker.

In 1934, five years after their initial discussion about the possibility of shooting a film in Buenos Aires, Victoria Ocampo sent the good news to Fondane that she had found a financier (Miguel Machinandiarena) and wanted to see a version of the script, which would have become *Tararira*, the debut film of Banjamin Fondane. Victoria and Miguel had some special requirements for the movie: they wanted a musical comedy involving the Aguilar Brothers that was written in Spanish. Victoria was a smart businesswoman and a prominent cultural figure. She was reaching for fame, visibility, culture and making memorable projects. On the opposite side, Miguel was a former banker and a businessman. Obviously, he was interested in profit, and he believed a musical comedy would sell well in Argentina according to the trend of that time, especially when the main characters were the most famous musicians in the world (the Aguilar quartet was known worldwide). The choice of a musical film with instrumental performances and acting games was also in line with the fashion for the tango films of the thirties in the Argentine cinema, influenced by the representative figure of Carlos Gardel.

Fondane proposed three versions of the film. The first was an adaptation of Ricardo Guiraldes' novel, *Don Secundo Sombra*, the story of an orphan on the Argentinean pampas (fields) on his way to becoming a gaucho (cowboy). In some ways this was a metaphor of Fondane's own life. Victoria rejected it because the script was not a comedy. The second proposal was *La Tocatina* and the third *A Musical Night*. Both were considered good ideas, but she wanted them combined to make one story. Fondane wrote of the new script in French (which was later translated in Spanish for the film production):

> "We have 4 musicians about to be hired for a wedding spectacle. In order to be hired for that event they must accept being presented at the wedding as famous robbers (bandits). They accepted this condition because they were poor artists and needed the money from the performance, but they leave before the end of the ceremony as a form of protest and end up giving a concert using instruments made from furniture in a Ducess' house who hires them out of pity."

The film has a series of peculiar, comic characters in extra roles, including a policeman, an ex-minister and several dancers. This was an absurd film with influences from the comedic form of Mack Sennet, Charlie Chaplin, the Marx brothers and, of course, *commedia dell' arte*. The movie is in the comic form of destruction, typically found in burlesque, in which conformity is satirized. Like the Marx brothers' films, the characters in Fondane's film were there to shock, oppose, and defy the *petit bourgeois*. Iris Marga, an Italian actress who was awarded the illustrious Citizen of the City of Buenos Aires in 1992, was cast in her first film appearance. Although she was mentioned in the credits, I have not found her in any behind-the-scenes photos or in any later descriptions of the film. I checked this information with Dr Olivier Salazar-Ferrer, an important scholar of Fondane's life. He agreed that "...she was replaced by a man in the role of the old duchess." We do not know why Iris Marga was replaced, but it could be assumed that the comic situation of using a man disguised as an old duchess was a better idea than having a very young, beautiful duchess in the interpretation, taking into consideration that Fondane was inspired by *commedia dell' arte*.

This film also features the Aguilar Brothers (four world famous musicians), as well as a number of the most famous Argentinian actors, then John Alton as a director of photography (a renowned camera operator and Hollywood celebrity who filmed five movies in one single year, 1936 – a record for a DOP even nowadays), then Machinandiarena, the former bank employee turned into a film investor, and Fondane, himself.

Fondane had planned to make a film that would serve to make a caricature of society as it was then, during the interwar period. He felt deeply that art was not considered important anymore in the society of this period (Duma, 2018) so he introduced four artists – the Aguilar brothers who were actually lutists – but put them in the South American context of the period – where they were mistaken for some well-known bandits, instead of the talented artists they were. However, these brothers were permitted to perform on their imaginary instruments to entertain guests at a duchess' home. This would lead to the utter destruction of the venue, ending the film (Duma, 2018).

The humour in Fondane's film is an overt attempt to provide a connection between the performer and the audience. On the other hand, the audience must have the ability to not only appreciate the comical elements but also to understand the intent of the performer's humorous acts or speech (Palmer, 1994).

This was his essential message – that art was considered to be worthy enough only if it was performed by anti-social elements. Even without the actual instruments, Fondane's portrayal of the absurd and subjective nature of silence is one of his most essential thoughts (Fotiade, 1997). Here he represented and visualized the absurdity of the imaginary instruments concert that ends in chaos instead of peace. He was able to bring out a new dimension of thought that used absurdity to visualise reality (Fotiade, 1997). Although this scene would initially be comical

in nature, the inner significance is brought out very subtly through the picturization techniques Fondane used.

Figure 1. Fondane with the Aguillar brothers and others (Duma, 2018)

Figure 2. Last scene from Tararira (Duma, 2018)

The thought that initiated this project was Fondane's love and yearning for freedom of all kinds, including in his artistic expression. He had earlier expressed his wish to make an absurd film that would exemplify his deep desire for freedom (Fondane, 1933). While this film was made, Fondane did not realise that the interwar society of his time was not ready to appreciate or applaud his *avant-garde* opinions or visuals. That was, maybe, one of the main reasons for the rejection of his film, although it could also be because of his portrayal of the clergy. Fotiade (1997) believes that the critics were not ready to accept a sarcastic portrayal of their deeply revered religion and clergy.

Fondane's *Tararira* film could be analysed in antithesis with the work of Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in *The Hour of the Furnace* (1968). In contrast to Fondane's work, *The Hour of the Furnace* did an exemplary job in conveying the intended message. The two authors began working on a documentary film that would bear testimony to Argentina's realities but in the middle of the work they gradually changed their original proposal and incorporated the revolutionist idea so as to capture a Peronist working class as the central subject of Argentina's revolutionary transformation (Fernando & Octavo, 1976).

This was a period when films and filmmaking were considered to have an effect in changing the world.

The Hour of the Furnace is divided into three parts, the first section of the film is based on neo-colonialism and violence while the second part is a reflection of the acts of liberation which was divided into two (chronicle of Peronism and chronicle of Resistance). According to the authors, the two chronicles provide an in-depth analysis of Peron's 10 years in power and the reconstruction of the ensuing struggles. The last part named *Violence and Liberation* is dedicated to a new generation of men being born out of the liberation war and articulates an original experimental language with its revolutionary content making a confluence of political and formal *avant-gardes* which received several criticisms. Furthermore, this film incorporates and works with a wide range of cinematic resources and techniques, absorbs and re-works various influences and also captures different perspectives on art and politics when influenced by great artists such as Bertolt Brecht (Fischer, 2009).

The first part of the film is strategized to attack the audience in a positive and friendly manner with the intent of avoiding any conflicts while the last parts proceed in a classic and reflective line through incorporation and reviewing a number of experiences with the aim of inviting the viewers to draw a conclusion and act accordingly. Further along, *The Hour of the Furnace* articulates an original experimental language with its revolutionary content thus forming a confluence of political and formal avant-gardes which received a number of adverse comments (Rist, 2014). After a successful premier, *The Hour of the Furnace* began to appear in different cinemas all over the world. It was eventually incorporated into the catalogue of major alternative distribution companies.

On the opposite side, *Tararira* is surrealistic in its approach to the thematic content as well as in the cinematic techniques used. Surrealism in this film is not only meant in the usually understood meaning of the word: bizarre or unusual. It is, instead, a residue or indicator that follows the performance of surrealism (Richardson, 2006). Since some characters, especially the lutenists, are not who other characters believe them to be, Fondane has the opportunity to create a medium that involves audience appreciation of the subterfuge. Audiences tend to build on characters' presentation by including what they already know about such people (Culpeper, 2001). This leads to their anticipation of the chaotic concert and its end by relishing the humour of the situation as if they have created it themselves. According to Fotiade (1997), Fondane's notion that society considered art worthy only if it was performed by anti-social elements or even without the actual instruments is the basis on which this film is built. Unfortunately, the decision-makers of this film did not understand the concept.

Fondane, with his yearning for freedom – freedom in his life, in his art and in society, set out with a plan to bring in humour as a medium to portray the absurdities and the social confinements of society of his times. This was too little appreciated at that time because one did not accept these concepts. In this sense, Fondane was far ahead of his time.

However, the interwar era with its uncertainties and the lawlessness in the Latin American countries served Fondane with fertile ground for exploring his ideas.

The loss of this great film is being felt now and has led to appreciation of the ways Fondane used humour and sarcasm to highlight the ills of society.

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