Humor Mechanisms in Film Comedy: Incongruity *and* Superiority

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Abstract In humor studies, incongruity and superiority are traditionally regarded as two independent concepts. Taken separately, each concept both under- and over-determines the field of humorous phenomena. When redefined, incongruity and superiority do not represent incompatible views of humor but are strongly interwoven in at least four specific ways: (1) normalization, (2) evaluation through indirect communication, (3) solution, and (4) conditioning. Moreover, such an integrated view of superiority and incongruity helps reduce the gap between concepts and observations. These findings are based on a detailed analysis of two films, *The Naked Gun* and *A Fish Called Wanda*. Their relevance for humor in other genres, contexts, and uses remains to be verified.

1. On Technical Concepts in the Field of Humor

1.1. Humor

Physical laughter, as a strange convulsion that appears to be an unambiguous outcome and sign of a psychological reality,[1] or smiling, usually make the ordinary language concept of humor seem obvious. Nobody will deny the existence of humor, since we all easily detect the behavior or feeling it provokes.[2] Still, things are not quite so simple: the feeling is supposed to be

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1. And not of another physical reality, as is the case with tickling.
2. Many humor tests in experimental psychology accept the existence of this feeling. Subjects have to fill out a questionnaire or are asked to rate humor on a preconceived scale. These introspective results are sometimes compared with observable laughter or smiling. For a review of the state of the art see Ruch 1993.

the reaction to humor, but can humor "be there" when the feeling is not? What seems obvious for common sense is in fact quite intricate when one has to define humor as a discursive object of study. What I posit, for methodological purposes, is that the feeling comes first. The feeling establishes a sign as humor. In practical terms I only study what my experimental subjects reported as funny, and anything laughed at is worth investigating.[3]

Only after the feeling is it possible to relate to that feeling some technical concepts that describe its causes: the structure of the discursive stimuli; their perception and processing by an individual, who belongs to some group; and the social context within which the stimuli are perceived.[4] Is this a strong enough argument to delimit an empirical domain called the field of humor? I think it is, but we must realize that the domain will always be an a posteriori one, for it will explain what has already happened. This is the strange situation of the humor researcher: the feeling happens, as if it were a "natural kind" and its causes were potential humor to be described technically.

Unfortunately, however, heuristics on the level of (discursive) stimuli has not yet conceptualized the exact correspondence of stimuli and reactions/ feelings, *exact* meaning here *explaining all such feelings and nothing but this type of feeling*. For a historically full and conceptually detailed overview of humor theories, I refer the reader to Keith-Spiegel 1972, Raskin 1985, and Attardo 1994. In spite of the diversity of approaches and terminology there, I remain convinced that two imperfect concepts (or, if you like, two traditions, each built around a signifier) have been mainly associated with humorous stimuli: *incongruity* and *superiority*. These terms do present some difficulties. Not only is it troublesome to mark off some types of reactions that are not fun or laughter (e.g., "fear," "disappointment," or "puzzlement" as a result of incongruity or "euphoria" or "aggression" as a reaction to superiority), but scholars even find it difficult to assess all tokens of laughter and fun in terms of incongruity and superiority. In short: humor is at different times either overdetermined or underdetermined by incon-

3. This uncritical move, meant to "grasp" a study object, involves one *épochè* and one reduction. First, I do not want to question this concept of "feeling" from the very start. I consider it indeed a "natural kind," easily recognizable when it happens, some instances being more prototypical than others and sufficiently described in physiological terms (see Chapman and Foot 1976). However, an a posteriori mind-oriented analysis will throw new light on differences between what we first monolithically felt as "one thing." Such an analysis is part of the present essay. Second, I do not introduce the concept of "personality" as an explanatory principle for possible differences between individuals in humor perception and appreciation.

4. *Perceiving* can be seeing, hearing, or reading. In my filmic corpus both visual and verbal humor are represented, but I have only stressed the images insofar as they interacted with the words.

gruity and/or superiority. Let us first consider this question in the case of incongruity.

1.2. Incongruity

Incongruity, apart from being a prominent aspect of humor, also stands for a whole theoretical tradition that tends to regard it as the only or the main generalizable feature of humor. Within this tradition, incongruity has too often been analyzed by reference to a series of humorous examples, limited in number and in variation and sometimes chosen to fit into the analyst's theory. Let me present some of the more operational definitions within this branch.

According to psychologist Thomas R. Shultz (1976: 12), *incongruity* is usually defined as "a conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs in the joke." On the one hand, it is evident that this is a purely psychological definition ("conflict," "expectations"); on the other, the definition implies that "expectations," if they do not already exist in someone's memory, must be created by a communicative stimulus to be "countered" by ensuing communication. It is this path that language-oriented researchers such as Mark E. Kiken (1977) and Victor Raskin (1985) have also taken. More specifically they independently made similar attempts to pinpoint, for modern English, the linguistic markers that carry the conflict (the incongruity) or, in more common semantic terms, the opposition. Unlike rather rough semantic explanations (Nash 1985, for example), they both refine their analysis down to the level of semes. The following examples will make this clear:

> Two dog owners are having a conversation:
> —Can you imagine, my Astor goes out for the paper on his own!
> —I know, my Rex told me about it yesterday.   (Kiken 1977: 45)

Kiken points to the seme [+*human*] of "to tell" and the seme [−*human*] of "dog," which are, as he calls it, "jammed" in the joke, this jamming being in fact the semic counterpart of the notion of incongruity and entirely responsible for the humor caused. A similar, though more refined, theory is set up by Raskin (1985: 106)[5]:

> An English bishop received the following note from the vicar of a village in his diocese: "Milord, I regret to inform you of my wife's death. Can you possibly send me a substitute for the weekend?"

Because of its lack of referential precision, *substitute* can point to "wife's substitute" as well as to "vicar's substitute." The one interpretation would then

5. Further developed in Raskin and Attardo 1991.

definitely have some connotative seme as [+*sexual*], the other a [−*sexual*] connotation. Raskin integrates this semic analysis in a theory of "script-oppositeness."[6]

Both scholars eventually propose a typology of incongruity based on the semic dichotomies they have found in their corpora.[7] Raskin (ibid.: 114), for instance, extrapolates the following incomplete and further analyzable series: [±*good*], [±*alive*], [±*obscene*], [±*rich*][8]—where the [±*sexual*] opposition in the "vicar example" can be viewed as a case of [±*obscene*]. Given the fact that their analyses consider incongruity to be the only factor involved in humor, their proposals can in a way be seen as typologies of humor. I will not criticize this premise for the moment, except to say that there remains an uncomfortable gap between the theoretical constructions and the experience of humor. Regarding Raskin's (1985) dichotomizing approach, undoubtedly one of the best in the field, I would add one critical remark for the present purposes. It concerns the usefulness of his manner of representation for my aims. Even though Raskin does bring Pragmatics into his theory, his approach is not "fully" pragmatic. His representational model of incongruity (or script-oppositeness) is ambiguous in this respect: it brings in the complex script theories, but in one and the same movement it formalizes the specific findings into semic dichotomies, that is, into purely semantic and highly abstract categories. My own goal is not to describe humor semantically but to present a discourse analysis, and therefore it is inappropriate to represent full-fledged meaning (co[n]text, reference, semantic disambiguation and completeness, illocutionary force, etc.) by means of such codes. If we conceive of incongruity as a contradiction of cognitive schemes, as I will do in section 2.1, we will see more clearly some domains of "oppositeness" that Raskin's model does not cover. A discursive description of humor mechanisms cannot immediately reduce cognition and meaning-in-use to semes.

1.3. Superiority

Superiority may be defined in very broad terms as "a 'reinforcement' or happiness increment" and a "heightened self-esteem" (La Fave et al. 1976: 86).

6. "Script" is to be understood here as "a large chunk of semantic information surrounding [a] word or evoked by it" (Raskin 1985: 81).
7. Raskin does attack a notion of incongruity that is different from the one proposed in Shultz 1976. In fact, I find that the latter's definition of incongruity comes very close to what Raskin calls script-oppositeness, and I believe that this oppositeness can be interpreted as a way to refine, in semantic terms, Shultz's definition of incongruity. This belief is strengthened by similar views expressed toward the end of Raskin and Attardo 1991.
8. Raskin does not use the plus or minus sign, but his categories are comparably dichotomous.

At first glance, this principle causes fewer problems than that of incongruity. Superiority thus defined is, to begin with, a great deal easier to grasp by intuition. If incongruity represents the more obscure, black box–like, cognitive aspect of humor, superiority highlights its social functioning; being superior is always being superior to someone.

From introspection and literature we can already deduce that the causes of this feeling can be various. First, a lot will depend on the circumstances that individuals find themselves in and that can make them predisposed to laugh. Michael Mulkay (1988: 46) talks about the "emotional climate," and Freud refers to a stimulating "cheerful mood" (quoted in Raskin 1985: 12). Second, as we have already seen, a great deal of humor involves problem solving. Jokes often present incongruities that still need to be "explained" in one way or another; understanding them demands an effort, and any failure of perception is easily noticed and increases the implicit social pressure. Understanding a joke leads to superiority feelings.[9] Finally, one can relate superiority to direct aggression. Here, we touch on aggressive humor in the sense of "laughing at": sarcastic irony, which explicitly targets a victim, is normally considered an example of this. In section 2.2 I will develop this typology further from the corpus I studied.

Once again there is no one-to-one correspondence between superiority feelings and humor. While every instance of humor in my corpus bears a moment of superiority, as will appear below, it is not true that this principle or concept provokes only laughter. Superiority is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for humor. After scoring, a soccer player doubtless experiences an increase of self-esteem and happiness but almost never starts to laugh immediately. Humor involves more than superiority, and it is this incompleteness of the concept of humor that I will try to fill out by a larger number of examples.

1.4. Interaction

Contrary to most analyses, I hold that it is impossible to offer a satisfactory explanation of the field of humor by means of one of the two main principles alone. For now, another glance at Kiken's and Raskin's previously mentioned examples may be sufficient.

The authors analyzed their examples exclusively in terms of incongruity. However, the notion of superiority gives the humor some important new dimensions. The joke about the dog owners, for instance, undeniably has some cues of humor that create the right mental setting. The format of the

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9. It is quite possible *not* to understand a joke, and this incomprehension is perhaps socially more visible than other comprehension failures. We all know the fear of not understanding a joke.

beginning ("Two dog owners . . .") introduces, in a way typical of jokes, elements that tell the listener that "laughter" will be the appropriate reaction. This relates both to Freud's "cheerful mood" and to the appropriate perception of what will be told: to social conditioning in short. Semantically, dog owners having a chat (and inventing tales) can be taken as a ridiculous stereotype (see my section on superiority below). Raskin's joke about the vicar assumes some inferential competence (social pressure on the cognitive capacities of the hearer as an element, again, of superiority strategies). In short, the field of humor consists of at least two basic and interactive explanatory subdomains.

2. Articulating the Field of Humor

Having pointed out some weaknesses of relevant descriptions of humor, I will propose in what follows an interactional incongruity-superiority framework that I believe reduces conceptual gaps. It is induced from all the instances of humor found in two case studies, the films *The Naked Gun* and *A Fish Called Wanda*, and in occasional complementary examples.[10]

Superiority, incongruity, and their respective subcategories will be treated here as pragmatic factors of humor rather than as essentialist boxes into which all instances can be put. Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity, sections 2.1 and 2.2 will present my concepts in a rather isolating mode, using somewhat prototypical examples. While focusing on one category (linguistic incongruities, for instance), I will only briefly indicate other elements (i.e., the significance of these linguistic schemes for social or aesthetic cognition and for superiority). Section 3 shows how an explicit and refined description of a complex case becomes possible if the various elements of my apparatus are combined.

2.1. Types of Incongruity

To base a typology of incongruity (incongruous humor) on full-fledged meaning, that "meaning" will have to be represented by appeal to the notion of *cognitive scheme*, which I define as "every mental construction a human possesses whereby to relate and, thus, to interpret or give meaning to stimuli from the outside world."[11] This yields a way of representing interiorized, interpreted reality. Smoke is not just smoke, it may be a sign of fire;

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10. *The Naked Gun* (1988, David Zucker, Jerry Zucker, and Jim Abrahams); *A Fish Called Wanda* (1988, John Cleese).

11. See, among others, Minsky 1975, Schank and Abelson 1977, and Johnson-Laird 1993 (1988) for an introduction to the notions of "frame," "scenario," "scheme," "script," or "mental model."

airport means planes; dancing means music; Nixon stands for fraud. But there are also less explicit constructions: our planet implies gravity; bricks are not food. The cognitive schemes constitute the constructions a person has learned to use in order to cope with the world he or she lives in.[12]

Incongruity is, in this perspective, a parasitic notion: if the cognitive scheme constructs expectations (meanings)[13] that people entertain as a result of certain stimuli, then the incongruity can be regarded as a contradiction of the cognitive scheme; in Wittgensteinian terms, as a rule that has not been followed.[14] In this way, the mapping of cognitive schemes can indirectly serve as a descriptive and explanatory typology of incongruous humor. The above definitions make it easier to see some incongruities that Raskin's (1985) theory does not cover. Quite apart from purely visual incongruities, an exclusively phonetic phenomenon can, for instance, be "perverted" in a meaningful way without direct bearing on locutionary meaning (see sections 2.1.1 and 2.1.2); or (film-)narrative structures, where language and image interact, can create inferential activities that may be exploited (see section 2.1.3). Longer texts can more easily exploit macrolevel patterns, for instance, the knowledge people have about cultural genres (see section 2.1.4).

Finally, consider one remark on the idiosyncratic nature of humor perception and, inevitably, of my approach. A stimulus referred to mental schemes can always yield different interpretations. In principle, anything

12. I will not focus in this article on the question whether the meaning-giving structure I call *scheme* draws on direct conventional links or on some kind of inferential process or on both. Nor will I differentiate between "norms" and "cognition," as does Luhmann (1995). From my point of view, the following terms all relate to what I generically call a scheme: *association*, *induction*, *deduction*, *analogy*, *metaphor*, *convention*, *intention*, *scenario*, *inference*, *belief*, *bridging*, *story*, *protocol*, *grammar*, *maxim*, *guideline*, *principle*, *plot*, *situation model*, *script*, *scene*, *presuppositions*, *logic*, *felicity conditions*, *encyclopedic knowledge*, *general background knowledge*, *rule*, *norm*, *conditioning*, *common sense*, *expectation*, etc. This list can include everything that helps us represent and explain the meanings we produce. In this respect, Artificial Intelligence has already learned that the most obvious and implicit knowledge patterns are very often also the most crucial ones. This "melting pot" of useful concepts does not imply that I deny the relevance of subtle technical distinctions among, e.g., scripts, stories, goals, and schemata, as they have been made (for example, by Abelson 1981 and Mandler 1984). Rather, at this stage of my research and for the present purpose, which is rendering humor describable, it seems wiser (and possible) to skip the whole issue: I merely hope to show that my general use of the scheme concept functions coherently as a tool.
13. Recall Shultz's (1976: 12) definition of incongruity: "a conflict between *what is expected* and what actually occurs in the joke" (emphasis added).
14. This is probably a more accurate account of what has sometimes been called the "subversive" nature of humor. Note, however, that the idea of subversion goes far beyond "not following a rule," for it is a social and "active" interpretation of it. As I will show, the non-application of a rule is indeed subject to other, completely different "passive" interpretations, e.g., "stupidity," "innocent playfulness," or "ridiculousness."

can be a sign of anything (Charles Sanders Peirce's "infinite semiosis"). Even if we deal here with strongly conventionalized communication—mainstream film comedy—naming the various types of humor encountered will turn out to be a border-crossing activity. This is because a good typology of humor would have to be a good typology of everyday cognition. Mass media probably aim at a very specific knowledge core, but I cannot pretend to map this knowledge in an Archimedean way, and the following "mapping" certainly is based on some institutionalized categories in the Western world. In other words, my division is functional: it applies to how a filmic object of study operates in a particular part of the world, and it remains to be seen to what degree it can be adapted to other objects (such as the theater or the novel) and audiences.[15]

2.1.1. Linguistic Incongruities   We all have some knowledge of what "normal language" is supposed to be. The phenomena described here as "linguistic incongruities" stand to some degree in opposition to these normal and, when rendered explicit, very trivial schemes. Mostly, incongruous language is subject to further interpretation, since it can generate social or "natural" incongruities (see below). However, I will now focus on the linguistic layer, with brief reference to other mechanisms involved.

On a formal, phonetic level we expect language to be fluent and as economical as possible. In this respect stuttering may be regarded as an incongruity. Quite often, as in *A Fish Called Wanda*, stutterers appear in comedies and jokes. Now, this articulatory problem may well be the exception rather than the rule, but this does not necessarily lead us to interpret it as humorous. Here, elements of superiority could already help us out of interpretive or explanatory trouble: irony (through exaggerated imitation), cuing ("it's comedy!") and stereotyping ("the stutterer") may build on stuttering and make the pronunciation defect funny.

Wanda, Otto's girlfriend, has orgasms when men speak in a foreign language. As a result, Otto addresses her in Italian. However, his Italian is lexically as well as syntactically very poor, and a viewer who knows some Italian has a somewhat different idea of what this language is really like. Otto's use of Italian breaks with our schemes:

> OTTO: Un osso buco Milanese con piselli, melanzane parmigiana con spinacio. Dov' e la farmacia? Dov' e la fontana di Trevi? Mozzarella, parmigiana, gorgonzola!

15. As such, my analysis does not conform to any supposedly intrinsic hierarchy of concepts, as does the taxonomy proposed by Raskin and Attardo (1991).

Again, an exclusively incongruity-based analysis will not do. Superiority elements ridicule what we might call the "Assimil or Linguaphone language learning method": how to order this, how to find that.

Most of the time it appears impossible to separate, even for expository purposes, the form and the meaning of a linguistic sign. It is well known that a linguistic form can, as such, add meaning to its referential significa-tion. In the next example, the signifiers do not just refer to feelings of regret but add sociolinguistic value to the scene between Otto, an American luna-tic, and Leach, a British lawyer who likes Otto's girlfriend. The former, in violent response, hangs the latter's head down outside the window.

> OTTO: You're really sorry?
> LEACH: I'm really sorry. I apologize unreservedly.
> OTTO: You take it back?
> LEACH: I do. I offer you a complete and utter retraction. The imputation was totally without basis. In fact, it was in no way a fair comment and was moti-vated purely by malice and I deeply regret any distress that my comments may have caused you and your family and thereby undertake not to repeat any such slander at any time in the future.

Leach does apologize, but there is more at stake: the situation, a complex stimulus created by images and language, does not require or even allow formal and juridical language. Cognitive schemes tell us so. Leach evi-dently breaks this convention. Also we expect his intonation and language register to be more emotional in this dangerous situation, but our intuitions are again countered. Note that the superiority principle would once more deepen the description by accentuating the stereotype of British upper-class language behavior.

Cognitive schemes can refer precisely to the interaction between signifier and signified in natural languages. The basic rule we expect in this matter is a one-to-one correspondence because that is what words are for, accord-ing to pre-Saussurian common sense: "for each thing, a word." Homonymy and, in speech, homophony are deviations from this scheme. In *The Naked Gun*, Jane Spencer, a stupid blonde vamp, has cooked for her newfound love Frank Drebin. She would like to know how he likes her cuisine:

> JANE: How is your . . . meat?

Of course, "meat" refers here to Drebin's body as well as his food. Once more, the humorous potential is far from fully explained by the linguis-tic incongruity of wordplay or referential vagueness: all homonymy-based incongruity will have to be supplemented by other criteria like institution-alization ("puns on sex are funny") and problem solving ("did you get the

pun?"). In short, the explanatory insufficiency of linguistic incongruity is general, but the detected incongruities are not unimportant: they often are the bases on which other mechanisms will operate.

2.1.2. Pragmatic Incongruities   These anomalies I define as elements that assume a humorous charge by breaking cognitive schemes concerning the actual *use* of language. H. Paul Grice's Maxims of Conversation are by far the most general pragmatic schemes that can be transgressed and are commonly accepted as a very powerful instrument for investigation into humor and irony.[16] Grice (1989: 34) himself showed how flouting a maxim may lead to irony. Dirk Delabastita (1990) is right to remark that humor shows a tendency to "cue" that the author is aware of the broken rule; Grice says in this respect that flouting has to be "blatant." In our case, the cuing is made obvious by the "blatantly" comic nature of the films.

The Maxim of Quantity, for instance, demands that the normal utterance be "informative." By this rationale, Jane is breaking a law when she warns Drebin, a cop, the protagonist, and her lover:

> JANE (referring to "bad guy" Ludwig): He's got a gun!

Indeed, the images show beyond a doubt that the policeman himself (and everyone else) notices she is threatened by Ludwig's Sten gun. Hence another superiority effect is used: the dumb blonde shows she is unable even to be informative. In another example, Grice's Maxim of Quality, which asks for "truthfulness," is not obeyed. A lorry transporting a missile crashes into a factory where fireworks are manufactured. The spectacular consequences attract a crowd, yet Drebin addresses them in the usual terms:

> DREBIN: All right, hold on. Nothing to see here. Please disperse.
> Nothing to see here, please.[17]

Still another maxim is blatantly broken in ambiguous discourse, namely the Maxim of Manner, which stipulates that one should "avoid obscurity of expression [and] avoid ambiguity" (Grice 1989: 27). When ambiguous

16. Grice's (1975, 1989) Cooperative Principle has been thoroughly criticized. Sperber and Wilson's (1986) concept of "Relevance" covers in a more integrated way the different Gricean Maxims. Moreover, Relevance is no longer a principle confined to serious speech but also explains ironic communication. Nevertheless, this article does not let go of the maxims in describing humor: in the course of my research, they have proved to be of greater interpretative power than Relevance.
17. If this scene were not part of comedy, this address would be interpreted as a lie. It is the cuing that makes the difference between funny/blatant transgressions and the deceitful/hidden violations of Quality. Here, Drebin fails to hide his lie and consequently makes himself ridiculous.

or double-edged discourse rests on semantic mechanisms like homonymy or polysemy ("hot"), it is generally called "wordplay" or "punning"; when ambiguities are based on the semantic "emptiness" of signifiers (like "he," "now," or "here"), Dirk Delabastita (1990) proposes to call them "punoids." As already argued, these linguistic uses can be perceived by common sense as unwelcome, but when intended, they become definitely exceptional and incongruous. Let us have a look at a punoid.

While puns find their double meanings in semantics, punoids are pieces of dual discourse created by referential equivocality, referential vagueness, or illocutionary ambiguity,[18] that is, the semantic blind spots of utterances. The next dialogue, taken from a sequence in which Drebin and Jane are enjoying a romantic dinner, presents speech act ambiguity and referential equivocality. Jane has just asked what he thinks about the meat.

> DREBIN: Mmmm . . . interesting. Almost as interesting as the photographs I saw today.
> JANE: I was young, I needed the work.

From the context, the audience understands that Drebin is talking about pictures of *the boat* where his friend Nordberg was almost killed; hence Drebin is purely informing Jane. However, her reaction implies that she thinks the lieutenant has found pictures *of her pornographic past* and considers his utterance an ironic reproach. The viewer processes Drebin's utterance according to the most available script or scheme ("the boat frame"); logically, he or she is first puzzled by Jane's incongruous reaction but finally resolves the problem by reprocessing "the photographs" via the implicit "porn frame." Although many other factors play a role in this subtle reframing procedure (Jane is again stereotyped, the understanders' happiness increases), the pragmatic incongruities play a crucial role: ordinary cognitive processing of utterances, in terms of immediate reference schemes, is countered by an incongruous utterance that demands a less obvious reframing.

Besides the general Maxims related to overall language use, more specific types of utterances often imply more particular cognitive schemes. This is the case with metaphor, to which several pragmatic rules seem to be attached. By a well-known rule, a continued or complex metaphor does not

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18. Referential equivocality arises from the fact that, in the interest of economy, the word "leg," for example, can refer to a broken, extended, or bent leg. Referential vagueness concerns personal, temporal, and local deixis in words like "you," "yesterday," and "there." The term *illocutionary ambiguity* stems from Austin's (1980 [1962]: 98–101) *speech act theory* and is well explicated by Ruth Kempson (quoted in Delabastita 1990: 134): the utterance "there are four large bulls in that field," pronounced by a farmer, can be interpreted as a warning, information, a bluff, or a threat. Along the same line, most sentences can be used to do many different things according to the pragmatic setting (context, intonation, relevance, etc.).

allow an arbitrary mixture of metaphors (Van Gorp 1986: 245). So when Drebin threatens Ludwig in the following passage, Drebin is venturing into the dangerous territory of incongruous metaphor use:

> DREBIN: It's way past time we talked. The gloves are off. I'm playing a hard ball, Ludwig. It's fourth and fifteen and you're looking at a full court press.

The "gloves" refer to boxing, the "hard ball" comes from baseball, "fourth and fifteen" draws on American football terminology, and it is usually in basketball that one can look at a "full court press." As always, Drebin makes a fool of himself in not following the normal procedures of figurative speech: he is inferior in the eyes of the audience.

2.1.3. Narrative Incongruities   Cognitive schemes related to the level of the fictional film's interpretation sometimes interact with pragmatic phenomena like referential vagueness. Indeed, in film understanding it is the film itself, together with cognitive schemes stored in memory, that constitutes the main context for the interpretation of equivocal dialogues.

After having beaten up in Beirut all "the world's bad guys" (such as Amin Dada, Khomeiny, Gadaffi), Drebin arrives home at an American airport. A large number of people and the press are waiting on the asphalt:

> JOURNALIST 1: It's a great day for America . . .
> JOURNALIST 2: There he is!! (*image of Drebin coming down the stairs of the plane*) (*image of a woman with roses coming up the stairs*)
> DREBIN: No, no flowers thank you.—And you came down here to get the hot story didn't you. Pictures of me to set in your lousy newspapers. . . . Do any of you understand how a man can hurt inside?

Our interpretation schemes, applied to the words and images of the film, suggest thus far a meaning that can be paraphrased as follows: Drebin is the hero of the day because he has beaten the bad guys; Drebin himself is also convinced that the public is there for him but, in a position of assumed superiority, gets angry. Only later does the painful "reality" come to light, for both Drebin and the audience. Ensuing images and a comment by Ed, another colleague of Drebin, explicitly show that Weird Al Yankovic (a pop artist) is the actual hero of the day. The second journalist's "there" and "he" referred in fact to Yankovic. These already discussed semantically empty "shifters" (with their referential vagueness) make possible the double interpretation and then trigger laughter. The reader may have noticed that I wrote "painful" reality. Indeed, Drebin is victimized, with effects that may be accounted for in terms of superiority. But more on this later.

2.1.4. Incongruities Located in the Field of Art ("Parody")   In this attempt to illustrate how humor in general builds on incongruity, I will now comment on two phenomena known as generic subfields of humor, namely "parody" (section 2.1.4) and "satire" (section 2.1.5). The reflections that follow are relevant in three ways. First, they strengthen my main argument that all humor bears incongruous features; further, I suggest that the very concepts of parody and satire are codefined by specific types (specific "locations") of broken schemes; finally, I illustrate what I call parody's and satire's possible "explicit duality" and relate it to the "locatedness" or "specificity" of the rules they break.

I fully realize that *parody*, *satire*, and—often related to them—*irony* are immensely large and ambiguous terms (see Rose 1993; Hutcheon 1985, 1994; Griffin 1994) that have broad cultural and/or rigorous technical uses, on macro- and microlevels (concerning a work of art, a sequence, an aspect, a genre, etc.). Cultural artefacts may alternatively be seen as "satirical irony," "ironic parody," "parodic satire," and so forth, and it is not certain that "ironic parody" in one research means the same as it does in another (plenty of similar phrases can be found in the books just mentioned). The more a term or a description wants to cover functionally all (parodic, ironic, or satirical) phenomena on all levels, the more it has to refuse any definitional criterion and to blur boundaries. Normative approaches, on the other hand, whatever their criteria, can be criticized for under- or overdetermining concepts vis-à-vis their many actual uses (see Griffin 1994: 3–4 for the overdetermination of satire).

My own definitional suggestions below accordingly risk over- and underdetermining intuitive categorizations to some degree, but they do avoid vacuous concepts. It may be a normative and artificial procedure to take irony as a concept different from the other two and to postpone its discussion on this ground. But does the same hold for the idea that differences (artistic, social, etc.) in the type of incongruity distinguish among parody, satire, and other incongruous humor? Possibly, but I see good reasons to use the idea. First, such an approach will stay close enough to some prestigious formulations of the concepts. I mean Linda Hutcheon's (1985: 18) view of parody as "repetition with critical distance" of "any codified form" and Dustin Griffin's (1994: 1) characterization of satire in its traditional sense as art "designed to attack vice or folly, [using] wit or ridicule, [seeking] to persuade an audience that something or someone is reprehensible or ridiculous, [engaging] in exaggeration and some sort of fiction," taking its victims from the real world and therefore being darker and sharper in tone than "pure comedy." In view of Hutcheon and Griffin's formulations, moreover, I take it to be fairly obvious that parodic and satirical humor may break

rules and do attack conventions.[19] Possibly less self-evident is my suggestion that the nature of the rules broken helps to determine whether humor will be read as parodic or satirical. However, I merely reformulate in terms of incongruity and cognitive schemes the claim made by Hutcheon (1985: 25): "parody is an 'intramural' form with aesthetic norms, and satire's 'extramural' norms are social or moral." Thus, when cognitive schemes located in the field of art are broken, parody may be in sight, while transgressing socially positioned schemes is fundamental to satire.

My third argument also links up well with Hutcheon's description of parody as "repetition" and Griffin's satirical "exaggeration." That parody—and less clearly, satire—have a dual structure of following-and-breaking the rules, in which the aspect of "following" is more explicitly present than in many other types of incongruity, also will appear from the examples. The parodic fragment cited below will show that the "following of rules" is a way of locating cognitive schemes, a necessary cognitive foregrounding of specific schemes to be transgressed—a foregrounding that triggers all sorts of incongruity- and superiority-based semiotic processes. Jane, hypnotized by the mean Ludwig, wants to shoot Drebin. The drama takes place in a football stadium and can be followed by an immense crowd on a huge screen.

JANE: I must kill Frank Drebin. I must kill Frank Drebin.
DREBIN: *No no. Don't shoot. Jane, it's me. Funny face.*
JANE: I must kill Frank Drebin.
DREBIN: *You love Frank Drebin. And Frank Drebin loves you. Jane, listen to me: if you don't love me, then you may as well pull that trigger, because, without you, I wouldn't wanna live anyway. I finally found someone I can love, good clean love,* without utensils.
JANE: I must kill Frank Drebin.
DREBIN: *It's a topsy-turvy world, Jane. Maybe the problems of two people don't amount to a hill of beans but,* this is our hill and these are our beans. *Jane, since I met you I have noticed things which I never knew they were there before: birds singing, dew glistering on a newly formed leaf,* stoplights.
JANE: I must kill . . .
DREBIN: *Jane, this morning, I bought something for you. This is not very much ah, but pretty good for an honest policeman's salary. It's an engagement ring. I would have given it to you earlier but,* I wanted to wait until we were alone.
JANE: *I . . .*
DREBIN: *I love you Jane.*
JANE: *Frank*!

19. But again, as with humor in general, these incongruities are important but not sufficient factors. Breaking the current rules of art may be the artist's serious challenge to the tradition; since the Romantic age, difference has arguably even become the major criterion of modern art. Also, breaking social conventions may result in caustic laughter but also in imprisonment for unacceptable behavior.

Indeed, the recurrent dual pattern of parody operates via congruous (allusive) and incongruous (transgressive) discourse elements, which I have italicized and underlined respectively. Remarkably both sides of the dual mechanism connect with incongruity as I have defined it. First and most obviously, the allusive elements tend to recall certain discursive schemes stored in our memory, so that transgressive parts may break more perceptibly with these evoked structures. Moreover, regarding the "following of rules," the structural use of hyperbole in the allusive parts turns imitation into a discourse that evokes and at the same time breaks certain rules. They become recognizable as, yet not fully compatible with, the targeted genre. In our fragment, the hyperbole refers to romantic film scenes: pathos, drama with a happy end, a sort of a *Natureingang* ("birds singing"). On the other hand, an instance of "pure" transgression can appeal to various principles as long as it does not match with the schemes evoked by the romantic script. Such is the case with the reference to sadomasochism ("utensils"), the total irrelevance of the argumentation ("our hill," "our beans"), the absurd reframing ("hill" and "beans" taken literally),[20] the parodic elements outside the Natureingang script ("stoplights"), a certain lack of truthfulness ("alone," says Drebin, while he is speaking into a microphone in a massive sports arena).

Note that these transgressions belong initially, so to speak, to other subcategories of incongruity. One cannot say that the schemes broken are all specific or intrinsic to the "aesthetics of romance." But, as they are integrated in a text displaying clear allusive markers, their violations are by contextual attraction further interpreted as violations of the specific genre and thus as parodic. As such, none of them accords with Gricean Maxims[21] (pragmatic incongruities). This goes to show that in parody the congruous (though possibly hyperbolic) side of duality is indeed semiotically important for "locating" the cognitive schemes within the field of art and, hence, for making general incongruity readable as parodic.

But the semiotic process does not necessarily stop there. At the same time, the sequence exhibits satiric incongruities: deviations from norms codified by specific social groups. If one laughs at the cultural products that a given social group identifies with, one possibly laughs, in a *pars-pro-toto* movement, at this particular group of people—in our case at those roman-

20. The fragment also refers to the film classic *Casablanca* (1943, Michael Curtiz): "Rick [to Ilsa]: It doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world." This is another kind of parodic intertextuality, which does not use hyperbole but only appeals to problem-solving abilities (see my section on superiority).
21. The details "utensils" and "stoplights" are irrelevant; "our hill" bears no information; "alone" does not comply with Quality.

tic "softies" who love happy endings and Hollywood romances (including "blurred vision" or slowmotion). Since art can turn into a strong social, identity-related, interhuman sign, as Pierre Bourdieu's (1979) oeuvre empirically demonstrates, parody can assume a satiric value. We thus enter the realm of socially oriented incongruity and the possibilities it opens for clearly focused superiority feelings.

2.1.5. Incongruities Located in the Social Field ("Satire")   Like parody, satire is more than incongruity, but the violation of cognitive schemes is certainly one of its crucial elements. As already mentioned, the cognitive schemes of satire are located in the social field. In this respect, Bourdieu (for example, 1979) laid bare different complexes of schemes that identify and determine what he called people's habitus, their "social practices," and that constitute the common doxic core of the group to which they belong. In a commercial product like *The Naked Gun*, it is likely that the authors would want to break with the social conventions shared, known, or recognized by as many kinds of habitus (groups) as possible. Social groups are made recognizable via allusive, often stereotyped representations and further made fun of at incongruous moments.[22] It would be easy enough to bring a convincing example of the British upper-class snobbism represented by Leach in *A Fish Called Wanda*. Instead, I have chosen a more problematic fragment taken from the other film. During an official press conference announcing a visit of the Queen of England, Drebin transgresses a very strict rule of decorum: even those negative opinions shared by almost an entire group of people are not to be openly expressed on official occasions.

> DREBIN: Protecting the safety of the Queen is a task that's gladly accepted by Police Squad. *For however silly the idea of a Queen might be to us*, as Americans we must be considerate and gracious hosts.

At first glance, the example is problematic because it questions my characterization of satire. Indeed, many will not acknowledge its satirical load, although the incongruity is obviously social: the situation as well as the people involved call for the observance of the politeness rule operative in Western societies.[23] Against the intuition of many, I argue that the excerpt is at

22. Some scholars would consider parody more "double-coded" (positive and negative, reverential and critical vis-à-vis the imitated entity) than satire: "parody is in general a much more ambivalent form than satire" (Rose 1993: 83).
23. One could also term the incongruity "pragmatic." According to Akmajian, Demers, and Harnish (1988 [1984]: 390–423), "politeness" is a pragmatic Conversational Presumption, just like the Gricean Maxims; see also Leech 1980: 79–118 and Brown and Levinson 1978. Leech (1980: 117) would probably argue that, unlike Drebin, people would *normally not* tell the truth since "the maintenance of friendly, peaceful human relations" is prior to the Maxim of Quality.

least potentially satirical: it transgresses rules and social rules; allusive moments (evoking protocol, officials, national symbols, uniforms) locate the incongruities; or, according to Griffin's above-mentioned characterization, it ridicules, exaggerates, and victimizes entities from the real world.

Whether you acknowledge the example's satirical component depends only, I believe, on who you feel is involved in the incongruity: Drebin-as-an-individual, Drebin-as-an-American, Drebin-as-a-policeman, Drebin-as-an-American-policeman, Drebin-as-a-notorious-weirdo, the Queen-as-a-silly-idea, or a combination of them all ("Who's the real fool here?"). In other words, possible nonsatirical readings do not falsify my analysis of satire as social incongruity but call for a detailed scrutiny of various superiority mechanisms as a basic complement to incongruity-based explanations of humor (section 2.2). One possibly antisatirical superiority mechanism is aggression reduction through cuing ("This is nonsatirical, harmless comedy"); a second possibly antisatirical device is story-internal stereotyping ("Drebin is a funny, fictitious weirdo"); another satire-enhancing mechanism is story-external stereotyping ("Americans are direct and rude"). Social incongruities are potentially satirical. Superiority-related elements may or may not actualize this potential. The more "real" the targeting, the more satirical the social incongruities.

Before we move on to discuss "unlocated" incongruities and the superiority effects they may trigger, one further relation between superiority and parody/satire needs to be pointed out. Some scholars might call the dual allusion-transgression mechanism "irony." While many theorists have stressed many aspects of irony, I refer here to those who see irony as fundamentally "echoic" (Sperber and Wilson 1981, 1986) and as a result, evaluative and "edgy" (Hutcheon 1994): think of "A: Great!—B: Yeah, great." On this definition, irony may be considered a formal technique applicable to various specific materials, so that the ironic echo of artistic material (styles, genres, oeuvres, writers, movements, etc.) is parody, and the ironizing of social habitus (persons, themes, groups, etc.) is satire. However, this is just one view of irony, a complex notion to be treated more fully in my section on superiority.[24]

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24. Although it is technically useful to distinguish the category of echoic irony, that designation does not cover the whole field of what is felt to be ironic within certain communities. The "echoic mention" theory has indeed been criticized. (Where is the echo in "Nice weather!" when it is raining?) Also, echoic irony as it appears in parody or satire is not always felt to be most typically ironic by ordinary society members, in spite of the mentioned structural parallelisms. As it stands, ordinary-life irony seems to be no "natural kind," in Sperber and Wilson's (1986: 240) words. I suggest that real-life irony is a concept that stretches beyond one core principle.

2.1.6. "Unlocated" or "Absolute" Incongruities   Why call some incon-
gruities "absolute"? What is it that unifies them? Unlike "located in-
congruities," they are not only incongruous for some particular groups
(producers and consumers of aesthetics, in the case of parody, socially posi-
tioned agents in satire) but are more generally transgressive. Notions like
"the cultural" (or the located) and "the natural" (the absolute) may easily
sound worn out, but they are key concepts in the study of humor. They
are also used, in a different terminology, by Victor Raskin's pioneering
book on the semantic mechanisms of humor, in which he argues (1985: 111)
that jokes are always partly "non-actual," "abnormal," or "(partially) im-
possible." Distinguishing between abnormal and impossible scenarios is a
hidden way of acknowledging the relevance of the classical culture/nature
dichotomy for humor understanding (the "improbable" presumably being
some intermediate category). And Raskin was right to draw the distinction,
for more than one reason.

First, if we assume that explaining understandability is a crucial objective
of cultural studies, we do not want to overlook the variations in absolute-
ness of cognitive schemes and social incongruities. Second, with regard to
my purposes, the concept of absolute incongruity helps to explain (1) the
presence or absence and (2) the sort of superiority effects caused by an in-
congruity. According to the order of incongruity, the implications for in-
terpretation may vary. A serious logical error may make the perpetrator
look and feel "completely stupid"; a strong psychological incongruity may
make behavior "absurd"; a strong physical incongruity may raise aware-
ness of fictionality (in *The Naked Gun*, a character gets shot, falls on a freshly
painted object, and jumps back startled)—the absoluteness being very rele-
vant throughout for explaining both the number of understanders and their
specific interpretations. While we suggested that located incongruities can
provoke group-related superiority feelings, absolute incongruities may be
subject to other superiority-bound interpretations. An example will best
illustrate what this means.

When Archie Leach (the lawyer from section 2.1.1) hangs outside a win-
dow, his posture would make every normal human being afraid of falling
and dying. That this does not much affect the lawyer's speech and general
behavior creates a strongly felt incongruity. His reaction looks impossible,
awareness of fictionality may increase, with the situation reframed from a
"fictional" point of view and interpreted as an extreme illustration of how
formality-governed a person Leach is. Thus, the absolute psychological in-
congruity builds on a (too) carefully crafted discourse at both the phoneti-
cal and morpho-syntactical levels (linguistic incongruities) and may lead
to different interpretations. The superficial one will bear few superiority

connotations ("Leach's behavior is incongruous/absurd"); the "deeper" one will resolve the absurdity by invoking not a real-world scheme but a negative stereotypical scheme enhanced by fiction ("Leach's behavior is after all normal for a caricatured British lawyer, which he clearly seems to be according to the scenario"). These and other superiority-related implications of incongruity perception are dealt with below.

2.2. Types of Superiority

I have first analyzed incongruity in extenso, pointing out how superiority is most of the time closely linked to it. This section proceeds to articulate and focus on superiority. As Salvatore Attardo (1994: 47) mentions, the concept of superiority is a social phenomenon, whereas incongruity could be termed cognitive. For conceptual and interpretive clarity, I take this characterization one step further and define superiority as the aggregate of social elements in humor dynamics. There is of course something artificial about the cognitive/social distinction: in real life, noncognitive social interaction is as unthinkable as "unsocialized" cognition. But that is also exactly the point this essay wants to make: humor involves both incongruity and superiority, but treating them separately and fully enables us to describe their specifics and thus to trace the sorts of interactions between them. Accordingly, what follows will focus on various types of superiority and point to their connections with incongruity.

2.2.1. "Aggressive" Superiority   By *aggressive* I mean that a target can clearly be identified: a so-called "butt of the joke." This is not the case in what we may call affirmative superiority (see below). One good reason for drawing this distinction is the existence of (verbal) irony, a well-researched phenomenon that has a target and is often humorous. But then, why not term the present category *ironic superiority*? Because some types of humor have a target without being ironic. Otto speaking Italian forms an obvious target for the audience in a clear example of unironic, aggressive humor. The same goes for Drebin's faux pas at the press conference.

In this respect, Hutcheon (1994: 25–26) correctly observes that the "humor/irony" problem is two-directional: not all humor can be called ironic, but conversely, "not all ironies are amusing . . .—though some are." To my knowledge, the work that has been done on this intertwined delimitation problem is rather poor, since most scholars have dealt either with humor or with irony. Attempts to integrate the two into a single theory—or even to address the demarcation problem—are rare. David S. Kaufer (1983: 455–62), for example, discusses irony as an "aesthetic opposition" between two "sets." Although his descriptions are very revealing, they could easily be

applied to a variety of nonironic humor. In his otherwise excellent summary of irony research, Fred Van Besien (1995) hardly makes any reference to humor. Conversely, Attardo 1994 does not clearly position irony within the theories of humor surveyed, and though Attardo 2001 does turn to the humor/irony question, the author admits to being far from the definitive answer.[25]

Resolving the issue is far beyond the scope of this essay. My key question for this section confines itself to the way in which aggressive superiority is related to incongruity. Since I have not yet fully treated irony in this essay, it seems more cautious to narrow the question down further to the way in which irony is related to incongruity. At the same time, at least one of Hutcheon's questions can be answered in part: why irony may be humorous; why irony is not necessarily just a sort of aggression (superiority) but often also is funny (incongruous). Let me first refer to Van Besien's *Ironie als Parasitaire Taalhandeling* [Irony as a parasitic speech act] (1995), which excellently brings together the main elements from most well-known irony research (including the irony-as-echo theory, among others).[26] Van Besien characterizes verbal irony not only on the locutionary level but also on the illocutionary and perlocutionary ones. Given these levels, irony is not only (1) an incongruity, an opposition or *transgression* of certain communicative norms and principles. (Irony can be ambiguous,[27] untruthful,[28] and uninformative.[29]) It is also (2) an *evaluative* speech act that (3) creates, according to existing research, at least two possible effects: *ridiculing* someone/something (the target) or *gaining* sympathy (mostly from the audience). This description shows that irony, apart from its rather social and superiority-based aspects (sympathy or aggression through evaluation), also lives on pragmatic incongruities. Further, the possible "targets" and "attackers" involved in aggressive humor are found mutatis mutandis in irony as well: "ironist," "target," and "public" are Van Besien's "actors" of irony.

In the corpus under study, the clearest examples of ironic humor can be found in *A Fish Called Wanda*, as when Leach, the lawyer who fancies Otto's girlfriend Wanda, is reacting to Otto's statement that Americans are "winners":

25. In fact, the irony/humor distinction is by no means the only delimitation problem. Scholars also encounter difficulties in their attempts to differentiate among verbal irony, parody, and satire (see Rossen-Knill and Henry 1997: 747–49).
26. This overview includes Knox 1973; Muecke 1969, 1970, 1973, 1978; Booth 1974; Kaufer 1983; Tanaka 1973; Clark and Gerrig 1984; Groupe μ 1978; Kreuz et al. 1991; Groeben and Scheele 1986; Groeben, Seemann, and Drinkmann 1985; Grice 1975; Leech 1983; and Sperber and Wilson 1981.
27. What does "Nice shirt!" mean?
28. Possible reaction: "Do you really like my shirt?"
29. "Look, this is my new shirt."

LEACH (to Otto): Winners! Like North Vietnam!

Considering the difficulties the United States encountered in the Vietnam War, we understand that when Leach affirms ("!") Otto's assumption that they are winners, he clearly means the opposite ("Winners?"). Leach's assertion opposes historical reality (where the Americans were beaten by the North Vietnamese). This incongruous flouting of the Gricean Maxim of Quality probably leads Otto and certainly the audience to construe the evaluative illocution of Leach's words, strengthening in this way possible in-group/target feelings.

Regarding the second part of Hutcheon's question (why is some humor ironic?), I would merely suggest one possible difference between Otto's and Drebin's faux pas and Leach's irony: one difference may lie in the speaker's obvious control over transgression, where *control* means perceptible intentionality and critical distance (even in cases of self-irony). While Otto and Drebin betray and victimize themselves through incongruous behavior, Leach not only controls his transgressive behavior but even deploys it as an aggressive signal and attributes it to his opponent. However, this example of irony is a simple one, and my corpus does not suggest many further conjectures about what might differentiate the various types of ironic humor from other aggressive fun.

2.2.2. "Affirmative" Superiority: Mood, Cuing, Problem Solving, Institutionalizing   One need not find and destroy a target in order to feel superior. The "affirmative" (i.e., not target-oriented) varieties of superiority I have encountered fall into three broad categories, namely, *circumstantial superiority*, *humor solving*, and *institutionalized humor*. All are relatable to incongruity and, as we shall see, "affirm" rather than destroy.

Let me first bring together some phenomena under the heading of circumstantial superiority. Such superiority stands in a general sense for the absence of inferiority/anxiety before and during the moments of humor. In turn this concept includes two humor-generating principles that have been described in previous research, namely, *good mood*[30] and *cuing*, that is, indicating that a communication is meant to be taken as a joke. The two are related because their functions regarding incongruity can be conceived of in the same terms: they suggest the "right" reactions to and interpretations of the intended humor. As I mentioned at the beginning, an "incongru-

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30. Mulkay (1988: 46) writes: "[Humor] can be converted from a comic into a tragic or purely intellectual experience, based on the same logical pattern . . . by a simple change of emotional climate." Or consider Freud (quoted by Raskin 1985: 12): "The most favorable condition for the production of comic pleasure is a generally cheerful mood in which one is 'inclined to laugh.'" A comedy takes advantage of a self-reinforcing process: earlier humor creates the good mood for what ensues. The denser the film, the stronger this process.

ous" stimulus can provoke a wide spectrum of reactions so as to be received as "rejectable," "ridiculous," "meaningless," "incredible," "disappointing,"[31] "humorous," "dangerous,"[32] "insulting,"[33] and so on. What circumstances do is help sift out the right response at the right moment ("humorous"). The type of interaction between our two main concepts can be made explicit as follows: circumstantial superiority functions as a general background that affirms the inference "incongruity→humor." In our case, the explicit label *comedy* functions as a reliable cue and generally evokes the right mood.

The second important mental process that is not directly aggressive I propose to call *humor solving*. In a way it is similar to mood and cuing, for it can produce a certain feeling of safety, this time *after* the arousal involved in confronting joke problems. Indeed most incongruities have to be solved (reframed),[34] which is not always an easy task since it often depends on the knowledge of very specific cognitive schemes. Humor solving sometimes involves recognizing "in-group" allusive frames. So, the more particular the references of parody and satire, the more pleased are the successful understanders to find themselves among "the happy few." Consider the following case, which begins with an allusive sequence:

> MAYOR: Oh Drebin, I don't want any more trouble like you had last year on the Southside, understand? That's my policy.
> DREBIN: Yes, well, when I see five weirdoes dressed in togas stabbing a guy in the middle of the park in full view of over a hundred people, I shoot the bastards, *that's my policy*.

Some may indeed have recognized the almost verbatim allusion to the scene in *Dirty Harry* (1971, Don Siegel) that follows:

> MAYOR: Callahan [Dirty Harry], I don't want any more trouble like you had last year in the Fillmore District, understand? That's my policy.
> DIRTY HARRY: Yeah, well, when an adult male is chasing a female, with intent to commit rape, I shoot the bastard, that's my policy.

Given this allusive sequence, the mayor's dialogue with Drebin takes on,

31. Regarding "disappointing," see Luhmann 1995: 321ff.
32. A large number of experimental psychologists regard laughter as a process of intensifying emotions ("arousal")—generated by experienced incongruity, I suppose—and then countering them by sudden relief ("safety"): hence, my "dangerous." See, for example, Chapman and Foot 1976. In comedy, as already said, the genre (the explicit label) is an initial cue for interpretation. For a more elaborate typology of cues, see Delabastita 1990: 182.
33. For an accurate analysis of the "amusing/insulting" relation, see Zajdman 1995: 332–33.
34. In canned jokes, for example, we expect a punch line. Norrick (1986: 242) describes very lucidly how "shaggy dog stories" skew "our expectations [i.e., schemes] about jokes." They do so by going on and on and ending in a trivial way. Indeed, even joke schemes can be food for "meta-jokes."

for the happy few understanders, a specific transgressive, parodic value. For other viewers, the sentences only lead up to the revelation of an "absolute" incongruity committed by Drebin, who seems unable to distinguish between reality and fiction:

> MAYOR: That was a Shakespeare-in-the-Park production of Julius Caesar, you moron. You killed five actors.

Understanding irony also demands an extra effort compared with straightforward utterances: "It's a lovely day for a picnic!" is incongruous on a rainy day and has to be reframed in the way just explained. Thus, the type of interaction between our two general concepts can be formulated as follows: incongruity creates a difficulty that can be solved, and this solution causes feelings of superiority (affirmed self-esteem).

Finally, one extremely important mechanism of humor deserves our special attention because, unlike most instances of superiority, it tends to free itself (although not always completely) from interaction with incongruity. This *institutionalized humor* can best be approached by means of an example. In *A Fish Called Wanda*, Otto, the very stupid bandit who nevertheless reads Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, repeats two sentences on several occasions:

> (1) OTTO: What was the middle thing?
> (2) OTTO: Don't call me stupid.

He uses the first sentence to conceal from his companions his total incomprehension of previously explained malicious plans. The second one is a hysterical reaction to friends calling him stupid time and again. It would be rather difficult to detect any incongruous element in either of the sentences. Yet the more often these sentences are repeated, the more they trigger laughter: the audience starts recognizing them and feels happy about it. In the series *'Allo 'Allo* this technique seems central: "you stupid old bat!," "you stupid woman!," "good morning" [*sic*], "listen to me very well, I shall say this only once," "it is I, Leclerc," and so forth, occur throughout the series and increasingly provoke "Pavlovian" humor. This mechanism is reflected, furthermore, in the traditional and "obligatory" catchphrases that British stand-up performers (used to) repeat from time to time.[35] What happens is that after a while the scenarist/comedian expects the stimulus to be in itself a sufficient reason for laughter. In the process, the message seems to become tacitly coded as laughter-eliciting. It becomes a command ("please

35. Sometimes, though, incongruous elements can be detected. "You stupid old bat," for instance, is quite an insult when addressed by a man to his wife, as is the case in the series. Moreover, as Van den Bergh (1972) points out correctly, the attitude of the people is very "unnatural" and robotlike in its repetitiveness.

laugh!") instead of mere information, or to use a social metaphor, humor is institutionalized or conventionalized ("something *is* funny!"). For anyone unfamiliar with the convention, there is no evident reason why the sign should create the humorous effect. The inference "incongruity→humor" has been replaced by "normality→humor".

Not only sentences can be institutionalized; a film (and *a fortiori* a series) is capable of doing the same with persons or characters. A person can be so systematically associated with a certain type of anomaly (incongruity) that the mere appearance of the person looks comical. Prior to *The Naked Gun*, the same old Drebin had already featured in the (less popular) comic police series *Police Squad*. Indeed, some people in the audience know what he stands for ("Drebin means fun") and start laughing once they see him.

Further, stereotypes do not necessarily have to be created inside the filmic product. Along with "internal" institutionalization, the origins of repetitive humor can be found in a more general cultural environment. I feel that themes like "sex" or "scatology," when incorporated into comedy, need not necessarily be regarded as incongruities (i.e., transgressions of cultural norms).[36] The constellation of wordplay associated with "sex" seems to evoke a rather institutionalized and expectable kind of humor. Let me give an example:

> JANE (to Drebin): You said we should have dinner some time. Tonight became some time. I'm boiling a roast. How hot and wet . . . do you like it?

The romantic dinner and Jane's intonation underline the fact that words like *hot* easily tend to suggest another, sexual meaning ("horny") rather than the anaphoric, "boiling"-related meaning ("very warm").

Cultural clichés (institutionalized opinions) that are humorous "because they are" also can be exploited for the purpose. Consider this idea, expressed twice by Otto:

> OTTO: I thought Englishmen didn't like women.
> OTTO: . . . talkin' to a lot of snotty stuck-up, intellectually inferior British faggots! Jesus, they're uptight![37]

36. Raskin's (1985: 149–221) comments on sexual and ethnic stereotypes are somewhat different from mine but are very instructive. He detects in many jokes the stereotyping of scripts (like "genital size" or "British stuffiness") opposed to more normal ones. Dolitsky (1986) criticized this analysis for not being incongruity-based and so failing to analyze humor as an act of breaking away from the script. I think Raskin could have stressed even more forcefully the nonincongruous nature of stereotypes.
37. Similarly, for the French and the Dutch, "les petits Belges" are often funny symbols of stupidity; in Great Britain the Scottish are generally considered to be the skinflints of the joke, though in Belgium the Dutch are better candidates. For a detailed analysis of ethnic stereotypes, I refer the reader to Christi Davies's work (for example, Davies 1988).

Socially incongruous ("rude") as these assertions may seem, they are more importantly "perfectly recognizable." The typicality of persons need not exclusively come from inside the series. Jane represents, for example, the well-known stupid blonde vamp.[38]

3. A Final Complex Example

The above analyses, I hope, have shown I do not think of humor as a simple thing. My exposition of it was largely determined by the need to establish some clear marks in a wide and dazzling field. I will finish with a relatively complex sample to show that my interactional analysis can deal with multifaceted humor. In this dialogue, Drebin tells Jane about his dramatic experiences of love:

> DREBIN: It's the same old story: boy finds girl, girl finds boy, boy loses girl, girl finds boy, boy forgets girl, boy remembers girl, girl dies in a tragic blimp accident over the Orange Bowl on New Year's day.
> JANE: Goodyear?
> DREBIN: No, the worst.

This "same old love-story" does indeed ring a bell in English: "boy finds girl, girl finds boy, boy loses girl" may be seen as an acceptable and sad variation on "boy meets girl." But Drebin's next three steps ("girl finds boy, boy forgets girl, boy remembers girl") do not meet the formal, discursive expectations attached to a normal variation (pragmatic incongruity). The last transgressive step ("girl dies . . .") even abandons the expected three-word format in being much longer; it is also semantically too specific and thus completely absurd in a "typical" love story (all pragmatic incongruities). This incongruous sequence stresses a stereotypical and ridiculous characteristic of Drebin, namely, his recurrent failure in the use of figurative speech. (This exposure involves victimizing and institutionalizing, since Drebin is once more presented as unable to hold normal conversations.)

Furthermore, the Orange Bowl is where different American college football teams compete for the championship. The tire brand Goodyear provides a blimp from which aerial views of the game are broadcast. This specific information alone enables a complete understanding of what follows (humor solving and recognizing in-group elements). It reveals Jane's ques-

38. Cristina Larkin Galiñanes (2000) suggests yet another possible type of interaction between incongruity and superiority. In her view, superiority-related stereotypes may function as "a second script" that offers a cognitive resource for solving incongruities produced within the first "real-world" script. As a real-world person, our threatened lawyer hanging upside down outside the window is not supposed to stay calm (incongruity), but he is acceptable in relation to the second, fictional stereotype (solution).

tion as a pun, for it refers both to the New Year and to Goodyear (a linguistic and pragmatic incongruity). In both frames moreover the question is irrelevant (pragmatic incongruity).

Interacting with these features is the ever-present circumstantial superiority cue of the Comedy genre and the story-based, internally institutionalized humor that Drebin provokes in general, as well as the culturally ridiculous stereotype represented by Jane.

4. Conclusions

Research on humor should start from observations but can tackle humor only via existing ordinary and more or less technical language. After humor has "happened," two reshaped "traditional" concepts can partly account for it. The first is incongruity, understood as a nonapplication of cognitive schemes; the second is superiority, understood as the social aspect of humor. Both are indispensable, and they interrelate in the following ways.

(De-)normalization. Most acts of incongruity can be assigned to a social product and/or agent. Incongruities therefore are not merely cognitive but also constitute products and agents as deviant and, in terms of normalization, not well adapted; in other words, as inferior. Depending on the operative cultural patterns, these incongruities and deviancies can be linguistic, pragmatic, narrative, "absolute," or "located." Hence we can identify such categories as verbal humor, parody, or satire. Incongruous signs may be interpreted as merely funny, absurd, and stupid or as parodic and satirical. An instance of humor may achieve its plural meaning via an extrinsic semiotic process: allusive markers, for instance, may turn pragmatic incongruities into parodic ones or may use linguistic deviations for satirical purposes.

Evaluation through indirect communication. What is perceived as irony is in fact an intricate cluster of flagrant pragmatic incongruities actively and consciously committed by an ironist and indirectly resulting in an evaluation. Strangely enough it appears that an ironist may overtly commit pragmatic incongruities as a sign of superiority, not inferiority. Again, irony may be more or less located/allusive ("echoic"). Further investigation should specify which are the exact characteristics of this irony cluster.

Solution. Incongruities are signs that we did not expect, and what we do not expect, we do not immediately understand. A great deal of humor can only be "solved" through reframing; and reframing is commonly accepted as an important index of intelligence. Every time we laugh at humor, we exhibit our wit to our peers and remove their social pressure.

Conditioning. Prototypical humor feelings are spontaneous. Normally one does not wonder whether schemes are really broken or patterns indeed

transgressed. One simply has or does not have "the humor feeling." However, humorists can never fully predict whether their schemes and the listener's are in effect compatible, whether the feeling will arise or not. That is why they can decide to "force humor" via cues that issue a more explicit invitation to humor. They can also play on the right preconditions: the cheerful mood. Finally, they can fall back on humorous stereotypes that are "funny without further explanation." A dumb blonde is funny because a dumb blonde is funny. Here, spontaneous incongruity has disappeared and humor has become a social convention through and through, or, to put it paradoxically, "an established incongruity."

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