freedom lab

THEME 02

Humor in the 21st century

HUMOR   METAMODERNISM   ZEITGEIST

The ability to laugh and joke is a human feature that helps us to view issues from a different angle and put things in perspective, making it an important biological-psychological skill. The combination of humor and comedy, as a broader societal phenomenon, reflects underlying societal and cultural values and has corresponding qualities and effects on society and groups. Analyzing the new form of humor that has arisen will give us a better understanding of underlying social, political and cultural developments.

Our observations

- In the past years, Netflix has invested heavily in stand-up comedy. Besides being a relatively cheap segment compared to pricey drama series and films, comedy is one of the three pillars of the content strategy. The other two are original content and acquiring film licenses.
- The past years have seen a relatively large number of comedians going into politics. In April 2019, comedian Volodymyr Zelensky won the Ukrainian presidential elections, in 2009, Beppe Grilo began the Five Star Movement currently governing in Italy, Jimmy Morales won the 2015 presidential elections of Guatemala, Marjan Sarec the Slovenian elections and Jon Gnarr was mayor of Reykjavik from 2010 to 2014. Donald Trump and Boris Johnson have both frequently appeared in comedy shows and are ascribed a "clownesque" attitude by many.
- Last week, we wrote that internet memes are a digital medium that allows for a message to be spread rapidly among large groups of people, and that for that reason, they're actively used as a campaigning tool. Pepe the Frog is an internet meme that, since the American presidential elections of 2016, is associated with far-right movements and online forums (e.g. 4chan), and is worshipped in the Cult of Kek. This Cult of Kek is an internet religion with its own theology, artefacts and rituals (memes are honored in the official prayers of the Cult of Kek). The use of this meme is of a largely ironic and satirical nature, it's a vessel for jokes about sensitive topics, that wouldn't generally be permissible in the current climate of "political correctness".
- In 2017, we wrote that, as a consequence of postmodernism, our culture has become saturated with parody, satire, sarcasm and cynicism in the past decades. The naive and optimistic search for a collective truth and progress has given way to the view that everything can and should be ridiculed. This nihilistic and postmodern "structure of feeling" is expressed in popular comedy series such as *Seinfeld, South Park, Family Guy, Married with Children, Viva La Bam, Jackass, Arrested Development,* and *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia.* Besides their ironic streak, there is little "redemption" in these shows, in the sense that developments and events don't contribute to the personal development of the characters and the world around them, nor do they have any constructive effect on the viewer. Vulnerability, sincerity, doubt, uncertainty or spirituality thus have little to no place in these shows.
- In response to this "parataxis" and deconstruction of postmodernism, which ultimately leaves us empty-handed, metamodernism is attempting to establish a synthesis between postmodernism and modernism by continuously oscillating between the modern, sincere, naive and positive search for truth, beauty, goodness and meaning and the postmodern skepticism and perspectivism. This is also expressed in "metamodern" comedy series in which – despite the presence of irony and sarcasm – sincere feelings and the development of characters are the main focal point, such as in the search for friendship and community (*Community, Scrubs*), the search for balance and meaning in modern everyday life (*Modern Family, The Office*), the exploration of existential questions (*Master of None, Louie*). Viewers are actively drawn into the emotional development of characters as well as being shown their flaws, e.g. their doubts, fears, prejudices.

Connecting the dots

In the classical age, the tragedy was a play with a fated and dramatic ending. According to Aristotle, the tragedy was concerned with how superior people relate to their fate and misfortune, and served to inspire pity and fear in the audience, in order to elicit "catharsis": emotional purification. In contrast, there was the comedy, in which inferior and weak people commit blunders and make mistakes, but which ends well nonetheless, leading the audience to catharsis through laughter, humor and enjoyment. Since then, comedy and humor have seen a long path of development and the emergence of many new forms, but catharsis remains at the core. In fact, comedy in a wider sense is still invaluable in our time of political polarization, "culture wars", growing uncertainty, doubt, fear, fake news and post-truth, which requires new ways to reach or maintain consensus, dialogue, intersubjective truth and commonality.

Humor, joking and laughing, serve an evolutionary purpose. Many important skills and lessons are learned by children and young animals through "play"; acquiring knowledge and learning how to comport ourselves and deal with our bodies, others and unforeseen circumstances. Think of the wrestling, playfighting and chasing of children and young primates. Sounds of laughter are important signs that this is harmless and pleasurable play rather than serious aggression or conflict. In a similar way, a smile shows that we don't have bad intentions: when we smile, our jaws are slack and our breathing is uninhibited, signs of restfulness and relaxation (e.g. we're not using our jaws to bite). This uninhibited breathing and the slack jaw and mouth muscles transformed into human laughter through primate sounds: from the "ah, ah, ah" of primates to the "ha ha ha" of humans. Evolutionary psychology has also shown that joking and laughing are signs of intelligence and adaptability to new situations. From this evolutionary basis, humor and joking are important templates for more complex social and cultural norms: they help to alleviate tension when we meet strangers or find ourselves in unfamiliar situations. A well-chosen and well-timed joke can, for example, break the ice on a blind date, while a stranger's failure to laugh will create a tense situation during a first meeting. Phenomenologically, humor plays with our mental patterns and categories. A situation is perceived as funny when we have a certain expectation but something else happens instead. In his third *Critique of Judgment,* rationalist Kant posits that humor and jokes are a kind of "mental gymnastics", with reason being misled and sensations having an immediate effect on our state of mind. This approach resembles the strategy of "stand-up comedy", as the set-up is the first part of a joke, meant to create expectations and the "punchline" conjures up a different image that defies those expectations. Eventually, this leads the audience to experience catharsis.

These elements of humor and comedy also give them an important social and even political duty: through comedy and humor, we can come to new views, see things in a different light and learn to put them in perspective by laughing about them. "Every joke is a tiny revolution", George Orwell wrote, showing the disruptive element of humor and comedy. It's no wonder then, that comedians and humor are often prohibited in repressive regimes, e.g. among many orthodox and puritanical religious groups, humor and laughter are to be avoided at all costs. In China, the meme of Winnie the Pooh supposedly resembling President Xi was banned. On far-right forums, memes are deployed to counter the left, as it is believed that "political correctness" has taken away all the fun and made many topics impossible to discuss in a breezy way. This shows that humor and comedy don't merely have social and political aspects but are also morally charged, as the line between a joke and an insult, laughter and offense, is thin and fragile. And this brings us to the "dark side" of humor and comedy: as a political force, they necessarily entail a dynamic of inclusion and exclusion. Where there's laughter, there's always something or someone the butt of the joke, and this could take the form of "laughing at" people. Laughing at others is an important source of social recognition of groups and individuals (i.e. thymos): the group pointing and laughing is united around the object of laughter and in this light, it's easy to see why so many comedians are successful in politics: in our postmodern condition which lacks objective truth and widespread social and political consensus, joint laughter is one of the last forms of collectivity and consensus. Online culture and far-right forums show that humor and certain types of jokes can be the epicenter around which broad social and cultural structures are organized. At the same time, the criticism that someone who doesn't join in on the laughter lacks a sense of humor and is not funny, is one of the last universal insults: a human being without a sense of humor is not a real human being. The only rebuttal against this is to reject the joke in itself but from a different value than its funniness or humoristic quality (e.g. from a political, religious or moral perspective). That's why many populist leaders who laugh and joke about women (e.g. Bolsonaro) or minorities (e.g. Trump about minorities), dismiss criticism as humorless or "sour" winging and whining. The irony, parody and satire they employ thus make them immune to any criticism directed at them. At the same time, we're witnessing a movement from which a new structure of feeling and appreciation of comedy and humor is arising, an antidote to cynicism, satire and irony that actively seeks the catharsis that belongs to the genre of comedy. Humor in metamodernism has a high degree of self-referentiality; there is joking and laughter but also a self-conscious search for meaning in humor. And in contrast to the modern inclination to see perspective as absolute or the postmodern reflex of deconstruction and criticism, within metamodernity, reality and perspective coincide. That's why humor is so important; new perspectives can be achieved through joking and laughing, and it can take the edge off tense political discussion and debate on divisive themes that involve groups that begrudge each other a smile. But to the metamodern comedian, not every joke is acceptable, rather the intent and the ability to occupy both the position of joker as well as that of the butt of the joke, determine the social quality of humor and comedy.

In this light, internet memes are also part of metamodern humor: there is a high degree of self-referentialiy in the sharing and modification of the original post, they often broach emotional (e.g. depression, loneliness) and political themes, have a high degree of intertextuality and perspectivism with an image and caption, frequently relay a hopeful message with a nihilistic streak, and make abstract ideas relevant to the reader by way of concrete and relatable images. By uniting these apparent contradictions, internet memes embody the metamodern oscillation between sincerity and irony and between perspectives and interpretations. In this way, they tie in with the positive energy of metamodernism, which seeks communion, meaning and catharsis in our times of uncertainty, fear and irony.

Implications

- **We may expect for "humorous" and "comical" archetypes to gain relevance in societal roles and debates. Think, for example, of the jester ridiculing political powers without legal or political consequences, the clown making a fool of himself or the harlequin making fun of local and common ideals, values and ideas. The most modern archetype might be that of the joker: the mysterious character that symbolizes both the diabolical and the genial in humans and represents a wide range of emotional and spiritual qualities. The playing card "joker" corresponds to the number 0 because he can be either all or nothing and can be played for "good" or for "evil". The recent film Joker displays the title character's destructive search for meaning and community, and illustrates how thin the line is between right and wrong when there is no social order to which the individual belongs.**
- **Comedy comprises a template of cathartic themes that aren't humorous or funny per se, and has a rich history. In Dante's The Divine Comedy, for instance, comical-though-not-humorous elements are reconciliation and redemption, the hero's spiritual development of a broader social and emotional consciousness, from selfishness and conceitedness to social obligations. These kinds of themes are important in metamodernism as effective value memes: templates in which metamodern values become relevant in economic, social, political, societal and cultural systems.**
- **internet memes are a relatively young information medium and form of comedy and befit our modern image culture. This category knows many subgenres, such as Dank Memes, Deep-Fried Memes, Wholesome Memes, Normie Memes and BoneHurtingJuice Memes, which shows that new cultural forms and templates for language, meaning and communication are continuously developed here as well.**