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Why Humor?

1 Introduction

The focus of this book is comics, while this chapter in particular focuses on the connection between comics and humor. While it might seem self-evident to some that comics are (or can be) comical, many comics scholars are keen to disabuse the general public of this very notion (McCloud 1993; Saraceni 2003; Gardner 2012) as the generic term *comics* continues to be used to refer even to serious, tragic, or violent works in a range of genres such as history, fantasy, and autobiography. As the field of comics studies expands and is taken ever more seriously, the kind of comic art studied seems to move ever further away from humorous comics. As a result, the *comic* of comics studies is vulnerable to diminishing in relevance. By addressing the question “Why humor?” this chapter aims to assert the importance of including humorous comics in serious comics studies, addressing the role of humor at the intersection of comics and gender, and considering what any expectations of humor imposed by the comics medium mean for comical vs. non-comical storytelling. This chapter explores verbal humor in particular as a strategy for highlighting critical issues of gender in comics, demonstrating how theories of humor can be applied to the linguistic analysis of such comics. The intersection of gender and humor is exemplified in a selection of single-panel comics by three prominent feminist creators from Sweden.

2 Comics as Humor

The very first cartoons (in the sense of non-animated humorous images) and comics as we know them today appeared in the 1800s in magazines, newspapers, and periodicals (Varnum and Gibbons 2001; Gardner 2012), exhibiting a “publication format and caricatural style [that] suggest[ed] a humourous content” (Lefèvre 2000, 1). These comics were in fact comical, centering on a punchline and thus adhering to at least one of the factors that Freud said accompanied humor, namely, the “expectation of the comic,” through which readers are “attuned to comic pleasure” (Freud 1905, 282–285, quoted in Raskin 1985, 12). It is thanks to the serial publication of early magazine and newspaper humor strips, cartoons, and gag-a-day comics that the English-language terms *comics* and *comic strips* are used today, as well as common alternatives, such as *the funny pages* or simply *the funnies* (Inge

1990, 11). Indeed, these latter terms reflect the humorous origins of comics and reaffirm the continued expectation of humor, regardless of the publication format.

Although the advent of graphic novels and graphic narratives has ushered in a modern development that has moved away from the traditional comic strip and comics-as-humor template, this development has actually served to reestablish the connection between humor and the objects still referred to as comics. In other words, regardless of whether comic art is meant to be (or reliably succeeds in being) funny, it can be assumed that a reader will approach it with an expectation of humor and/or will consider the comic strip context as favorable to humor (Beers Fägersten 2017; 2020); this is what Streeten refers to as “humour through association” or “the recognition of the comic form itself with its Western historical associations” (2019, 132).

The comics medium can therefore be understood as invoking what is known as a *play frame*, i. e., the framing of an interaction as “this is play” (Bateson 2006). In an interaction, a play frame or a humorous key is conventionally signaled discursively or paralinguistically (Mulkay 1988; Hay 1999), for example, by means of a wink, laughter, or the joke template, “Did you hear the one about ...” By invoking a play frame, the participants in a communicative interaction can metacommunicatively signal to each other that their actions are acquiring new meaning; this signaling is crucial to achieving the desired interpretation of the communicative event as play or something non-serious.

A central concept of communication theory, framing refers to “the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue” (Chong and Druckman 2007, 104). The framing of an issue – for example, as serious, absurd, dangerous, etc. – affects how it is received and accepted. Comics provide their own frames, both literally, in terms of pages and panels, and metacommunicatively, in terms of their comical or humorous frame. The literal, visual frame imposed by panels, spacing, or page borders encompasses the contents of the comic, marking it as a potential site of humor. Meanwhile, a comic’s metacommunicative frame invites the reader to approach the content as humorous. Content, however, is multilayered and includes the overall propositional content of the narrative (in other words, what the comic is about), the language used to instantiate the narrative, and the visual representation of these two elements in the form of illustration, ballooning, and lettering. Each of these aspects of content can separately or simultaneously and collaboratively constitute the site(s) of humor and/or operationalize the humor of the propositional content. The relationship between comics and (an expectation of) humor is thus one that is encoded within the medium itself, and while humor is not essential to the medium, it is nevertheless an underlying feature.

3 Humor, Comics, and Gender

Humor as a potential feature of any comic provides an opportunity to consider the intersection of comics studies and gender studies. For example, comic art characterized by humor, satire, and irony has long been vital to operationalizing feminist movements (Chute 2010; Lindberg 2014; Galvan 2015; Nordenstam and Wallin Victorin 2019; Streeten 2019; 2020; Beers Fägersten et al. 2021). Feminist comic art serves to depict gendered perspectives, share private trauma, address taboo subjects, explore sexuality, or challenge gender roles. In such comics oriented toward or explicitly targeting issues of gender, experiences of, for example, violence, abuse, discrimination, or embarrassment are rendered all the more disarming when depicted in the comic art format, generating what Streeten identifies as “discomfort” due to the visual representation of trauma in comics form (2019, 119).

The emergence of women’s humorous and satirical comics as social commentary and critique can be traced back to the underground *comix* movement of the 1970s US – a time when, as Trina Robbins has observed, “it was almost *de rigueur* for male underground cartoonists to include violence against women in their *comix*, and to portray this violence as humour” (2009, 3). Women’s *underground comix* were produced in response and resistance to this misogyny, namely by using the very same medium. In Europe, Claire Bretécher from France and Franziska Becker from Germany were also actively publishing comics during this time and became influential figures in feminist comic art during the development of women’s underground *comix* in the 1970s and 1980s (Nordenstam and Wallin Victorin 2019). However, Margaret Galvan notes that women’s *comix*, as “political critiques in this visual, often humorously irreverent form,” were in large part rejected by feminists at that time for not conforming to an agenda of serious discourse (2015, 204). The importance of humor and satire – and especially comic art – for transnational women’s movements and gender politics has now, of course, been duly recognized (Chute 2010; Lindberg 2014; Nordenstam and Wallin Victorin 2019; Streeten 2019; 2020; Beers Fägersten et al. 2021a; 2021b). The influence of women’s *comix* can be seen in Sweden in particular, where feminist comic art has flourished since 2000, led by Liv Strömquist and Nina Hemmingsson, for whom humor is the “main tool for communicating their feminist message” (Lindberg 2014, 86). They are not alone, however, in using humor to expose gender inequality and inspire social change, which warrants the application of humor theory to analyses of the intersection between gender and comics.

4 Fundamental Theories of Humor

In this section, three main theories of humor are presented and illustrated by looking at the examples of single-panel comics by three of Sweden's most prominent creators: Liv Strömquist, Nina Hemmingsson, and Nanna Johansson. It has been noted that these three theories – relief theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory – account for the role of humor in specific situations: “relief humor for relaxing tensions during social interactions, incongruity humor for presenting new perspectives, and superiority humor for criticizing opposition or unifying a group” (Wilkins and Eisenbraun 2009, 351). While these theories do not explicitly apply to gender problematics, their illustration by way of comics exposes gender as a source of conflicting expectations that lends itself to humorous resolution.

4.1 The Relief Theory of Humor

The relief theory of humor proposes that humor is “dependent on relief from a state of anticipated unpleasantness involving heightened arousal” (Shurcliff 1968, 360). According to this theory, humor is indexed by laughter, which in turn is the manifestation of a release of built-up pressure, nervous energy, social tension, or fear (Morreall 2014, 124). Relief theory also maintains that humor serves to navigate and ultimately overcome social inhibitions or repression. Ultimately, humor is understood as relief manifested in laughter upon the release of nervous energy that has been rendered “superfluous” – energy summoned for an emotion that is no longer necessary or appropriate: “If while driving we think we are about to collide with an oncoming car, for instance, but then we avoid a collision, we may laugh to vent our now superfluous fear” (124).

An analysis of the following single-panel comic art in Figure 1 illustrates how relief theory can be applied to a humor strip that invokes gender.

In this comic, the depicted woman addresses the implied reader, saying, “I read in *Slitz* that ‘Swedish men’ want women’s breasts to be firm and say, ‘hi.’” She then lifts her shirt and directs her attention to her breasts, asking, “Wonder what my breasts actually say?” The comic concludes with the breasts answering – in stereo as indicated by the double-tailed speech balloon – “FUCK OFF!” This comic immediately invokes gender by explicitly referring to “(Swedish) men” as well as “women’s breasts.” Furthermore, the comic creates a gendered tension with its reference to *Slitz*, a (now discontinued) Swedish men’s magazine which typically featured scantily clad women on the cover as well as female nudity within. In this comic, *Slitz* is positioned as providing a platform for “Swedish men” to voice their sexist ideals and expectations of “women’s breasts” – with regard to not only their firm-



Fig. 1: “Wonder what my breasts actually say?”
Strömquist, *Hundra procent fett*, 14.

ness but also their amenability to initiating a friendly or flirtatious interaction. The comic thus trades on the practice of men objectifying women and judging their appearance, thereby arousing a range of emotions in female readers, such as fear, insecurity, anger, or frustration. In the second panel, the depicted woman seems to be falling in line, measuring herself against the desires of “Swedish men.” The act of lifting her shirt and exposing her breasts makes her vulnerable to the male gaze and thus intensifies the emotional experience. The allusion in the first panel to talking breasts is maintained and appropriated: in the second panel, the woman wonders what her breasts “say.” In the third panel, the breasts subvert the men’s desire for them to “say hi” and instead voice a vehement rejection of their objectification. This last panel thus acknowledges, and offers the reader a release from, the built-up and sustained pressure of sexism, objectification, and expectations of physical perfection. Upon concluding the comic, the reader may laugh as a manifestation of relief from certain emotions (e.g., anxiety, insecurity, fear, worry) aroused by the situation that are no longer necessary as the talking breasts have rendered them superfluous. Alternatively, the reader may find the talking breasts humorous and then experience a sense of relief. Ultimately, the comic acknowledges objectification as a gendered issue and, from the perspective of the relief theory of humor,

offers a humorous resolution to a stress-inducing situation (Berlyne et al. 1972; Kuiper et al. 1993; Wilkins and Eisenbraun 2009).

4.2 The Superiority Theory of Humor

The superiority theory of humor can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle (Kuipers 2008), but has Thomas Hobbes to thank for its central thesis (Morreall 2014, 123), namely, that “laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly” (Hobbes 1987 [1650], 20, quoted in Kuipers 2008, 367). In other words, the superiority theory of humor proposes that one sees comedy in the misfortunes of others, an experience that is neatly represented in the term *Schadenfreude*. Superiority implies inferiority, whereby the latter is characterized by a risible form of comparatively lower social, aesthetic, or intellectual qualities than the former. The superiority theory of humor acknowledges, however, that making light of inferior traits is done in the spirit of fun, and it does not necessarily follow that anyone is actually superior or inferior to anyone else (Clewis 2020). Indeed, in its focus on the other in comparison to the self, the superiority theory recognizes the social aspect of humor and its bonding potential. Kuipers views this theory as the one “most obviously connected with social relations” (2008, 366), while Wilkins and Eisenbraun note the social-bonding function of laughter: laughing together at others “can reinforce unity among group members” and can maintain social order, “as laughter, rather than aggression, is invoked toward those who refuse to comply with rules [...]” (2009, 352–353).

From a gender perspective, an analysis of humor that invokes the superiority theory positions one gender as superior to another. While such an application does not require a binary gender system, the opposition between the male and female genders lends itself well to a superior-inferior dichotomy, as illustrated in the comic art in Figure 2.

At first glance, this comic image suggests that the woman inhabits a superior physical position: she is standing and, together with her shadow, leaning into and occupying the space both above, behind, and between her and the man. Her outstretched arm gestures to the end of what we can take to have been an extended explanation of the inequality that plagues women’s social existence: “... because of course we live in a patriarchy.” The suggested dynamic of superior-inferior qua teacher-student is subverted, however, by the man’s pose and response. Sitting with his arms crossed, he is both unreceptive and impervious to the lecturing. Instead, he seizes upon the mention of the patriarchy and asserts his inherent superiority, which includes the right to dismiss this woman – and by extension, all women:



Fig. 2: “So why am I listening to you anyway?”

Hemmingsson, *Jag är din flickvän nu*, 99.

“Damn right! So why am I listening to you anyway?” This response reveals that the man has suddenly understood that the patriarchy awards him a superior position *because of* the woman’s conversational turn – one that he has defiantly endured but nevertheless benefitted from, illustrating, ironically, the very conditions of patriarchal oppression that the woman has presumably outlined.

The humor in this comic, according to superiority theory, is thus a function of two broad groups of people being categorized as superior and inferior to each other. Outwardly, the patriarchy positions males as superior to females. In this comic, however, this state of affairs is revealed as absurd, considering that the woman seems to fully comprehend and pedagogically explain the discriminatory culture, while the man shows himself unengaged and obtuse. The Hobbesian “sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others” (as quoted above) incites respect for the woman and ridicule toward the man. Nevertheless, the comic reinforces unity among both men and women, as both can laugh at the type of man depicted while still feeling superior to the other.

4.3 The Incongruity Theory of Humor

Humor, in its most basic conceptualization, “derives from the juxtaposition of two odd, unexpected, or inappropriate elements in a particular context. The incongruity that results from this pairing must then be at least partially resolved in order for the contrast to be interpreted as funny” (Bell and Pomerantz 2015, 23). The incongruity theory of humor thus proposes that humor is the result of a textual or visual

cue that encourages a likely interpretation of a narrative or a contextualized image, which is then challenged by new information that opposes this likely interpretation, rendering it incongruent. This incongruity results in “cognitive dissonance” (Yus 2003, 1308), which can only be resolved with an alternative, humorous interpretation: “The resolution of the incongruity, by finding an overall coherent sense of the whole text, together with the addressee’s realization of having been fooled into selecting a specific interpretation, is supposed to trigger a humorous effect” (1309). Incongruity is therefore understood as a necessary condition for conveying humor, which in turn depends on one’s ability to manage conflicting interpretations at the same time (Warren and McGraw 2014, 52).

Incongruity alone, however, is not enough to convey humor (Attardo 2014, 384). Any incongruity invoked must also be recognized and at least partially resolved in order for humor to be perceived or experienced. Efforts to understand humorous incongruities have led theorists to focus on what is required of the receiver to resolve them, namely, the acceptance of given premises, a willingness to suspend disbelief, or an ability to surrender to the immediate context of the humorous text (Attardo and Raskin 1991).

Incongruity is particularly essential to the humor of comics, the multimodality of which allows for three possible kinds of opposition: within the text, within the image, or between the text(s) and the image(s) (Beers Fägersten 2014, 156). As illustrated in the previous examples, both text and image are used as resources in the processing and reading of comics (McCloud 1993; Cohn 2013) in order to formulate both likely – or “relevant,” to use Sperber and Wilson’s (1995) and Yus’s (2003) terminology – and alternative interpretations. Interpretations, for their part, are often steered by a script, or a “large chunk of semantic information surrounding [a] word or evoked by it. It is a cognitive structure internalized by the native speaker” (Raskin 1985, 81). Script opposition can arise due to “the reinterpretation of familiar words and phrases, and the overall misuse of language” (Apte 1985, 179), resulting in semantic incongruity and providing the necessary condition for humor – that is, its resolution (Attardo et al 2002; Hempelmann and Attardo 2011).

Gender roles and gender stereotypes are a fruitful resource for incongruities, as illustrated in the comic in Figure 3.

The comic is titled “Young men on honor and decency:” and depicts the heads of five men, whose faces have been blackened out and their names replaced by aliases, as indicated by the use of quotation marks. The men say the following:

“Paul”: Sometimes my big sister follows me on my date. She makes sure no one takes my flower.
 “Krille”: I always have water with every other drink. Girls don’t think drunk guys are sexy, and then there’s always the risk of being the victim of assault.

UNGA KILLAR OM HEDER OCH ANSTÄNDIGHET:



Fig. 3a: Young men on honor and decency.
Johansson, *Fulheten*, 42.

Fig. 3b: Young men on honor and decency.
Johansson, *Fulheten*, 43.

"John": A girl at school told everyone that I had group sex with her and some others. So I got a whore's reputation and no one wanted to talk to me.

"Micke": My girlfriend went away for a year to find herself. She called sometimes to make sure that I was still a virgin.

"Örjan": You don't want to show too much skin... You want women to have something to fantasize about.

The title of the comic includes, and each of the men use, words that immediately evoke the gendered experiences of (young) women and that are decidedly not associated with (young) men, for example, "honor," "decency," "my flower," "victim of assault," "whore's reputation," "virgin," and "too much skin." These words can thus be said to trigger a gendered script and cognitive structure that are in conflict with the gender stereotypes that are invoked by the male avatars and aliases. The comic thus creates a series of incongruities based on subverted expectations of gender, including men's need for anonymity, their concerns about their own honor and decency, their preserved virginity, their vulnerability to assault, their reputations as whores, the monitoring of their alcohol intake, and their awareness of revealing clothing. Further incongruities in gender roles are evident in phrases such as "my big sister," "girls don't think drunk guys are sexy," "a girl at school told everyone I had group sex with her and some others," "my girlfriend went away," and "you want women to have something to fantasize about." So gendered are these incon-

gruities that the comic must be seen to be trading on the premise of “reversal” in the tradition of Gloria Steinem (1978) and Valerie Solanas (1996) (Fahs 2019, 158). The humorous resolution of the incongruities occurs when we recognize the differences in the experiences of young women and young men, unpack gender norms and stereotypes, and acknowledge the absurdities of gender roles, gender inequality, and sexism.

5 Conclusion

Comic art provides both a literal and a metacommunicative frame for the humorous exploration of gender issues, and humor is an ever-more salient transnational characteristic of the intersection of comics and gender, as can be observed in feminist comic art. While the use of humor to explore and expose the tensions inherent to a gendered society is abundant in many examples of comic art, they are seldom subjected to the systematic application of humor theories. This chapter has illustrated the application of three fundamental theories of humor to comic art and demonstrated how humor functions in relation to gender, thereby hoping to encourage further analysis of humor within comics scholarship.

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