



# Comic Relief: Subversion and Catharsis in Organizational Comedic Theatre

Robert Westwood

*Robert Westwood*  
University of  
Queensland,  
Australia

## Abstract

There has been a growth of interest in the role of humour in organizations from both practitioner and academic perspectives. Various claims for the functionality of humour have been made, ranging from stress reduction to helping form and cement corporate cultures. Latching on to these presumed benefits, businesses and consultants have begun to employ humour and comedy in a direct and explicit manner. However, there is a counterpoint, which suggests that humour cannot always be managed and in fact has subversive qualities. This article addresses the issue of the subversive potential of comedy in organizational contexts. It draws illustratively on the case of a successful corporate comedian to do so. The article argues, through an analysis of the case, the history and philosophy of comedy, and theories of the comedic, that while comedy has inherent subversive potential, it most often is contained. Indeed, it suggests that comedy works by intruding as a potential threat to mundane reality, but offers comic relief when it is apparent that the threat will not be actualized and the status quo ante prevails. Implications for using corporate comedy are drawn.

**Keywords:** humour, comedy, subversion, incongruity, catharsis

## Introduction

There has been a rise in humour research in organizations over the past couple of decades and more recently growth in the deliberate application of comedy in organizations through corporate comedic theatre, jesters, and other devices. This article is concerned with the extent to which comedy in organizational contexts is subversive or not. It uses illustratively the case of one corporate comedian whose agenda includes satire and subversion of authority and the expert. The subversive potential of humour is examined with respect to that, but also in relation to the history and philosophy of comedy and more recent conceptualizations and empirical research.

The article makes a contribution at a theoretical and practical level. Theoretically, it contributes to our understanding of theatre in organizations and particularly the use of comedic theatre. It advances our understanding of humour theory. It also contributes to the important debate about whether humour and comedy can be subversive and the functional effects of humour in organizations. Practically, it helps understand the use of corporate comedy

Organization  
Studies  
25(5): 775–795  
ISSN 0170–8406  
Copyright © 2004  
SAGE Publications  
(London,  
Thousand Oaks,  
CA & New Delhi)

by explaining the mechanisms by which it operates, the contexts of its use, and some cautionary tales about unintended effects.

### **Theatre in Organizations and Corporate Comedy**

While the relationship between theatre and organization has long been explored at both a theoretical and pragmatic level (Czarniawska 1997; Goffman 1959, 1972; Kärreman 2001; Mangham 1986), the comedic genre generally has been neglected in organization studies. However, perhaps impelled by recent growth in humour research in organizations, an interest in the role of comedy as a theatrical genre in business contexts has developed. This is mostly pragmatic, concerned with using theatre in organizations to derive some effect. Some corporations have embraced comedy as a potentially valuable part of organizational culture and management practice (Caudron 1992) and a number of providers of theatre for corporations have sprouted (*Management Today* 2000). An interesting example related to the concerns of this article is British Airways' employment of a type of corporate jester. A humour consultancy business has developed (Collinson 2002; Gibson 1994), the aims of which vary. For example, a leader in the field seeks to release creative potential and improve communications (Buchanan 2000). Owens-Corning Fibreglass used a humour consultant to run workshops for 1,600 employees when they laid-off 40 percent of their workforce and claimed humour helped minimize the negative responses normally associated with downsizing (Caudron 1992: 68). Corporations are deploying comic theatre for functional ends and indeed humour has been proposed as a tool for management (Malone 1980). This has led to a spate of popularist texts preaching the virtues of humour in enhancing management (Kushner 1990; Paulson 1989; Ross 1989). Again, the stated aims vary, but include stimulating creativity, improving decision-making, enhancing morale, improving group functioning, or cementing cultural values (Boverie et al. 1994; Deal and Kennedy 2000).

Academic research and theorizing has also focused on the functionality of humour and the majority of contemporary approaches have clear structural, functional roots. Early work dealt with its role in relieving the negative effects of bureaucracy (Bradney 1957; Blau 1963), alleviating boredom, and cementing group relations (Roy 1960). There is also a long tradition dealing with the relationship between humour and power relations and hierarchy (Cosser 1960; Lundberg 1969; Traylor 1973). This relates to the superiority theory of humour, in which jokes and humour reproduce the social ordering and hierarchical structures of systems, and has its roots conceptually in Hobbes and empirically in Radcliffe-Brown's (1940) analysis of joking relationships (Duncan 1985). It is obviously a negative view of humour, but clearly not a subversive one; indeed, it is a functional mechanism in which extant social structures are perpetuated.

Others question that humour reproduces power structures, asserting that it can diminish hierarchy and status differentiators (Duncan 1982) and that

managers can signal their availability and trust through joking (Vinton 1989). Other work shows that humour can lessen communication risk (Dwyer 1991; Kahn 1989; Ullian 1976) and enhance social influence processes (O'Quin and Aronoff 1981; Powell 1977). Another stream of work addresses humour's functionality for group processes, suggesting that social relations and group processes can be enhanced, group communication facilitated, and group cohesiveness, solidarity, and a sense of belonging engendered (Duncan 1982; Duncan et al. 1990; Duncan and Feisal 1989; Holmes 2000). It is also claimed that humour improves group problem-solving and aids creativity and innovation (Consalvo 1989; Smith and White 1965). The role of humour in moderating or reducing stress, aiding coping behaviour, and in other forms of adaptive or palliative behaviour has also been documented (Buchman 1994; Martin and Lefcourt 1983; Yovitch et al. 1990). Lastly, humour is suggested to help reveal, diagnose, or even change culture (Deal and Kennedy 2000; Dwyer 1991; Kahn 1989) and is linked with effective leadership (Avolio et al. 1999; Crawford 1994).

There is a counterpoint to this functional view, which suggests that comedy and humour can be deployed as resistance, challenge, and subversion (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Collinson 1988, 2002; Linstead 1985). The argument is that humour and comedy can be subversive, act as a counterpoint to the status quo, and serve to undermine positions of dominance. There is certainly a long tradition going back to Plato in which humour and comedy are positioned as potentially dangerous and subversive and in need of control or suppression. Contemporarily, part of Collinson's (2002) evidential base is the catalogue of organizational attempts to suppress humour, with the implication that if the powerful see the need to suppress humour it must be threatening. However, none of that proves an actual subversive effect. Indeed, historical evidence suggests that humour and comedy, while widely perceived as having subversive potential, have habitually been contained or co-opted by the dominant position. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to provide any concrete instances in which humour or comedy actually had a material subversive consequence.

It will be argued, drawing upon an illustrative case and theoretical and historical evidence, that comedy contains an inherent challenge and subversive potential, but that its effect as comedy lies precisely in the fact that the threat remains a potential and is not materially realized. It is a position that seems closer to what Collinson (2002: 272) calls 'radical functionalists', wherein although appearing subversive, humour actually serves to reinforce existing power relations. However, that would be mistaken, since what is advocated here is not a functionalist position; comedy can still be considered as *part of* a subversive movement: revealing inadequacies and problems in the status quo that modularities other than the comic may further expose, exploit, and expand to work a change. However, comedy on its own cannot subvert established order.

The subject of the illustrative case, Rodney Marks, recognizes that humour and comedy are multifaceted and multiple in their effects, but sees his own practice as containing subversive purposes. He aspires to have his comedy

received as a challenge to authority and the expert and as partly liberative and transformative, but acknowledges that this is hard to achieve. Occasionally, he has witnessed comedy's cathartic effect. As we shall see, the context is critical for the reception of comedy and sometimes the reception and its consequences are not what were intended. In comedic organizational theatre, there is a dynamic between the comedian, the material, the audience, the comedy, and the setting, with an additional complication that the audience is actually multiple.

### **'Hoaxes and Jokeses': An Illustrative Case**

The case used illustratively here is part of an ongoing study into corporate comedians and other modes of humour in organizational contexts. It is not presented as a formal case study, but rather as a source of illustrative material with respect to a line of theoretical reasoning.

The data were collected over the period of a year using a variety of methods. The main source of data was observational, obtained during various performances by Marks as well as from videos of him performing. There was also a series of unstructured, intensive interviews with Marks exploring his views on comedy, practice intentions, methods, performance, and comedic effects. I also had access to a significant database maintained by him in which was recorded information about the administration of his performance (dates, venue, client, mode of referral, fee received, and testimonials) as well as about the content (the character, role assumed, type of accent, key themes tackled, and details of the biography of the character). Also included is a self-administered grading of each performance on a five-point scale. Lastly, data from clients and audiences were collected in two forms. First, via informal conversations with audience members *in situ* as the performance concluded, data were recorded as field notes. Second, more formal interviews with commissioning clients yielded further data.

Marks is a professional comedian who specializes in performing hoaxes at corporate and other organizational venues. He is a trained actor who aborted an acting career and moved into arts administration. To further that second career, he undertook an MBA and while doing that he realized how fertile the world of management was for comedy. He thus embarked on a career as a corporate comedian that he has pursued successfully for about 20 years. The appellation 'comedian' is misleading — Marks does not tell jokes, rather he is a purveyor of 'hoaxes and jokeses' as his business card states. Typically, a client makes a booking and provides a brief. The booking clients are normally senior executives of companies or other organizational leaders. The reasons for client bookings are very varied. Sometimes the client just wants an entertaining interlude, but some clients told me they sometimes have a more specific agenda. His bookings are often by word of mouth and recommendation, so clients are often aware of the type of humour Marks engages in. They sometimes want to draw attention to some organizational problems, but in a light-hearted manner.

Marks develops a role he feels fits the situation, the audience, and his own satirical inclinations. On 'performance' day he enters the setting and makes a presentation or conducts a seminar in character. During the performance, he parodies, satirizes, and lampoons the organization, its activities, its members, or some combination of those. The performance depends upon the hoax being initially credible. As an MBA graduate and ongoing student of the argot of business, Marks is able to adopt, but then play with and parody, the language of modern business. Using his acting talent and characterization he is able to 'pass' in the assumed role and appear credible.

As the performance progresses, he engages in increasingly absurdist commentary and behaviour until the audience begins to realize that the role cannot be authentic and the hoax becomes manifest. The humour comes from establishing the character, building up tension, and then letting people realize that they have had a hoax perpetrated on them. The timing is crucial: if the hoax is not revealed then the humour is lost, but equally, if it is not sustained for a reasonable time, there is no tension and the humour dissipates. He sees the mechanism of hoax construction and revelation thus: 'It's an accumulation and wobbling of jargon so that it becomes empty, saying the same thing many times but in a different way.' There is clearly more to it than that, but here is an example:

'I do think an idea is the kernel of a general idea, a common idea one can meld into a whole, into a precept, then on to a concept. And from that concept perhaps a model can be developed, and after a while a model can be enhanced into a template. In due course, a template can be developed into a matrix ... and once a model has been fully understood as four quadrants and two axis, hopefully it will be exploded so that there is an extension, a development and elaboration — along the lines of the Rubik cube — so that we can move into three dimensional space where we have a three dimensional representation of ideas along those x, y and z axis ... Naturally, we at Telcomucom [a fictitious name], threw over three dimensional matrices sometime ago in favour of paradigms [*small pause*] and now we are into shifting that paradigm.'

This was delivered to the managers of a telecommunications company at a post-workshop dinner. Marks was introduced as an e-business specialist. The presentation is completely deadpan with no extravagant gestures, hysterics, or sneaky smiles. While not obvious from the textual form, in performance this speech does not come across immediately as gobbledegook. It is, however, such talk that signals that all is not what it seems and people are alerted to the hoax. The example is typical of satire, beginning on a plausible enough foundation there is an excursus along a known and familiar path, but as it progresses there is a build up until the edifice collapses under its own weight and topples over into absurdity.

Marks makes three interrelated claims for his comedy. First, that it is an ironic commentary on the jargon, pretensions, and absurdities of contemporary management and business practice and the arcane theoretical language upon which they fashionably draw. In doing so, he also often satirizes the particular organization and its managers, parodying or insulting authority figures and experts in the company. Second, he exposes and punctures the *expert* and expertise. His characters are typically positioned as expert

and the performance is designed to reveal the flimsiness, presumptiveness, absurdity, and impertinence of the expert. The performance involves a babble of jargon through which the emptiness of the language of expertise is exposed.

Underlying both is an overarching attempt to undermine authority. Marks sees the assumption of authority as arbitrary and accidental, and as he says, 'whether the people are management gurus, politicians, religious leaders, business leaders or academics ... most people don't have stunning ability, they're there because they've claimed the space, not because they've earned it'. This leads to the third aspiration — a kind of educative, liberative function. He wants lower organizational members to realize that they need not be in awe of the powerful and the expert, and that hierarchical relationships are maintained as much with smoke and mirrors as by genuine differences in ability or expertise. They can elevate themselves and escape the traps (often self-imposed) of authority relations. The message is indirect, conveyed by pointing out that the emperor has no clothes, the guru is vacuous, and the expert's narrative empty. He sees this latter aim as a move away from the more insulting type of humour in which comedy is a weapon and revenge against authority figures and notes that his comedy used to be more acerbic and critical. Attacks are less overt, the aim being to convey the arbitrariness of power and authority, the accident of status, and the sham of 'guruhood'.

The subversive intent and potential of Marks's comedic theatre is apparent. However, he recognizes, perhaps better than some theorists, that comedy is multifaceted and multiplex. Subversion and satire are there and intended, but he acknowledges that senior managers and the commissioning client often collude with that and in so doing diffuse the subversive potential. Furthermore, performances are not always received as intended, and all manner of meanings can be read and attributed. Lastly, he is acutely aware that he is also, and perhaps primarily, an entertainer.

### **Limits to the Subversive Potential of Comedy: A Multi-perspective Analysis**

We have seen that the subversive potential in organizational humour and comedy is supported by certain theorists (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Collinson 1988, 2000, 2002; Linstead 1985) and pursued by some corporate comedians such as Marks. Marks's comedic practice satirizes the language and pretensions of modern management, but he also sees it as an attempt to invert power relationships and usurp authority. On occasion the 'putting down' of authority is literal: at one performance he had seven of the client's most senior managers sitting on the floor in front of their subordinates. He then attacked the corporate culture-forming exercises they had been involved in as part of their retreat, and had a royal time with notions of vision, mission, and values statements. The company had talked about the 'bottom-up organization' and managers 'serving the front line'. Having the managers on the ground, he pointed to the fact that all the company's senior managers were at this retreat and hoped that:

‘middle management will continue to run the company — as we go through these processes and these re-structurings — as they always do. And that as you [senior managers] sit around at retreats like this it will become obvious that what you do makes absolutely no difference to the performance of the company.’

The potentially subversive nature of such comedy, suggesting the redundancy of senior management and offering an inversion of power structures, is quite apparent.

Marks says that undermining authority is not the difficult part, and the above bears him out, but it is one thing to pull it off in performance, quite another to do it in reality. He admits that people in authority often collude with his satirical activities, comfortable to do so because they are in positions of authority and power. As a senior manager said: ‘What can you really do to me. You can tease me, but, hey baby I’m there and besides, you’re talking about *me*, so that’s good too.’ Indeed, some managers ask to be ‘roasted’, wanting to signal that they can take a joke.

The subversive function of comedy claimed by Marks, other comedians, and some theorists can be questioned. An examination of the history, philosophy, and theory of comedy and humour reveals the limits to such claims. A multi-perspective analysis follows whereby evidence from different spheres is brought to bear on that issue.

### **A Sociological Perspective: Boundaries of the Comic and Comic Intrusions**

Comedy works because it is a register distinguishable from other modes of being or social behaviour. Certainly, to be subversive it must have this distance; it needs to be differentiated from that which it subverts. But what is its register, and from what is it differentiated?

Demarcating comedy from other modalities goes back to Aristotle and Plato, with the latter being particularly derogatory and positioning comedy and humour as frivolous, peripheral, and incompatible with any serious or noble activity. Humour and the comic become differentiated from the serious realm, including work — to such an extent that Morreall (1991: 359) asserts “‘humour in work” to be an oxymoron’. Work and work places have come to be seen as arenas for serious and sober endeavour, not humour and comedy. There is an implicit recognition of humour’s potential danger — perhaps subversion.

The serious has clearly been privileged and delineated from the comic in organizations. A boundary is constructed that both limits the intrusion of the comic and creates the very condition by which it can be seen as subversive. The comic’s intrusion into the realm of the serious implies an antithetical relationship and the two need delineating. This can be achieved structurally through such devices as comic theatre and the role of the comedian. In organizations, the boundary between the two is sometimes clear, but at other times not, with few explicit rules. The boundary location very much depends on context. Clearly, at times humour erupts spontaneously into the serious and the boundary is less structured, less well defined, and in a sense comedy



is 'ubiquitous in ordinary, everyday life' (Berger 1997: 5), including organizations (Duncan and Feisal 1989; Morreall 1991). However, comedy is still largely viewed as an intrusion and boundaries are established, however fuzzy, that allow humour to be deemed appropriate or inappropriate. Completely dissolving the boundary would indeed be subversive, but stepping over the boundaries could also be subversive.

The theatre of comedy depends upon and plays with such boundaries, and indeed humour depends on drawing attention to and transgressing boundaries. Marks certainly plays with them. His comedy, in one sense, is bounded and 'staged' in that it occurs within a predetermined setting and is planned, but it is not literally 'on the stage'. His performance appears within ongoing organizational activities, but intrudes as a hoax. He is indeed sometimes perceived to cross the boundary and to deliver inappropriate comedy. The following example illustrates this.

He was once hired to perform at a dinner for 500 major corporate donors to the Australian Liberal Party's election campaign held at New South Wales Parliament House. Before his performance a promotional video was shown of the Liberal leader riding up the hill at Parliament House on a bike, given babies to kiss, and then surveying the rest of Canberra atop the hill while talking about his 'vision'. As Marks says:

'Now any comedian would have taken the piss out of him ... and I did too, and the audience is laughing, and I'm doing it more. I'm thinking "the audience is the audience", and I'm doing it more. They're the audience, I'm the comedian, they're laughing — keep going, keep going. [Laughs] But in one sense the only member of the audience to worry about is the one with the cheque.'

On this occasion the cheque was slow in coming, and then it was for only half the amount.

This is clearly a complication in the comedy of theatre in organizations. Audiences are not homogenous and differences may exist between the performance audience and the client. While Marks has rarely had a client dictate or circumscribe his performance, professional comedians are in business and need to satisfy the client, who often expects a safe and sanitized humour. This potentially limits the extent to which humour can be an assault upon or subversion of the client organization. But for Marks and others, the name of the game *is* to lampoon, ridicule, parody, and satirize business and management theory and practice, and this cannot be done without the risk of overstepping the mark and giving offence. There are occasions when the distinction between the audience and the client gets blurred and a boundary crossed inappropriately. An example is when Marks was booked by a telecommunications company.

It was at the time when such companies were frantically jumping into e-business opportunities. The division hiring him was responsible for those developments and had dubbed Internet and e-business functions 'enhanced services'. At the venue, Marks is on a stage and hanging from floor to ceiling on either side of him are two huge banners that have 'telecom enhanced services' in acronym form. Marks notices and points out to the audience that



on one side he has 'TES', and on the other 'TES', which, of course, together spell 'TESTES'. 'Look, I'm surrounded by a load of bollocks,' he declares. The audience laughed. Indeed, the humour stuck. The company had spent large sums of money developing a campaign for these services centred on that acronym, but now no one could take it seriously and they had to re-brand it and begin a different campaign. The people who booked Marks were not happy, but as he pointed out, 'Its comedy — you *have* to do it. That was a gift, it will never happen again. I mean the acronym. And then to have banners side-by-side, and then to be able to make a testicle joke about it. If I had not said that, I would have regretted it my whole life.' This can be interpreted as subversive (in that it undermined the organization's planned strategic activities), but only mildly and unintentionally so.

The comic-serious boundary in organizations is ambiguous and is precisely what creates the opportunity for someone like Marks to play. Does this reveal something more general about the relationship of comedy to our other life spheres that can be theorized? In his exploration of the comic, Berger (1997) makes use of Schutz's (1962, 1967) notion of multiple realities wherein there is the 'paramount reality' of mundane, lived experience, but also enclaves of alternate realities, or 'finite provinces of meaning' as Schutz calls them. These 'finite provinces of meaning' entail a specific cognitive style, a different form of attentionality and consciousness, a holistic and exclusive sense of reality, and a suspension of doubt (relative to paramount reality). They also embrace different conceptions of time, self-experience, and sociality, and are consistent and logical within their own bounds (Berger 1997: 8–9). Dream states are the paradigmatic case, but the fictive world, child's play, extreme types of aesthetic or spiritual experience, and drug-induced states are others. Berger argues that the comic is close to a 'finite province of meaning'. He points to a unique structuring of human experience wherein:

'Only man belongs to multiple levels of being and this multiple experience of reality is the basis of comic perception ... Man's eccentric position allows man to perceive the world as both constrained and open, as familiar and strange, as meaningful and meaningless.' (Berger 1997: 48)

The comic depends on the boundaries of mundane reality and the possibilities of other realities. This suggests a radical distance between the comic and the serious. Berger links this to the 'eccentric' (or decentred) position of humans wherein the body is experienced as both a condition and an object, a self-awareness and reflexivity that means we can simultaneously be cognizant of different modes of reality. Comedy is an intrusion of an alternate reality across the boundary of the mundane. It is experienced as a threat or disturbance to paramount reality and a tension is established, but is released when the intrusion of an alternate reality is shown not actually to eventuate and paramount reality is reaffirmed. This generates a pleasurable sense of relief that is experienced as humour.

The near universal parent-infant game of 'peek-a-boo' illustrates the dynamics of this process. At the onset of the game, the parent's face appears to the child; this is reassuring and pleasurable. Then the parent removes

himself or herself from the child's vision; this generates anxiety and a sense of loss. The parent's head reappears; the child is relieved and reassured and pleasure is experienced. However, the dynamic is more nuanced. It is the sudden reappearance of the parent's face accompanied by a verbal surprise, the loudly declared 'peek-a-boo', that precipitates a pleasurable shock of relief and causes laughter in the child. The paradigmatic dynamic (loosely adapted from Berger 1997: 50) is:

Presence — pleasure, reassurance, security.

Withdrawal — an interruption of pleasure.

Continued absence — mounting anxiety, tension.

Re-presence, return of the familiar — relief, cathartic release, laughter.

The timing is critical: if the parent's head reappears too soon, there is insufficient time for tension to build, and hence no relief on return; if withheld too long, anxiety grows and moves beyond a comfort zone in which a return can be experienced with positive effect.

This is not paradigmatic for all situations of laughter and humour (no single explanation is possible given diversity in the comic and humorous), but it resonates with the humour exemplified by Marks's performances. The phrase 'comic relief', it turns out, has a literal meaning. Marks's performances can be read as an intrusion into the paramount reality of organizational life and its attendant seriousness. He builds tension in various ways: by satire and parody, trading in the absurd, and by interpolating a caustic alternative to the sanguine etiquette of organizational discourse. The hoax is the vehicle for the tension; people are unsettled as they sense that all is not what it seems. Relief occurs when the hoax is revealed. The invasion of the alternate, the absurd, is shown to not be real — and people can, laughingly, slip back from this odd and oddly threatening world into the security of the paramount reality. The realization that the threat to normalcy is not real engenders feelings of relief and return that is pleasurable and experienced as humour.

This is a plausible explanation of organizational comic theatre; it is, however, clearly not subversive. It courts the subversive by intimating an intrusion into mundane reality, but the humour lies in the revelation that the threat is not actual, and people feel relief at the return of the mundane reality that was temporarily threatened. This is a recurring dynamic in the history and explanation of humour and comedy.

The Bergerian perspective represents comedy as potentially subversive since it as an alternate representation of reality. However, the relationship between comedy as an alternative reality mode and paramount reality is subtle and nuanced. Humour can reveal the limits of reason and the arbitrariness of paramount reality. Freud saw humour as a form of rebellion against authority, but also against reason (Freud 1932, 1960). For Berger (1997: 16), the comic experience 'debunks all pretensions, including the pretensions of the sacred. The comic, therefore, is dangerous to all established order. It must be controlled, contained in some sort of enclave.' Threats to paramount reality are something to be guarded against, controlled, or managed. Witness the incarceration of the mad and the alarmed reaction to and policing of

consciousness-changing drugs. As Berger (1997: 12) says, 'The paramount reality of everyday life always defends itself against the ever present danger of being swept away by those other realities lurking behind its facades. In this sense, the comic, the aesthetic, and the sexual realities are always, at least potentially subversive.' However, alternate realities are themselves fragile and in danger of being subsumed by the paramount reality.

I argue that ultimately comedy is not subversive in the sense of undermining the status quo. Humour cannot subvert or overturn a social system. It may point to alternative realities, and indicate the limitations, partialities, and absurdities of dominant reality, but, on its own, it cannot effect change in that reality. Comedy is primarily a subversive reminder, an echo of subversive possibilities, rather than something that ultimately can *perform* subversively. Comedy has most often, throughout history, kicked the shins of dominant reality, poked and prodded at it, but almost always from an internal, contained position. Its relationship to the serious paramount reality is one of adjacency and edgy juxtaposition, not opposition. A brief exploration of some of the historical roots of the comic helps demonstrate this.

#### **A Historical Perspective: Comedy Contained and the Limits of Subversion**

A candidate for the comic's antithesis, if not the serious, is the tragic. But even there we find adjacency rather than antithesis. According to Aristotle (1973), the word 'comedy' derives from the *komedía*, the song of the *komos*. The *komos* is the name of the frenzied crowd taking part in the orgiastic rites of Dionysus. Dionysus is the god of transgression and the cult's rites involved deliberate violation of every convention and notion of decency: the sacred is invaded by the profane, sexual mores overturned, and gender boundaries blurred. Dionysus is opposed to Apollo, the god of light and reason. Nietzsche (1967) uses the distinction in exploring the twin forces within human culture, but specifies their dialectical relationship. Simply put, if there was no conventionality, it could not be transgressed. There is an inescapable tension in the relationship — one comedy has always exploited. The Dionysian perspective is seen as a subversive and dangerous threat to the Apollonian world, but it cannot exist without that other and is thus contained by this symbiosis. From the very beginning the cult was contained: Dionysian rites being incorporated into the Apollonian schedule at its own shrines.

Similarly, long before comedy became an independent dramatic form it was incorporated into tragedy, originally as a Dionysian postlude at the end of classic Greek tragedy. From the beginning comedy was comic relief (in a literal sense) from unsettling tragedy. The difference between tragedy and comedy is that tragedy is 'real', in the sense that it does not take us into an alternate reality. Tragedy deals seriously with the problems, pain, and suffering of life, requiring the palliative of comedy to transport us into another world. It is tragedy that offers scope for serious criticism of society, systems, or persons, not comedy (Dhond 1992). Genuine tragedy and comedy cannot occupy the same space. Witness how long it took humour associated with September 11 to appear.

The Dionysian–Apollonian relationship is paradigmatic for a persisting relational structure between the comic and paramount reality. Comedy has always had this subversive, threatening quality, but has invariably been acted out within a space delineated and circumscribed by mundane dominant reality. The contained relationship persists today: comedy is put on the stage, in the cinema, or in the novel and these delineated spaces frame, localize, and contain the comedic. Corporate comedy is similarly theatrical and ‘staged’, albeit in Marks’s case in a disguised form.

The boundedness of comedy is part of Bakhtin’s interest with ‘carnival’ (Danow 1995; Hirschkop and Shepherd 1989), since there rebellious laughter escapes a designated location to invade the streets and permeate common cultural ground. Marks’s comedy seems carnivalesque — it has come off the stage, is among the people, and appears impromptu and emergent out of the everyday. But it is commissioned, framed, and staged by the powerful. Once again, the carnivalesque lives alongside the ‘official’ world, ordered and hierarchized by the powerful. Even on Bakhtin’s own analysis, carnival’s transformative power is not realized until embodied in the high literature of Rabelais. The subversion is an idealization and the dangerous potential of carnival was never realized; it was transformed and sanitized into the circus and the Mardi Gras. This is not to say that the carnival, like other comedic forms, does not contain transgressive potential, but it has never succeeded in overturning a dominant reality. Rather, it remains as a salutary (and perhaps hopeful) reminder of the constraints, limits, and fragility of mundane, ordered reality.

Throughout history the comic has intruded, but has been institutionalized and co-opted. The fool and the jester are further cases in point. There is a long history of their use within the establishment (Davidson 1996; Duran 1966). The role differs across time and places, from Pharaonic Egypt and ancient China to Elizabeth I’s England and beyond. In some situations, the ‘fool’ had a physical or mental deficiency and was cruelly employed to provide amusement through inappropriate behaviours. But there is another role of more relevance to this article and the Chinese case provides an early example. ‘Jesters’ were not perceived as mentally deficient, but rather, as possessing wisdom and their role was to advise the ‘noble’ by way of jest. Direct and sober criticism of the noble person would have been illegitimate and an effrontery, but the jester avoids this through assuming a specific role and by disguising the critique in humour. The ‘noble’ provides himself or herself with a valuable source of critique and advice via a mode that cannot be construed as a challenge to his or her authority. Jesting is a questioning and corrective of authority, but not, however, a subversion of it. The role of *corporate* jester has recently emerged (Kets de Vries 1990) and Marks’s practice has some affinity with it. Like the jester he lampoons and parodies authority figures, but from within their own institutional contexts. Like the jester, he can attack authority figures and the powerful from behind the cover of humour and the specialized, non-threatening role he occupies. Furthermore, the powerful cannot take offence without looking damagingly churlish.

There are other instances of the institutional containment of comedy's subversive potentiality. During the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church allowed the so-called Feast of Fools, wherein the church permitted the priesthood to engage in behaviours that were an inversion of normal sacred practice. Liturgies were cited backwards, profanities exclaimed, and lewd behaviour rife. From this root emerged two branches of the comic: the coarser 'fart' humour of the carnival and burlesque, and the more refined and bourgeois 'farce' (Davis 2001). The same root gave rise to the Harlequin and the Pierrot. In the 16th and 17th centuries, harlequin performances were used to criticize the establishment and there was an attempt to ban them in Austria in 1770. The Pierrot was a more satirical mode. Vaudeville and burlesque are more recent mechanisms for the institutionalization of the comic. Today, we have comedy theatres, sitcoms, and comic movies. Today, too, we have the corporate comedian, bringing humour back into the very heart of the new establishment.

What this selective historical analysis shows is that comedy has repeatedly been viewed as potentially subversive, but has always been contained and co-opted. Comedy always has a position of interiority or adjacency and is never really external to that about which it constructs humour. So it is with corporate comedic theatre: it is interior to organizations and not an external threat.

### **An Embodied Perspective: Falling into Laughter**

Comedy is a threat because it intrudes as an alternate reality, but also because it signifies a loss of control — of reason and of the mind relative to the body. As Foucault (1967) argues, the fascination with the Ship of Fools in the 16th century and the turn to the Great Confinement of the mad by the middle of the next occurs precisely as reason achieves ascendancy and a new discursive order is established. Fools, previously at liberty and celebrated, come to be viewed as a threat to reason and the rational. As noted, Freud also sees humour as a rebellion against reason, involving a kind of infantilism in which we return to the fantastic, liberated, and playful realm of the child.

Bergson (1928) argues that the comic is the 'mechanical in the living', meaning that what is laughable is that which is 'done automatically': in other words, an involuntary action or response that has slipped out from conscious control. As he says, 'The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing' (cited in Bliss 1915: 241–242). This introduces some subtle relationships between humour, laughter, and the body. A sense of humour, and laughter as its key signature, is a distinctly human phenomenon. Lorenz (1963) refers to laughter as a 'reflex of capitulation'. A tension builds up in the individual and is then suddenly released — the person collapses into or capitulates to laughter. It is also noted that only humans can distance themselves as bodies — whereas an animal *is* its body, a human is a body, but also *has* a body (Plessner 1970). This precarious relationship needs sustaining. However, when we weep or laugh the balance is disturbed, and control over the body is lost (again, the person collapses into laughter or weeping): the person no longer *has* a body, but *is* a body. Laughter, in this collapse, is an experience of relief, both physical and psychological.

Bliss (1915) also refers to the loss of control, the ‘falling into laughter’. The comic occurs when the purely physical intrudes, when people are attempting to sustain a serious, cognitive mode — particularly intellectual, moral, or spiritual modes. The farting priest, the judge who slips thereby dislodging his wig, the president caught with his pants down — these are occasions of the comedic. Bliss goes further, suggesting that the moral and the intellectual are evolutionary latecomers relative to the physical and ‘the abrupt assumption of rule by the physical delights because there is relief, triumph, even, fancifully speaking, a species of revenge’ (1915: 242). The civilized is threatened by the physical and the primordial. It is because the threat is only a temporary reminder and there is a realization that there is no substantive and sustained threat to civilized order that it becomes funny. But this is a limited perspective on humour that fails to cover other forms, such as the hoax and satire used by Marks. It fails to offer a satisfactory explanation of how comedy works and the mechanisms of humour, that is, unless we want to maintain that comedy (and particularly laughter with its falling out of control) *is* a return to this more primal condition, to this state before the serious, and that the pleasure of humour and laughter lies exactly in that return. Comic relief is literally a relief from the bounds of mundane reality, from the imposition of order, limits, and seriousness that have come to occupy paramount reality — one might even say, the tragedy of the real. This is not sustainable. A synthesis of the Bergerian perspective with incongruity theory offers a more cogent explanation.

### **A Cognitive Perspective: Incongruity Resolved**

I argue that the comic does not generate humour through being actually subversive or intruding into mundane reality as an otherwise repressed impulse, infantile regression, or re-emergence of the primordial. Rather, it comes from the realization that the threat to paramount reality, the intrusion of an alternative reality, is averted and is only temporary: is only a joke. The comedic *does* intrude and interpolate an alien reality that threatens our taken-for-granted understandings and sense of the order of things. However, ultimately dominant reality is reaffirmed by comedy, signalling that the alternate reality is not to be taken seriously and that we can, with relief and with a laugh, return to the comfort of our known and settled world.

This resonates with the incongruity theory of humour, which has been a key perspective since Aristotle. Technically, incongruity is the apprehension of two or more disjointed or ill-suited pairings of ideas; but there is more to it than that. Elements of an incongruity perspective are found in numerous philosophical reflections on the comic. Descartes, for example, sees laughter as caused by an effect of surprise brought about by the apprehension of a different view of reality — a view that resonates with the Bergerian thesis. For Kant (1952), laughter was caused by the perception of something contradictory, more specifically, by the ‘sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothingness’. The comedic situation sets up expectations which move in a destabilizing, even threatening direction relative to our



mundane understandings, but then there is a resolution and we realize that there was *nothing* (threatening) there at all — it was just a joke. A view of humour deriving from contradictions was also expressed by Hegel, who puts it in social context and points to situations where disparities (between the effort expended and the results achieved, ambition and achievement, and purposefulness and the accidental) become large and potentially comic. Here, the disjuncture is between intended or espoused reality and what actually occurs.

Contemporary incongruity theory is varied, but has conceptual and empirical support (Deckers and Kizer 1975; Deckers and Devine 1981). The issue of what is incongruous remains pertinent. Synthesizing incongruity theory with Berger's conceptualization suggests that the relationship between an alternate and a paramount reality provides an overarching incongruity. 'The perception of the comic is the perception of something that falls out of an overall order of things' (Berger 1997: 32). He rightly notes that incongruity depends on the notion of congruity. The perception of the comic, therefore, 'depends upon (is parasitical upon) the basic human urge to order reality. Comic laughter is, so to speak, the philosophical instinct in a lower key' (Berger 1997: 32). This is only possible, and humour is only possible, because of our capacity to imagine other realities. Our common and habitual ways of ordering reality are challenged by the comedic, but the comic can only appear in relation to that reality.

Research on the linguistic structure of jokes shows that they work by encouraging the mind to process the joke with adductive logic that initially takes thought down habitual and tested pathways. Humour arises with a turn in the language that jolts the logic and thinking 'sideways' out of those pathways (Attardo 1994). Maier (1932–33) puts it simply, saying that humour leads the audience in a certain direction, but suddenly takes them somewhere else. There is surprise and temporary confusion. However, and this is critical, Maier insists that mere incongruity is inadequate for humour to emerge; there must also be *resolution* of the incongruity. Resolution brings relief, relief that the mental confusion did not signal a real failure of understanding, which would presage either a break down in mental capacity or in the known order of things. If there is no resolution, we actually are in trouble — and it certainly will not be funny. Imagine the clown at the circus who points a gun at the audience. There is not much real apprehension because of the setting, but there is enough so that when the gun is 'fired' and a flag with 'bang' on it appears, there is sufficient relief to laugh at the incongruity. But what if the clown pulls the trigger and blows the brains out of the five-year-old girl in the front row? The comedy rests uneasily on this potential alternate reality. It is the imagining of that horrific possibility that provides the tension upon which the comedic depends. Research also notes this fine line, indicating that even as the joke is being developed the incongruity needs to be moderate. If it is too weak, there is no tension; too extreme and it will precipitate anxiety and stress (Kuhlman 1985). Remember 'peek-a-boo'.

Incongruity itself is not funny; it is the resolution, the relocation of understanding, that provides for humour as the mind finds a way to accommodate



the odd worldview that comedy has introduced. The comedic turn must become re-anchored to the known world — else it slips off into the more frightening other and possibly the mad. Laughter comes from the relief, the excitement of the resolution. This view of humour is compatible with recent research on the neurological correlates of humour (McCrone 2000). Brain activity varies in location and intensity during different phases of a joke. A particular location and intensity is discernible during the joke's build-up phase, but as the punch line is delivered, a different intensity and a wider spread pattern occurs. The brain uses areas linked with information evaluation and with feelings and emotions associated with evaluation. The habitual patterns the set-up phase engendered come to a halt, are purged, and make way for new thought patterns to develop, resulting in a relocation of meaning and order, a resolution that provides the pleasurable experience. It seems that the brain monitors for shifts (including monitoring its own internal processes) and makes ongoing evaluations. Most shifts in mental activity do not register as significant, but major or abrupt ones do, producing either negative or positive reactions. We might experience fear, or extreme pleasure. The abrupt realization that the parachute has not opened — there is, inevitably, a closeness between fear and humour.

## Conclusion

This article has addressed the increasing use of comedy by organizations and specifically the role of corporate comedians. The multi-perspective analysis supports neither a narrow functionalist interpretation of comedy and humour in organizations nor the interpretation that they are inherently subversive. Combining an incongruity perspective with the Bergerian thesis provides a more nuanced account that suggests that humour arises when an incongruous, comic intrusion is resolved and relief is experienced when the threat to paramount reality and established order is shown not to have actualized. Despite claims and aspirations to the contrary, comedic theatre, even the most satirical and abrasive, will not cause authority structures to be overturned or dominant orthodoxy to be supplanted. This does not invoke a functionalist account or diminish the importance of humour and comedy. They, in fact, rest upon an inherent subversive potential — the knowledge of an alternative mode of reality is precisely what allows the potential challenge to paramount reality, tension to be generated, and comedy to work. But comedy is more an echo of the possibility of paramount reality dissolving, proving inadequate, or being usurped by an alternative — a reminder, too, of the fragility, arbitrariness, and dependence of dominant reality. Nonetheless, the subversive echo might take hold and become the motivation for a move to radical change through means other than comedy.

These dynamics of the comedic sometimes mean that comedy can have cathartic effects. If tensions around the potential threat to paramount reality are built up strongly enough, and there is adequate adjacency of the alternate reality to the dominant, then catharsis may occur. Marks is aware of this and had turned

away from comedy as vitriol and revenge on authority towards its liberative possibilities. He aspired to these effects and was able, at times, to construct performances that had cathartic effects, as this final example demonstrates.

Marks was once booked by a subsidiary of a multinational at a time when Australia was experiencing a minor recession and the media was full of economic downturn and job insecurity. Prior to the performance another company had ‘let go’ 2,000–3,000 workers and the state government had laid-off 500. Marks adopts one of his favourite roles: ‘the arsehole from head office’. Ostensibly, he is a corporate HQ executive there to tell the subsidiary’s management team of some 450 that their performance had been inadequate. He only talks for about 10 minutes, berating their performance saying, ‘If you don’t lift your game we’re going to have to let you go.’ Indeed, the company was not performing well and was losing money in some operations. In the prevailing climate, the possibility of lay-offs had a frightening whiff of reality, and the audience is aware of that — the hoax is absolute. The performance is greeted by shocked silence. Marks notices the two advertising executives who booked him are off to the side with their head in their hands. As he says, ‘they’re experiencing the silence as death ... the comedy is not working, no one’s laughing or smiling. I’m thinking, this is ... perfect, I wish those two would take their head out of their hands. Look, I’m in control guys, its working, everything’s cool.’ Three managers stand up in the audience to ask questions or make points.

Speaker one: We are losing money, but we’re gaining market share, when the recession lifts we’ll be ready to go ... we’re well poised.

Speaker two: Look, you’re probably wondering about that thirty thousand grand that went missing, I mean you probably heard about ... but we’ve found the guy, he was having a few personal problems ... needed some bridging finance, the money’s paid back. We’ve let him go, sorry about that.

As Marks interprets later, ‘It’s meant to be comedy, people are bleeding, people are crying, and their wives ... Then the State sales manager stood up.’ This manager begins to speak, ‘You mean to tell me that even though we’ve been working hard, and even though there’s a housing recession, and even though when things get better ...’ Then he pauses and half talking to himself and half addressing Marks, the penny drops and he says, ‘Oh, you prick’ and begins to laugh. Almost immediately the whole room is on its feet, screaming across the tables and the room to each other, ‘I knew it,’ ‘I knew all the bloody time,’ ‘No you didn’t, but I knew,’ and so on. As Marks recalls:

‘It was an absolute catharsis. It was not focused on me at all; it was focused on them. Such a liberation. Confronting the issue of redundancy, and they understood perfectly that if a joke could be made of redundancy, it wasn’t going to happen, so their jobs were secure. It was just the most wonderful celebration ... lots and lots of people came up after — 30–40 people — wanting to shake my hand, telling me “thank you” and “that was really funny”. But it wasn’t that it was really funny, the audience really understood what was going on.’

This type of effect is certainly hard to precipitate, and to predict and control, as are humour and comedy generally. We have seen with Marks how

unintended consequences can occur. There is no guarantee that comedy will be received as intended, so there is a limit and a risk to any aspired-to managerial control or engineering of the comic in organizations. There is also a risk that yet another aspect of our everyday lived existence is appropriated by organizations in pursuit of an ill-conceived managerialist agenda. Organizations should at least be cautious about comedy, given its subversive potential and the unforeseen consequences that often follow.

## References

- Ackroyd, Stephen, and Paul Thompson  
1999 *Organisational misbehaviour*. London: Sage.
- Aristotle  
1973 *The basic works of Aristotle*, R. McKeon (ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Attardo, Salvatore  
1994 *Linguistic theories of humour*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Avolio, Bruce, Jane M. Howell, and John J. Sosik  
1999 'A funny thing happened on the way to the bottom line: Humour as a moderator of leadership style effects'. *Academy of Management Journal* 42/2: 219–227.
- Berger, Peter L.  
1997 *Redeeming laughter: The comic dimension of human experience*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Bergson, Henri  
1928 *Laughter: An essay on the meaning [1912] of the comic*, trans. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell. New York: Macmillan.
- Blau, Peter M.  
1963 *The dynamics of bureaucracy*, revised edn. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bliss, Sylvia H.  
1915 'The origin of laughter'. *American Journal of Psychology* 26/2: 236–246.
- Boverie, Patricia, Jeffrey E. Hoffman, Diana C. Klein, Marilyn McClelland, and Marlynn Oldknow  
1994 'Humour in human resource development'. *Human Resources Development Quarterly* 5/1: 75–91.
- Bradney, Philip  
1957 'The joking relationship in industry'. *Human Relations* 10: 179–187.
- Buchanan, Leigh  
2000 'Send in the clown'. *Inc.* 22/12: 89–94.
- Buchman, Elcha S., editor  
1994 *The handbook of humour: Clinical applications in psychotherapy*. Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing.
- Caudron, Shari  
1992 'Humour is healthy in the workplace'. *Personnel Journal*, June: 63–68.
- Collinson, David L.  
1988 'Engineering humour: Masculinity, joking and conflict in shop-floor relations'. *Organization Studies* 92: 181–199.
- Collinson, David L.  
2000 'Strategies of resistance: Power, knowledge and subjectivity in the workplace' in *Work and society: A reader*. K. Grint (ed.), 163–198. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Collinson, David L.  
2002 'Managing humour'. *Journal of Management Studies* 39/3: 269–288.
- Consalvo, Carmine M.  
1989 'Humour in management: No laughing matter'. *Humour* 2/3: 285–297.
- Coser, Rose L.  
1960 'Laughter among colleagues'. *Psychiatry* 23: 81–95.

- Crawford, Chris B.  
1994 'Theory and implications regarding the utilization of strategic humour by leaders'. *Journal of Leadership Studies* 1: 53–67.
- Czarniawska, Barbara  
1997 *Narrating the organisation: Dramas of institutional identities*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Danow, David K.  
1995 *The spirit of carnival: Magical realism and the grotesque*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.
- Davidson, Clifford  
1996 *Fools and folly*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western University of Michigan.
- Davis, Jessica M.  
2001 *Farce*. Somerset, NJ: Transaction.
- Deal, Terrence T., and Allen A. Kennedy  
2000 *The new corporate cultures*. London: Texere.
- Deckers, Lambert, and J. Devine  
1981 'Humour by violating an existing expectancy'. *Journal of Psychology* 108: 107–110.
- Deckers, Lambert, and P. Kizer  
1975 'Humour and the incongruity hypothesis'. *Journal of Psychology* 90: 215–218.
- Dhond, Mavesh V.  
1992 'Humour as social critique'. *Indian Journal of Social Work* 52/2: 284–288.
- Duncan, W. Jack  
1982 'Humour in management: Prospects for administrative practice and research'. *Academy of Management Review* 7: 136–142.
- Duncan, W. Jack  
1985 'The superiority theory of humour at work: Joking relationships as indicators of formal and informal status patterns in small, task-oriented groups'. *Small Group Behavior* 16: 556–564.
- Duncan, W. Jack, and J. Philip Feisal  
1989 'No laughing matter: Patterns of humour in the workplace'. *Organizational Dynamics* 17/4: 18–30.
- Duncan, W. Jack, Larry R. Smeltzer, and Terry L. Leap  
1990 'Humour and work: Application of joking behavior to management'. *Journal of Management* 16: 255–278.
- Duran, John  
1966 *The history of court fools*. New York: Haskell House.
- Dwyer, Tom  
1991 'Humour, power, and change in organizations'. *Human Relations* 44/1: 1–13.
- Foucault, Michel  
1967 *Madness and civilisation: A history of insanity in the age of reason*, trans. Richard Howard. London: Tavistock.
- Freud, Sigmund  
1932 'Wit and its relation to the [1905] unconscious' in *The basic writings of Sigmund Freud*, trans. A. A. Brill. A. A. Brill (ed.). New York: Modern Library.
- Freud, Sigmund  
1960 *Jokes and their relation to the subconscious*. New York: Norton.
- Gibson, David E.  
1994 'Humour consulting: Laughs for power and profit in organisations'. *Humor* 7/4: 403–428.
- Goffman, Erving  
1959 *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NJ: Anchor Books.
- Goffman, Erving  
1972 *Encounters: Two studies in the sociology of interaction*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Hirschkop, Ken, and David Shepherd  
1989 *Bakhtin and cultural theory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

- Holmes, J.  
2000 'Politeness, power and provocation: How humour functions in the workplace'. *Discourse Studies* 2/2: 159–185.
- Kahn, William A.  
1989 'Toward a sense of organizational humour: Implications for organizational diagnosis and change'. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 25/1: 45–64.
- Kant, Immanuel  
1952 'The critique of judgement' in *The critique of reason and other ethical treatises*. J. C. Meredith (ed.), 461–613). Chicago, IL: Encyclopaedia Britannica.
- Kärreman, Dan  
2001 'The scripted organisation: Dramaturgy from Burke to Baudrillard' in *The language of organisation*. R. I. Westwood and S. Linstead (eds), 89–111. London: Sage.
- Kets de Vries, Manfred F. R.  
1990 'The organisational fool: Balancing a leader's hubris'. *Human Relations* 43/8: 751–770.
- Kuhlman, Thomas L.  
1985 'A study of salience and motivational theories of humour'. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 49/1: 281–286.
- Kushner, Malcolm  
1990 *The light touch: How to use humour for business success*. New York: Simon Schuster.
- Linstead, Stephen  
1985 'Jokers wild: The importance of humour in the maintenance of organizational culture'. *Sociological Review* 33: 741–767.
- Lorenz, Konrad  
1963 *On aggression*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.
- Lundberg, Craig C.  
1969 'Person-focused joking: Pattern and function'. *Human Organization* 28: 22–28.
- McCrone, John  
2000 'Comic relief'. *New Scientist*, 27 May: 2240.
- Maier, Norman R. F.  
1932–33 'A gestalt theory of humour'. *British Journal of Psychology* 23: 69–74.
- Malone, Paul B., III  
1980 'Humour: A double-edged tool for today's managers'. *Academy of Management Review* 5: 357–360.
- Management Today*  
2000 'Cragrats Limited: Small organisation'. September: 12–13.
- Mangham, Ian L.  
1986 *Power and performance in organizations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Martin, Rod A., and Herbert M. Lefcourt  
1983 'Sense of humour as a moderator of the relation between stressors and moods'. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45: 1313–1324.
- Morreall, John  
1991 'Humour and work'. *Humour* 4/3: 359–373.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich  
1967 *On the genealogy of morals and ecce homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House.
- O'Quin, Karen, and Joel Aronoff  
1981 'Humour as a technique of social influence'. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 44/4: 349–357.
- Paulson, Terry L.  
1989 *Making humour work: Take your job seriously and yourself lightly*. Los Altos, CA: Crisp Publications.
- Plessner, Helmuth  
1970 *Philosophische Anthropologie*. [1941] Frankfurt: Fischer.
- Powell, Chris  
1977 'Humour as a form of social control: A deviance approach' in *It's a funny thing, humour*. Anthony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot (eds), 53–55. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred R.  
1940 'On joking relationships'. *Africa* 13: 195–210.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>Ross, Brian<br/>1989 <i>Laugh, lead and profit: Building productive workplaces with humour</i>. San Diego, CA: Arrowhead.</p> <p>Roy, Donald F.<br/>1960 'Banana time: Job satisfaction and informal interaction'. <i>Human Organization</i> 18/winter: 158–168.</p> <p>Schutz, Alfred<br/>1962 <i>Collected papers: The problem of social reality</i>, M. Natanson (ed.). The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.</p> <p>Schutz, Alfred<br/>1967 <i>The phenomenology of the social world</i>. Evanston, IL: Northwestern Press.</p> <p>Smith, Edward E., and Hayden L. White<br/>1965 'Wit, creativity, and sarcasm'. <i>Journal of Applied Psychology</i> 49: 131–134.</p> | <p>Traylor, Gary<br/>1973 'Joking in a bush camp'. <i>Human Relations</i> 26: 479–486.</p> <p>Ullian, Joseph A.<br/>1976 'Joking at work'. <i>Journal of Communication</i> 26/summer: 123–133.</p> <p>Vinton, Karen L.<br/>1989 'Humour in the workplace: It is more than telling jokes'. <i>Small Group Behavior</i> 20: 151–166.</p> <p>Yovitch, Nancy. A., J. Alexander Dale, and Mary A. Hudak<br/>1990 'Benefits of humour in reduction of threat-induced anxiety'. <i>Psychological Reports</i> 66: 51–58.</p> |
|---|--|

---

**Robert Westwood** Robert Westwood is Reader in Organization Studies at the UQ Business School. He was educated in the UK, receiving a PhD from Bath University. He has worked in the Asia-Pacific region since the mid-1980s. He has published widely in the areas of comparative and cross-cultural management and in various aspects of organization theory. His latest book was *Debating Organisation Point/Counterpoint in Organisation Studies* edited with S. Clegg and published by Blackwell in 2003. He is Associate Editor of *Culture and Organisation* and on the board of three other journals. He is currently working on projects further related to humour and organization, on the representation of organization in popular culture, and postcolonial analysis of comparative management. Additional research interests include the meaning and experience of work, gender, and language–power relations.  
*Address:* UQ Business School, University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD 4072, Australia.  
*E-mail:* b.westwood@business.uq.edu.au