

**UNIVERZA V LJUBLJANI**

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**HELENA POPOVIĆ**

**AUDIENCE, TEXT AND CONTEXT: TELEVISION COMEDY AND  
SOCIAL CRITIQUE**

**(OBČINSTVO, TEKST IN KONTEKST: TELEVIZIJSKA KOMEDIJA IN  
DRUŽBENA KRITIKA)**

**DOKTORSKA DISERTACIJA**

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**Helena Popović**

**Mentorica: red. prof. dr. Breda Luthar**

**Audience, Text and Context: Television Comedy and Social Critique**

**Občinstvo, tekst in kontekst: televizijska komedija in družbena  
kritika**

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## Abstract

This research sets out to explore the social reception of a controversial television comedy series in a comparative perspective including Croatia and the United Kingdom (UK). The research is framed within media theory on the text-audience relationship that has moved from the 'old' to a 'new' paradigm which includes different visions of the power of the text and audiences as well as different visions on how to research this area. Setting out with the assumption that a cultural product never stands alone, but rather that it refers to previous texts and is multiplied in the extra-textual environment, this new paradigm argues that the process of meaning-making can only be located in the more complex connections between texts, audiences and context of encoding and decoding. Following the reception theory's assumption that interpretation and the negotiation of meaning is always social, I attempt to locate the ways that meaning is produced and to identify which maps of meaning emerge with regards to comedy with all its generic specificities. The social context within which these maps of meaning are formed is important because it fosters some interpretive repertoires while rejecting others, and thus reveals what types of ideas are dominant in a specific socio-cultural context. Thus, the aim of the research is to explore the reception of television comedy, framed within the dispute between the 'old' and 'new' paradigm, in order to understand how the meaning-making processes evolve. I argue that although the text provides clues for its reading, meaning-making is socially determined: the broader socio-cultural context provides the frames that guide what a text means for the audiences. In addition, although the 'new' paradigm has shed important light on the text-audience relationship, the 'old' paradigm has not yet been completely exhausted in the assessment of the relationship between the text and audiences.

Setting out with the assumption that a cultural product never stands alone, but rather that it refers to previous texts and is multiplied in the extra-textual environment, I have, as indicated in the title of my thesis, organized the study of social reception of this ambiguous, controversial text into three interconnected parts: the text/genre, the extra-textual environment (including academic and newspaper articles), and an exploration of the interpretive community that likes this type of text.

In the first part, I consider the text. I focus on *Da Ali G Show*, created by Sacha Baron Cohen, which is (based on my own reading) a critical commentary. In addition to the fact that all popular texts are useful for understanding everyday life and the construction of meaning, creation of identity and community in a particular culture – this type of provocative comedy

and its broader reception also reveals the boundaries of what can and should be said in public, as well as what counts as civilized and tasteful in contemporary society. This is particularly interesting since comedy and humour in general is an area in which tolerance of the blunt and the outspoken is more acceptable than in most spheres of life, revealing the nitty-gritty of social life – the acceptable and its transgression. Even if sensitive themes provoke reaction and constantly balance on the border of (un)acceptable utterance, it is true that comedy, in the last two decades, carries a more overt ‘ruthlessness’, perhaps as a negative reflection of the normative condescension that has emerged with the political correctness debate.

The second part is the analysis of the extra-textual environment. This includes academic articles, and newspaper articles mainly written by professional journalists and critics located in UK and Croatia.

The academic articles mainly originate from the British, Canadian and American academic community. Three discourses were found, the most dominant one being the *identity and political correctness* discourse - linked to the interplay between powerful and subordinated identities, in which the one arguing in favour of the text claimed that it subverts stable categories and initiates discussion and self-criticism while the opponents argued that it perpetuates stereotypes and is politically incorrect, harmful and offensive. However the ‘victims’ of Cohen’s comedy were differently defined: Black, Eastern Europeans, Kazakhstan, Muslims. The other discourse that appeared was the *discourse on cultural competence* – here the conventions and communicative strategies of the text were put forward as the factors creating ambiguity. The underlying assumption of this discourse is that the text is a repository of meaning but that because of its deliberately confusing communicative strategies the audiences might not recognize the preferred meaning, which is social commentary. The third one was labelled the *postmodern ‘diagnosis’* of contemporary cultures - that in line with one of its main features – distance, didn’t carry any particular position, *pros or cons* of the text, but immersed it in the context of signifiers such as hyper-reality, remediation, post-irony, deconstruction, camp, narcissism etc.

The analysis of the newspaper articles in the UK and Croatia that referred to the text showed that in both contexts parallels were drawn to previous work and inter-textual references were frequently made in order to make sense of the text. Also two types of discourse dominated the extra-textual field in the evaluation of the show: Meaning - the issue of whether it was offensive or not – which was related to power and identity and the potential social consequences of it. In this respect the identity of the author (Cohen) was frequently put

forward; and Product - the role of marketing campaigns, popularization and the media industry, i.e. in a world dominated by media products more aggressively than ever.

Within these two contexts, there were substantial differences: while the UK articles were predominantly concerned with race framed within the context of multiculturalism and respect for other identity groups. The Croatian articles were immersed in a nation state discourse that either focused on geopolitics in which countries of Eastern Europe (including Croatia) sharing a socialist past were viewed as powerless compared to the power of the West, or on the holiness of the nation and nation-state in general, in which scorning this was not considered appropriate.

The research on the actual readers was conducted through interviews carried out in London and Zagreb. The audience was conceptualized as an interpretive community built on shared preference for the show. The research showed that the broader social context was important in shaping the meaning that the show had for the readers. There was an obvious difference in the position the text itself had in these respective communities. This was most notable in the way the readers constructed themselves as audiences. The UK interpretive community constructed the audience in relation to socio-demographics, of which age was the most important one, followed by gender (more male) and class (mostly middle class). It was basically measured against their own position, and linked to the author (Cohen) and the way he was embedded in the social structure – as male, young, middle class, white. Since the show was very popular in the UK, it was almost obligatory to watch it, especially among the young people, as a way of being trendy. The Croatian interpretive community defined the audience as a small niche, a minority (which they too formed a part of), constructed through specific traits that were seen as the opposite of the Croatian mainstream: being urban, English speaking, modern, liberal, unconventional, open-minded, knowledgeable etc. This reflects the marginal position the text had in Croatia, viewed by a small niche that considered themselves to be alternative to the Croatian mainstream.

The way the interviewees talked about the show revealed two totally different discourses within the respective cultural settings. The UK interpretive community engaged in a completely clear-cut politically correct, ‘civilized’ discourse; in the Croatian interpretive community, a politically incorrect discourse was dominant. The majority of the Croatian interpretive community explicitly expressed negative attitudes towards gays, Americans, Jews, Croats, human kind in general, Blacks, Eastern Europeans etc. This was also reflected in their decoding of the show. In the UK interpretive community mechanisms were found in the process

of meaning-making which enabled one to appreciate the show and still remain within a 'civilized' discourse. This 'window' was provided by the ambiguous communicative strategies. It was seen as exposing hidden prejudices towards marginalized groups, but also as being a welcome provocation in order to open up debates on the issues of identity and exclusion in Britain that seemed to be suppressed by the politically correct discourse. The mechanisms visible in the UK interpretive community were absent in the Croatian interpretive community, since there was no sense of a violation of the norm if one engaged in a politically incorrect discourse. The appeal of the text for the Croatian interpretive community seemed to lie in the already mentioned all-inclusive scolding that was in accordance with a somewhat cynical worldview of the Croatian interpretive community. However, it was also due to its subversion of the superior image of the West which showed that the supposedly inclusive, civilized, politically correct conduct of the West was fallacious.

Finally, framed within media theory, the findings suggest that the meaning-making process is shaped by the social context. The way a text is interpreted is always in relation to the broader systems of signification. External agencies, such as dominant ideologies, institutions and values that circulate in the discursive environment guide the way a text is read. These external agencies determine both the way a text is encoded as well as decoded. Together, the interconnectedness of these parameters is what shapes the way texts are read. This is what limits the possible decodings within a specific historical context, and it is also what enables one to draw conclusions about the modes of decoding that are contextually not legitimate.

This research also shows that the text is frequently viewed as powerful. It is seen as a repository of meaning, reflected in the frequently expressed fear that the text will be 'misread' by the audiences. It is also reflected in the discussions which imply that the text influences the audience – regardless whether it does so in a positive or negative manner. The identity of the author and his intention as viewed by the reader is quite important – at least when comedy and humour are concerned – since it guides the process of decoding and evaluating the comedy. However, this might be specific to comedy and more generally to humour – especially if it balances on the border of what is considered to be a socially acceptable utterance. Last but not least, the constraints caused by structural positions are still visible in the consumption practices and meaning-making. All this indicates that the old paradigm might not have been exhausted yet in the assessment of the complex relationship between the text, audiences and context.

**Key words:** audiences, old and new paradigm, edge comedy, textual event, decoding

## Povzetek

Namen raziskave je raziskati družbeni sprejem spornih oddaj televizijske komedije v primerjalni perspektivi med Hrvaško in Veliko Britanijo. Raziskava odnosa besedilo-občinstvo je uokvirjena znotraj teorije medijev, ki se je preselila iz "stare" v "novo" paradigmo ter vključuje različne vizije moči besedila in občinstva, kakor tudi različne vizije o tem kako raziskovati to področje. Domneva, da kulturni izdelek nikoli ne stoji sam, ampak se nanaša na prejšnja besedila in se množi v zunaj besedilno okolje, pomeni da se proces ustvarjanja pomena nahaja le v bolj zapletenimi povezavami med besedili, občinstvi ter v kontekstu kodiranja in dekodiranja. V skladu z domnevo recepcijske teorije, da je razlaga in pogajanje o pomenu vedno družbeno, sem poskušala določiti, kako je pomen proizveden in kakšni zemljevidi pomena se pojavljajo v zvezi s komedijo z vsemi njenimi generičnimi posebnostmi.

Družbeni kontekst, v katerem so omenjeni zemljevidi pomena nastali, je pomemben, ker pospešuje nekaj interpretativnih repertoarjev ter zavrača druge in s tem pokaže, katere vrste idej prevladujejo v določenem družbeno-kulturnem kontekstu. Na ta način je namen raziskave raziskati sprejem televizijske komedije postavljene v okvir med "staro" in "novo" paradigmo, da bi razumeli, kako se razvijajo procesi ustvarjanja pomena. Čeprav besedilo zagotavlja namige za njegovo branje, je ustvarjanje pomena družbeno določeno v širšem družbeno-kulturnem okolju in določa kontekste, ki napeljujejo k pomenu besedila za občinstvo. Poleg tega, čeprav je "nova" paradigma na novo osvetlila odnos besedilom-občinstvom, "stara" paradigma še ni povsem izčrpana pri presoji odnosa med besedilom in občinstvom. To bo ponazorjeno s primerom televizijske komedije *Da Ali G Show* in njenega sprejema v dveh različnih družbeno-kulturnimi kontekstih – Veliki Britaniji in Hrvaški.

Izhajajoč iz predpostavke, da kulturni proizvod nikoli ne stoji sam, ampak da se sklicuje na prejšnja besedila in se množi v zunaj besedilno okolje, sem se, kot je navedeno v naslovu moje disertacije, odločila strukturirati preučevanje socialnega sprejema tega dvoumnega, kontroverznega teksta v treh med seboj povezanih delih: tekst/žanr, zunaj besedilno okolje (vključno z akademskimi in časopisnimi članki) in raziskovanje interpretativnih skupnosti, ki jim je všeč ta vrsta besedila. Raziskava vključuje tri med seboj povezane dele, ki tvorijo "tekstualni dogodek" kot to opredeljuje Couldry (2000): raziskovanje določenega besedila, diskurze, ki krožijo okoli besedila v zunaj besedilnemu okolju, in dejanske bralce (Couldry, 2000: 83-87).

Podzvrst televizijskih komedij, ki jih uporabljam v študiji, so robne komedije, ki uporabljajo surov črni humor, nimajo običajnih vrednot, strmoglavljajo avtoriteto, uporabljajo



"slab okus", so proti moralnemu varovanju, ki opredeljuje "zdravje" družbe in so "politično nekorektne". Prav tako so satirične kar pomeni, da izražajo družbeni komentar. Vendar imajo jasno izraženo dvoumnost, saj angažirajo ironijo in parodijo kot komunikativni strategiji. Ker provocirajo, so na meji sprejemljivega in nesprejemljivega, s čem se začne razprava o njihovi primernosti. Svoj sporni status besedilo, ki me zanima v tej raziskavi, dolguje "politično nekorektnemu jeziku", ki je pomemben element zahodne civilizacije danes in je rezultat samorefleksivnega diskurza, ki je nastal znotraj Zahoda – politična korektnost. To spominja na koncept "civiliziranosti", na nov način in v novem kontekstu. Biti "politično korekten" je v sodobnih družbah pomembna lastnost, pomeni "biti civiliziran", čeprav je izraz redko sporen in zato tako pogosto uporabljen. Lahko bi rekli, da je "politična korektnost" trajna razsežnost vsake družbe, če je le-ta opredeljena do tabujev, ki naj ne bi bili izraženi, ali kot pozicije/svetovni nazori, ki so kaznovani s strani politične oblasti in pravno preganjani. Vendar pa menim, da je politična korektnost nov pojav, posebna oblika samocenzure do katere je prišlo z pritiskom, ki ga je razvila zgornja plast zahodnih družb. To je oblika samorefleksivne kritike, ki je uvedla občutljivost v jeziku, še posebej povezano z manj močnimi, podrejenimi skupinami, med katerima so nekatere bile ustanovljene kot oblike novih kolektivnosti v šestdesetih in sedemdesetih letih. Zaradi dejstva, da robna komedija napada to dimenzijo – "biti civiliziran" – se poraja polemika. To povzroča nezadovoljstvo v delu občinstva, medtem ko drugi odobravajo njen obstoj.

Oglaševanje, plakati, fanzini, spletne strani, članki, uvodniki, intervjuji in akademsko pisanje, vse prispeva k sistemu označevanja. Vendar pa strukturni položaj različnih akterjev ima pomembno vlogo v procesih označevanja. Obstaja neravnovesje pri opredeljevanju, ocenjevanju in vrednotenju različnih družbenih pojavov med tistimi, ki imajo ali nimajo moči. Delitve moči v smislu legitimne oblasti in dostopi do različnih komunikacijskih kanalov so vidni v razdelitvi med institucionalizirano proizvodnjo (kot je medijska industrija, akademske institucije) in individualno proizvodnjo (spletne klepetalnice, YouTube, itn.). Odločila sem se, da raziskujem institucionalizirano proizvodnjo (strokovni in časopisni članki) v zunaj besedilnem okolju, kot primere močnejših formacij pri širjenju pomena.

Analiza akademskih člankov napisanih o tekstu je pokazala, da je tekst neločljivo povezan s publiko. "Identiteta in PC diskurz" in "diskurz kulturne kompetence" sta bila zainteresirana za medijske učinke: kako naj bi določeno besedilo vplivalo na občinstvo in kakšne posledice bi to lahko imelo za družbo kot celoto. Pozitivni vidiki možnih vplivov so bili ustvarjanje samokritičnega občinstva, ki prevprašuje vprašanja identitet in je sposobno ter

pripravljeno razpreti družbene tabuje in razpravljati o njih. Kar zadeva negativne vidike, gre za ohranjanje stereotipov, dodatno zaviranje marginaliziranih, revnih in žalitev različnih skupin ali posameznikov. Oba položaja dajeta veliko moči besedilu. Drugače od njiju pa je tretji diskurz – "postmoderna diagnoza", že vključen pri ocenjevanju razmer sodobne družbe in medijskega prostora.

Časopisni članki, ki so jih napisali novinarji in kritiki, so del medijske industrije produkcije besedil. Čeprav je medijska raziskava odnosa besedila in občinstva odmaknjena od vprašanj o avtorju in njegovem namenu, kot manj pomembnemu pri določanju smisla besedila za bralce, novinarski izdelki kažejo, da je avtor pomemben v smislu procesa odločanja, zlasti v kontekstu humorja. Identiteta (razredna, etnična, narodnostna, starostna in spolna) avtorja in zaznani namen sta bila pomembna mehanizma pri presojanju in vrednotenju primernosti Cohenove komedije, kar je bilo razvidno v pogostokrat omenjenih informacijah o Cohenovom ozadju – skupni označevalci, ki so se ponavljali skoraj vedno v vsakem članku so bila dejstva, da je bil izobražen na Cambridgeu ter, da je Žid iz meščanskega okolja. Razlika med hrvaškim in britanskim tiskom je bila predvsem v dejstvu, da se britanski tisk osredotočil na rasno vprašanje, medtem ko je bil hrvaški predvsem obrnjen na vprašanje odnosa med Cohenom/alias Boratom in Kazahstanom kot nekdanjo socialistično državo. Vsaka družba razlaga in poudarja oznake, ki so bolj povezane z njenim vsakdanjim življenjem – na Hrvaškem so to novoustanovljena nacionalna država in podobnosti s Kazahstanom glede nedavnega padca socializma, kar naredi bližnjo izkušnjo razvidno v časopisnih zapisih kot je "to bi bili lahko tudi mi". Velika Britanija – na drugi strani – ima številne etnične identitete, ki so del britanske kulture in reprezentirajo problem izključevanja in vključevanja.

Raziskava občinstva je pokazala, da je bil širši družbeni kontekst pomemben pri oblikovanju pomenov, ki jih je oddaja imela za bralce. V tem je bila očitna razlika v položaju samega besedila v zadevnih skupnostih. To je bilo najbolj opazno v načinu, kako so bralci sami sebe gradili kot občinstvo. Britanska interpretativna skupnost je zgradila občinstvo glede na socialno-demografsko sliko, pri čem je bila starost najpomembnejša, potem sledijo spol (več moških) in razred (predvsem srednji razred). To je v bistvu merilo glede na svoj položaj in povezovanje z avtorjem (Cohen) ter načinom kako je on vgrajen v družbeno strukturo: kot moški, mlad, pripadnik srednjega razreda, belec. Ker je oddaja bila zelo priljubljena v Veliki Britaniji, jo je bilo skoraj obvezno gledati, zlasti za mlade, kot način, kako biti v trendu. Hrvaška interpretativna skupnost je opredelila občinstvo kot majhno nišo, manjšino (oni so tudi bili del le-te), vzpostavljeno s pomočjo posebnih lastnosti, ki so bile videti kot nasprotje

hrvaškemu *mainstreamu*: urbano, angleško govoreče, moderno, liberalno, nekonvencionalno, odprto, z vednostjo, itn. To odraža obrobni položaj besedila na Hrvaškem, opazovano s strani majhne niše, ki sebe definira kot alternativo hrvaškemu *mainstreamu*.

Način kako so anketiranci govorili o oddaji razkriva dva popolnoma različna diskurza znotraj posameznih kulturnih okoljih. Britanska interpretativna skupnost izvaja popolnoma jasen tip "politično korektnega" diskurza; v hrvaški interpretativni skupnosti prevladuje politično nekorekten diskurz. Večina je izrazila izrazito negativen odnos do homoseksualcev, Američanov, Židov, Hrvatov, človeške vrste na splošno, črncev, vzhodnih Evropejcev, itn. To se je odrazilo tudi v njihovem dekodiranju oddaje. V Veliki Britaniji so mehanizmi interpretativne skupnosti bili na voljo v procesu ustvarjanja pomena, kar ji je omogočilo, da ceni oddajo in še vedno ostane znotraj civiliziranega diskurza. To je bilo omogočeno s strategijami dvoumnih sporazumevanj. V hrvaški interpretativni skupnosti so pa ti mehanizmi bili odsotni, ker ni bilo nobenega občutka za kršitev norm, če nekdo opravlja politično nekorekten, neciviliziran diskurz.

Končno, ugotovitve znotraj ovira teorije medijev kažejo, da je proces ustvarjanja pomena oblikovan z družbenim kontekstom. Način interpretacije besedila je vedno v zvezi s širšimi sistemi označevanja, zunanjimi dejavniki kot so prevladujoče ideologije, inštitucije in vrednote, ki krožijo v diskurzivnem okolju in nakazujejo pot branja besedila. Ti zunanji dejavniki določajo tako način kodiranja besedila kakor tudi njegovega dekodiranja. Skupna povezanost teh parametrov je tisto, kar določa način branja besedil. To je tisto, kar omejuje možnosti dekodiranja znotraj posebnega zgodovinskega konteksta in to je tudi tisto, kar omogoča komu, da oblikuje zaključke o načinih dekodiranja, ki kontekstualno niso legitimni. Ta raziskava kaže, da je besedilo pogosto obravnavano kot močno. Videno je kot odlagališče pomena, kar se odraža v strahu, da bo besedilo "napačno prebrano" s strani občinstva ter, da vpliva na publiko v pozitivnem ali negativnem smislu. Poleg tega sta identiteta avtorja in njegov namen, kot ju dojema bralec, zelo pomembna – vsaj ko gre za komedijo in humor – ker to usmerja proces dekodiranja in ocenjevanja komedije. Vendar pa je to lahko specifičnost komedije in bolj splošno humorja. Na koncu, vendar nič manj pomembno, zadržanosti zaradi strukturnega položaja so še danes vidne v praksah potrošnje in ustvarjanja pomena, kot je bilo ponazorjeno na več primerih v tekstu. To nakazuje, da stare paradigme morda niti niso še izčrpane v presoji zapletenih odnosov med besedilom, občinstvom in kontekstom.

**Key words:** občinstvo, stara in nova paradigma, robna komedija, tekstualni dogodek, dekodiranje

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## 1. Introduction

This research sets out to explore the social reception of a controversial television comedy series in a comparative perspective including Croatia and the United Kingdom (UK). The research is framed within media theory on the text-audience relationship that has moved from the ‘old’ to a ‘new’ paradigm which includes different visions of the power of the text and audiences as well as different visions on how to research this area. Setting out with the assumption that a cultural product never stands alone, but rather that it refers to previous texts and is multiplied in the extra-textual environment, this new paradigm argues that the process of meaning-making can only be located in the more complex connections between texts, audiences and context of encoding and decoding (Hall 1973). Following the reception theory’s assumption that interpretation and the negotiation of meaning is always social, I attempt to locate the ways that meaning is produced and to identify which maps of meaning emerge with regards to comedy with all its generic specificities. The social context within which these maps of meaning are formed is important because it fosters some interpretive repertoires while rejecting others, and thus reveals what types of ideas are dominant in a specific socio-cultural context. Thus, the aim of the research is to explore the reception of television comedy, framed within the dispute between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ paradigm, in order to understand how the meaning-making processes evolve. I argue that although the text provides clues for its reading, meaning-making is socially determined: the broader socio-cultural context provides the frames that guide what a text means for the audiences. In addition, although the ‘new’ paradigm has shed important light on the text-audience relationship, the ‘old’ paradigm has not yet been completely exhausted in the assessment of the relationship between the text and audiences. This will be exemplified using the case of the television comedy *Da Ali G Show* and its reception in two different socio-cultural contexts – the UK and Croatia.

Research on the text-audience relationship within media and cultural studies has to a great extent been informed by Stuart Hall’s (1973) Encoding-Decoding model which appeared as a critique of the then dominant linear communication model. Hall offered a more complex view of the process of communication treated as a complex structure of relations in which a “message structured in dominance” did not necessarily result in uniformed decoding which would be in accordance with the encoder’s preferred meaning, thus its newness was that it allowed for more complex perspectives on decoding strategies determined by positions in the social structure but also by social discourses. It has been used both to address popular fiction

(Jhally and Lewis 1992) as well as factual genres (Morley 1980), and represented a turn in the way media audiences were theorized and researched in relation to text. However, this focus on meaning-making related to ideology and resistance of subaltern groups was soon to be replaced by issues of pleasure and carnival, which contributed to the overall idea of audiences as heterogeneous interpretive communities, with an active and potentially resistive position in relation to popular texts.

The move from the issue of social change or the field of politics towards pleasure has been both praised as a step forward in realising other dimensions of popular texts that are crucial in explaining its nature, but it has also been rejected as a retreat from an emancipatory agenda that was the most important dimension in researching the field. Even though there is no consensus about how to research this complex field, the developments in researching the text-audience relationship in the last two decades imply several important changes of perspective, and it can therefore be argued that there has been a move from 'old' to 'new' paradigm.

Put simply, the first shift concerns the way audiences are conceptualised in terms of power ascribed to them in the decoding process. Instead of viewing the audiences constrained by structural position (class most notably) the audiences are viewed as powerful and active – capable of subverting the intentions of the encoders (Fiske 1987; Ang 1985; Joke Hermes 2005). This shift from the idea that audiences are constrained by structure towards the idea of active audiences capable of subversion and resistance is closely connected to the concept of 'cultural competence' (Bourdieu 1984). In the 'old' paradigm, cultural competence refers to a type of knowledge transferred through the school system and the academy (Bourdieu 1984) while the new perspective on cultural competence refers to the competence needed in relation to popular culture text as 'untutored' (Bennett 2007) and, as such, unconnected to formal, institutional knowledge, but rather to any type of knowledge acquired by lived experience of various groups.

The second shift in the study of the text-audience relationship involves the 'place' where meaning resides. In this respect, there has been a move from researching the text as a repository of meaning, without references to audiences, which implies that the text has an objective essence, towards the perspective that focuses on audiences only and argues that a text does not exist outside the interpretation of the readers. This shift also implies a move from the importance of authorial intention as a superior reading towards a focus on what is relevant for

the decoder. It also implies that modes of decoding are not limited – as it used to be claimed within the ‘old’ paradigm – but infinite, as it is claimed in the ‘new’ one.

While the above stated puzzles will be tested without a previously explicated position regarding the 'old' or 'new' paradigm, two important changes in researching the text-audience relationship have been embraced and applied in this study as a starting point. The first one is that of the need to research the context – the more complex network in which a text reproduces itself, since the context in which the encoding and decoding (Hall 1973) occurs is important in determining meaning. This implies that a text never stands alone: instead, it is immersed in complex reading relations that cannot be viewed outside the web of texts that the author, institutions, industries and audiences are immersed in. Couldry (2000) argues that the text is still important, but that its analysis has to be supplemented with the analysis of the wider textual environment. This means that in the research of the text and the audiences it is no longer sufficient to research the text as a closed unit and the audiences as interpreters, but that it has to include researching the textual event (Couldry 2000; Klinger 1994) This study embraces Couldry's suggestion that researching the textual events should include two levels of research: the study of a particular text and its features (genre, plot, characters...), the industry strategies and discourses circulating about the text; and the way it is read by actual readers.

Couldry's latter suggestion refers to the way audiences are conceptualized. In the development of media theory, the audiences have been conceptualized in various ways, as masses (class), groups, market niches, according to sociodemographic variables etc. Audiences were viewed as objective formations that could be assessed through empirical research, which has been rejected in the ‘new paradigm’ as a construct created by academics, the industry and other interested parties. In this research, following Morley's (1997) argument, audiences are viewed as existing outside discourses, but as knowable only through discourses. Thus, the focus is on the way the audiences discursively construct their engagement with the text. Discourse is defined as a body of “language use as a form of social practice” that reproduces hierarchies of power through language and contributes to the construction of social identities, social relationships, systems of knowledge and belief, and subject positions (Fairclough 1995), and as different from ‘utterance’ that is used in this study as indicating an immediate speech act that can be linked to the individual level and bound by time and space.

Another change in the way audiences are conceptualized implies a break with the usage of traditional ways in which audiences were constructed according to who they are in terms of sociodemographics or class, towards conceptualizing audiences according to what they do (Fiske 1994). In this research, audiences are conceptualized as interpretive communities that are, according to Stanley Fish (1980), defined as communities whose interpretative practices are guided by shared cultural codes. Fish points out that the process of meaning-making is primarily a social act, in which interpretation is constantly negotiated. Thus, the interpretive communities in this study are constructed according to their shared attitude towards the text (researching fans and fandom is one example of conceptualizing an audience as a community with a shared attitude toward a text). In my writing I will refer to audiences, readers and decoders as synonyms, although 'audiences' as a term stems from mainstream analysis of audiences within social sciences, readers are derived from literary theory, while decoders are linked to Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model.

In order to assess the shared cultural codes of the interpretive community (IC), I have situated the research in two settings – the UK and Croatia – in order to delimit the socio-cultural context. In this respect I find Benedict Anderson's (1991) vision of a nation as an 'imagined community' useful because he conceptualizes it as a social construct in which the members of the community 'imagine' their belonging to the community through a unified field of communication, a standardized language that represents the language of authority, and a sense of commonly shared and experienced social world. This understanding of a community has been eroded by changes in media technology that enable 'global cultural flows' (Appadurai 1990) and other globalising unifiers that have diminished the role of the nation-state, while the supra-national and sub-national formations have gained more attention. Even if this erosion has triggered debates whether it is supportable that the nation and its political organization – the state – as communities remain in the centre of research, they are here given a relevant status because of the specificities of the genre that I consider in this research – namely, comedy and humour. Funny stories, jokes about other nationalities (usually the 'neighbouring other' (the Irish for the British, Norwegians for the Swedish, Bosnians for Croats etc.) are commonplace in defining ourselves in relation to others, and for the creation of a sense of identity. Language is important for an understanding of the subtleties of humour. In addition, themes and topics of ridicule, satire, jokes and the like are often linked to public persons, national politics, and other



issues of public concern that require ‘inside’ information in order to be understood, let alone appreciated as a successful joke.

The two imagined communities I am focusing on are Croatia and the UK, two European nations that are quite diverse in terms of history, social and political organization, economic strength, and structural position in the world order: UK being a part of the West and Croatia being a part of the East. The division of the world in terms of power relations on a global scale has been pushed forward in numerous theories with different approaches, from Immanuel Wallerstein’s (1986) economic world-system theory of the interrelated Core, Semi-periphery (among other states also Eastern Europe) and the Periphery; Edward Said’s (1978) culturalist approach to the power relations between the Occident and the Orient; Samuel Huntington’s (1997) culturally exclusive theory of the ‘clash o civilizations’ based on cultural specificities, most notably religion; Norbert Elias’s (1994) sociological approach to the civilizing process by which the West ‘civilized’ other parts of the world through colonization processes which in turn led to the development of the western self-awareness and assumption of supremacy relating to behaviour, science and art. Although the world order and power relations have changed in the last few decades, the West (the main focus here is on West Europe and the USA) still dominates the discourses on what is ‘civilized’ and what is not. The common denominators that perpetuate the notion of a common civilization of the West as a large-scale cultural formation normatively include democracy as a political system, liberal market economy, commitment to human rights, multiculturalism, freedom of speech, definitions of deviance and crime etc. Even though this implies looking at commonalities while ignoring the vast differences that are present within this cultural formation, it is useful for the purpose of outlining the power relations between the West (that UK forms a part of), and the East (that Croatian forms a part of). The East is hence narrowed down to the former Eastern block, or the region that implemented socialism as a political system during the Cold War. Even though the political system formally collapsed in 1989, and despite the fact that a considerable part of the Eastern block embraced the values of the West manifested in the integration processes of the European union, the division between East as ‘followers’ and West as ‘leaders’ still serves as a platform of distinction.

Some of the differences between the East and West that are important for this study, because they sketch out the context within which cultural texts are encoded and decoded, include the assumption that the West is encompassed by a long tradition of freedom of speech, which

implies that the state should not engage in any form of censorship. The role of the state is, in this sense, smaller in western democracies, not only as a result of the bygone Cold War split, in which the fear of statism (or etatism) present in the eastern block, was constant, but also because of the domination of the free market ideology, in which the limitation of individual action is condemned, especially if it comes from the state. Instead of 'external' forces determining our actions, there is a positive emphasis on self-regulation and self-reflexive actions that lie in the core of individualism. One important form of self-censorship emerged with the political correctness debate. The latter emerged as a result of the New Left movements in the sixties, a period in which identity politics, affirmative action and multiculturalism swept across the West, processes in which the previously powerless and marginalized groups demanded their right for recognition as relevant social actors. At the heart of this idea was the attempt to point at deep inequalities and firm hierarchies in the West, embedded in language. With the recognition of these inequalities and the attempt to change them, it was necessary to change the conceptual tools in usage. Political correctness or 'inclusive language' is today one important element of being 'civilized' in the West today.

In stark contrast to this, post-socialist states have a tradition of state regulation in which forms of censorship as legitimate, something that has, in contemporary societies, been blended with new values of liberal democracy and free market. This results in frequent confusion on what is acceptable and desirable and what is not, especially coming from the political establishment. Typical for Croatia of the 90ies, in the period of transition from censorship and authoritarian regime towards political pluralism, the 'freedom of speech' argument, intrinsic to liberal democracies, was used to tolerate and often legitimise public expressions of hatred and extreme nationalism. However, this argument was only used when an utterance was in harmony with the political ideology of the regime. On the other hand, path dependency related to censorship in former Yugoslavia, whose legal manifestation is visible in Article 133 subsumed under the term "verbal delict" – a period in which critical thought was not well taken – is still traceable in some forms in contemporary Croatia. This is particularly visible in the area of politics, in which critique of the establishment or powerful social groups – either in 'serious' or satirical form – can still have repercussions for the critic, even though the legal framework ensures broad freedoms.

These differences and inequalities in terms of power-relations between these large-scale cultural formations (West, East), and nation-states that form a part of them (UK, Croatia) are important because they sketch out the context within which the media text in focus here was, in Hall's terminology, encoded and decoded. The text *Da Ali G Show* originated in the UK, known for a very particular type of humour, most prominently characterised by satire and black comedy. The wide popularity of British comedy is visible in the broad presence of its shows (such as Monty Python, Benny Hill, Only fools and horses, Mr Bean, Blackadder, The New Statesman, Absolutely Fabulous – to name just a few) on a global level. The text was imported into Croatia, where the television programme is based on imports and its own production; however the domestic products are not widely exported (except for a few texts exported in the region).

The success of comedy as a genre is hard to anticipate because it is quite complex. One's own language and its conceptual organization, as well as the context within which a comedy appears and refers to, enriches our understanding of it. Locally produced programmes are generally, regardless of the genre, likely to be more popular, even though specific genres with themes such as violence and crime or pornography travel more successfully into other cultures. In contrast, comedy is quite specific in that it is "produced from the matter of dominant cultural assumptions and commonplaces" (Stott 2005, 8) and relies on implicit understandings of cultural codes. For this reason it is more likely to be successful if locally produced. However, the 'success' does not necessarily imply laughter or amusement (this is much more complex) but it does imply that the communication codes are familiar, and that one understand the intention of a joke. Interestingly, there are texts that transgress localities and successfully migrate on a global level since they manage to speak to the experience of diverse social groups from very different cultural backgrounds, even though their reception and appropriation on a local level can be completely different from case to case.

I am interested in a specific type of comedy: comedy that is critically engaged. As I decoded it, it attempts to make a 'serious' statement by using a form that is commonly referred to as trivial, banal or escapist and/or funny; it lies within the field of entertainment that supposedly suspends, or in the best case diminishes, the possibility to cope with 'serious' issues. Besides the fact that all popular texts are useful for an understanding of everyday life and the construction of meaning, creation of identity and community in a particular culture – I am also

interested in this area because this type of provocative comedy and its broader reception also reveals the boundaries of what can and should be said in public, as well as what counts as civilized and tasteful in contemporary society. This is particularly interesting since comedy (and humour in general) is an area in which tolerance of the blunt and the outspoken is more acceptable than in most spheres of life, revealing the nitty-gritty of social existence – the acceptable and its transgression.

Viewed from a historical perspective, some topics are persistently seen as ‘sacred’ and thus not easily converted into comic material, whereas other topics go through a process of ‘desacralisation’, meaning that they no longer occupy the ‘taboo’ status. In contemporary debates a theme that seems to be particularly disturbing is the Holocaust, a historical event that clearly mark the limits of humour that cannot easily be trespassed and converted into comic material. Even if themes such as religion and sex (in contemporary debates most notably paedophilia) provoke reactions and constantly verge on the border of the (un)acceptable discourse, it is true that comedy in the last two decades carries a more overt ‘ruthlessness’, perhaps as a negative reflection of the normative condescension that emerged with the political correctness debate.

The text that I am interested in uses crude and dark humour which lacks conventional values, subverts authority, uses ‘bad taste’, and is against moral guardians that define the ‘health’ of a society; in other words, it is ‘politically incorrect’. It is also satirical, which implies that it carries a social commentary. However, since it employs irony and parody as communicative strategies, it clearly has a capacity for ambiguity. In terms of class, it is anti-establishment, and targets the elite, but it also targets society as a whole: the mainstream, the established and accepted social norms and values that are agreed upon, often taken for granted and unquestioned. These texts cannot be claimed to be political in a narrow sense of being conservative or liberal, since they rise above these splits. Instead, they tackle the underlying assumptions and norms, the deep “fundamental” dogmatic beliefs and taboos in a society, ranging from topics such as religion, race, war, political institutions, bodily functions /dysfunctions, sex, deviant behaviour...

Because they provoke, they balance on the border of the acceptable and unacceptable, initiating debates about its appropriateness. The debates evolve around the old mythical division between what is good or bad: their advocates claim that they open up debates and raise issues that would

otherwise have not been talk about and that need to be discussed, while the opponents claim that they are offensive and make fun of matters that are important and should not be subjected to scorn. This is usually followed by accusations that they are sadistic, nonsensical, infantile and distasteful, promoting hatred, violence, cruelty and anti-social behaviour. This split in the evaluation of these types of texts contributes to their controversial status, further boosted by the communicative strategies employed that make them ambiguous and further complicate the processes of meaning-making.

Setting out with the assumption that a cultural product never stands alone, but rather that it refers to previous texts and is multiplied in the extra-textual environment, I have, as indicated in the title of my thesis, organized the study of social reception of this ambiguous, controversial text into three interconnected parts: the text/genre, the extra-textual environment (including academic and newspaper articles), and an exploration of the interpretive community that likes this type of text.

My starting point is the text itself. I have chosen to research the television comedy *Da Ali G Show*, which I read as a social critique that aims to achieve something else other than to provoke mere laughter. In the analysis of the text, I have focused on the themes joked about and the way they reflect contemporary culture; the strategies employed in the text that create ambiguity; and the cultural competences possibly needed in the process of decoding.

The second part is the analysis of the extra-textual environment. This includes academic articles, and newspaper articles mainly including the writing of professional journalists and critics located in the respective imagined communities (Croatia, the UK). This part aimed at locating the discourses that evolve around this comedy and the way it was decoded in order to assess the circulation of meanings. By analysing the extra-textual environment, which serves as a field within which meanings are produced and reproduced in the public spheres, the maps of meaning structured in discourses reveal what counts as sacred and important or valuable in specific socio-cultural contexts.

Finally, the third part is the study of the audience that I assessed through semi-structured interviews with an aim of gaining a broader understanding of the following: 1. their relation to comedy as genre framed within taste hierarchies and the debate about the limits of humour, and

2. the way they read the concrete text - *Da Ali G Show* (including meaning-making and discourses on viewing practices).

The results of all three levels were then situated within media theory and the 'old' versus 'new' paradigm.

The processes of meaning-making are always more complex than it is possible to embrace in any conceptual and theoretical construction, however an extraction of one dimension and its analysis will surely contribute to the understanding of how these processes evolve. Thus, this study aims at the analysis of the social reception of a television comedy that attempts to be more than just amusement, and is provocative in that it bounces against the limits of what can be uttered in contemporary society. The specific focus is put on the modes of decoding of the ambiguous text I chose to concentrate on (*Da Ali G Show*) and the discourses that encompass its emergence and which reflect its controversial status. The modes of decoding and the discourses that emerge are located in the extra-textual environment and the interpretive community formed according to their positive evaluation of this type of cultural text. Implicitly, this positive attitude towards this text signals a more relaxed approach towards humour and what can and should be uttered in public. With this research, I intend to pin down the meaning-making processes within the complex framework of texts, audience, and context, and with this make an original contribution to media theory and research, more specifically to the disputes within the 'old' and 'new' paradigm regarding text-audience research. In addition, I hope to make a contribution to the understanding of the extremely complex nature of comedy that has, because of its complexity, been under-researched.

## **2. The text-audience relationship: from old to new paradigm**

### **2.1. Audiences: constrained or active?**

The changes in researching the text-audience relationship in media theory in the last two decades have been profound. The first shift concerns the way audiences are conceptualized in terms of power ascribed to them in the decoding process. Instead of viewing the audience as a mass constrained by structural position (class most notably) the audience is viewed as powerful and active, capable of subverting the intentions of the encoders.

The beginning of this shift can be traced back to the 70ies and the development of Cultural Studies in the UK at the time. It was to a great extent been influenced by Stuart Hall's (1973) Encoding-Decoding Model which appeared as a critique of the then dominant Linear Communication Model. By drawing on concepts deriving from Marxism, such as ideology (Althusser), class and material production, Hall offered a more complex view of the process of communication, treated as a complex structure of relations in which a “message structured in dominance” did not necessarily result in uniformed decoding which would be in accordance with the encoders' preferred meaning.

This was an insight which shed new light on the field of media studies: until then the main focus was on the power of media text or the ‘sender’ (either in the context of ‘successful communication’ or in the context of media propaganda and manipulation), while the audiences were viewed as passive ‘receivers’ of the message. The idea that any text is ‘open’ to various interpretations and that decoding does not necessarily match the encoding was new in the 70ies.

Stuart Hall related different patterns of decoding to class position. This model<sup>1</sup> was groundbreaking in that it realised that modes of decoding varied and did not necessarily correspond with the preferred reading of the encoder. Thus, encoding can prefer, but cannot guarantee a specific type of decoding, because the latter will depend on the maps of meaning of the decoder, which represented a step away from the idea that meaning resides in the text,

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<sup>1</sup> The work of Stuart Hall has been important in the incorporation of concepts and ideas emerging from reader-response theories as part of media and cultural studies. Hall's (1973) Encoding-Decoding model is a theoretical framework which has been widely used in order to understand how audiences make sense of specific television texts in relation to ideology. Hall's model represents a turning point in the theorising of the communication process as a ‘transparent’ linear one, but it also forms part of a general trend of moving from closed to open text; from predictable to unpredictable decoding; and from the power of media text to the power of media audiences.

moving instead towards the idea that the meaning-making process is solely produced by the audience. The implication of this was that the audience was no longer viewed as uncritical masses, influenced by the text (such as within the Frankfurt school<sup>2</sup>), but rather as a social group that decoded the message in a variety of ways depending on the relevant structural position, everyday life experiences and broader social context of the group. This initiated research which attempted to establish what determined different readings, and within the Cultural Studies tradition, class was viewed as the most important determinant.. .

Hall (1973) developed a theory which sought to establish a direct link between a reading or interpretation and a relevant class position. David Morley tested this Encoding/Decoding model<sup>3</sup> in a study first conducted in 1978, *Everyday Television 'Nationwide'*, together with Charlotte Brunson. The second project was conducted by Morley, two years later in *'Nationwide' Audiences*, in which Morley explored how media output was decoded by groups with diverse social backgrounds and socio-demographic marks (more specific: race, party-political orientation, class, gender and ethnicity)<sup>4</sup>.

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2 Following the Marxist tradition, the members of the Frankfurt School - (Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin...), which first emerged at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt in 1923. - had a pessimistic view of the media audience and regarded it as representing the masses and 'cultural dopes'.

3 According to Hall any culture "imposes its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a dominant cultural order" (Hall in During 1999, 513). Thus, the discursive domains of social life are always hierarchically organised into "dominant or preferred meanings". 'Dominant meanings' are always subjected to change and we can decode something within other mappings, depending on the competence of the decoder which enforces one reading over another, but in addition "there exists a pattern of 'preferred readings'; and these have both the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized" (Hall in During 1999, 515). By building on Frank Parkin's (1971) idea of the existence of dominant, negotiated and oppositional value systems (Morley, 1980) Hall proposes three hypothetical decoding positions:

1. Dominant-hegemonic position - the message is decoded in terms of the reference code in accordance with which it has been encoded – and thus operates inside the dominant code. This position assumes that the broadcaster, even though relatively autonomous in relation to the dominant code, encodes the message in a hegemonic manner, due to the institutional position of broadcasting and the inevitable link between the defining elites and broadcasting professionals. (Hall in During 1999, 515-516)

2. Negotiated code where the viewers understand and acknowledge what has been dominantly defined as legitimate (such as global or national issues like national interests) and professionally signified, but on a 'micro' situated level invoke other rules according to local conditions ('situated logics'). This often makes the negotiated position contradictory. (Hall in During 1999, 516)

3. Oppositional code or position – the viewer understands the dominant-hegemonic discourse, but decodes in a globally (entirely?) contrary way and imposes an alternative framework of reference (resistive reading) (Hall in During 1999, 517).

4 The focused interview research showed that similar decoding was linked to similar social position; however some groups sharing the same social position decoded differently, depending on discourses and institutions which they were affiliated with (Morley 1999, 160). Class position was more important in terms of decoding issues directly linked to class and politics, consequently working classes would have more oppositional readings while middle classes had more dominant or negotiated readings. (Morley 1999, 257). In addition, the dominant and oppositional readings took into consideration different aspects of the programme in their readings: while in the dominant readings mode of address was more prominent, the oppositional readings displayed an acceptance of the mode of address (as light entertainment) but rejected



While Hall and Morley were first to identify and focus on class as a determining mode of decoding, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis later focused on racial issues in their analysis of the reception of the sitcom *The Cosby Show* (1992)<sup>5</sup>. In addition to these, another well known research project conducted by Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz (1990) focused on the soap opera<sup>6</sup> *Dallas*, and it considered ethnicity and nationality to be crucial to the formation of interpretive communities.<sup>7</sup> These are just a few examples of research that aimed at assessing various modes of decoding by focusing on specific social formations of which the most frequently used are class, ethnicity, race and gender, but also ‘old’ socio-demographic variables such as age, urban or rural setting etc.

The concept of ‘active audiences’ that evolved out of Stuart Hall’s model and the Cultural Studies tradition, implicitly includes both class relations and the relationship between preferred meaning of texts (ideology imposed in the interests of the encoder), and the subversion of its meaning conveyed by the consuming audiences (populi). Active audiences imply resistance and subversion; the rejection of hierarchies of meaning and the celebration of the creativity of the popular class. This has been pushed forward in the last two decades by scholars working within

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the ideological formulation (Morley 1999, 268). Also, while contradictions of same composition occurred within groups and between groups, this however, did not “...erase the patterns of consistency and similarity of perspectives within groups ...” (Morely 1999, 260).

5 They conducted a qualitative audience study (focus groups) in the cultural studies tradition using the Encoding-Decoding model. They first embarked on a content analysis of the text, i.e. *The Cosby Show*, a Black sitcom featuring an upper middle class family's every day life, originally broadcast in 1984. The sitcom was mainly seen as positive, since it represented black people in a progressive way. This show was the first to feature the appearance of upper middle class black people on television, which was, until then rare, so in that sense it could be seen as a positive representation of black people. However - compared to the real figures of black upward mobility - depicting blacks as upper middle class was a delusion, which is why Jhally and Lewis saw it as a step backward. The wide popularity of this sitcom was, according to the authors, due to the fact that both white and black people could relate to the program: white because they felt an alleviation “not only from fear but from responsibility” (Jhally and Lewis 1992, x); and black people because it was seen as affirmative of their representation. In addition, the characters were sophisticated in manners, but yet down to earth, which also made it easy to positively relate to them. The authors considered the social context in the USA, especially focusing on the problem of race, giving a thorough description of the affirmative action policies and the civil rights movement in the United States, and the myth of the American dream, i.e. the idea that there is an equality of opportunity in the USA which the show also promoted. In the initial phase the authors had a positive relation to the text, but concluded that the research revealed a new insidious form of racism in which Blackness was again defined as cultural inferiority -- anyone can ‘make it’, even Blacks, so long as they are hard working. However, since most of them do not succeed it means they do not try hard enough. Instead of addressing this problem within the context of structural inequalities, it maintains that it is attributable to the individual themselves. They concluded that the show promotes an ideology of capitalism in which economic success is the main aim, with America being shown as a classless society (Jhally and Lewis 1992, 133).

6 Research on the text-audience relationship informed by Stuart Hall’s (i.e. the way culturally situated audiences interpret/decode/read particular popular television texts) has to a large extent focused on the genre of soap: Sonia Livingstone (1998) on the whole genre (*East Enders*, *Coronation Street*, *Neighbours*), Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz (1990) focusing on *Dallas*, Ian Ang (1985) also researching *Dallas*, Dorothy Hobson (1982) on *Crossroads*, Buckingham (1987) on *EastEnders*.

7 Israel (including Russians, Arabs, Moroccan Jews and kibbutz members), America and Japan.

the Cultural Studies tradition such as Dorothy Hobson (1982), Janice Radway (1984), Ian Ang (1985), Joke Hermes (2005) and John Fiske (1987), John Hartley (1999)... One example of a pronounced optimism in highlighting the creativity of audiences is John Fiske, who argues that the audience creates the meaning that they want or need out of TV programmes. In his view, audience power is strong and it is capable of redirecting the meaning of the media in progressive or recalcitrant ways, partly because media content is accessible and open to divergent interpretations and also because the market pressure forces the media to connect to the social experience of people (Fiske in Curran and Morley 2006, 136-137). Audiences respond selectively to the media by drawing upon the social discourse of their everyday world. Fiske claims that popular texts are appreciated according to their functionality linked to everyday usage, and not to aesthetic criteria (learned in educational institutions and defined by the bourgeoisie), which means that there are no superior readings since it is based on relevance to the reader. For Fiske there is a substantial difference between preferred and relevant meanings – while the first ones are linked to the text and thus to the ideology and the establishment, the second ones, the relevant meanings, are what the reader produces (Fiske, 2002, 148-149). In a nutshell, the debate about the power of audiences conceptualized as active audiences is closely related to class, and the core question is whether the popular class is constrained and conquered by the producers (elite) or whether it is creative and able to subvert attempts to push forward ideological messages of interest to the privileged elite,

This shift away from the idea that audiences are constrained by structure towards the idea of active audiences capable of subversion and resistance is closely connected to the concept of ‘cultural competence’. Competence is needed in order to be able to hold an opinion in relation to a text. Competence refers to the skills involved in decoding a text. Pierre Bourdieu (1980) views cultural competence as a type of knowledge transferred through the education system. He distinguishes between legitimate dispositions and ordinary knowledge about everyday issues and claims that formal education is important even in acquiring knowledge that is not necessarily learned in school (Bourdieu 1980, 228). Bourdieu claims that cultural competence that ‘counts’ as an asset, is acquired through formal education and refers to legitimate works of art. However, in the shift from structure to agency within media and cultural studies, cultural competence is not seen as necessarily related to formal schooling but is something needed in the interpretation of any kind of text/cultural product. Tony Bennett (2007) claims that the specificity of popular texts is that they are ‘untutored’ – they are not mediated by academic

institutions which create specific types of readings of canonized texts, but are productively activated directly by the readers. (Bennett 2007, 45). From this perspective popular competence is defined as the capacity of an audience or section of an audience to deploy skills in the interpretation of a text (genre or forms are rule-governed and require skills and competences to be understood (Abercrombie and Longhurst 2007), but without any reference to structural constraints that guide the acquisition of specific knowledge. In Bourdieu's work, this exclusivity of access to different meanings is organised top-down, in a pyramid structure. This exclusivity, however, can move in both directions – as emphasised within the new paradigm. Texts can require a cultural competence that is not linked to formal, institutional knowledge, but rather to ‘street competence’ - including slang, dialect, rituals... - acquired by life experience of various groups.

## **2.2. The repository of meaning: text or audiences?**

While the text-audience relationship that included the discussion about audiences as constrained or active implied that the text had a preferred meaning which is potentially subverted by the subordinated through their everyday tactics of resistance, new developments moved from the text as a repository of meaning towards the audiences. As Jon Cruz and Justin Lewis argue “Interpretive conventions govern reception; thus authorial intent - what authors and producers of texts want to convey - matter less than the interpretive strategies readers bring to texts.” (Cruz and Lewis 1994, 6). This idea constitutes a second shift in the study of the text – audience relationship, and the moving away from the idea that the text should be analysed as having an objective essence and a superior meaning, where the author plays an important role, and where he is key to the meaning-making process adopted by the audience. This trend can be traced back to the influence of structuralism and literary studies and their related theories dealing with the text-reader relationship that emerged in the early 70ies. Within structuralism, Roland Barthes’ essay *The death of the author* (1968) was very influential. He claimed that a text cannot be viewed as a separate, coherent whole created by the author, nor will it be read in accordance to ‘authorial intention’. Instead, the text is an intersection of different discourses and it can be read in a multiplicity of ways.

Reception theory, reader-response theory or reader – response criticism are - as Robert Allen claims - all “names given to a variety of (...) works in literary studies that examine the role of the reader in understanding and deriving pleasure from literary texts. Reader-oriented criticism

starts from the belief that the meaning of a literary text does not reside in any absolute sense within the text itself.” (Allen 1992, 102).<sup>8</sup> Some concepts developed within this field, through prominent work of Umberto Eco (1979) (model reader, open text), Roman Ingarden (1971) (undetermined spots), Wolfgang Iser (1974), (the implied reader)<sup>9</sup>, Hans Robert Jauss (1978) (horizont of expectations), Stanley Fish (1980) (interpretive communities)... have all had great influence on theory and research in media studies.

Under these influences, the text-audience relationship has moved from focus on text to focus on audiences. While the text was seen as a repository of meaning without references to audiences in the mass audience theories, it has in recent developments moved towards the complete opposite. The argumentation that a text does not exist as an object at all, and should thus not be studied, has been present in various, more radical, interpretations of the text-audience relationship (Hobson 1982; Radway 1984; Ang 1985...). In *Texts, Readers, Reading Formations* (2007) Tony Bennett claims “the ‘text itself’ is challenged, there seems to be nothing to stop the total dissolution of the text into a potentially infinite series of different readings-in.” (Bennett 2007, 14).

Bennett further argues that the text has to be viewed as variable in the same way the readers are. He states as follows:

*“It is necessary to recognize that the history of reading is not one in which different readers encounter “the same text,” but one in which the text that readers encounter is already “overworked,” “overcoded,” productively activated as a result of its particular inscription within the social, material, ideological, and institutional relationships that distinguish specific reading relations. The text has no meaning effects that can be constituted outside of such reading relationships.”*

Umberto Eco (1990) points out that this move from one extreme to another, or the move from the idea that interpretation includes assessing the intended meaning of the author, (objective

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<sup>8</sup> Barbatsis Gretchen (2005), on the other hand, claims that there are two different approaches involved: 1. Reader-Oriented Approach – focusing on the production side and the way a text implicates and guides the meaning-making process of the reader; 2. Reception Analysis – focusing on the reception side and the way audience make sense of a text and construct meaning in accordance with social context (Barbatsis 2005, 271-272).

<sup>9</sup> The concept of the implied reader indicates the importance of the dispositions of the reader in the process of meaning-making, in which the reader evades the absolute control of the text, and with this, of the author (Iser 1974).

essence of text), to the idea that interpretation of text is seen as infinite are both 'epistemological fanaticism' (Eco 1990, 24).

In 'The limits of interpretation',<sup>10</sup> Eco argues against the claim that a text, separated from the author<sup>11</sup> and the concrete context of utterance, opens up an infinite range of possible decoding (Eco 1990, 2). He rejects the argument that the text is infinitely open:

Eco claims that even though we cannot assess the right interpretation, (which was the main concern of sender-message-receiver models, i.e. that of successful communication) we can certainly, based on the context, decide which interpretation is wrong.<sup>12</sup>

As he points out: "...even though the interpreters cannot decide which interpretation is the privileged one, they can agree on the fact that certain interpretations are not contextually legitimated. " (41) (...) "if it is very difficult to decide whether a given interpretation is a good one; it is, however, always possible to decide whether it is a bad one, my purpose was to say, not so much what unlimited semiosis is, but at least what it is not and cannot be". (Eco 1990, 42)

Without going into any of the extremes in the text-reader relationship, what emerges as important is the *context* of encoding and decoding. In the field of television production, as Hall points out, the practice builds on the "...already given meaning. (...) each act of signification transforms the given actualized state of all the significations already in existence." (Hall in Cruz and Lewis 1994, 260). As Hall claims:

*"...[there is] no notion of any originating moment" ... "so what the media pick up on is already a discursive universe (...) The reporter is picking up on the presignified world in order to signify it in a new way again. (...) But of course, the real world is not outside of discourse; it's*

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10 Here Eco refers back to his previous work, which was, according to him, misinterpreted.. In Eco's view the role of the interpreter has been 'overstressed' (Eco 1990, 6).

11 The separation of the author, or the marginalisation of authorial intention can prove to be problematic in interpreting comedy, due to the fact that a joke is always evaluated in relation to the speaker, i.e. whether the communicator has the right to utter the joke or not.

12 There are two cases when semiosis - which is claimed to be unlimited - is faced with something external to it - Firstly, the case of indices - when we, in the act of indication point to something and say 'this' (the extralinguistic); and secondly, - the Dynamic Object - a thought emotion, belief..."...a text can be interpreted independently of the intentions of its speaker, but we cannot deny that any text is uttered by somebody according to his/her actual intention, and this original intention was motivated by a Dynamic Object". (Eco 1990, 38-39).

*not outside of signification. It's practice and discourse like everything else is*" (Hall in Cruz and Lewis, 1994, 260-261).

Thus, reading relations cannot be viewed outside the web of texts that the author, institutions, industries and audiences are immersed in, which are relations that are all reflected in the text.

This insight has led to the importance of the context both of the encoding of a text as well as the decoding conducted by the audiences. The analysis of such a complex and 'messy' environment is much more difficult, but as Ian Ang points out, it is no longer sufficient to research cultural artefacts (film, television series etc) as a "a discrete unit of analysis"(Ang 1996, 67 in Couldry 2000, 69) created by the author, that is analysed in isolation in order to extract a particular meaning from it. Instead, a broader phenomenon, that of inter-textuality<sup>13</sup> defined by Couldry as „the dense network of interconnections between texts (...) is as important to understand, as the texts themselves. (Couldry 2000, 69)..

This does not mean that the text should not be analysed. Couldry (2000) argues that the text is still important, but that its analysis has to be supplemented with the analysis of the wider textual environment. In order to understand the text and its status in the textual environment we have to investigate the textual production and distribution (that are highly concentrated in institutions) and "the processes which tend to order how we read, what connections we make between texts, what texts we screen out, and so on" (Couldry 2000, 81). These processes are interlinked to social and ideological relations and institutions which make them complex to assess. According to Couldry, there are three main priorities for research:

1. The textual environment – that includes researching the production of meanings, the type of texts produced and circulated, and the usage of the textual resources by people.
2. Patterns of belief – researching the wider patterns of belief and their interconnectedness to the text (both in closely related area such as media production but also seemingly remote areas of social life)

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<sup>13</sup> Couldry (2000) follows Bennett and Woollacott who distinguish between intertextuality (Kristeva) which refers to references internal to a text and inter-textuality (with hyphenated spelling) which, according to Bennett and Woollacott refer to the relations between texts established as a result of reading relations (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 44–5 in Couldry 2000, 88-89).

3. Textual event – this includes two levels of research: researching particular texts and its features (genre, plot, characters...) including the industry strategies and discourses circulating about the text; and the way it is read by actual readers (Couldry 2000, 83-87).

In this way, instead of analysing the closed ‘unit’ we need to study the textual processes in which texts emerge as part of a ‘textual event’ in Janet Staiger's term (Staiger 1992, 9 in Couldry 2000, 86), which is also the approach taken in this study.

The importance of the extra-textual conditions has been outlined in a study conducted by Barbara Klinger (1994). She focuses on the meaning-making process and claims that it is neither the audience nor the text but the discursive environment in which a text exists that is crucial. She analyses melodrama as a genre, but looks at it from a historical perspective – starting from the moments of origin and moving towards contemporary reception - by giving equal importance to author, genre and ideology in order to recognize “the role external, social and historical factors play in negotiating the cultural politics of a body of films. “ (Klinger 1994, XII). She analyses Douglas Sirk as author, the role of social institutions and their discourses and ideological values in order to understand the way Sirk’s melodrama acquires meaning and the way the genre's ideological function changes under changing historical circumstances. Klinger claims that meanings are negotiated by agencies external to the text (such as academic interpretation, practices of film industry, film reviews etc.) within a particular historical landscape, which is why she is interested in the historical conditions that shape the reception as the most important factor in determining meaning. However, this does not mean that the text is free of meaning - the identity of a cultural product is:

*“...a negotiation between textual features and contextual imperatives. It is therefore contingent upon certain social and historical circumstances. This contingency does not signify a relativistic free-for-all of meaning – that any meaning “goes” at any time: to the contrary, it suggests that we attempt to specify the particular ideological function of a film by examining key moments within its historical transit”* (Klinger 1994, XIX).

In a more simple manner, but also focusing on the context that determines meaning, Fiske stresses that the creation of meaning linked to television text is a specific context and requires a flexible definition, since there are, at least, three levels of television text which trigger the

circulation of meanings: the primary television text (aired on the screen), the secondary text - the one produced by the publicity industry, (posters, promos, journalistic criticism, fan sites etc.), and the third which consists of the talk and gossip produced by the people (Fiske 1987, 85).

As Nightingale rightfully points out, the articulation of the text outside the situation of engagement is continual, which is why, in analyzing the text and its reception, we have to look at other forms through which it multiplies itself: in newspaper articles and advertisements, magazines, product licensing, fan clubs, schoolyard discussions and gossip). (Nightingale 1996, 147-148).

### **2.3. Conceptualizing audiences**

A third important shift that has occurred in the study of texts and audiences is related to the way audiences are conceptualized. Throughout the development of media theory, the audience has been conceptualised in a variety of ways: as masses (class), groups, market niches, according to socio-demographic variables, as consumers, interpretive communities etc. The shift has seen a move away from the traditional way of viewing audiences in terms of sociodemographics or class - instead, the new trend is to conceptualise according to similar interpretive frameworks and consumption practices.

In this context, Stanley Fish (1980) has been particularly influential with his concept of 'interpretive communities' – defined as communities whose interpretative practices are guided by shared cultural codes - Fish points out that the process of meaning-making is primarily a social act, in which interpretation is constantly negotiated and in which the reader 'authors' the text. Fish's idea of interpretive communities brings the reader into the spotlight, claiming that interpretation will depend on interpretive strategies that circulate within the interpretive community of the reader – a community whose members can have different structural positions.

The notion of interpretive communities contributed to an important shift in how we think about what audiences are because they are analysed as 'discourses' rather than in terms of traditional socio-economic categories such as gender, race, class, age... (Barbatsis 2005, 286): As Fiske claims "Understanding audiences as discourses implies a social formation, which is identified by what its members do rather than what they are (Fiske 1994 in Barbatsis 2005, 288).



A concept that built on Fish's is the concept of 'interpretive repertoires', which implies that audiences are not formal groups or communities "but contextually defined agents who employ such repertoires to make preliminary sense" (Jensen and Jankowski 1991, 42). The interpretive repertoires are formed according to linguistic blocks, words/phrases that communicate an attitude toward the text and the extra-textual. Thus, media audiences are not defined by social roles and demographics or physical communities, but by shared interpretive frames or repertoires that emerge from their engagement in media content.

In its most radical manifestation, audiences conceptualized as discourses are viewed as "complex configuration of shared knowledge, beliefs, values, and communicative strategy" These communities cannot be reduced to one single marker (race, class, gender), and are "as many (...) as there are groupings of any two people...." (Hutcheon 1994, 97), which again sets aside traditional social roles and demographics in a way that neglects the importance of structural divisions in society. It also disables sociological analysis, traditionally based on larger social formations (class, gender, age etc.). Viewing audiences as "groupings of any two people" implies that social divisions and inequalities are set aside as supposedly irrelevant and replaced by more complex formations such as identity collectivities and different lifestyles, which completely obscures the power relations in society.

Furthermore, conceptualizing audiences as discourses also means that the idea that we can access the audiences as objective formations is rejected as a construct created by academics, the industry and other interested parties. The development of this idea has led some scholars to abandon the idea of audience research altogether since they are just "fictional objects" (Hartley 1987 in Morley 1997). However, following Morley's argument that, although the orientation towards discursive practices is of value as a "corrective to any simple minded naive-realism" this does not mean that audiences only exist as discourses. As Morley outlines, any empirical knowledge will be constructed through discursive practices, but audiences still exist outside discourses, even if we can only know them through discourses (Morely 1997, 135).

To summarise, there has been a shift from 'old' to 'new' paradigm in researching the text-audience relationship. This includes the following:

- 1. Structural constrains (class) versus active audiences as complex configurations

- 2. Text as repository of meaning versus audience as repository of meaning
- 3. Authorial intention (superior readings) versus relevance for the reader (no superior reading)
- 4. Limited modes of decoding versus infinite modes of decoding

The above mentioned splits are radical oppositions that are pointed out in order to emphasise the differences in the various approaches. While the 'old' paradigm (listed on the left-hand side of the outline above) has been corroded by the 'new' one (on the right-hand side) and thus abandoned in its most radical form, there is no consensus on the accuracy and validity of the new one, which is why the research of the textual event in this study will be set within this theoretical framework in order to shed light on these matters, and figure out how this applies to the particular textual event chosen in this study.

While the above stated puzzles will be tested without an in advance explicated position in regards to the 'old' or 'new' paradigm, two important changes in researching the text-audience relationship have been embraced and applied in this study as a starting point. Firstly, there is the need to research the more complex network in which a text reproduces itself, following the principles of Couldry where the textual event is researched on two distinct research levels analysing particular texts and their features (genre, plot, characters...) against the backdrop of industry strategies and discourses in circulation related to the text, as well as the way in which it is read by actual readers (Couldry 2000, 83-87). The other change refers to the way audiences are conceptualized as interpretive communities and constructed according to what they do rather than what they are (Fiske 1994 in Barbatsis 2005, 288), i.e. constructed according to a shared attitude towards the text - both of these changes or shifts will be reflected in this particular study.

### **2.3.1. Fans as interpretive communities**

One type of interpretive community which has emerged in the context of the above mentioned changes and which has become the focus of scholarly engagement in the last two decades is the fan community, constructed in accordance with cultural consumption preferences. According to

the dictionary<sup>14</sup>, "*fan*" is a shortened form of the word 'fanatic' – referring to a fierce worshipper (of sport, arts, artists), rapturous follower, passionate supporter.

In its simplest form "fans" are defined as audience members devoted to a particular media text or media person. Grossberg refers to fans in relation to cultural text in a very broad sense as to "something that matters"..."These mattering maps are like investment portfolios: there are not only different and changing investments, but different forms, as well as different intensities or degrees of investment" (Grossberg 2006, 585-586) ..."Everyone is constantly a fan of various sorts of things, for one cannot exist in a world where nothing matters (including the fact that nothing matters)." (Grossberg 2006, 589).

Another definition of fandom is particularly linked to the market, as "a form of sustained, affective consumption" (Sandvoss 2005 in Longhurst 2007, 33) of popular culture text (music, television, sports, celebrities...). According to Grossberg, this is the case because popular culture in a capitalist society is the "only space where the fan relationship can take shape. ...It is here, increasingly, that we seek actively to construct our own identities, partly because there seems to be no other space available, no other terrain on which we can construct and anchor our mattering maps" (Grossberg 2006, 589).

Grossberg further links fan practices that occur in the domain of popular culture to political struggle:

*"The fan's relation to culture in fact opens up a range of political possibilities and it is often on the field of affective relations that political struggles intersect with popular concerns. In fact, the affective is a crucial dimension of the organization of political struggle" ... "fandom is, at least potentially, the site of the optimism, invigoration and passion which are necessary conditions for any struggle to change the conditions of one's life."* (Grossberg 2006, 590)

Affirmative approaches to fandom have developed parallel with the increased interest in popular culture as the focus of scholarly research which in turn has seen an increased interest in the investigation of fiction genres, popular pleasures, consumption practices, popular tastes and

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14 Bratoljub Klaić. 1988. Rječnik stranih riječi, Zagreb: Nakladni zavod MH.

entertainment. In addition, the altered approach to this type of phenomenon has also been influenced by the emergence of the internet, which facilitates an easier involvement in various practices and social networking. What was initially criticized as a problem (Jensen 2002), or even as a form of pathology, carrying negative attributes - as infantile, hysterical, and even deranged behaviour, has now found a new, more affirmative ground, linked to engagement, resistance, subversion and creativity.

This positive aspect of fandom has come to the fore particularly in the context of Cultural Studies, where fans are mainly seen as a powerful element, with an active role in altering the text, challenging private property controlled by producers, engaging in resistive tactics of everyday life and moving away from being spectators to being participants. This co-creativity of fans has been stressed by Henri Jenkins (2005) who claims that fandom is specific in that the boundaries between consumption and production are fading, since fans alter the text, and make the producers modify their product to suit the vision of the fans.

In an attempt to locate cultural products that are likely to attract fans, Fiske claims that fandom is usually oriented towards cultural forms that occupy a low position in the hierarchy of taste (Fiske 2002). He sees fans as part of a culture that resists the mainstream meanings of their chosen media text, and act outside the domain of cultural industries. This margin of cultural products and fans is emphasised by Taylor and Willis (1999) who claim that fans are a minority that lack power. They view them as marginalized in the public sphere and with little access to media institutions or influence on representation of themselves. These communities use the chosen text to construct alternative visions of the world, and can be seen as communities that symbolically resist the dominant systems and power relations (Taylor and Willis 1999, 193).

As visible from the above, the common denominator of fans and fan practices within cultural studies is the attempt to shed light on positive aspects of fandom, even though they are defined differently and linked to different domains of the social sphere. The questions of power relations, political activism and the creative potentials of fans are the most prominent in debates about fandom.

In terms of concrete social practices Brian Longhurst (2007) attempts to distinguish between various forms of fan practices, and suggests a variety of positions that audience members can

adopt on a continuum representing the relationship of audiences and media programs/stars: The first type is “the consumer” – this type of stance indicates a “generalized and unfocused” interaction with the media product. The second type is “the fan”, -- it denotes someone who is attached to the object “within the context of relatively high media usage”. The third is the ‘cultist’ – focused not only on the media object but also on the audiences with whom he/she attempts to interact; Finally the ‘enthusiast’ – is “involved in actual production of artefacts connected to their fan and cultic activities” (Longhurst 2007, 42-43).

This continuum of fan practices includes a range of activities through which fandom is reproduced. In the field of media, this includes regularly watching a program, gathering information from secondary sources, active participation in formal fan communities (online or offline), visiting places of significance of a program (for example visiting the public places which the four protagonists of *Sex and the City* used to occupy), buying spin-off products, producing text related to the object of fandom etc. Staiger (2008) points out that in general fan studies (including her research) show that fan behaviours usually include:

- *“Intensive textual investigation for the purposes of interpreting the film, often seeking out minute detail or trivia and using these for interpretative purposes;*
- *Re-watching to memorise dialogue which will be used in conversations with peers;*
- *Re-watching to master the plot for:- creating alternative dialogue (joking with peers) or making fan-produced fiction, videos, and songs;*
- *Scopophilia – the sheer pleasure of watching;*
- *Emotion-on-demand;*
- *Ritual collectivity” (Staiger 2008 62).*

Whittenberger-Keith is less interested in the object of fandom; instead, she stresses the importance of fans as community. In her analysis of the ‘*Beauty and the Beast*’, she focuses on fandom through the analysis of fan-generated literature (fanzines). The author defines fandom as “a collectivity of people who interact together on the basis of a specific media artefact. The distinguishing features of fandom include the intense involvement of the viewers/fans and the interaction of the fans not just with the artefact but with one another” (Whittenberger-Keith 1992, 131-132). She claims that fans and fandom are marginalized and have been ignored within media studies, since the focus is usually on the interaction between text and audience

and not on the interaction between fans themselves within a collectivity. She argues that fandom has to be approached rhetorically and with a purpose to “create and sustain community through the use of discourse and other symbolic forms” (Whittenberger-Keith 1992, 132). The author analyses fanzines as the ‘thing’ that holds fandom together. She points out that there are three types of rhetoric in fan communities of B+B: aesthetic rhetoric (quality of the show); “fighting the good fight rhetoric”; and rhetoric of personal fulfilment from belonging to a community (p 136). She describes the show from the point of view of the fans as saving lives, changing lives, enabling them to connect to other people realizing that there are “others like them”, (Whittenberger-Keith 1992, 141). The author claims “fans go beyond simple appreciation of the program’s values; they enact these values in their everyday lives” (Whittenberger-Keith 1992, 142). The fans of B+B changed things - they were more involved in helping the homeless, doing charity work, giving donations etc. According to the author the artefact plays an important role only in the initial phase of fandom, at the point where people get involved, but later it is more about the people that are fans and their relations. She claims the interaction with the artefact is secondary to the interaction among fan members within the community.

Another approach focusing on the artefact is taken by Matt Hills who is interested in television text that he calls ‘cult TV’. In addition to the broadly accepted notion that fan texts are polysemic, i.e. that they are open texts, Hill points out the main characteristics of cult TV shows: according to him they are anti-mainstream, not industry-led (as opposed to soap fans), emerging over time, ahead of their time, textually innovative or unusual and - in relation to their media institutional context – they usually first appear on cable or in “fringe timeslots” indicating that they never intended to reach a mass audience (Hills 2004, 521).<sup>15</sup>

Hill proposes that cult TV should be analyzed on three levels:

- 1 Through textual analysis, designed by media producers;
- 2 Through an analysis of secondary texts or inter-texts ... Which works to promote the circulation of selected meanings of the primary text? The cult is activated inter-textually as a form of “anti-mainstream” distinction, where cult status is about finding quality in

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<sup>15</sup> Reeves, Rodgers and Epstein give the example of Beavis and Butthead (1996).

unexpected places but also as a brand of mainstream consumerism, with commercially available products dealing with the text (Hills 2004, 516);

- 3 Through an analysis of fan practices and fan activities, which produce a distinctive form of fandom (compared to other programs) in that their “inter-textual network is not recognizable as industry-led”, they organize in “appreciation societies”, they use the term ‘cult’ self-consciously, it is about bottom up grouping, they produce commentaries, fan fiction, episode guides and production histories; they create a market for memorabilia, related to the TV shows (Hills 2004, 518-519).

Hills focuses on television text and attempts to make a distinction between cultural products (artefacts or people) that are industry-led and ones that are not. According to him, an important feature of cult TV is that it appears ‘outside’ the industry, and it includes fan networks that are not industry-led. This is adequate as a description of the initial phase in which the text is circulated, however if a profitable niche is recognized the whole ‘package’ gets subsumed by the market and triggers profitable industry-led actions (spin-off products). This sequence of events is usual for edge-comedy (*South Park*, *Monty Python*, *Da Ali G Show*); however, with the more rapid and aggressive search for new hip cultural products this first, almost romantic phase, is short lived.

The approach to fandom has changed. It is less connected with obsession and a type of fanaticism, and more viewed as a creative act. Today it seems that everyone are fans of something, and that it is a part of everyday life, perhaps boosted by the rise of celebrity culture, camp, and a consumer society, a trend in which emotional attachments towards different products or persons-as-products is acceptable, legit and even desirable as an identity mark. However, to be engaged in particular popular culture artefacts is to remain on the level of aesthetics; the spill-over to forms of political engagement has not yet been convincingly confirmed in scholarly research. In this study I will approach fandom by researching the interpretive community that has a positive attitude towards the television comedy *Da Ali G Show* that carries elements of what Hills refers to as ‘cult TV’. This is an attempt to find out what fandom means for the interpretive community and to trace how fandom potentially alters everyday life.

### 3. Comedy and taste hierarchies

This study is particularly interested in television comedy as a genre. As with all type of texts comedy initiates interests of a particular type of audience, and is, according to its characteristics, classified within hierarchies of tastes within the framework of cultural consumption. Simply put: who enjoys comedy? High-brow, middle-brow or low-brow audiences? The young or the old? Male or female? Alternative or mainstream audiences? Can this genre be approached as homogeneous or is it too diverse to be unequivocally situated within the hierarchy of tastes? If we consider the position television comedy as a genre takes in the social hierarchy of tastes, it is visible that there is no agreement as to what position it occupies.

Jonathan Gray argues that comedy is a genre “almost universally liked, for while some hate romances, sci-fi, soaps or reality television, it is rare to find someone who does not enjoy laughing” (Gray 2006, 86). It is certainly true that most people enjoy a laugh, however comedy as a specific cultural product “packed” and served in a mediated form is – in the reproduction of taste hierarchies - often considered to be vulgar, trivial, or simply stupid. It is more associated with the rural and local, related to lowbrow cultures, which is vividly showed in Frye’s crude depiction “Comedy and satire should be kept in their proper place, like the moral standards and social classes which they symbolize” (Frye 1990, 22 in Stott 2005, 25).

Pierre Bourdieu (1980) relates comedy to popular taste and claims that:

*“Like all forms of the comic and especially those working through satire or parody of the ‘great’ (mimics, chansonniers, etc.), they satisfy the taste for and sense of revelry, the free speaking and hearty laughter which liberate by setting the social world head over heels, overturning conventions and proprieties.”* (Bourdieu 1980, 239).

David Marc (1997) argues that even though comedy has “...*Never quite achieved the status of the epic or tragedy in western culture, comedy has certainly been valued and admired by critics when ‘properly’ presented as drama, satiric poetry, or (in recent times) the novel. But the bald-faced telling of jokes in public-divorced from these traditional contexts – has, like most mass*



*culture phenomena, generally been considered a vulgarity no even worthy of back-row admission to the hierarchy of forms.*” (Marc 1997, 114).

Thus, the place of comedy as a genre placed on a scale of value in the universe of media products is evaluated as one of ‘low social value’, simply providing pleasure and escape. However, comedy as a genre is very diverse and it is clear that this area contains very different types of texts, a diversity which is then also reflected in its diversified modes of consumption, interpretation and evaluation.

In addition to comedy as a cultural form, television - as a medium of transmission - is usually also classified as a popular activity. Watching television is regarded as a non-worthy cultural activity and an ‘unhealthy’ habit. Charlotte Brunsdon claims that television has become the ‘bad cultural object’ (Brunsdon 1997, 114 in Tylor and Willis, 1999, 207), seen in a positive light only in the context of democratic expectations of media, where television is seen as a possible way to disseminate ‘quality’ programs, (usually related to seemingly unmediated events or ‘the real’ world such as documentaries, news, sports) (Tylor and Willis 1999).<sup>16</sup>

Bourdieu considered television to be a lowbrow medium, even though it represents a medium in which lowbrow taste is linked with high culture. Television “brings certain performances of ‘high’ art into the home, or certain cultural institutions ... which briefly bring a working-class public into contact with high art and sometimes avant-garde works...(Bourdieu 1980, 238). According to him, television is a medium that serves popular taste, regardless of the type of program broadcast. However, watching television is such a widespread practice that the division of lowbrow and highbrow taste cannot easily be maintained. Watching television is the practice of all classes; however, there are taste hierarchies of television text and genre where some are evaluated as more worthy than others. For example, news and documentaries are ‘serious’, they provide ‘information’ and ‘knowledge’, while reality shows and soap opera are considered to be ‘trivial’... Empirical research on television viewing confirms the existence of taste hierarchies in television programs. David Morley found that men tended to under-report

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<sup>16</sup> Applied to literature theory, Wolfgang Iser (1974) claims that “...there is an element of 'escapism' in all literature, resulting from this very creation of illusion, but there are some texts which offer nothing but a harmonious world, purified of all contradiction and deliberately excluding anything that might disturb the illusion once established, and these are the texts that we generally do not like to classify as literary.” (Iser 1974, 284).

their fictional viewing and over-emphasise the viewing of news and documentary, since they thought of them as more worthy than fiction (Morley, 1986).

The hierarchies of values in a society are (re)established through consumption practices of various social groups. Pierre Bourdieu interconnects taste, lifestyle and social position, arguing that preferences in different types of cultural consumption are socially constructed. Bourdieu connects 'cultivated dispositions' with 'cultural competence' and claims that cultural practices are linked to educational capital (education) and social origin (father's occupation) (Bourdieu 1980, 226) which together forms cultural capital.

Bourdieu focuses on the type of knowledge transferred through the education system which is defined as legitimate. In addition to cultural transmission that occurs within the family, he emphasizes that formal education is important, even in acquiring knowledge that is not necessarily learned in school. In his research Bourdieu incorporates 'legitimate work of art' such as classical music, painting, choices of radio stations, cinema going, knowledge of directors etc., and links them to consumption practices. He distinguishes between three zones of taste that correspond to education and class: legitimate taste (legitimate works or art); 'middle-brow' taste; and 'popular' taste ('light', classified as 'lower' genre or 'devalued by popularisation') (Bourdieu 1984, 229).

According to Bourdieu there are three forms of cultural capital:

- The embodied state (embodied in the individual; properties inherited through culture and traditions, socialization, family, including linguistic capital (mastery of language, ways of speaking (Bourdieu 1984, 114);
- The objectified state (owned material things, work of art, instruments, valid if their cultural meaning is understood);
- The institutionalized state (institutional recognition of cultural capital – academic qualification related to labour market - conversion of cultural to economic capital).

Cultural capital is a concept closely related to 'field' as a structure of social relation and site of struggle for positions, and the concept of 'habitus' which refers to competences and dispositions which govern the social movement of individuals throughout life. For Bourdieu

human practice lies between habitual playing by the rules - as a common sense activity - and the ability of social actors to improvise within these rules according to their own interests. According to Bourdieu, most of our practices are habitual, internalized through mechanisms of socialization. Habitus is determined by everyday life practices which, in a differentiated society, manifests itself as a specific lifestyle, or social identity that Bourdieu relates to social class, which forms specific cultural and social values and establishes specific preconditions of existence. The distinction between people holding different social positions is maintained through constant processes of identification and differentiation in the sphere of cultural consumption. According to Bourdieu, the aesthetic disposition is related to class, and the main aim is to constantly reproduce borders between classes.

*“Being the product of the conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence, it unites all those who are the product of similar conditions but only by distinguishing them from all others. And it distinguishes in an essential way, since taste is the basis of all that one has – people and things – and of all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others”* (Bourdieu 1984, 253).

Legitimate taste, middle-brow taste, and popular taste are constantly re-affirmed and re-defined through cultural consumption. In that process the popular taste linked to the lower class serves as a “negative reference point, in relation to which all aesthetics define themselves” (Bourdieu 1984, 57).

*“Tastes (manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes. In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation; and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance (‘sick-making’) of the tastes of others”* (Bourdieu 1984, 253).

Thus, the emphasis is placed not only on the positive preferences (in terms of cultural consumption) for particular tastes, but also, on the very important negative feelings of disgust provoked by specific preferences of others, which are important in the process of distinction. It serves as a way to create barriers between social formations that are socially constructed even though they appear to be ‘natural’.

*“There is no accounting for tastes (...) because each taste feels itself to be natural – and so it almost is, being a habitus – which amounts to rejecting others as unnatural and therefore vicious. Aesthetic intolerance can be terribly violent. Aversion to different life styles is perhaps one of the strongest barriers between the classes...”* (Bourdieu 1984, 253).

Bourdieu claims that cultural consumption is connected to class. In order to create distinction, the highbrow still avoids being associated with consumption of cultural expressions that are associated with lowbrow tastes (that implies trivial, popular etc.) and claims that the rules and borders are established perpetually.

On the other hand, Richard Peterson and Roger Kern (1996) argue that as opposed to the late 19th Century when the distinction between highbrow (fine arts) and lowbrow culture (popular entertainment) was clearly visible, a qualitative shift has since occurred whereby the elite taste is no longer exclusive but has moved towards an eclectic, 'omnivorous' consumption practice – defined as being open to various types of cultural forms. Comparative research using data from 1982 and 1992 has confirmed this change in tastes. Paul DiMaggio (1987) also takes up a similar position in that he sees the elite as being engaged in diverse consumption practices of both fine art and popular expressions.

Earlier, in the 60ies, empirical research on consumption practices and taste hierarchies conducted by Lynes (1954) and Sontag (1966) showed that “when highbrows are open to non-highbrow art forms, they seek out lowbrow forms created by socially marginal groups (Blacks, youth, isolated rural communities) while still holding commercial middlebrow forms in contempt” (Lynes 1954, Sontag 1966 in Peterson and Kern 1996, 901). However, later research conducted by Peterson and Kern showed, that highbrow tastes increase the tastes for lowbrow but also middlebrow music and that highbrow is more omnivorous than other non-highbrow classes, meaning that they are consuming a wider range of various cultural products than other classes. Thus “omnivorousness is replacing snobbishness among Americans of highbrow status.” This does not, however, mean, as the authors points out, that the “omnivore likes everything indiscriminately. Rather, it signifies openness to appreciating everything.” (Peterson and Kern 1996, 903-904). Omnivores are hostile to snobbish closure and the question is not so

much what is consumed, but how the consumption of various forums are understood and interpreted.

The authors suggest five factors that explain these changes: structural change and mobility that creates opportunities and accessibility to various types of art; value change - concerning race, gender, religion, ethnicity... which implies a seemingly more tolerant world; art-world change - the self-reflective, relativised position that illuminates the fact that there is no single standard, and that quality of art depends on the evaluation made by the art world and does not reside in the art work itself; generational politics – in which the idea of strictly defined stages of life, from childhood, youth to adulthood and maturity in which different types of proscribed behaviours are diminishing and replaced by the idea of lifestyle; and status-group politics – meaning that dominant status groups define popular culture to suit their own interests – this includes co-optation of alternative elements of pop culture and encapsulation of them into dominant status-group culture (Peterson and Kern 1996, 906).

An example of taste hierarchies of television texts related to comedy is the research of Giselinde Kuipers (2006) who analysed preferences for television comedies in the Netherlands. She conducted a survey in which she extracted one cluster that grouped 'highbrow' comedy together. She defines this type of comedy as being ambivalent, absurd, and disagreeable, including a type of humour that attempts to add something to the amusement, which "intended to stimulate, to irritate, to educate, to satirise, as well as to amuse. Thus, it is an oppositional taste culture: it is self-consciously trying not to be 'just amusement'! (Kuipers 2006, 15)<sup>17</sup> Kuipers argues that highbrow comedy asks for a specific kind of knowledge or cultural competence in order to be appreciated. Thus, despite the accessibility of television in a general sense, it can be very exclusive, because some broadcast texts do not convey meaning except to a specific niche, equipped with a specific cultural competence.

According to Kuipers's research, educated viewers showed more knowledge of various comedies and comedians, not because they watched more television, but because of surfing between channels, and due to their capacity to express themselves more eloquently, they could more easily create an argument in relation to these comedies. The highbrow group showed a clear distaste for lowbrow comedy and disapproved of the lowbrow taste - the reverse however,

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<sup>17</sup> Kuipers mentions Monty Python and Absolutely Fabulous in this context.

did not arise (Kuipers 2006, 17). The lowbrow taste culture did not even know about highbrow comedy, which is why they could not express an opinion about it. The respondents who did know about them showed incomprehension or disinterest in such type of comedy. They did not dislike them, they were not insulted or against it, it just did not move them in any way<sup>18</sup>. Thus, there was no type of disagreement, but simply a disinterest or a difference in style. Hence, the less educated people had no upward aspirations regarding highbrow comedy. They did not consider it as 'legitimate' taste – they thought of themselves as having a better feeling for humour than uptight intellectuals. Kuipers concluded that television makes highbrow tastes transform from legitimate tastes to exclusive subcultures. This is why, as she argues, television - as a popular medium - threatens the highbrow-lowbrow model of taste cultures (Kuipers 2006, 21).

By looking at the widely accessible and depreciated forms of media products and forms that are rejected in a society (like the distaste for vulgar, emotional, expressive etc) one can draw conclusions as to what forms legitimate taste in a specific context. In the case of comedy as a genre, it is, from a traditional, elitist perspective seen as vulgar and shallow. However, as mentioned before, the genre of comedy is quite diverse: it includes various forms representing different types of humour. Thus, the romantic comedy or the family sitcom that usually depicts the world in an idealised manner is usually depreciated as 'dumbing down' and as trivial or banal. As opposed to that, a more 'refined' humour, that adds something else to the amusement (social commentary, political satire) and requires specific knowledge on the part of the audiences, or supports an alternative worldview (black comedy) is more appreciated. The more 'sophisticated' it gets, the higher the status. By classifying comedy (or in a broader sense types of humour) and by expressing appreciation or aversion to specific comedy/humour, one communicates a social position.

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<sup>18</sup> The fact that a specific television programme does not 'speak' to specific portions of the population has also been confirmed in other research. In *Nationwide Audience* (1980), David Morley encountered the "critique of silence" (Morley 1980, 135) related to the groups of black students who did not make any connection with the discourse of *Nationwide*, and refused it as "not the concerns of their world" (Morley 1980, 134).

#### 4. Comedy as genre

In order to research the reception of a specific television text I begin with the analysis of comedy as a genre. Since the genre *per se* is quite diverse, and includes very different texts and different audiences, I shall attempt to define the conventions of the specific sub-genre of comedy which I have chosen to analyse in this research.

Genre is a means of classifying different cultural texts which serves as a template, addressing both the process of production and consumption. Cultural texts are categorized according to the way they are structured around common codes and conventions. Genre is defined in relation to “patterns/forms, styles/structures” (Tom Ryall 1975 in Neale 2000, 12) but also in a broader sense, “as determined by the subject matter, goal, and situation of the utterance” (Bakhtin 1999, 152).

In relation to the properties of the genre, a text can be categorized as a specific genre through its content (or as “kinds of texts”) and/or through the “conventions” used in structuring the texts (Berger 1992, 29). These conventions are what Cawelti labels “formulaic”; he defines “formula” as “a conventional system for structuring cultural products” (Cawelti in Berger 1992, 29). This involves aspects of a text such as time, location, heroes, heroines, villains, secondary characters, plots, themes, costume, locomotion, weaponry etc., which are organized into distinct patterns. To this conventional element of the work of art, Cawelti adds the inventional element, meaning the *not-yet-seen* moment of a text. The balance of conventional and inventional elements is important since a transgression in both directions potentially results in the rejection of the text due to its failure to fulfil the “horizon of expectations” (Jauss, 1978) of the audiences which potentially results in ‘generic frustration’ (Altman 1996, 289 in Creeber 2008, 3). In addition, the interplay between repetition and innovation is crucial to genre because it frames the broader theoretical considerations related to whether genre is viewed as a static structure or as an open category constantly engaged in the dynamic process of change.

Besides the internal properties of a genre, genre relates to larger groupings of cultural texts whose properties are known and recognized by the regular audience. This knowledge is created through exposure to the genre but also through its connection to broader “topical interests and activities of the audience” (Neale 2000, 14) They are socially recognizable communicative formats that signal to the audiences what to expect (O’Keeffe 2006) but they also

“...Presuppose a certain degree of institutionalization, if only because their existence depends on repetition within a defined setting” (Benwell 1996 in O’Keeffe 2006, 19). This broader aspect of genre is important in that it moves away from the structure and properties of a text classified as specific genre, and communicates how genre is agreed upon and how classification and grouping occur in a wider socio-cultural context.

However, the categorization of texts is not without problems. According to Tudor, who refers to the analysis of film, one problem that occurs is that “...We are caught in a circle that first requires that the film be isolated, for which purpose a criterion is necessary, but the criterion is, in turn, meant to emerge from the empirically established common characteristics of the films” (Tudor 1974, 135-8 in Neale 2000, 18). In practice this causality dilemma is overlooked in the dynamic process of negotiating between the text and the conventions of a genre.

The problem of genre categorization has led some scholars to criticize the way their borders are defined. Tony Bennett (2007) claims that genre classification is more disabling than enabling because it cannot be characterized according to its positive criterion according to what it is, since “that positivity always turns out to be relationally conceived as a set of differences from the properties of other genres whose defining attributes, while assumed as given for the purposes of defining the genre in question, are similarly theorisable only as set of differences from other genres” (Bennett 2007, 30). However, classification conducted in relation to other genres and creating distinctions according to what something *is not*, by attaching a set of attributes that other genres do not possess, is a common way of creating distinctions, not only between genres, but between concepts in general (as the Saussureian model showed). Thus, the problem lies not so much in the relational nature of genre categorization, but more in the interplay between generalization and specification of a category: the fact that the larger the sets of attributes we try to ascribe to a specific genre, the smaller the number of texts that can be placed into that category, and alternatively, the lower the number of attributes ascribed to a genre, the greater the number of texts. Both extremes show the difficulty in fixing a category at a certain level, which makes it necessary to think of genre as a dynamic category. This is further complicated by the fact that the main attributes ascribed to a genre are related to very different criteria – some texts are categorized according to their function (to thrill, to amuse...), some according to content (war, western...), others are grouped according to their relation to



“reality” (as an example, in television genres, news and documentaries are more “real” than reality television which is in turn, more “real” than a fictional television police drama)...

Besides the general problem of classification, genre is applied differently according to the type of media. It derives from literary studies in which epics, lyrics and drama are defined as larger categories that further divides into different genres and sub-genres (Solar 1987, 125). However, there are substantial differences between literary and televisual text. Even though there are, as Wolfgang Iser claims, ‘gaps’ in every text, that enable us to use our imagination (Iser 1974, 283) the work of interpretation is more demanding in literary texts where we only have the written word. As different from this, television (and film) provides us with iconic signifiers as well, which ensure a big part of the task of interpretation is already done for the viewer.

Jane Feuer (1992) claims that the traditional view of genres as used in literary studies is of limited application to film and television because they are products of popular culture and characterized by culturally specific and temporally limited content (Feuer 1992, 139). Another difference between literary genres and film genres is, as pointed out by Neale that literary genres are usually defined in terms of their formal characteristics, while in film criticism the content division is more usual (Neale 2000).

In addition to the difference between literary genres and other media genres in using iconic signifiers, there are also differences between film and television. The genre theory is better applicable to film making (i.e. the categories seem clearer), since it represents “mechanisms for the regulation of difference ... and organize large numbers of individual works into a coherent system that could be recognized by the interpretive community” (Feuer 1992, 157). On the other hand, television programs are quite diverse in terms of content and form. Glen Creeber divides television genres into the following groups: drama<sup>19</sup>, soap-opera, comedy, children’s television, news, documentary, reality TV, animation and popular entertainment. Popular entertainment includes diverse categories, such as quiz shows, celebrity talk shows, confessional talk shows, sport, music, daytime TV, advertising and ordinary television. These are all grouped together since they are seen “as sharing a number of inherent forms and characteristics - not least, their tendency to be downgraded and despised by critics for their

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<sup>19</sup> A broad category including single play, western, action series, crime series, hospital drama, science fiction, drama-documentary, mini-series, costume drama, teen series and postmodern drama.

unashamedly populist and frequently commercial aspirations” (Miller in Creeber 2008, 159). Others have classified and included different categorizations along divisions such as reality-fiction, daytime-primetime, children-adults etc., however, all these forms are melted into a stream characterized by a property of ‘flow’ (Williams 2003) that blends the programs constantly interrupted by advertisements.

In the past decade we have witnessed an increase in genre re-combination, both in film and television, in which two or more genre conventions are used which further complicates a clear-cut classification. In this respect we are faced with new signifiers such as docudrama, comic-drama, mockumentary, or with a description that includes the traditional genres that are combined.<sup>20</sup> Thus, we need to think of genre as a more loose grouping of texts that includes categories that constantly overlap, merge and transgress and eventually change, but still provide some guidance on the content and on what the audience can expect. As Neale (2000) points out, regardless of various difficulties with genre classification, there is a common understanding in that:

*“All agree that genre is a multi-dimensional phenomenon and that its dimensions centrally include systems of expectation, categories, labels and names, discourses, texts and corpuses of texts, and the conventions that govern them all. Some stress the primacy of expectations, others the primacy of texts, still others the primacy of categories, corpuses, the norms they encompass, the traditions they embody and the formulae that mark them. What seems clear is that all these dimensions need to be taken into account. What also seems clear is that they need to be distinguished one from another”* (Neale 2000, 26).

Comedy is one of the oldest genres that developed as a category of drama. The distinctive feature of comedy is humour, even though humour is not confined to the genre of comedy only but goes well beyond it. Apart from the intent to amuse and to initiate laughter, the debate is ongoing whether comedy is a genre or “pre-generic ‘moods’ of narrative” (Frye 2000)... The difficulty arises from the fact that comedy is so diverse: it can “entail an array of defining conventions (...) and is able in addition to combine with or to parody virtually every other genre or form” (Neale and Krutnik 1990 in Neale 2000, 66). According to Neale we can

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<sup>20</sup> As an example, the Internet Movie Database web site gives a description of the movie's genre. *Burn?? after reading* - directed by E. Coen and J. Coen in 2008 - as ‘comedy, crime, drama’ – which are all three traditionally quite distinctive genres. Internet Movie Database. Available at: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0887883/> (Retrieved: 07 March 2010).

distinguish between two types of comedy that emerge in relation to their constitutive elements: the comic units and the narrative. In the first type of comedy, the comic units “... occur outside, or are dominant over, narrative contexts and narrative concerns” (Neale 2000, 66). In the second case, the narrative dominating over the comic unit simply means that the syntagmatic dimension (linking events together in a meaningful timeframe and the paradigmatic dimension (referring to character and setting) (Fiske 1987) is foregrounded. The comic units are interwoven in the narrative, but the way the story is told, the sequence and pattern of cause and effect are in focus. As viewers we are interested in the plot, the setting, orientation, complication, resolution, evaluation, conclusion (Van Dijk 1987, 276 in Livingstone 2005, 75) that appears as a closed structure within the text. In comedies in which the comic units are foregrounded, short comic gags comprise the core of the text (such as sketch comedy, candid camera etc.), while the narrative is open.

There are also other ways of categorising comedy. These groupings occur based on different logics - conventions, the audience it aims for, parodying other genres, or closeness to ‘reality’... Below I will describe a few sub-groups and their main characteristics as outlined in *The Television Genre Book* (edited by Creeber 2008) in order to exemplify what forms the basis of their groupings and to place the type of comedy dealt with in my research into a contextual framework.

Sitcom - According to John Hartley (Hartley in Creeber 2008) sitcom is a type of comedy that lies between sketch comedy and situation drama. It has migrated from radio to television (as for example *I love Lucy*, CBS, 1951-7). It usually includes a live audience, theatrical performance style, laughing track, brightly lit settings shot on video which thus appear artificial compared to realist aesthetics (Feuer in Creeber 2008). The usual setting is either the home and family environment or the professional environment exploring sexuality. (Hartley in Creeber 2008, 80-81). They are usually seen as ideologically conservative in their form, reaffirming the status quo with their structure in which equilibrium is always established in the end of each episode. As Marc (Marc 1989 in Creeber 2008) claims, the ‘narrative architecture’ of sitcoms is always the same and in this respect there is no innovation, however it does have an ‘ideological flexibility’ in that it is able to accommodate different ideological conflicts (Feuer in Creeber 2008, 83-84). Feuer also points out that, from a historical perspective, the ideological oppositions, present in sitcoms wane out with time. There are also sitcoms that bring about

changes and renew the form with their innovativeness: *The Office* that looks more like a documentary (created by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, BBC, 2001-2003); *Curb your enthusiasm* (created by Larry David, HBO, 2000-); *Seinfeld* (created by Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld, NBC 1989-1998 and later syndicated); *Absolutely Fabulous* (created by Jennifer Saunders, BBC, 1992-2004) that brings out female excess, breaking social boundaries, and transgressing norms of femininity which makes it radical (Feuer in Creeber, 2008: p 83); *The red dwarf*, (BBC, 1989-1999) - the cult science fiction sitcom; or *Will and Grace* (NBC, 1998-2006) – a gay and queer sitcom. Mills claim that various kinds of sitcom co-exist at the moment, united in their comic intent but with different aesthetics. (Mills in Creeber 2008, 91).

Sketch comedy – as described by Steve Neale, includes a mixture of comic units, music, acts and performances. It is short with a single-scene structure, one setting, with one or more characters. They can be visual in orientation or focused on dialogue. Sketch comedy developed mostly in the UK, and the ultimate example is *The Monty Python's Flying Circus*, (BBC, 1969-1974). In the USA, one widely known is *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1981-3), however, as different from the UK, the USA production has focused more widely on sitcom and stand-up comedy (Neale in Creeber 2008, 76).

Adult animation - whose distinctive convention is “eschewing the whole notion of ‘realism’ and embracing zany activities...” (Donnelly in Creeber 2008, 154). These types of texts proliferated in the nineties, and are characterized by appealing to the juvenile in adults and a cruel sense of humour. Best known examples are the dark satirical cartoon *Monkey Dust* (BBC, 2003-5) created by Harry Thompson and Shaun Pye; *Beavis and Butthead* created by Mike Judge, (MTV, 1992-97); and perhaps the most famous one, *The Simpsons*, created by Matt Groening (Fox, 1989- ) and *South Park*, created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone (Comedy Central, 1997-present).

Mock factual broadcasting – mock current affairs programmes or news that – adopt a standard format, with which they “lay bare the contradictions and ideologies of such programming through its stretching of these characteristics to excess”. (Mills in Creeber 2008, 80). Factual broadcasting scorns the pompous, paternalistic attitude and they are “...demonstrating well-known faces willingness to speak on subjects that they don't know anything about. A well known example is *Brass Eye* (C4, 1997, 2001) by Chris Morris that undermines televisual

conventions of authority and expertise, and is therefore an early intervention into debates about celebrity culture” (Evans and Hesmondhalgh, 2004 in Creeber 2008, 80). *Brass Eye* has been accused of offensiveness, especially with an episode on paedophilia and sexual abuse, and has been proclaimed as unacceptable to a part of the British audience – regardless of authorial intention which was, as Morris noted, “...to shock because outrage forces debate and discussion rather than acceptance (Ferguson 2001, 13 in Creeber 2008, 80).

Comedy Verite – grows from the trend in which the use of documentary conventions across different genres is present. In the mock documentary format the characters are aware of the camera crew, with an implied viewing audience. This use of documentary elements in television is claimed to be part of the postmodern aesthetic; it is used more and more which contributes to the erosion of the traditional fact/fiction dichotomy. Brett Mills claims - ...”The collapse of the traditional fact/fiction dichotomy can be seen to indicate the dissolution of traditional objective categories, resulting in generically confused media which makes no distinction between truth and lies, between reality and fiction” (Mills in Creeber 2008, 90).

The blurring of reality and fiction is a characteristic of postmodern comedy that distinguishes it from traditional comedy. Harris and Steeves (Steeves 2005, 264 in Creeber 2008, 90) stress that postmodern comedy is a significant and novel development with the transgression of genre boundaries and mixture of reality and fiction, while Mittell argues that ‘generic blending is not a new phenomenon’ (Mittell 2004, 156 in Creeber 2008, 90). Mittell claims we can not find evidence of pure genres anywhere. However, if we look at the development of television comedies in the last 50 years, it suggests that there is a newness in comedies produced from the 90ies onwards. The example I will turn to later in the text shows that a strict categorization within any of these mentioned subgenres might be difficult, since it is both playing with reality and fiction and could thus be categorized as mock factual broadcasting or comedy verite, but also as sketch comedy. What is more important in categorizing television texts focused upon here is their tone, attitude and purpose.

#### **4.1. Edge comedy**

In a broad framework the texts that are the focus of this research could be categorized within the “universals of comedy” (Frye 2000) defined through the art of making people laugh, with the intention to amuse or entertain, but here we stop short of finding strict conventions that

could be ascribed to them. They can be categorized within any of the above mentioned subgenres of comedy.

Warren and Welleck distinguish between the “outer form” which they define as the specific structure of a text and the “inner form” which includes attitude, tone, purpose, or subject and audience (Warren and Welleck 1956, 260 in Neale 2000, 13). I found this particularly helpful when attempting to pin down the type of text I am interested in my research.

The difficulty in defining the ‘outer form’ of television comedies that are in the focus of this research stems from the fact that the ‘outer form’ refers to conventions or formulae that include a defined narrative, setting, themes, characters and iconography. The most researched subgenre of comedy is the sitcom, probably due to its relatively clear conventions: canned laughter, thirty minutes length, a continuity of characters, everyday life situations, reinforcing a status quo; continuance of structure that includes a problem and a resolution in the end.<sup>21</sup> This surely is a simplified account of the sitcom because, as previously mentioned, the sitcom is changing continuously and whilst evolving it embraces new elements previously not used.

As opposed to the sitcom with its conventions, the type of comedy dealt with here is not easily constrained within genre boundaries since one of its main features is to subvert various genres by means of parody which means that they carry the conventions of the genre they ‘inhabit’. This suggests that it might be more useful to view these texts as proposed by Northrop Frye who argues that “...The comic, and the ironic and the satiric” are “pre-generic ‘moods’ of narrative” (Frye 1990, 162 in Stott 2005, 29). It is also a standpoint held by Stott (2005) who relates this type of comedy to postmodernism – not specifically though in terms of genre conventions that are merging reality and fiction as mentioned above – but more in terms of the usage of “parody, burlesque, and satire – notably ‘comic’ techniques – as a means of providing serious critique of Enlightenment philosophy”, which is why he claims that, instead of relating them to the genre of comedy, we should relate to them as forms of humour free from generic constraints (Stott 2005, 2).

It is certainly true that this type of text resists subjection to genre classification, if we define genre as convention or formula with a defined structure: they are fictional but can also include

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<sup>21</sup> For a detailed account on sitcoms see Feuer 1992; Jhally and Lewis 1992; Marc, 1997.

non-fictional, reality elements; they can have various modes of address – both cinematic (ignoring the viewer) or rhetorical (addressing the viewer) (Allen 1992, 116), the main characters are stable, but the secondary characters vary; some texts have a narrative that dominates, while others are structured as “comic units” (Neale 2000) thus, if they have a narrative, they are likely to use it “As only a loose excuse for holding together moments of comic business” (Horton 1991 in Neale 2000, 66). Again, this points to the difficulty of constructing a distinctive subgenre relying on structural conventions.

One recurrent feature that seems to be found commonly in this type of comedy is the length of the program and the scheduling pattern that emerges as a result of the positioning within a wider cultural context. These are typically made to hold a half-hour format and are scheduled in a late time slot which is why they are sometimes referred to as “late-night comedy shows” by which it is made clear that these texts are not for children (even if they can take the form of a cartoon which is primarily associated with children television and often include features that resemble childlike worlds).

The fact that they usually use parody is perhaps the point where they are in closest proximity in terms of us being able to link them to genre in a conventional sense. Parody includes the imitation and ridiculization of style, texts or genres, strategies that rely on the audience’s cultural competence to recognize these moments that are drawn from previous texts. In parodying genre, the conventions are used but ridiculed and turned upside down. The text inhabits another genre, it adapts its subject to its form but with an ironic twist by which these conventions are distorted and gain new meaning. The genre used is often indicated in the way comedies are labelled, for example, *Brass Eye* is categorized as a “satirical spoof documentary” (Wikipedia)<sup>22</sup>, *South Park*<sup>23</sup> and *The Simpsons*<sup>24</sup>, are American “animated sitcoms” (Wikipedia) *Da Ali G Show* is a “satirical talk-show” (imdb).<sup>25</sup>

Neale and Krutnik argue that “Parody has its own techniques and methods, but no particular form or structure” (Neale and Krutnik 1990, 19 in Gray 2008, 44) which leads Jonathan Gray to

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22 Wikipedia. Available at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brass\\_Eye](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brass_Eye) (Retrieved: 28. December 2009).

23 Wikipedia Available at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South\\_Park](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Park) (Retrieved: 28 December.2009).

24 Wikipedia Available at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Simpsons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Simpsons) (Retrieved: 28 December.2009).

25 Internet movie database. Available at: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0367274/> (Retrieved, 28 December 2009).

argue that even though it uses genres as a source, "...Parody is more an intertextual and generic *process* than it is its own stand-alone genre" (Gray 2006, 44).

Gray explains parody employing the concept of intertextuality<sup>26</sup> linked to referencing previous text, however, there is a difference between these two concepts: parody has a more narrow meaning. It is a specific form of intertextual referencing that involves a cultural product, while the concept of intertextuality has a broader scope - it refers to the continual process of endless transposition of meanings in the web of cultural texts. As Jim Collins claims "intertextual references are emblematic of the hyperconsciousness of postmodern popular culture: a hyperawareness on the part of the text itself, of its cultural status, function, and history, as well as of the conditions of its circulation and reception." (Collins 1992, 335). Norman Fairclough (1992) defined intertextuality as a property of the text being "full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated, or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict, ironically echo etc." (Fairclough 1992, 73).<sup>27</sup>

Having a more narrow meaning, parody implies taking an already existing cultural text, 'inhabiting' its structure in order to create a new text. In the example of genre parody, it implies that the new text that uses parody carries the structure and conventions of the text parodied.

Bakhtin argues that "every extra – artistic prose discourse - in any of its forms, quotidian, rhetorical, scholarly – cannot fail to be oriented towards the 'already uttered', the 'already known', 'the common opinion, and so on'" (1982, 53 in Berger 2005, 76). Again, it indicates the elusiveness of intertextuality as compared to parody, which uses a specific existing text that has been singled out from the past and creates a new form that carries the elements of both the old one and the newly formed, which refers to the pattern or structure of the 'inhabited' text.

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26 The term was coined by Julia Kristeva in 1966 who built on Bakhtin's work. It has since been used by various authors. The concept of intertextuality is valuable in assessing the endless transposition of meaning.

27 Fairclough uses this concept, not only in the analysis of text, in which the focus is placed on production (or the historicity of text (Fairclough 1992, 84), but also on distribution – which marks the text undergoing transformation as it shifts from one type to another, and finally, the intertextual perspective of consumption, which stresses the interpreters' role and the influence of other texts they bring with them in interpreting the primary text.



Arthur Asa Berger claims that the difference between intertextuality and parody is that the first evolves unconsciously, based on styles, ideas, plots and characters from previously made works of others, while the latter refers to situations when this borrowing is done consciously (Berger 2005, 77). This conscious borrowing is often related to ridiculization of the parodied texts that includes the comic, even though there are plenty of examples in art forms where that is not necessarily the case<sup>28</sup>. However, the idea of ‘unconscious borrowing’ is too simple to describe the complex and diffused ways in which intertextual references are made. While parody always includes a deliberate, conscious borrowing, since it ‘inhabits’ a style or structure, intertextual references fall into both categories: of conscious and unconscious borrowing.

Jonathan Gray argues that parody “...Attaches itself to generic discourses and either playfully or scornfully attacks them, aiming to destabilize the common sense of genre...” (Gray 2006, 43-44). Gray makes a distinction between the two ways in which parody can be used: either as “tributary and loving, serving as homage and flattery”, or as a way to subvert a genre in order to destabilize the power of it by stepping onto its space (Gray 2006, 45).

As different from Gray, Linda Hutcheon (2000) considers parody to be more neutral and claims that there is a mutual interdependence of parody and parodied texts. In her view “its two voices neither merge nor cancel each other out; they work together, while remaining distinct in their defining difference”... It is “...building upon more than attacking its other” (Hutcheon 2000, xiv).

This might be the case for some texts, however, in the type of parody used in this subgenre of television comedy, the relation between the text parodied and that which parodies is not that of “coexistence” as Hutcheon points out – it is better described in terms of the destabilizing subversive mode pointed out by Gray, in which the parodied text is explicitly ridiculed. The use of parody in this way is an attempt to question the claims that specific genres are inclined to make: news and documentaries claim to represent the ‘truth’, the ‘newsworthy’ and the ‘factual’; police drama sustains the order, stability and authority; the sitcom idealises the domestic realm and promotes the values of family etc. Ridiculing genre conventions by parodying them shakes the ‘horizon of expectation’ (Jauss, 1978) of the audiences.

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<sup>28</sup> For an account on parody in various art forms see Linda Hutcheon. 2000. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century art forms*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

In summary, Warren and Welleck's 'outer form' that includes the structure of a text is not sufficient to group this type of comedy together. As opposed to the 'outer' form, which is difficult to pin down as a shared feature of television comedy dealt with here, the 'inner' form – including attitude, tone, purpose, subject and audience – contributes more to the attempt to find a common ground that allows for a loose subgeneric grouping.

One important feature of the inner form is **tone**. In describing the tone - an important communicative strategy employed in these texts is that they use irony - a rhetorical form and an interaction requiring shared understandings of the spoken and the unspoken. It includes both an explicit utterance and its underlying, (sometimes) oppositional, implied meaning, or to put it simply, the discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. However, as Wolfgang Iser (1974) argues it is not enough to reverse the meaning and to claim that the text means the opposite of what is said, because "the ironic allusions can no[t] ... be regarded as a mere reversal of the written statement" (Iser 1974, 33), which makes the meaning-making process more complex. In the words of Breda Luthar, "irony might be defined simply as an evaluation that does not correspond to the explicitly spoken" (Luthar 1998, 34), a definition which encompasses the incongruity between the value judgment and the outspoken, but escapes the simple reversal of meaning. The incongruity present in irony is, as Lars Ellestrom argues, not only related to the text (as usually argued), but to a shared understanding of what "'normal' language, 'normal' behaviour, 'correct' norms and a 'true' description of the world are" (Ellestrom 2002, 60).

Hutcheon points out that irony is related to power. This is why she frames it as a discursive strategy connected to society, history and culture. It is political in nature because by "provoking laughter, irony invokes notions of hierarchy and subordination, judgment and perhaps even moral superiority" (Chamberlain 1989, 98 in Hutcheon 1994, 17). It is also transideological – meaning there is nothing intrinsically progressive or reactionary in it: it "can be provocative when its politics are conservative or authoritarian as easily as when its politics are oppositional or subversive: it depends on who is using/attributing it and at whose expense it is seen to be." (White 1973, 38 in Hutcheon 1994, 10). In addition, irony has an 'edge' which appears since the meaning - in its moment of occurrence - has a target subjected to ridicule, which makes it carry an emotional dimension as well. Furthermore, different from prevalent ideas of irony that

refer to it as a primarily intellectual enterprise, Hutcheon claims it also has an emotional charge, firstly because it ‘denies certainties’; and secondly because it always includes judgmentally (Hutcheon 1994, 14-15).

Irony can appear in texts not necessarily comical in nature; however, when irony appears as a communicative strategy in comedy, it is easier to ‘find’ than in more ‘unexpected’ places, since the context - or to be more specific the particular properties attached to comedy, and the particular expectations held by the audiences - make the reader<sup>29</sup> more attentive to it. The usage of irony in comedy is a match because both comedy as a genre and irony as a rhetorical strategy enable expression of values, and at the same time “escape from the substantiation of (...) statements” or, in other words, escape from the responsibility of the outspoken (Luthar 1998, 35).

Another feature of the inner form important in this respect is the **purpose** of this type of comedy. In addition to the main purpose of comedy in general which is to amuse, it also attempts to do something else - to satirize, to give a social commentary, to critically process some social phenomenon viewed as problematic. Satire is traditionally defined as ridiculing human vice with an aim to initiate improvement or correction. The function it serves is the “debunking of prevalent social norms, institutions and mores” (Neale 2000, 71). As Stott defines it:

*“Satire aims to denounce folly and vice and urge ethical and political reform through the subjection of ideas to humorous analysis. In the best instances, it takes its subject matter from the heart of political life or cultural anxiety, re-framing issues at an ironic distance that enables us to revisit fundamental questions that have been obscured by rhetoric, personal interests, or realpolitic”* (Stott 2005, 109).

Stott further argues that there are two types of satire with root in ancient Rome, formed by the writers Horace and Juvenal: the first ‘moderate’, aiming at improvement and with a faith in humans as benign, while the second referred to as the satire of “savage indignation, the bitter condemnation of venal and stupid humanity” (Stott 2005, 112). The first is more linked to the

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<sup>29</sup> The notion of “reader” or “reading” stemmed from the field of literary studies (Ingarden 1973; Iser 1978; Jauss 1970) and was imported into the field of media studies in the 70ies.

traditional view of satire as attempting to serve as a corrective, while the second, perhaps more immanent to contemporary societies, carries a cynical attitude and does not attempt to offer any solutions at all.

In addition to irony and satire, as mentioned before, these texts involve various genres that are appropriated and then parodied or re-contextualised “through the transformation of [their] textual (and contextual) elements, thus creating a *new* text. This conversion - through the resulting oscillation between similarity to, and difference from the target – creates a level of ironic incongruity with an inevitable satiric impulse” (Harries 2000, 6 in Gray 2006, 44).

Even though irony and parody can be employed separately and do not have to be comic, they are often linked together. As both irony and parody imply a sort of duality or two coexisting positions - the implied and the outspoken, or the parodied texts and the parodic text - they have a capacity for ambiguity. Hutcheon claims that because “parody always implicitly reinforces even as it ironically debunks, it will always be ideologically suspect to some” (Hutcheon 2000, xii). In addition, satire carries a moral or social commentary and offers - as Stott claims - “no counter-argument that can either be concretely identified with the authorial position or be considered socially constructive ... [it makes] satire appeal to widely disparate groups” (Stott 2005, 113). Thus, by employing irony, parody and satire these texts clearly have a capacity for ambiguity.

In summary, this type of comedy can only be categorized as a subgenre if one focuses more on the inner form: the tone, purpose, style and/or attitude towards the world. The outer form includes a few loosely defined conventions that could be attached to these texts. These are that they are scheduled in a late time slot (which indicates the way the audience are perceived by the broadcasters), and do not usually last longer than half an hour. Since they employ parody, they also carry some conventions of a genre (or genres) that they ‘inhabit’. In addition to the ‘outer’ form, the ‘inner’ form enables a more successful grouping because they are similar in attitude, tone, and purpose and likely to attract the same audience. Besides their function to amuse and initiate laughter, they aim for something else: to criticize matters of concern for the satirist and to make a statement that is in a broader sense political in order to initiate debate. Thus, if - as Hanno Hardt puts it - media still “...Continue to represent the economic and political authority of the dominant order, from where it creates the realities of self and society...” (Hardt 2004,

141) - it is possible to view these groups of texts as a contribution to the unmasking of the dominant order. It strategically challenges the common-sense which potentially contributes to changing conditions of that same order. However, in addition to this ‘Horace path’ Stott refers to, or the political function of satire in destroying authority and in reframing naturalized social rules, it can also take the ‘Juvenal path’ in which its cynical mode is more destructive, not only in the light of its possible targets, but also as a way in which the “‘limited transgression’” is a tool “for reckless behaviour that enables the continuance of the social order” (Stott 2005, 35).

By using irony, parody and satire as communicative strategies they have a capacity for ambiguity, and combined with a merciless rhetoric, and a biting, uncompromising tone, they are likely to provoke anger or discontent on the part of the viewers. A crucial feature is the play with authority and hierarchy – this is conveyed in various ways - by depicting the main protagonists as children vs. adults (as in *South Park*) or by using a setting in which the goal of the show is to educate (as in *Ali G Show* or *Zlikavci*), or to inform (*Brass Eye*) by parodying genres such as news or current affairs... They also play with binary oppositions, and undermine their taken-for-granted naturalness, by reversing them in terms of value. For example, the usual depiction of parents and children in which parents are responsible and children are not, is reversed in *Absolutely Fabulous*, in which the mother takes the position of the child and vice versa. In *Da Ali G Show*, using drugs is a positive thing etc. Social conventions are questioned and the unspoken or the taboos are brought back into public utterance. In this sense, they criticize norms and conventions, or what counts as civilized, and they do so by purposefully engaging in ‘uncivilized’ modes of conduct which makes their reception twofold, ranging from acceptance and praise to rejection and critique.

They are intentionally political but not in the narrow sense, as well as overtly progressive or regressive, liberal or conservative. They move beyond the established political options, and usually ridicule these splits and separations as particular interests of different social actors. Perhaps the liberal option is somewhat nearer because they probe the borders of what can be said and done in an orderly, normative setting. Furthermore, tradition – important for conservative/regressive - is often a valuable source of inspiration for scorn. But in a general sense, instead of taking one side or the other, they move beyond these divisions. In terms of class, they are definitely anti-establishment, and target the elite in general, but they also target the mainstream population - established and accepted social norms and values that are agreed

upon, often taken for granted and unquestioned. They target social norms that form the basis of what counts as 'civilized', and one of their targets is the quest for 'politically correct' language that permeates contemporary societies.

A possible label for texts grouped into this sub-genre could be 'edge-comedy,' not only because of the delimitations to generic grouping in terms of form, but also due to one of their crucial features - the blade of their content. Another label that is frequently attached and which indicates some of its characteristics is the concept of 'postmodern comedy'. This category, however, has been used in a variety of different ways and implies different meanings, including a transgression of the borders between reality and fiction, the spread of parody and intertextual references and the hyperconsciousness of itself (Collins 1992), and using irony as a communicative strategy by which everything can be said, but with a distance secured. What the label 'postmodern' lacks in this case is the social commentary, the critical edge, the satire, which is not necessarily implied in this category.

## 5. Comedy and society: the limits of humour

Different functions are attached to comedy as a genre. The social function of comedy, and in a broader sense, of carnival - in which 'rites of reversal' or the anti-structure (in Turner's terminology) are at stake and "the poor could mock and laugh at the rich" (Turner in Barnard and Spencer 1996: 489-490) - is viewed in different, often contrasting ways. It is seen as conservative and simply providing pleasure and escapism from reality – more a way to preserve the status quo which includes the reaffirmation of persisting hierarchical positions. Purdie argues that "all forms of comedy involve a recognition of the norms whose transgression they entail, and hence a claim to social membership at the expense not only of those who are comedy's butts, but also of those who don't get its jokes." (Purdie 1993 in Neale 2000, 71). In this respect, comedy is seen as a mode of distraction that is more disabling than enabling in subverting the established norms in a society.

The other position is one according to which comedy can be linked to political resistance, since it is a way to 'know reality' (Berger 1992), to be critical to this "reality" and to attempt to 'improve' it by the usage of humour,

For Bakhtin (1981) laughter and comedy have a subversive potential in that they bring distant, powerful elements in society closer to the viewers, by which existing hierarchical positions are diminished. As he claims:

*"As a distanced image a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical it must be brought close. Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand, all comical creativity works in a zone of maximal proximity. Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of creative contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically."* (Bakhtin 1981 in Berger 2005, 78).

A moderate path is proposed by Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik who argue that “deviations from the norm are conventional in comedy and hence that ‘subversion ‘is a licensed and integral aspect of comedy’s social and institutional existence (Neale and Krutnik 1990, 83-94 in Neale 2000, 71). For this reason, the social significance of comedy should, according to them, be analyzed and attached to the local level rather than to generalize its potential significance (Neale 2000, 71). The potential subversion that comedy can provoke is context specific: it can be subversive in one particular setting while reaffirming in another, which is why it is important to analyse the social context within which it appears.

The context is also important in respect to how far one can ‘push the envelope’ and use different events or people in order to produce comic material. What can be joked about and what not is subject to change and is determined by historical changes including a broader consensus about what counts as 'fundamental values' in a community. In addition to this broader macro-level, the specific situation on the micro-level is important because of the constant process of evaluation and estimation of the intents of the one involved in a comic situation – including both the speaker/author, the target and the bystanders.

Even though the tolerance for specific *faux pas* in comedy is stretched due to its amusement value, they often transgress this line and initiate debates on the limits of humour. As visible in the case of edge-comedy, because of its sharp type of humour and its political character, this type of television text occupies a liminal position, in that its discursive strategies balance on the edge of acceptable and disputable discursive practice, and triggers debates of what is acceptable and what is not, what is civilized behaviour and what not. Due to the fact that comedy and humour are a field within which the borders of acceptable and unacceptable is utmostly stretched, it provides a useful field of researching and detecting the normative regarding what can/should be mediated in public as well as in interactional relations among members of a society.

In ancient Greece, Aristotle set the foundations of what ‘good’ comedy is, defined in relation (and in opposition) to tragedy. As he claimed, comedy includes representing men as worse while tragedy shows them as better than in actual life (Aristotle, Part 2), it is “...an imitation of characters of a lower type - not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or



destructive.” (Aristotle, Part 3). Good comedy is “dramatizing the ludicrous instead of writing personal satire” (Aristotle, Part 4), and in its construction “...the poet first constructs the plot on the lines of probability, and then inserts characteristic names - unlike the lampooners who write about particular individuals.” (Aristotle, Part 9). Thus, according to Aristotle, the limits to ‘good’ comedy is that – even if it includes exaggeration of human traits, especially the ugly/bad ones - it should not be painful or destructive, nor should it include personal derision, that aims at particular individuals.<sup>30</sup>

Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering tackle the distinction “between serious and comic discourse and more specifically between humour and offensiveness” (Lockyer and Pickering 2006, 3), because they contest the argument that the quality of being funny is encompassed with the “commonplace notion that a joke is *sui generis* and shouldn’t be registered within the same schema of understanding as serious discourse” (Lockyer and Pickering 2006, 2). According to the authors, humour is not always well taken, especially when it touches upon social identities of people or when it is offensive. The usual backfire directed towards the offended is that they are accused of lacking a sense of humour, that they are moralistic or intolerant, or that they are ‘politically correct’ – something the authors claim to be an “uninspected term of condemnation” (Lockyer and Pickering 2006, 3).

There are two main positions with regard to the limits of humour: one is that humour should be constrained, since it can destroy self-belief and have serious repercussions on self-esteem. Thus, the “...aesthetics of comedy, even if conceived only in terms of its intrinsic formal dynamics, cannot be cleaved off in that way from moral, ethical and political considerations associated with the ‘real world’ (Lockyer and Pickering 2006, 13); The other position clings to the argument that “jokes can be made about anything and that the right to offend is paramount” (Lockyer and Pickering 2006, 10).

Jerry Palmer claims that “...excessive contentiousness produces offence instead of humour, [and] excessive politeness produces boredom; one of the arts demanded of the comedian is the ability to tread this dividing line (Palmer 1987, 175 in Lockyer and Pickering 2006, 12).

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<sup>30</sup> In ancient Greece, the population of a city-state was smaller, which made the mockery of individuals more personal.; However, in a mediated world, this type of nearness has become a thing of the past. The distance makes it seem less harmful. This is applicable to other areas of social life also, where new, fast emerging technologies facilitate operations to take place and be initiated from a distance which makes it harder to establish a link between individual actions and their potential consequences.

Nevertheless, this line is obscure, and differently defined depending on context. In its most radical form, the crossing of the line results in legal penalties, swinging between freedom of speech regulation and open censorship, while the more 'soft' version, visible in the form of social pressure circumscribed in the idea of political correctness or the definition of (dis)taste, potentially results in self-censorship.

This line with comedy has been crossed many times. Frequently this gives rise not only to discussions regarding its appropriateness, but also censorship and/or legal actions taken either by social institutions or individuals. The contentious issues dealt with by comedians change and develop depending on context, time and place: in a broad sense, they tackle the underlying assumptions and norms, the deep "fundamental" dogmatic beliefs and taboos in a society, ranging from religion, race, war, and political institutions to bodily functions /dysfunctions, sex and deviant behaviour. As Stephen E. Kerchner argues in his writing about the 60ies in the USA (at a time when satire was broadly used as a mode of social critique) "...No matter how offensive these satirists may have appeared to their opponents, it was not until they uttered obscenities and addressed the subjects of sex and religion on stage that they encountered truly bitter and angry resistance" (Kerchner 2006, 390). Some topics are to a certain degree permanently causing outrage, others become more accepted while new ones continuously emerge. In contemporary debates a theme that seems to be particularly disturbing is the Holocaust, a historical event that has clearly set out limits in terms of comic potential where transgression of the same is inevitably going to be seen as unacceptable. Even if themes such as religion and sex (in contemporary debates most notably paedophilia) provoke reaction and constantly balance on the border of (un)acceptable discourse, it is true that comedy in the last two decades, carries a more overt 'ruthlessness', perhaps as a negative reflection of the normative condescension that emerged as political correctness, which implies that it is not OK to make fun of the subaltern identities that seek recognition in the 60ies such as women, Blacks, homosexuals.

Regardless of the evident changes in contemporary comedy that can be identified by comparison with previous form, style and content, every period in history has limits in terms of what can be said; a border that is constantly negotiated. Today – as in the past - the borderlines of what is deemed to be 'appropriate' and 'disputable' are reproduced or reconstructed through discourses that reflect social relations. In that way this type of comedy and its reception is

valuable in that it reveals discourses on what is civilized as opposed to uncivilized (Elias 1994), or what good (legitimate) taste is as opposed to bad taste (Bourdieu 1984), what should be laughed at and what not etc.

### **5.1. Controversial humour today: politically incorrect discourse**

Politically incorrect discourse in edge comedy provokes discussions about where we stand in terms of basic values or deeply hidden taboos, and what we want our society to look like. In connecting this sub-genre with civilized behaviour a twofold relationship emerges: on the one hand these texts use values and norms as a primary target and dominant motif for critique, and set out to challenge the assumptions which they imply; on the other hand, the appearance of this type of comedy invokes strategies of silencing 'inappropriate' humour, in which various social groups and institutions participate: specific media text will be referred to as 'uncivilized', 'distasteful' or - in a contemporary setting - linked to '(in)appropriate language' labelled as 'politically incorrect', offensive and/or harmful.

Discourses on 'civilized', 'tasteful' and 'politically correct' constitute the core of edge comedy. It is also substantial in the analysis of the reception of this type of text - it creates links among people but also clearly separates groups. The centrality of these concepts, operating both within the texts, as well as in the extra-textual environment, makes it necessary to conceptually clarify them and place them in a wider social context.

What does it mean to be civilized? 'Civilization' is, according to the dictionary<sup>31</sup>, defined in two ways as:

1. "A stage of social development, in which the division of labour and exchange among people that emerges from that division, as well as material production that unites both of these processes, fully blossoms and makes an upheaval of the whole former society" (Engels);
2. "A high stage of social development and material culture" From the same source, the term 'civilised' is defined as "cultured, educated, enlightened, mannerly, courtly, polite."

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31 Bratoljub Klaić 1988. Rjecnik stranih rijeci. Zagreb: Nakladni zavod MH.

The Wordnet web site defines it as “a society in an advanced state of social development”; “as a social process whereby societies achieve an advanced stage of development and organization”; and “as the quality of excellence in thought and manners and taste”.<sup>32</sup>

As visible from the above the concept of civilization is related to both material and immaterial progress: a process of development, a higher stage of material production, but it also relates to immaterial ways of conduct, specific behaviour that is defined as appropriate. The interlinkage of these two levels has been well theorised by Norbert Elias who<sup>33</sup> traces the etymology of the term ‘civilization’ to concepts of courtesy, civility and their relation to modes of distinction between antagonistic classes. Elias goes back to the sixteenth century ‘courtoisie’ or ‘courtesy’ which was a standard of ‘good behaviour’ (Elias 1994, 50) related to courtly circles. However, this term was replaced with ‘civilité’ or ‘civility’, a development that, according to Elias, marked an important change in society<sup>34</sup>. In the 18th Century, with the upward mobility of the bourgeoisie, the popularization of court manners was favoured and encouraged by clerics and the church. Since then, publications on ‘civility’ mushroomed and the manners proposed were widely adopted by other layers of society which made them lose their function as behaviour-specific for the absolutistic court. In this period, the term ‘civility’ was abandoned (just as the

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32 WordNet: A lexical database for English, Princeton University. Available at: <http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=civilization> (Retrieved: 18 March 2009).

33 In his theory of civilisation Norbert Elias (1994) tackles the nature of social process and connects structures of psychological function and standards of behaviour with structures of social functions which together initiate change of habitus which occurs in iterations. Elias gives us an outline of the civilising process from the Middle Ages onwards, which he links to broader social processes of industrialisation interwoven with differentiation of society, the increased interdependence of classes and people in general, which urged for a new form of social organisation that would include a more precise regulation of social life in general. This regulation was conducted by and through monopolistic physical force and its centralisation in the nation state which emerged at the time (thought of as a community, homogenised in terms of norms and values) in order to protect and enable the interdependence of people which would be jeopardised if instinct were expressed; a new type of behaviour was needed: accountability and self constraint of affects. In the Middle Ages aggressiveness was possible, but so was the possibility of becoming a victim, uncertainty was present in everyday life. The extreme of pleasure and displeasure changed, but with the change of human relations, and the creation of a monopolistic organisation of physical force, humans are kept disciplined and focused on peaceful functions founded in gaining assets, profit or status. Thus the expression of affects moves towards the middle, while the extremes are abandoned, resulting in more moderate behaviour, and the exclusion of drives from the surface of social life (Elias 1994, 464). In this process the individual internalises the social constraints forced upon him/her and shame and repugnance seems as if it is inherited from within (Elias 1994, 510). The change in shame and disgust regarding the socially accepted and prohibited is a result of long term iterations, and is connected to changes in interpersonal social relations (Elias 1994, 517). “Society is gradually beginning to suppress the positive pleasure component in certain functions more and more strongly by the arousal of anxiety; or more exactly, it is rendering this pleasure ‘private’ and ‘secret’ (i.e., suppressing it within the individual), while fostering the negatively charged affects – displeasure, revulsion, distaste – as the only feelings customary in society.” (Elias 1994, 117).

34 Elias analysed the treaty of Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus „De civilitate morum puerilium” ( “On civility in children” published in 1530, reprinted in various forms and languages in the course of the 16th Century. In this treaty, Erasmus outlined the etiquette in the 16th Century related to manners: how to look, dress, sit, greet, stand, walk, dance, set the table, eat, etc... (Elias 1994, 43-45).

term ‘civilitéé’ was abandoned before civilite). (Elias 1994, 152), and slowly replaced by the newly coined term ‘civilization’<sup>35</sup> (Elias 1994, 153).<sup>36</sup>

In the beginning ‘politesse’ (‘manner’) or ‘civilitéé’ (‘civility’) had “the same function as ‘civilization’ “by which the courtly people wished to designate, in a broad or narrow sense, the specific quality of their own behaviour, and by which they contrasted the refinement of their own social manners, their ‘standard’, to the manners of simpler and socially inferior people” (Elias 1994, 32).<sup>37</sup>

However, in the second half of the 18th Century ‘civilized’ was not only related to a specific class but to broader social structures. It referred to the behaviour, norms and values typical of Western civilization, and specifically to the self-consciousness of the western world and its achievements (related to progress in terms of technology, modes of behaviour, scientific paradigms or world views). In addition, it implied colonization and the attempts to ‘civilize’ the ‘barbarian’ – it implied western supremacy. Even though this broad level was interlinked with national consciousness, ‘civilization’ goes beyond vast differences and has a tendency to emphasize similarities in an otherwise heterogeneous pool of nation states.

Thus, in the beginning of its emergence, ‘civilization’<sup>38</sup> served as an instrument by which the upper class distinguished itself from the lower.<sup>39</sup> Later, at the end of the 18th Century (which

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35 Elias traces the first appearance of the idea of ‘civilisation’ back to Turgot in 1751. However, the first appearance of the concept deriving from the verb ‘civiliser’ is credited to Mirabeau (1760), who develops what Turgot referred to as ‘politesse’ or ‘manners’ into the more wide and dynamic concept of ‘civilisation’

36 According to Elias, the concepts of ‘civilitéé’, ‘civilitéé’, and ‘civilisation’ first emerged and became broadly used only once the actual social process was completed. Hence, by the time the concept of ‘civilized’ was broadly circulated, the change in behaviour of upper classes had already occurred in the previous phase - the ‘civilitéé’ period. In the same manner, by the time the concept of ‘civilisation’ had become widespread in the 19th Century, the whole civilisation process was completed, and was only still occurring in other nation states, and perhaps sporadically in the lower strata’s of western societies (Elias 1994).

37 Within the second half of the 18th and 19th Centuries in Europe, differences appeared in the understanding of the notion of ‘civilisation’ and these very much related to context and the emerging nation states. In Germany, the bourgeoisie was appreciated for its contribution to the formation of the nation state -- a specificity of German culture. The newly established middle class was related to national categories and had a legitimacy due to its accomplishments, whereas the upper class, the aristocracy did not have a legacy of creating anything but a form of distinct behaviour, referred to as social courtesy and refinement in order to justify their privileged position. This is why ‘civilisation’ in the context of the German tradition was only an externality, an empty form of behaviour, and had a negative connotation. On the contrary, ‘culture’ marked a primal virtue, and was related to national pride and accomplishments, but confined to the spiritual, artistic and religious sphere. In this context ‘Kultur’ is a term which emphasises national differences, peculiarities and borders (Elias, 1994).

38 Stephen Mennell and Johan Goudsblom (1998) point out that Elias made clear that this did not “represent the ‘beginning’ of the human civilising process” (Mennell and Goudsblom 1998, 17). He also distinguished between three levels of the civilizing process: the individual

marks the end of the civilizing process in the West), this ‘development process’ has transferred to other parts of the world carried by the colonization processes. The supremacy of the upper class remained, but it was related to colonialism instead of aristocratic reign. In Elias's view, this marked an important phase in the civilizing process characterized by the development of an awareness of western supremacy related to behaviour, science and art.<sup>40</sup>

This spiral of civilisation moves beyond particular societies and today includes the “spread of civilization” or the standards and institutions of the West to other parts of the world, (Elias 1994, 461) either by “settlement of Occidentals or through the assimilation of the upper strata of other nations.” (Elias 1994, 362). Thus, the upper strata can be related to class but what is important is that “western nations as a whole have an upper-class function” (Elias 1994, 463). Elias points out the ambiguous position that they have, since the patterns of distinction are constantly reproduced in order to increase the distinction, but at the same time, whilst the patterns spread, there is a counter process whereby they necessarily make the variation diminish.

*“On the one hand, they [western nations as upper-class] build, through institutions and by the strict regulation of their own behaviour, a wall between themselves and the groups they colonize and whom they consider their inferiors; on the other, with their social forms, they also spread their own style of conduct and institutions in these places”* (Elias 1994, 463).

Thus, civilisation is linked both to the West, as ‘superior’ compared to other civilizations, as well as to civilised behaviour which is socially defined and appropriated by the upper class

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level, related to infants and children and internalisation of social norms and values; the level of particular societies and the level of humanity as a whole (Mennel and Goudsblom 1998, 17-18).

39 From a close-up look at today’s western societies, the difference between low and high class may seem considerable; however, from a historical point of view, these differences have diminished, and the behaviours of different social groups are becoming more and more similar. The characteristics of the upper class migrate downwards, but this migration works in the opposite direction also: the characteristics of the lower classes migrate upwards (as the regulation of work). This is, according to Elias, an important sign of civilization. However, the more similar they become, the more rigid are the patterns of distinction created by the upper class, and the higher the control of the in-group members in order to prevent the “breach of the common distinguishing code” (Elias 1994, 463). This group-fear related to the loss of position is in turn converted into individual anxiety about degradation and loss of prestige (Elias 1994, 463).

40 This supremacy has in contemporary political thoughts been evoked by Samuel Huntington’s thesis on the clashes of civilisation that foreground cultural and religious identities as a source of conflict, which he developed in the book ‘The Clash of Civilisations And the Remaking of World Order’. 1997. London: Simon and Schuster.

within a society. Both modes still work on a conceptual as well as an empirical level, even though it is certainly true that contemporary societies have a more relaxed and propulsive way of class formation than was the case in 18th and 19th Century societies which were the subject of Elias's analysis. Social mobility is one of the core values promoted in the ideology of democracy and liberal market economy that encompass it. In addition, civilization as a concept has been heavily criticized through post-colonial theories as a 'colonizing discourse'. However, regardless of the self-reflexive attempt to deal with injustices, exploitation and the superiority syndrome of the West, this idea of civilization defined as a level of progress, and civilized behaviour defined by the establishment, still works as a pattern of 'distinction' in our societies, even though the contacts are more frequent and accessible in a globalized world, in which nation states compete for power with supranational entities. The Cold War divisions along East and West, socialism and liberalism have been dissolved in favour of the West, by which the spread of Western civilization values are penetrating into a new area. However, new divisions are deepened on a wider global scale: Huntington's culturally exclusive theory of the 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington 1997) - in which he views 'civilizations' as stable and separate entities - has been vivified and exploited in the defamation of Islamic culture and religion, with a breaking point in the event of 9/11 that recreated the notion of civilization along religious lines as its fundamental principle of distinction in ways that could not have been foreseen only a few decades ago.

Regardless of what the distinctive characteristics are in the respective formations, the processes of (re)creating distinctions are the same everywhere, as are the relations of domination and hegemony. Edward W. Said deals with the concept of 'orientalism' and claims:

“Orientalism almost constantly strategically depends on a flexible position of superiority, which brings the Occidental into a range of different relations with the Orient, but never losing its predominance” (Said 1978, 14).<sup>41</sup>

An important element of the occident civilization today - which is a result of the self-reflexive critical discourse that has emerged within the Occident - is political correctness. It evokes the concept of “civility” in a new way and in a new context. To be “politically correct” is an

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41 Translation by author. “Orijentalizam gotovo konstantno strateški ovisi o toj fleksibilnoj pozicijskoj nadmoći što zapadnjaka dovodi u svekolik niz mogućih odnosa s Orijentoma da nikada pri tome ne gubi razmjernu prevlast” (Said 1978, 14).

important feature of “being civilized” in contemporary societies, even though the term *per se* is a rare example of one so much disputed and yet so much in use. It could be argued that political correctness is a permanent dimension of every society if it is defined as taboos that should not be uttered, or as positions/world views that are censured by political authority and legally prosecuted (such as National Socialism in Germany after World War II, or a critique of the regime in former socialist states). However, I consider political correctness to be a new phenomenon; a specific form of self-censorship that has emerged as a result of pressure coming from the upper strata of western societies. It is a form of self-reflexive critique that has introduced sensitivity in language especially linked to less powerful, subaltern groups, some of which were constituted as new collectivities in the 60ies and 70ies.

Thus, the term ‘politically correct’ is primarily related to language. David Macey defines it as the “avoidance of the discriminatory and offensive language and behaviour associated with sexism and racism” (Macey 2001, 301) but it also refers to any type of discriminatory or offensive language oriented towards different identity groups (especially the less powerful). Political correctness appeared with the emergence of the New Left<sup>42</sup> movements in the 60ies, a period in which identity politics, affirmative action and multiculturalism swept across the West, processes in which previously powerless and marginalized groups claimed their rights for recognition as relevant social actors.<sup>43</sup> What formed the basis of this idea was the attempt to point at deep inequalities and firm hierarchies in the West, embedded in language. With the recognition of these inequalities and an attempt to change them, it was necessary to change the conceptual tools in usage. As an example, people with physical problems were no longer

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42 According to Ruth Perry (in Aufderheide 1992), the term *per se* first appeared in Mao Zedong’s Little Red Book ;,however, this seems a bit far fetched, since Mao used the phrase “correct in a political way” to pin down the relationship between arts and politics. In a speech in Jenan on literature and art in 1942 he said: “What we request is the unity of politics and art, unity of content and form, unity of revolutionary political content and the highest perfection of art forms”. Mao rejects art that is progressive in a political sense, but without artistic quality, and artistic forms with “wrong political standpoints” as well as tendencies close to ‘poster and slogan style’ correct in a political sense, but with no artistic strength.” (Mao Zedong, 1964). He argued for a unity of politics and arts, as a unification of content and form (Mao Ce Tung, Izabrani citati, Mali zarez, 2009).

43 Anthony Slide traces the upholders of political correctness back to the early 20th Century and the City Censorship Board in Chicago, which was led by Lucullus Cicero Funkhouser, who was “opposed to the screening of any films that might be considered anti-German propaganda” (Slide 2007, 222). In 1917 the feature *The Little American* was banned, so Paramount filed a lawsuit against the city of Chicago and were successful. Major Funkhouser was later suspended when World War 1 broke out and the context changed; however,as Slide points out “his opposition to blatantly offensive anti-German propaganda suggests Funkhouser might be categorised as an upholder of political correctness” (Slide 2007, 222). In its contemporary form he claims that the true arrival of political correctness came with the movie *The Fish Called Wanda*, aired in 1991 and criticised heavily because of its incorrect jokes (Slide 2007).



referred to as ‘invalids’ – because of the negative connotation of non-validity in a society, instead a more neutral, non-offensive term replaced it, namely the term ‘disabled’.

Political correctness is usually comprehended in binary frames according to political position: the critique from the right<sup>44</sup> is - as the US conservative Roger Kimball argues - oriented towards the liberal’s effort “to promote affirmative action and to nurture multicultural aspiration” and towards the spreading of an “abstract moralist triumph over realism, benevolence over prudence, earnest humorlessness over patience”.<sup>45</sup> However, this polarization on the basis of political orientation simplifies it and ignores the varieties of critique also coming from the left. The critique coming from multiple directions including a part of the left is related to the fact that it prevents certain questions to be articulated, which provoke uneasiness, a process that ends up in self-censorship. It is also seen as a hypocritical position, in which the inequalities are tackled on a superficial level, remaining on the level of language, while the change in attitude and behaviour - that would give hope for the dismissal of inequalities - does not necessarily encompass this change. To only advocate for change in language ensures a comfortable position to the supporters of political correctness: on the one hand the insistence on ‘politically correct language’ implies a political position that roots for equity and fairness and at the same time leaves structural inequalities intact. This kind of critique of political correctness goes beyond left or right political orientation.

Political correctness is supposed to show awareness and protect previously powerless collectivities (‘minorities’ or identity groups), but in the formation of such collectivities, the expectations of its subjects to comply and act homogeneous and in accordance with their supposed ‘interests’, are often taken for granted. This occurs both from the outside and from the inside of a collectivity built around a particular identity trait that is foregrounded as the ‘dominant’ one (ethnic, sexual orientation, gender etc). For instance, in their writing, Pickering and Lockyer (2006) give an example of Berlusconi who made a joke about German concentration camps and SS guards, targeting a German politician who was a member of the European Parliament. In this case the authors stated that some people were prepared to defend Berlusconi some of whom "*even* included Jewish people." This is an example of the

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44 It should be noted that the traditional difference between the right and left in contemporary democracies is fading, and that the policies of ruling political parties are quite similar. There is, however, a gap between citizens and the ruling elites, in which the crisis of representative democracies is more and more visible.

45 Roger Kimball 2003. Political Correctness, or, the Perils of Benevolence. National Interest 74.(Retrieved: 25 May 2008).

‘automatic’ labelling in relation to social identity, and the 'straitjacket' of proscribed subject positions. It deprives one of the right to engage in a free manner, and forces a homogeneity proscribed for and/or by the collectivity. In this particular case, it is clearly expected that the ‘unified body’ react in the same manner to specific kinds of utterance, and it seems unthinkable that a Jewish or German could laugh at such a joke (of course, for various reasons – the positions of victim and the perpetrator). Applied to comedy and humour, in evaluating whether a joke is acceptable or not, Lockyer and Pickering (2006) claim that the identity of the speaker is crucial – if the joke is related to the identity of the speaker – it is acceptable, but if it is at the expense of others, it is not.

Contemporary western societies have, to a large extent, introduced the awareness of what ‘appropriate’ language is, and this is reflected in the changes in power relations to a certain degree. However, this awareness is often the subject of criticism because the attempt to accomplish equality in and through language re-invokes issues of freedom of expression, which ends up in a hypocritical collective silence through which prejudices towards the ‘Other’ are present but not discussed and brought into the arena of public discussion. The dismantling of the silence is one possible aim of edge comedy, and it is conducted by transgressing the borders of civilized behaviour and utterance.

Finally, even though political correctness as a term has often been subjugated to harsh criticism and referred to as negative and non-sensical, it is still frequently referred to in the context of dismissing expressions that are considered to be harmful, insensitive, uncivilized etc. Since the term ‘political correctness’ *per se* has a pejorative note, there have been attempts to replace the term with terms such as “inclusive language” or simply “civility”, however, ‘political correctness’ as an expression is still more widely used. Thus, ‘political correctness’ is one dimension of being civilised today; it is incorporated into the old matrix of being civilized, well behaved, polite, mannerly, tasteful...Due to the fact that edge comedy attacks this dimension of being civilized, it tends to raise controversy – it provokes discontent on part of the viewers, while others applaud its existence, as we will see in the examples below.

## **5.2. Examples of controversial television comedy**

Controversial television comedy that has stirred up debates about its appropriateness and has, at the same time, been praised, by some, as genius critical commentary is not new. Looking back

at the history of television comedy one reference point that is commonly referred to is the *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. The collective work of Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin appeared in the late 60ies and was, at the time, very innovative. These comedies drew on the radio broadcast *The Goon Show*, aired in the early 50ies and *Beyond the Fringe*, which according to Michael Palin was “the first show to joke at the expense of the Prime Minister” (Chapman et al. 2007, 45)<sup>46</sup>. In the beginning of broadcasting, the *Monty Python's Flying Circus* was marginalized within BBC. The time slot was constantly moved, indicating confusion on the part of the broadcasters in their attempt to predict the audience. Initially, the programme got a marginal time slot on Mondays at around 22 h which later changed due to an increased television audience, when *Monthy Python* got a permanent slot on Sunday evenings.

The Python group was inspired by pompous themes such as art, history, sacred national heritage, and rules which defined ‘civilized behaviour’ and which reflected on the conventions of their time. The sketches did not have a conventional narrative flow, with a beginning, an end and a punch-line. They were satirical, with elements of fantasy, parodying television forms (such as studio interviews, talk shows and news), and showing the absurdity and arbitrariness of social conventions.

For the Python group the limits of humour were clear, even though they held different values and had very different social backgrounds. As they claim, they did not ridicule, nor did they link the materials directly to particular people or events, but were more interested in scorning prevalent conventions that were firmly defined and followed without questioning. They wanted to emphasize the value of individual freedom, which is why authority of any kind was ridiculed. Terry Jones emphasized that they did not deride particular people or events, but focused more on human nature (Chapman et al. 2007, 214). This very general focus on norms and constraints that encompassed the “civilizing process” (Elias) is what made the Python group successful outside the borders of UK from where they originated, because people from other cultures could recognize the conventions scorned, without needing to know specific events or public persons.

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46 Author's translation.

According to the critics, *Monty Python* was sadistic, primary-school humour, pathetic, hopeless, nonsensical, infantile and distasteful. They were seriously criticized mostly for blasphemy, for scorning Christianity, especially in the movie *The Life of Brian* which was banned in the USA, and in some cities in the UK. However, in their attempt to explain their position, they emphasize the difference between heresy and blasphemy: they never thought of Jesus Christ or what he proclaimed as material for comedy, rather they scorned the church as an institution, and the various interpretations of ‘truth’ that develop and vary in accordance with the interests of particular groups.<sup>47</sup>

The shocking, disturbing theme was mostly linked to religion. At the time, political correctness was not yet labelled, even though the foundation for its spread was laid, with the multiculturalists’ demands, and identity politics that started to emerge. One early example of political correctness that they encountered was in the commentary on the *Ministry of Silly Walks*. According to Cleese, Con Mahoney – the Head of Light Entertainment at BBC - claimed their sketch was funny, but he expressed concerns about the sketch on silly walks because parents with handicapped children might take offence (Chapman et al. 2007:174). The *Monty Python's Flying Circus* was embraced by the youth, especially the student population when it first emerged and it had a slightly elitist twist in that lofty cultural references were often used, relating to art, history, politics which were perhaps a bit far-fetched for the mainstream population. However, because of their broad opus that also included slapstick and travesty, they were also embraced by a larger audience and are today representing a ‘classic’ in the world of comedy.

Another contemporary example of controversial comedy, with global reach is *South Park* - the animated satirical television comedy starring four primary school boys, living in South Park, Colorado. It was created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone, and first broadcast on the cable

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47 The Monty Python celebrated their 40th anniversary in Britain in October 2009 in the Royal Albert Hall. The show was created by Eric Idle and John Du Prez with Michael Palin, Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam appeared as guests. The text related to Brian i.e. religious dogma and conformism, with some sexual allusions (that seemed to amuse the audiences to a great extent) which seemed mild and old-fashioned compared to the explicit and cruel material available in contemporary cultural comedy texts. The visitors predominantly being the same age as the Pythons (most probably the young, liberal, drug abusers they attracted back in 1969, as Michael Palin pointed out in their biography). The event could now be characterised as highbrow and mainstream judging by the audience which was predominantly white, above 45, and could afford and were willing to pay the price of the ticket), and this was further reflected in the place where it was held (Albert Hall).

network Comedy Central (1997- ), As Donnelly points out, "*South Park* allow a kind of regression to childhood for their adult viewers ... There is [an] additional perverse enjoyment of the child characters' precociousness as well as their misunderstanding of the adult world" (Donnelly in Creeber 2008, 158). This television comedy is characterized by reversed values, mocking its way through issues related to morality, religion, politics, science, death, friendship etc. It particularly targets questions raised in the political correctness debates that permeate contemporary realities. Their show is related to the question of identity politics and more specifically to issues such as identity appropriation, single motherhood, disability<sup>48</sup> etc. In addition to this, *South Park* is characterized by many intertextual references especially attached to pop culture which can include either other media texts (such as *The Simpsons*), parody of other televisual forms (such as quiz games) or make reference to real, publicly known persons and celebrities. In order to read the cues of *South Park* the viewer has to have a general knowledge permeating contemporary public debates and be familiar with North American popular culture texts. However, even if the text refers to 'local' issues such as the relationship between the USA and Canada, these issues are well known to the audience that goes beyond national borders and enables people to connect to it. An asset in watching the show is an understanding of a wider social context, and issues that are saturating a globalizing world, such as terrorism, political correctness, paedophilia etc.

*South Park* have, on several occasions, been subjected to debate and even censorship by the broadcasting channel Comedy Central: for example the episode "Trapped in the Closet" was highly debated because it made fun of scientology and the actor Tom Cruise as a follower; the episode Cartoon Wars in which the scene with an image of Mohammed was prohibited. Since it had a global reach and was aired in many countries, it also provoked debates about its appropriateness. In Russia, 2008, the regulators banned the Cartoon Network because of *South Park*<sup>49</sup>. The channel faced an investigation because of the episode of *South Park* "Mr Hankey's Christmas Classics", which was claimed to promote religious hatred. In addition, the Prosecutor General's office argued that the cartoon's broadcast promoted violence, cruelty, pornography and anti-social behaviour.

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48 For a satirical critique of 'politically correct' treatment of disability and the way one gets cast into subject positions constructed through discursive practices, look for the *South Park* episode Timmy 2000.

49 Andrei Richter (Moscow Media Law and Policy Institute) mentioned this case in his presentation at the conference Beyond East and West: Media Change in Comparative Perspective (Budapest, 25-27 June, 2009).

„They are full of scenes of mutilation and infliction of physical and moral suffering that evokes fear, panic and terror in children. ... This media product is of low moral and ethical content and has an extremely negative effect on children; it perverts their moral orientation and increases the danger of panic and neurotic ailments.”<sup>50</sup>

The most recent controversy was raised in April, 2010 when the authors portrayed the Islamic prophet Mohammed dressed in a bear costume. This was followed by a death threat from a radical Islamic group Revolution Muslim based in New York, who used the internet web site Revolutionmuslim.com to direct their warning to the authors, referring to the filmmaker Theo van Gogh, who was killed by Muslim extremists for his documentary *Submission: Part 1*, on the suppression of Muslim women in the religious faith.<sup>51</sup> The death threat resulted in that Comedy Central censored the next episode that also satirised Mohammed in the freedom of speech context. The images of Mohammed were obscured while the reference to his name was replaced by audio bleeps. This has once again triggered the debate on freedom of speech and religious fundamentalism.<sup>52</sup>

This planetary popular show has initiated many conversations, newspaper and academic articles. Anthony Slide claims that *South Park* is characterized by bad taste: “Bodily functions are the primary source of humour on *South Park*”. He argues that even though it implies a comedy with a subversive and most left wing position which “raises serious issues on everything from paedophilia to the war in Afghanistan.” it is actually much “...that is conservative in the editorial commentary on South Park” (Slide 2007, 105-106).

Contrary to this view, Richard Hanley claims that South Park is one of the most important contemporary television shows in a philosophical sense, arguing that the show has a ‘detector’ with two functions: marking and alarming. It makes us contemplate on things we otherwise would not think about, and does it though brilliant humour (Hanley 2008, 7).

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50 The Guardian. 2008. Russia attempts to ban South Park. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/blog/2008/sep/25/television.russia>. (Retrieved: 27 August 2009).

51 Dagens Nyheter. 2010. South Park retar fundamentalister. Available at: <http://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/south-park-retar-fundamentalister-1.1081594>, (Retrieved 26 April 2010).

52 An interesting example of intertextual references in this case is the support given to the authors of *South Park* by the creators of *The Simpsons*. In the episode "The Squirt and the Whale", Bart Simpson writes on the school board "South Park-We'd Stand Beside You if We Weren't So Scared".

A third example of controversial comedy transgressing the border of what counts as acceptable humour by a part of the viewers, is the Croatian example of a television cartoon called *Zlikavci* (The Wicked), created by Goran Pirš, and produced by Nedžad Haznadar. The animated satirical television comedy was broadcast on the PSB television Hrvatska radiotelevizija (HRT). It was broadcast for four seasons, starting from 2004 and ending in 2006. It was aired once a week (Fridays) and lasted for 10 minutes. The television show resembles South Park even though it originated as a local radio program in Zagreb, which appeared on Radio 101 in the 80ies. It is evident that the show originated from a radio setting in that it had no action, it was very static and the animation was basic, so it mostly relied on audio conversation. The show was usually played within a classroom, with three pupils and a professor of religious culture,<sup>53</sup> who discussed social and political issues in Croatian society, related to local as well as global events<sup>54</sup>. Because the local conditions were in the main focus, it required an understanding of the Croatian socio-political context.

This show provoked uproar in Croatia, giving rise to a broad range of negative reactions from a section of the population that claimed that it was insulting. This was especially pursued by the religious association Radio Marija which started a petition and collected 42 779 signatures of citizens who demanded the show to be banned. They even issued a publication “Are Catholics Wicked?” edited by Ivica Relkovic and published by the association Radio Marija in 2005, in which they argued against the show and the abuse of freedom of expression. They referred to relevant legislation in Croatia, primarily Article 39 of the Croatian Constitution according to which incitement of religious hatred is banned. The social actors, who claimed that this type of text should be banned, used a range of arguments, from more generic to more specific:

In a broad sense it was connected to the values of democracy. It was argued that it contravenes its fundamental principles. This position was upheld by the Prime Minister at the time, Ivo Sanader, who condemned the show *Zlikavci*, and their scorning of Jesus Christ, claiming that

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53 He is called Vj<sup>z</sup>eran Božic. Both the name and the surname are common in Croatia -- however, both the name and the surname have a meaning in their own right too, i.e. 'Vj<sup>z</sup>eran' means 'Faithful' and 'Božić' means 'Christmas'.

54 As an answer to *Zlikavci*, the commercial television NOVA TV broadcast the show *Laku noc, Hrvatska* (God Night, Croatia) in 2005, which is a parody of news, but the show is not remotely as sharp as *Zlikavci*. One of the authors of the show criticised it and claimed that the director of Croatia Film who, according to him, controls the entire operation stops some topics from being broached (especially dealing with powerful public figures such as the Croatian Prime Minister). For this reason the team working on the project was constrained. The failed plan was to make a sharp satire similar to French or British cartoons. Jelinić, Berislav. 2005. Udar na satiru: 'Naš crtić cenzurira director Croatia filma'. Nacional 492. Available at: <http://www.nacional.hr/clanak/14156/nas-crtic-cenzurira-direktor-croatia-filma>. (Retrieved 4 May 2008).

this, as well as the publishing of the caricatures of Mohammed, is a ‘bad editorial move’, since it is against the fundamental values of democracy<sup>55</sup>. This ‘argument’ was one that appeared regularly, harnessing the fact that the term ‘democracy’ had become a ‘buzz’ word with positive connotations, usually used in contrast to socialism which had developed negative connotations. The usage of these terms is almost mythical; it has become a way to distinguish right from wrong. This phenomenon is reflected in another argument used to condemn the show, which claims that the show destroys Croatian traditional values, something that communists and liberals are attempting to do, supported by foreign powers:

*“People from the former system have taken over positions of power (including media). They are aligned with those who conform to the old and quasi-new liberal way of thinking, and cloaked with new phrases and supported by powerful (foreign?) capital - they pursue their mission” (Comment made by Zvonimir Badurina Dudić, Parish Priest in Pag, in relation to Zlikavci and their producers.<sup>56 57</sup>*

Nedjeljko Pintaric, the editor of the catholic weekly *Glas Koncila*, who at the time was also a member of the Program Council of the PSB HRT also made comments in a similar, although more subtle, vein, claiming that this type of language had a negative effect on Croatian values, notably in the statement where he said: “I don’t think this type of humour is in accordance with the common cultural values that we, as a society, aim for.”<sup>58</sup>

In addition to these broad explanations, an argument that appeared frequently was one specifically related to Christianity. It was claimed that *Zlikavci* is an attack on fundamental Christian values – since it is blasphemic and offensive, mocking religious symbols regardless of the fact that they have a sacred status to believers. In this respect, it was also claimed that

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55 Vjesnik, Sloboda se ne smije zlorabiti, 09.02.2006. (izvor: HINA-T. Grdic, M. Rožanković, M. Lipovac.

56 Badurina Dudić, Zvonimir. 2004. U njihove 'dogme i bogove' ne smije se dirati. Vjesnik, 06.12.2004. (Retrieved: 17 November 2008).

57 This resembles the 90ies, when Croatia gained its independence with the breakdown of Yugoslavia, but with serious repercussions for the democratisation processes which were delayed due to the war (1991-1995). In the beginning of this period the nationalist movement led by the Croatian Democratic Union (the winners of the first parliamentary elections in Croatia in 1990, and the leading political party in contemporary Croatia) mobilised dissident groups from the previous system, but also gained the support of the masses and this support grew from strength to strength from the beginning of the war in 1991 onwards. The unification of the national body, under threat from the “external enemy” hardly allowed for alternative voices to be heard. At that time, civil society activities were viewed as dangerous when not in accordance with state politics, and their main protagonists were labelled as ‘foreign mercenaries’.

58 Čokić, Dženeta. 2004. Tko ne razumije 'Zlikavce' Vjesnik 26.11.2004.(Retrieved: 27 March 2008).



the primary focus of *Zlikavci* was to attack the Catholic Church, and that it only briefly touched upon other social institutions or issues.

Finally, what also appeared as relevant was the function of public service television in democracies. It was argued that this type of text is improper for public service television, since the fundamental principle of such an institution is inclusiveness and responsibility. This was specifically grounded in the argument that PSB is funded through the license fee, and should thus be responsive to a broad population.

The other position, advocating in favour of this type of texts, claimed that this type of social commentary is useful and that it unmasks certain problems in Croatia. On an institutional level, it was supported by some organizations such as the Croatian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, the Croatian Journalist Association (HND) or The Croatian P.E.N. Centre. In P.E.N. they argued that citizens have the right not to watch this type of show if they feel offended, and that humour and irony are intrinsic to artistic freedom that cannot be brought into question.<sup>59</sup>

The Program Council of the PSB HRT was also divided in their view: one stream claimed that this type of humour was useful, and of quality, especially since it commented on relevant current social issues in Croatia. They also argued that in *Zlikavci* a variety of topics were brought up, not only topics related to the church or religion, and that this type of satire should be understood by adults. Their suggestion was to move the show to a later time slot and in this way automatically reduce the audience. The opponents of the Broadcasting Board of Directors claimed that the derision of human flaw is acceptable, but to make fun of religious sacred feelings is not. In their view, the show specifically attacked the church while other issues were marginalized.<sup>60</sup>

Two years later the show was discontinued. The Executive Director of the PSB HRT, Tanja Šimić, claimed that co-operation with the producers had stopped, and that the show would not be re-broadcast due to its “distasteful and low level of humour”.<sup>61</sup> The author, Goran Pirš, was

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59 Vjesnik, Hrvatski PEN Centar o 'Zlikavcima', 06.05.2005.

60 Dzeneta Cokic, Vjesnik, 26.11.2004.

61 <http://www.hnd.hr/hr/novine/show/50966/>

not surprised and this is reflected in his statement where he said: “To tell you the truth, I somehow assumed this, because this is, after all, not a country for satire”.<sup>62</sup>

### **5.3. Controversy and television as the medium of transmission**

The examples stated above are all television comedies. However, comedy carrying a social commentary with a sharp edge is not exclusively made for television. It is likely to migrate from one medium to another, of which the most frequent are the move between television and film, internet and television, or between radio and television. But they can also migrate from non-mediated live performances (stand-up) to mediated ones. However, their televisual form enables their popularization and dissemination on a broader scale. Television appearance – especially broadcasts with national reach - indicates and guarantees a broader popularity due to its inclusive capacity because it primarily builds on iconic signification and requires less specific skills related to language (as compared to the press). As opposed to radio and the press which are more linked to local consumption, television has a ‘translation capacity’, in that it offers a frame in which television text can migrate on a global scale, which is especially true regarding fiction genres. In addition, television is an inclusive medium since its usage does not necessarily involve any specific technical skills thus distinguishing it from new technologies, primarily the internet, a medium which is, in contemporary societies, also widely used for the dissemination of various texts.

Due to its inclusive capacity, television – still most popular medium - is also considered to be the battle field of different interest groups competing for access and control. Television is a medium that, as Silverstone puts it, “operates at the interface between the elite and the popular, the commercial and the public, the state and the citizen” (Roger Silverstone 2003 in Williams 2003, IX). It operates in and between the interests of the broadcasters, advertisers and audiences framed within policy regulations.

Various social actors are engaged in this field in which the interests of producers and advertisers oriented towards profit-making are merged with the interests of the government in sustaining social order and public support for their actions, which are all linked to the actual

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<sup>62</sup> Filmski.Net, HRT. 2006. Ukinuti Zlikavci, od Korupcije ni K . June 9. Available at: [http://www.filmski.net/vijesti/animirani-film/3708/hrt\\_ukinuti\\_zlikavci\\_od\\_korupcije\\_ni\\_k](http://www.filmski.net/vijesti/animirani-film/3708/hrt_ukinuti_zlikavci_od_korupcije_ni_k) (Retrieved 11.10.2008).

consumers/citizens i.e. the audience. High ratings mean increased revenue by media institutions, which in turn, attracts advertisers, while, for the authority, it potentially enables public support for their actions and creates a wider platform for the ‘manufacturing of consent’ (Herman and Chomsky 1988). This has a profound impact on content creation, not only mediated by market research agencies or consumption habits, but also in a broader sense, creating discourses on what is socially acceptable, interesting and so forth. This complex constellation influences what type of content can and should be mediated.

Regardless of the type of programme offered, the main concern of the commercial television industry is regular consumption and spending on diverse products, regardless of the potential social consequences. Simon Frith sees the industry as liberated from any moral values or ideological standpoints as long as they generate profit. He claims that “from an industry point of view, what people make of leisure goods matters less than that they routinely consume them – entertainment corporations are happy to take their cut of gangsta rap, kung fu movies, comic cults and ecstasy-driven dance records (Frith 2000, 211). As a consequence, the industry also creates a space within which subversion to the dominant order and social critique can be communicated as long as they are profitable (this explains the fact that Fox Broadcasting Company owned by Rupert Murdoch - known for his blatant conservative bias - broadcasts *The Simpsons*). However, one possible drawback of the television industry embracing such texts is that they potentially abate their cutting edge. Thus, texts that are offering alternative visions of the world and are critical of the established social order are drowned in a profit-oriented logic, which subsumes subversions into its matrix, and transforms into a profitable brand or goods. The co-optation or incorporation of subversive elements into the dominant matrix, raises the question whether a commercial media product can claim to be oppositional since the process of incorporation into the market and the mainstreaming process becomes unavoidable. As much as it has a specific, alternative cultural form, it is at the same time part of the system it supposedly opposes. Evaluations are different - on the one hand it is argued that this still does not negate its content and message which are still subversive, while on the other, it is argued that there is no form of expression that is not subsumed by the market by which it loses its subversive potentials (Croteau and Hoynes 2003, 183-184).

Contrary to the agenda described above, the regulators define the legal framework of what type of content is acceptable, in order to preserve social stability and order, by controlling types of

content that are deemed to be potentially harmful. By focusing on Europe and the United States, Herbert N. Foerstel (1998) argues that the interference of the state in terms of censorship in the media is a continuous process which he traces back to the 12th Century. State control has weakened in the course of history with the development of democracy and its values – one of which is freedom of speech - but is still intervening today even though the coercion is more subtle, and conducted in a more indirect way. The role of the state is, in this sense, smaller in western democracies, not only as a result of the bygone Cold War split, in which fear of statism (etatism) - present in the Eastern block - was constant, but also because of the domination of the free market ideology, in which the limitation of individual action is condemned, especially if it comes from the state. Instead of ‘external’ forces determining our actions, there is a positive emphasis on self-regulation and self-reflexive actions. As different from this, post-socialist states have a tradition of explicit and consensual state-regulated control, which is, in contemporary societies, blended with new values of liberal democracies, free market and choice. Croatia is one case in point in which there is a frequent confusion about the extent and the way this field should be regulated - a confusion which, as a consequence, ends up in a frequent gap between regulation and practices.

In any case, various public institutions are established in order to supervise this area and to participate in the creation of the legal framework for media operation - balancing between freedom of speech and the limits of this freedom. Some mechanisms of control are the licensing policies and the spectrum scarcity (less applicable today due to digitalization processes) while the most frequent contemporary mechanism of control is the obligation imposed on the television industry to create their own rating systems related to content and age. This means that a limited number of social actors decide what is appropriate content, and who should be allowed to view it. Restraints in this respect influence the production and the scheduling of content. This is fought back against by the industry, because these restrictions impact on the advertising schema. This occurs because labels indicating restrictions have a tendency to scare off advertisers who do not want their product to be associated with controversy (Foerstel 1998). This avoidance of controversy is of course also a precaution strategy of the television industry itself that precedes the rating systems; they produce content and organize the program schema that complies with the taste of many, which – as a consequence – results in sameness of output, especially in prime-time broadcasting slots. The “streamlining” (Ang 1991) of audiences is conducted through scheduling, in which prime-time is reserved for a broad audience aggregate

with diverse socio-demographic backgrounds. The assumed characteristics of the audience(s), will then guide the ways the trailers of new programs are implemented as well as the type of advertisement created for the target audience. Alternatively, if a small profitable niche market is recognized as appreciating certain texts, this will also guide the schedule organization as well as the accompanying advertising politics. As John Hartley (Hartley in Creeber 2008) points out, in discussing television scheduling, the format of the ‘family programming schedule is consciously constructed and includes “breakfast TV for children preparing for school (and their carers); daytime for women (and ‘unproductive’ persons); afternoon for children; early prime-time for family (channel choice exercised by children); late prime-time for family (channel choice dictated by ‘dad’); late-night television for men or non-family (single) adults” (Hartley in Creeber 2008, 177). As an example related to television comedy, *The Simpsons*<sup>63</sup> (Fox, 1987-1990) were, according to Paul Wells, thought of as a challenge to the “right-wing agenda of *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-92) which it was scheduled against”...due to its “left-leaning liberal position [that] presented the dysfunctional, blue-collar family as an intrinsically American family, which implicitly challenged established and accepted moral and political authority” (Wells in Creeber 2008, 149).

Allen points out the formal characteristics of television: its oceanic flow of programming, the textual gaps created by the constant interruption of the programs and television’s multiple modes of address (Allen 1992). In addition to the property of flow, its main task is - as Hans Magnus Enzensberger argues - “not so much the selling of specific products as the selling of an existing order” (Enzensberger 1974 in Marc 1997, 132). This highlights the understanding of television as providing viewers with a flow of enmeshed webs of meaning created through symbols and icons encoded in the dominant code (Hall 1973) which – to a certain extent - makes it unified in term of social values. Michael Parenti claims that “ the media are filled with themes and images that are decidedly political, drawn mostly from the mainstream spectrum, ranging from pale liberal to brute conservative” (Parenti 1992, 177). Roger Bromley argues that popular television texts are characterized by a system of exclusion of topics, such as exchange relations in economy, or working classes in relation to capitalism, while some topics are continuously pushed forward such as personal relations, domestic life, marriage etc. This makes

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63 In October 2010, the Vatican paper L'Osservatore Romano stated that parents should allow their children to watch the series *The Simpsons* since they had found proof that Homer and Bart converted to Catholicism. The producer of the show Al Jean claimed that this was completely misleading and that actually they were ‘presbeluterans’. Source: [www.dn.se](http://www.dn.se). WebTv. Har tror Vatikanen att Simpsons ar katoliker. Available at: <http://www.dn.se/webbtv/kultur-noje/har-tror-vatikanen-att-simpsons-ar-katoliker-1.1193276>. (Retrieved: 14 October 2009).

the world seem “uniform, unambiguous and non-contradictory” (Bromley 1978, 39 in Bennett 2007, 34). It is within this context that the comedy that I am interested in here can be labelled ‘alternative’ since it escapes from this flow of uniform, taken-for-granted, broadcasting world order. It could be argued that its ‘alternativeness’ grows from the context of televisual broadcasting, which represents the ‘mainstream’ order of things, a context in which texts operate in a more controlled environment, compared to the press and (especially) the internet - where a wide variety of alternative worldviews and critiques of the dominant order can be found. Thus, in the context of a continual ‘flow’ of consensual order of things, this particular type of comedy definitely ‘stirs up’ this broadcasting ‘order’. We will, in the following sections turn to such an example.

## 6. Methodology

The research focuses on edge comedy and its reception in two different contexts, framed within media theory that is concerned with the text – audience relationship. It includes three interconnected parts that form a ‘textual event’ as Couldry defines it: researching the particular text, the discourses circulating about the text in the extra-textual environment and the actual readers (Couldry 2000, 83-87):

1. THE TEXT – The analysis of the primary text, *Da Ali G Show*, as a television comedy chosen to represent this sub-genre. In this part I outline my own reading of the text and focus on the themes joked about, as well as the way they reflect contemporary culture; the strategies employed in the text that create ambiguity; and the cultural competences possibly needed to facilitate decoding. *Da Ali G Show* was broadcast on Channel 4 in the UK starting from March 31, 2000, and in Croatia on Nova TV – a television channel with national reach. It was broadcast in 2003 for the first time, and then in 2004 and 2006.

2. THE EXTRA-TEXTUAL - The analysis of the extra-textual environment, the scope of which I have limited to academic articles and newspaper articles. This section aims at identifying the discourses that circulate in relation to the text and the way it has been decoded by media scholars and journalists/critics. The focus is placed on the discursive strategies found in what Fiske (1987) calls ‘secondary texts’, Couldry (2000) refers to the same as the "extra-textual", and Hills (2004) uses the term ‘inter-texts’ – all names given to texts that work to promote the circulation of selected meanings of the primary text. The analysis of the extra-textual is aimed at eliciting the patterns of various interpretative repertoires that occur in the public spheres in relation to the text. The secondary text includes academic articles concerned with this particular comedy, written in English and available either in the British Film Institute or online. It also includes UK and Croatian newspaper articles related to this particular comedy and its author (*Da Ali G Show*, Sasha Baron Cohen). This of course does not exhaust the list of different mediators of meaning in a society, however I found the newspaper articles particularly interesting since they form a part of the media industry that sets the agenda and provide coordinates on interpretative frames to a larger readership. Newspaper articles also contribute to the formation of the imagined communities that Anderson (1991) links to the nation-state, and provides a window into matters of concern raised in a particular context – in this case in the UK and Croatia. The newspaper articles were important in order to assess the way in which this

particular text was decoded in the respective countries within which the interpretive communities operated. In addition, it was a way to capture different modes of decoding that were not accessible in the interviews – due to the fact that the interviews were structured in such a way that they only dealt with the interpretive community that *liked* the show, while the analysis of the articles also aimed at sketching out the arguments of opposing discourses. So, in addition to my own reading of this text, I identified the meanings circulating in the press published in the two countries in relation to the texts in question, and the discourses that dominated their judgement. I particularly paid attention to the ways in which the show was interpreted and evaluated in order to establish what the essence of its controversial status was.

I analysed 49 articles published in UK daily newspapers: *The Times*; *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Sunday Telegraph*; *The Observer*, *The Guardian*; *The Evening Standard*; *The Independent*. The period of analysis included articles published in the UK from 1999 (2), 2000 (16), 2001 (1), 2002 (16), 2004 (2), 2005 (2), 2006 (6) and 2007 (4).

The articles were selected using the following criterion: in the UK the articles available in the British Film Institute (BFI) were searched using the key words ‘Da Ali G Show’ and ‘Sacha Baron Cohen’. The same method was used in choosing Croatian newspaper articles, found online by doing a keyword search through Google. Only the articles that were predominantly concerned with the topic of the show or the author of the show were analysed, while the articles in which it was only marginally mentioned within a different context were disregarded. Due to the fact that the BFI had articles categorised until the year 2007, I decided to limit the Croatian sample to the same period, i.e articles published up until 2007, while later articles found on the Web were excluded. These were mainly concerned with the third movie *Bruno*, released in 2009. However, since this character also appeared in the television show, this persona was not considered to be something new, although both the comedy and the author enjoyed increased media attention both preceding and in the aftermath of its release. The analysis of the television show and its coverage was hard to separate from the movies and the appearance of the alter egos in real-life situations (such as in interviews or shows in which Cohen appeared as one of his developed personae). Thus, the articles included the television show, the movies and his public appearances in one of his characters.



The Croatian dailies analysed were the following: *Jutarnji list* (30), *Novi list* (8), *Vjesnik* (13), *Slobodna Dalmacija* (3), *Večernji list* (1). The show was broadcast in Croatia in 2003, 2004 and 2006, so the period of analysis covers 2002 – when the first article appeared (2 articles), 2003 (3 articles), 2005 (5 articles), 2006 (33 articles) and 2007 (12 articles). As visible from the number of articles, the television show did not stir much attention in the Croatian press. It was only when the movie *Borat* was released in Croatia in 2006 that the film became hugely popular and the press started to cover the text more frequently.

The articles published in Croatia were mainly retrieved from online editions of daily newspapers. I first tried to search for articles in the Information and Documentation Centre, however, this attempt was unsuccessful and the staff claimed that this was the "most bizarre request" they ever got. Obviously, they had not been faced with many requests concerning searches on topics related to popular culture and hence their surprise and inability to deal with the request. The search for the British articles on the topic was very different. I approached the British Film Institute, where they promptly gave out microfilms filed and labelled with regard to both programme and author. To a certain extent, this exemplifies the way in which popular culture research is thought of in the respective countries. The changes that emerged in academic institutions in the UK in the 70ies - which saw a shift of focus towards exploring everyday life experiences, popular culture, the 'trivial'...- have not yet taken place in the equivalent Croatian academic institutions.

3. THE ACTUAL READERS - conceptualized as an interpretive community based on their shared positive attitude towards the cultural product in question. The research was directed at persons who used to watch this television comedy, and whose interpretive repertoire includes a positive attitude towards the show and the type of humour it promotes.<sup>64</sup>

I conduct 18 semi-structured interviews: 9 in London, UK, and 9 in Zagreb, Croatia with interviewees selected using the snow-ball method. Prior to the interview interviewees would fill out a questionnaire (Appendix A). The aim of the questionnaire was to collect data on socio-demographics in order to establish the participant's socio-economic position and to find out about their viewing preferences and dislikes regarding television comedy and television genres.

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<sup>64</sup> Data on audience share and socio demographic data was obtained from the media research agency AGB Nielson in Croatia and the BFI in UK.

The interview (Appendix B) that followed took approximately 30 minutes and included three broad fields of interest linked to the television comedy:

1. Exploration of cultural consumption and taste hierarchies (with respect to comedy as genre and the limits of humour);
2. Meaning-making of Da Ali G Show - assess modes of decoding of the show by the interpretive community (with respect to its controversy and the (potential) social commentary);
3. Viewing practices and fandom.

Instead of defining a fixed class position of the interviewees, I attempted to outline the in-group social hierarchy of the interviewees, since it was difficult to unquestionably categorize them within a specific class. In the questionnaire handed out to the interviewees I asked for background information about age, gender, status of employment, occupation, number of persons living in the household, monthly income, whether the interviewee owned or rented their home, education of interviewee, education of parents, and religious preferences. Based on the combination of the available information (some questions were not answered either because the interviewees did not know the answer or did not want to reveal it) I constructed a list ranging from the most privileged/highest positioned to the least privileged/lowest positioned in the social structure.

The interviewees were diverse in terms of socio-demographics:

Anne – White, female, 26, no religious affiliation, full-time retail assistant manager, educated to secondary school level

Albert – Black, male, 23, Christian, part-time basketball coach, educated to secondary school level

George – White, male, 56, Protestant, full-time marketing consultant, educated to secondary school level

Henrietta - White, female, 39, atheist, Jewish background, part-time lecturer in education, has a PhD

James – White, male, 32, no religious affiliation, part –time research assistant, enrolled in a PhD program

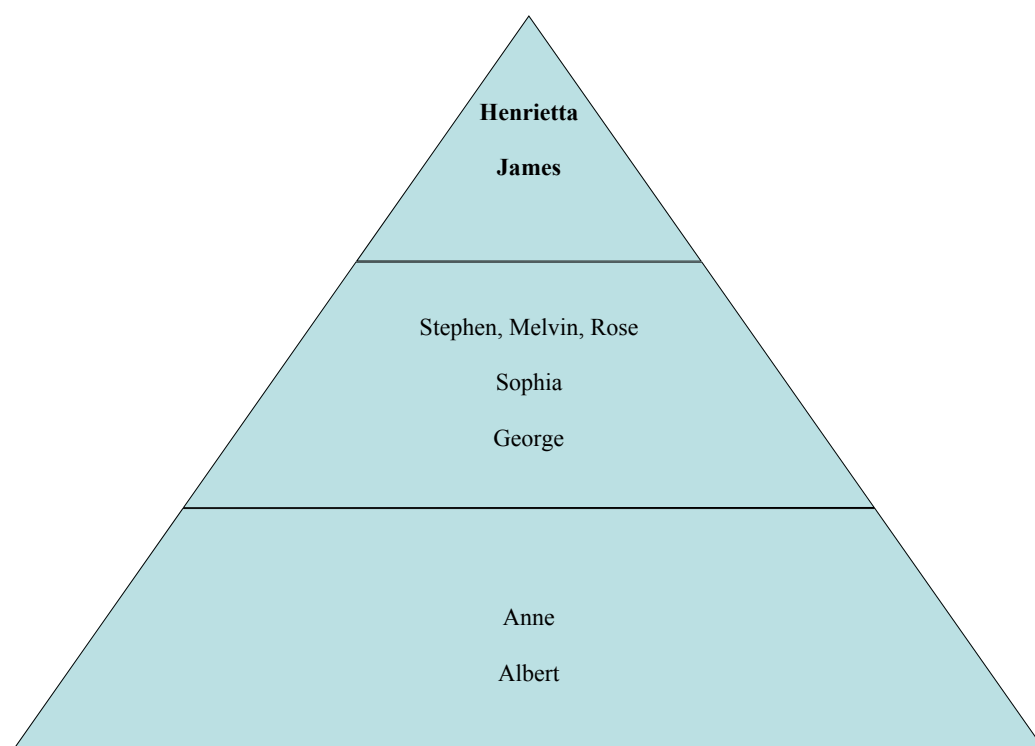
Melvin – White, male, 35, no religious affiliation, part-time artist, has an M.A.

Rose –White, female, 24, no religious affiliation,, full-time librarian, has an M.A:

Stephen – White, male, 26, no religious affiliation, full time DPhil student, has an M.A.

Sophia – White, female, 26, no religious affiliation,, studying full time, enrolled in a B.A program

### 6.1. Pyramid A - In-group hierarchy: London, United Kingdom



The Croatian interviewees:

Domagoj – White, male, 37, Buddhist, part-time handyman, educated to primary school level

Dmitar - White, male, 33, no religious affiliation, full-time central heating installer, educated to secondary school level

Držislav – White, male, 40, Catholic, full-time private entrepreneur, educated to secondary school level

Ignjat – White, male, 32, Catholic, full-time wholesale correspondent, educated to secondary school level

Katarina – White, female, 38, no religious affiliation, full time marketing manager, educated to secondary school

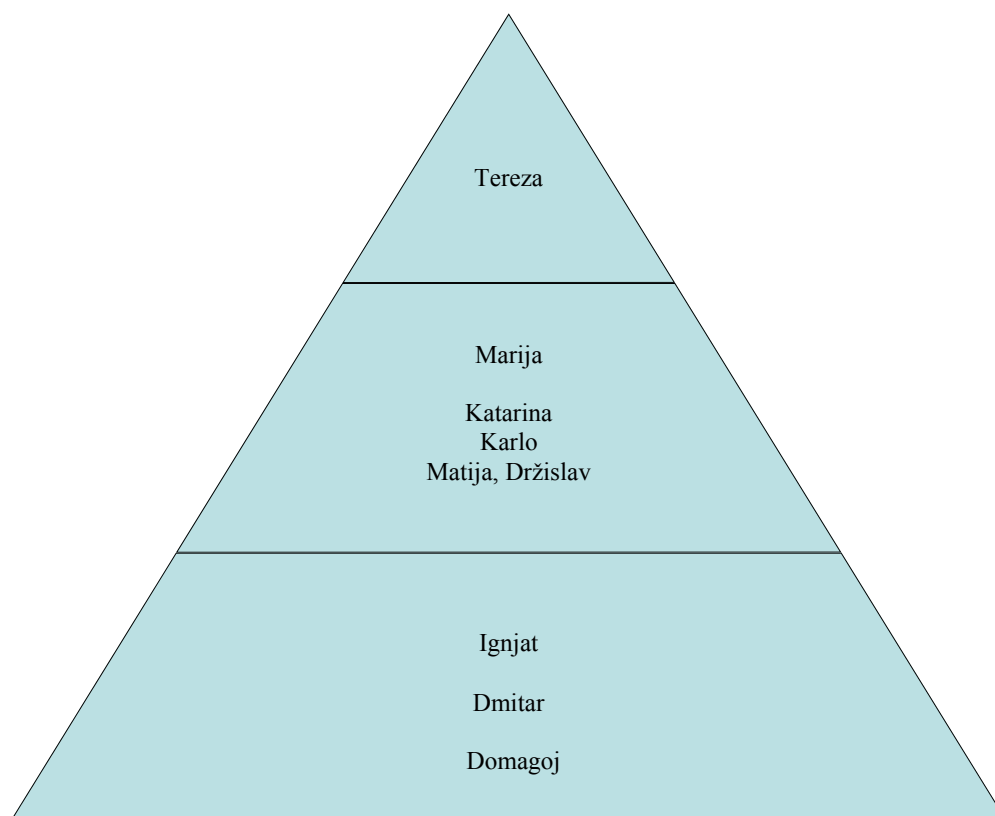
Karlo– White, male, 34, no religious affiliation, full-time producer, educated to secondary school level

Marija – White, female, 35, new age, full-time journalist, has a B.A.

Matija - White, male, 39, Catholic, full-time clerk, educated to secondary school level

Tereza - White, female, 30, no religious affiliation, part-time translator, NGO, has an M.A.

## 6.2. Pyramid b - In-group hierarchy: Zagreb, Croatia



The extra-textual environment which includes academic articles and newspaper articles, as well as the actual readers conceptualized as an interpretive community that favour this comedy is explored from a comparative perspective. The comparison is aimed at illustrating the similarities and differences in the meaning-making process found in the Croatian and UK contexts respectively, and links it to the ‘old’ and ‘new’ paradigm present in media theory.

In summary, this qualitative research is an attempt to assess the social reception of edge comedy in two different countries in order to shed light on the meaning-making process that occurs mediated by different social actors, including author, producer, extra-textual environment and the audience of this show. In addition to the 'social life' of this text, which includes controversy and different evaluations given by different social actors, I was also interested in the meaning of the text to its favourably disposed audience. While I consider all three levels to be relevant in the analysis, the focus is placed on the interpretive community in both settings. In my interpretation of the interviews I draw conclusions based on socio-demographics which enable a provisional class categorisation. In this context I wish to stress that the research results obtained do not claim to be a representative sample and that I am aware that drawing conclusions based on only a handful of cases (related to class or any other type of categorisation) is far fetched in that context. Hence my goal is merely to provide an illustration of how this concrete interpretive community - favourably disposed towards this controversial text which attempts to give a social commentary (at least in my reading of it) - decode it and to outline what discourses dominate their judgement. In addition, I subsequently link these findings to the extra-textual environment found in the two respective countries. I hope that this will highlight the interconnectedness of readers, comedy texts and context and provide some guidance for future empirical work in this field of media audience studies.

## 7. The text: edge comedy - *Da Ali G Show*

*Da Ali G Show* was selected due to its global success amidst controversy raised by its provocative, ‘uncivilized’ humour. Needless to say, there are numerous other shows which fall into this category, the category of edge comedy amidst controversy; however there are not many television texts that have been broadcast in Croatia which would fit into this category. In the selection of this particular comedy, I was also guided by personal preference. I used to watch the series when it was broadcast in Croatia and soon became a fan of it.

*DA Ali G Show*, created by Sasha Baron Cohen, is a television comedy that originated from the United Kingdom. The show developed out of *The 11 o'clock show* broadcast in 1999, where the character of Ali G appeared as a cast member. *Da Ali G Show* was first broadcast on Channel Four in 2000. After the success of the television comedy<sup>65</sup>, Cohen has continuously appeared on television, embodying one of the three characters he developed: Ali G, Borat and Bruno. The success of the television comedy was accelerated with the three movies starring the three characters: *ALI G Indahouse* (2002), distributed by Universal Pictures, with a budget of approximately 2,300,000 USD and a gross revenue of 15,700,000 USD<sup>66</sup>; *Borat cultural learnings of America for make benefit glorious nation of Kazakhstan* (2006) distributed by 20th Century Fox, News Corp., with a 18,000,000 USD budget and a gross revenue of 261,471,111 USD<sup>67</sup>; *Bruno* (2009) distributed by Universal Pictures and Columbia Pictures with a budget of 42,000,000 USD and a gross revenue of 136,933,838 USD. In addition to Cohen’s appearance on television and film, he also made a broader entrance into the world of popular culture in the music video of Madonna, and has provided a voice for the animated movie *Madagascar* (2005).

The television show and the movies that accelerated Cohen’s success and ensured a global reach, triggered debates and controversies around the globe. They have been rated ‘restricted’ due to ‘pervasive strong and crude sexual content including graphic nudity, and language, as

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65 The show received a BAFTA Television Award as the winner of Best Comedy Series in 2000 and a Rose d'Or, winner of Bronze Rose-Comedy in 2001.

66 Wikipedia. Available at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ali\\_G\\_Indahouse](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ali_G_Indahouse) (Retrieved: 22 May 2008).

67 Wikipedia..Available at:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borat:\\_Cultural\\_Learnings\\_of\\_America\\_for\\_Make\\_Benefit\\_Glorious\\_Nation\\_of\\_Kazakhstan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borat:_Cultural_Learnings_of_America_for_Make_Benefit_Glorious_Nation_of_Kazakhstan) (Retrieved 22nd May 2008).

well as drug content<sup>68</sup>. Because of these and other characteristics the movies have been banned in several countries: the movie *Borat* was banned in most Arab countries except the Lebanon.<sup>69</sup> In addition, numerous lawsuits have been filed related to Cohen's work.

In *Da Ali G Show*, Cohen embodies three trickster characters that represent identities of the 'Other': the homosexual (Bruno) the low-class (underclass), black, subculture (Ali G); the Oriental (Borat). All three characters are fake journalists that either invite guests to the studio, or go out to report "live" on specific stories. This cover enables Cohen to make people take part in the show, since their expectation is that they are interacting with 'normal', 'real' journalists. The humorous situations develop from their unpreparedness to be confronted with the characters that Cohen embodies, and the set of questions he asks.

Cohen's first alter ego – Ali G - is a reporter and host of a television show that aims to 'educate' and 'motivate' young people from the street. He is dressed in a Tommy Hilfiger skull cap, heavy jewellery, trainers and wrap-around sunglasses. He is from the West Side of Staines, very eager to stress his (questionable)<sup>70</sup> black identity (an image created by means of his clothing, as well as language, referring to other blacks as 'brothers' and whites as 'honkeys'). He is a part of the drum and bass/hip-hop subculture, and dresses accordingly. As part of the criminal milieu in Staines<sup>71</sup>, he has committed a few burglaries, uses, and occasionally deals drugs. His consumption practices are of popular/ 'lowbrow' taste (Bourdieu) - his highest values lie in the material world in which a Lexus and a massive necklace with one's name set in diamonds, presents the ultimate achievement. The most creative idea that crosses his mind is to watch 'telly' and eat chicken burgers from McDonalds. He is vulgar, emotional and with no inhibitions and embodies the opposite of highbrow/legitimate taste (sophisticated, rational, moderate).

Uneducated, and, more precisely, barely literate, he has never read a book, which makes him overexcited about how good *Sesame Street* is, and prompts him to ask his guests in the studio

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68 Internte movie database. Available at: <http://www.imdb.com> (Retrieved: 25 February 2009).

69 The Guardian Unlimited. 2006. Arab countries ban Borat. (1 December). Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2006/dec/01/filmcensorship>. (Retrieved: 10 May 2009).

70 Ali G was first read as character mocking Blacks; however, it was later 'discovered' that Ali G stands for Alistair Graham, which made the critics change their view on his racial identity, claiming that he is a white wannabe (Atluri 2009).

71 A quiet suburb of the Greater London area, not known for a high level of crime, gangs or antisocial behaviour as suggested by Ali G. This image of Stains is completely fictional.

why someone hasn't created a version of Sesame Street for children, in addition to the existing one for adults. Ali G is, at times, incapable of drawing simple, logical conclusions: he asks a veterinarian on a farm whether he has a video or a photograph of an undiscovered animal, or suggests that the best punishment for a suicide bomber is to punish the terrorist severely by sending him to jail for twenty years.

He creates a childlike image, by asking questions that challenge common-sensical ideas established in the world of adults, and by confusing reality and phantasm. He claims that Disneyland is a state and asks why skeletons are involved in evil stuff; or by setting a seriously perceived institution, such as the UN, in a context more appropriate for primary school by asking whether the representatives in the UN ever need to be separated if they are 'chucking around'? This childlike image is important because it makes him 'likeable', despite his distasteful and controversial world views.

On the other hand he is a 'wannabe' rough male from the street, obsessed with proving his manhood: he is constantly bringing up the matter of size and always points out that he has a 'big dong'. Ali G engages in uncivilized discourse - a homophobe who under no circumstances want to be associated with anything remotely close to what he understands as gay or homosexual (he does not want to 'touch blokes'; he even rejects the fact that he is a homo sapiens because he understands the term to mean homosexual).

He is also sexist perceiving women as inferior to men. He views them as objects (How can stealing a TV be illegal and stealing a women legal, when the latter is worse?) While at the same time, and in accordance with traditional, patriarchal values, the mother or the 'nana' are sacred. Insult, by way of discrediting these sacred female figures, is the worst possible thing and can even justify murder of the attacker (resembling the order of things in a mafia environment). Women should not be involved in politics since they are sentimental, they cry, and the risk is high that they will fall in love with the enemy, because practice shows that the worse a man treats a woman, the more she feels attracted to him. In addition, they spend all their time on make up, shopping and getting shoes, and are 'naturally' deceitful.

Ali G is a local patriot dedicated to Staines, and to the UK in general, claiming that UK is 'not a democracy but we're doing OK'. The USA is seen as a country that has invented many great



things (like McDonalds) but has “its problems too” - the problem being the Indians. Thus, he is a follower of the powerful ‘core’ states while disrespectful to less powerful ones. He claims that states such as Guinea and Greece are ‘crap countries’, and is also ignorant about other nation states, so he questions the fact that Jordan actually exists as a state and claims that Iran and Iraq is one and the same thing.

The strategies used to create humorous situations are several. He uses and miss-pronounces ‘big’ words, so he invites his guests in the studio to talk about “tattoo subjects” on “incense” instead of 'taboo' on 'incest'. He extensively uses slang and strong language, and has popularised specific words that have taken on a ‘life of their own’ following their emergence in the show, such as ‘boyakasha’,<sup>72</sup> a word which he uses as a greeting.

He confuses different names and labels and in that way demonstrates a complete lack of knowledge about different social and historical facts. So, he ends up with the United Nations of Benetton, thinking that Jordan, as a state represented in the UN, stands for the sportsman Michael Jordan, and that Africa is a state. He thinks that 'General Motors' is a general (as in a rank in the military forces), and confuses 'anthrax' and 'Tampax' which to him are just different brand names. He confuses Louis Armstrong (the musician) and Neil Armstrong (the astronaut) and claims Michael Jackson invented the Moonwalk (a break-dance move) which he relates to the landing of humans on the Moon. He is convinced that Art Garfunkel is a style of art similar to Art Deco and Art Nouveau, and that William Shakespeare is alive and can be interviewed, since he himself went to the “theatre to see William Shakespeare”. In a similar manner he confuses God and Santa Clause and thinks it is an incredible coincidence that Jesus was born on Christmas day.

Ali G brings up issues that question the consensual rules established in contemporary societies related to the norms and values of the western civilization. However, in this case these norms and values are not linked to the notion of civilisation as understood in Elias's work as a common property of nations in the West, but is placed within a context of ‘internal’ values of the West and their transgression, or their reversal. It is linked to the way the West defines

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<sup>72</sup> According to the urban dictionary web site, it has a variety of meanings. The word can be translated as an African word meaning “death to the white man” , but also as “bevakasha” which in Hebrew means “you are welcome” . Urban Dictionary: boyakasha. Available at: <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=boyakasha&defid=1486528> (Retrieved: 18th May 2009).

deviant behaviour as opposed to appropriate and acceptable behaviour. As an example, slow reactions and learning disabilities provoked by drug abuse are good things, and Ali G wonders what the bad consequences are? Why not give the drugs confiscated by the police to charity? If it is illegal to have sex below the age of 16, shouldn't it be illegal to have it above the age of 50 as well, since it is, according to him, disgusting to see old people having sex? Ali G also claims that people should get more from the welfare, the longer they are on the dole, since they really get 'into it' after a few years and it shows *commitment* (a term very much used and abused in the sphere of labour in which an ideal employee has to show commitment to the firm, as the collective he/she *belongs* to, a discourse which masks the power relations involved).

He also asks absurd questions such as: How do you know when you have an idea? Why do the police use dogs for finding bombs when dolphins are more intelligent? If someone who is on death row orders their last meal from an 'all you can eat' restaurant, can they then escape death by eating forever? He asks what the chances are that he might die? When his guest answers him that he will surely die, Ali G says he would like to get a *second opinion* on that (a usual practice in real life situations when a serious diagnosis has been given). In relation to animals, he ascribes anthropomorphic characteristics to them - he treats the animal world as identical to the human social organization, so senior dogs are supposed to interview other dogs 'working' for the police as bomb-sniffers, while animals living on a farm are likely to fake that they are ill in order to get a 'day off'.

Humorous situations also arise from the context of a reversal of the legal and the illegal, social prohibitions and norms. During his 'public appearances' he often unintentionally and spontaneously 'gives away' information in front of the camera which incriminates him and discloses some of his illegal activities (related to weed, dealing drugs, burglaries, tax evasion etc.). He understands that these are illegal, as a 'bloke from the street', but on the other hand he is completely uninhibited as regards some of these activities which would normally be internalised through the socialization process and he does not understand why certain topics or types of behaviour are 'wrong' or 'right', which also adds to his childlike image.

He is also suspicious of figures that are authorities in their field (scientists, or staff in the institutions that he visits) and he questions their claims, no matter how commonsensical they are, especially when they are not in accordance with his own viewpoints ("so you say"). This

would, of course, in the world of ‘real’ interviews be outrageous, since the media always attempt to create a credible image, and grant authorities of knowledge the privileged position of knowing and speaking the truth.

In covering various topics, Ali G always takes the ‘wrong’ side: he claims that war is good because it is an activity which enables us to see who is stronger and in which one can see ‘major hexplosions’. Animal rights arguments are wrong, since fur coats are a way for animals to ‘get out of the ghetto’. Regarding the threats to the environment provoked by human exploitation of the Earth: Ali G does not see a problem in the fact that the rainforests are threatened, since nobody lives there anyway, and anyone who does should be happy to get out of there. He attends an anti-nuclear protest organized by hippies, however his world view is in direct opposition - he is not against nuclear energy (he wants to ‘nuke’ Canada) and the only reason why he is there is to be close to “loose hippy bitches and have a rumble”. In terms of religion, for Ali G, God is an improved version of the illusionist David Blaine, while Jesus is the Mack Daddy of the Christian ‘thing’. In addition, he concludes that all nuns are strippers because he once saw a movie (porn) in which this was the case. In terms of politics, and more specifically elections, he opposes the fundamental principle of contemporary democracy that everyone should have the right to vote (above 18) regardless of gender, social position or any other characteristic. According to him, “clever people” (such as himself) should have the right to vote more times than “stupid” people, since the latter are “ignoraneous.”

Cohen uses intertextual references in various ways. In fictional genres, intertextual references relate to other media texts, but they also make references to ‘real’ existing public figures and celebrities: in the *South Park* episode “*Simpsons Already Did It*” they compare themselves with the cartoon *The Simpsons*; while in the episode ‘*Timmey 2000*’ they reference Phil Collins and his songs. Ali G engages in ‘real life’ situations by interacting with existing people, and he uses fictional elements from media texts *as if* they were real, and in doing so he completely obfuscates his interviewees. Thus, he is constantly confusing the world of reality and the world of mediated texts: he asks a representative of the CIA ‘Who shot JR’? He believes that the hoverboard from the movie *Back to the Future* really exists. In another situation, he attempts to separate reality and fiction but presupposes that others are not capable of doing so, and this is of concern to him: in an interview with the chief of the LA police who mentions OJ Simpson in the interview, he confuses the football player who was accused of the murder of his wife, with

the cartoon *The Simpsons*. He expresses his concern that the police get “involved with a cartoon” and thinks that the police involvement relates to the fact that Homer Simpson killed Marge Simpson (cartoon characters).

The second alter-ego Cohen develops is Borat, a reporter from Kazakhstan, working for Kazakhstan Television, who travels to the USA in order to learn about American culture and report back to his homeland on his experiences. He learns about dating, etiquette, hobbies, acting, sports, politics, real estate, jobs and employment etc. The opening sequence starring Borat is encompassed with oriental music, the announcements are written in Cyrillic letters, and the images that surround him are American symbols such as the flag, an Indian panache, a taxi... His outlook confirms the stereotypical expectations of the Oriental man - dark hair, moustaches, and a slightly oversized, old-fashioned suit. With a notebook and pen, he is the perfect embodiment of the ‘bureaucrat’ hailing from the socialist era.

Kazakhstan is represented as a culture in which the hierarchy of value starts with God, men, horse, dog, women, rat... In the political sphere a leader of strength, with a ‘big hram’ (testicles) is valued, since testicles are a man's pride and represent a measure of worth. The types of politicians appreciated are Stalin-like figures that award the loyal and destroy the opponents. In Kazakhstan, the execution of criminals is conducted in gun clubs (for fun, as a cultural custom), bribe is omnipresent, and incest is acceptable. In terms of customs, greeting includes two kisses on the cheek, but only in the case of men, not women. Women are seen as inferior, they cannot vote and the idea of gender equality is completely remote. The most widespread hobbies are table tennis, shooting dogs and porno; wine is made of fermented horse urine. In a technological sense, Kazakhstan is a completely backward society: transportation is underdeveloped, while television and remote controls or cars are seen as a sign of wealth and success. To contrast this, America is presented as the land of opportunity. As Borat claims in his reportage, the country offers many job opportunities for Kazakhs: for men - construction work, taxi driving, or accounting, and for women – prostitution. In Kazakhstan, American popular culture is well known and highly evaluated (he makes references to Snap, Cindy Lauper etc.).

In the depiction of Kazakhstan, Cohen combines real and invented language/words and customs and creates a mixture that enables his character to seem ‘authentic’. To create authenticity he is

counting on the complete lack of knowledge of Westerners about other, more remote cultures. A mixture of completely different cultural influences such as Russian, Balkan, Eurasian, Middle Eastern are merged together in order to depict a quasi-authentic Kazakhstan culture as constructed from an occidocentric point of view. A mixture of English, Armenian, Romanian, Hebrew and Polish is presented as Kazakh language. He invents rituals, historical events and customs. As an example, he refers to the 'Tishniek' massacre which never happened; when leaving the room after a dialog with a politician, he goes down on his knees and refuses to stand up until the politician taps him on the back of his head. With these depictions he 'confirms' the stereotypical construction of an average individual/society of the Orient. Because he is from a country unknown to most of his collocutors, it can easily be 'sold' as authentic and 'real' – which conforms to existing stereotypes and lack of knowledge about the East and because they link Borat to a different civilization and thus to different social rules, he can afford to behave in an 'improper' manner. He is 'excused' because of his lack of knowledge and because he is willing to 'learn'.

Using a binary matrix, the character of Borat represents the opposite of the 'civilized West'. His manners are uncivilized and distasteful and his language vulgar. As opposed to Western civilization, in which bodily functions are increasingly hidden, Borat openly discusses them by bringing up topics such as sex, incest and defecation in the most inappropriate situations. He is completely unfit in terms of any physical activity and this also represents a way of placing him at the other side of the binary matrix of a corporal culture such as the West. His world views are completely intolerant: he is sexist and sees women as being inferior to men. They only have to show fidelity, have good genetic material for reproduction and be beautiful. He is glad that his first wife died, since she was boring, fat and hairy, (she got killed in the field by a hunter who thought she was a bear). He has had sexual intercourse with his sister, who is a prostitute in Almati, which is a 'normal' profession for women. During the interviews, he attempts to 'sell' her to his collocutors, to ensure she gets a better life in America (as a prostitute). Borat is also a racist – he refers to Blacks as 'chocolate faces', Jews are depicted as having claws, and being greedy, while 'gypsies' are simply unworthy.

The reactions to his sexist and racist behaviour vary: from blasé, silent ignorance, anger, laughter... However, in his performance, he often exposes similar attitudes to his own. As an example: when he performs in a country bar, he sings a racist song with a line "Throw the Jew

down the well so my country can be free. You must grab him by the horns. Then we have a big party...” and most of the people in the bar sings along with him – some of them approve from the beginning, and others after brief hesitation.

In another situation he attempts to ‘buy’ a house. He is talking to a real estate agent who is showing him a house in an upscale, picket-fenced neighbourhood. He expresses his racist views, and brings the real estate agent into a situation in which his racist views (or conformism and hypocrisy) are revealed:

Borat: “My wife...aaa... very scared from... aa... men with a chocolate face, there will be in this community?”

Realtor: “Aaa... they may or may not... aaa... they will have to be fairly well off, to live in this area.”

Borat: “So they won’t behave like the other chocolate face?”

Realtor: “Oh, no! No, no, no!”

A third example is when Borat goes on a wine-tasting tour and visits the Brotherhood of The Knights of The Vine. A Black servant enters the room and pours the wine for Borat and two members of the association. Borat asks the Commander of the Brotherhood:

Borat: “He is your slave?”

Commander : “No, no, no, no, not a slave!”

Borat: “He is his slave (pointing at the other person)?”

Commander: “No, no, no his not a slave at all, we don’t have slaves here any more”

Borat: “Yes I hear you do not have any more... Why you stop?”

Commander: “No, no, no... Nooo, well it’s, it was a law that was passed that...aaa...they no longer can be used as slaves which is a good thing, yes it is a good thing ...for them”

Borat : “But not so much for you...”

Commander: “You right, right!”

Finally, the third alter ego developed by Cohen is Bruno, a reporter, working for an Austrian gay television channel. The opening sequence of the section of the show “Funkyzeit with Bruno” is encompassed with fast exchanging flashes that include fashion shows, celebrity

icons, hip clothing, with techno music in the background. Bruno is all about hip – short hair with a Mohawk hairstyle, extravagant clothing, and jewellery with themes communicating he is gay (a pink armband around his upper arm etc.). He is fascinated with celebrities, fashion, night life... If camp, as a sensibility is - as Susan Sontag (1964) explains - linked to glamorous, a glorification of "character.", and being different, then this is camp. Bruno is openly extravagant, frivolous, egocentric and ruthless.

He claims individuality and difference in every gesture. When he conducts his interviews, he asks pompously “What is Paul Wilmort?” (or any other name), as if he is faced with something that goes beyond individual life, something of great importance. He is trying hard to be unconventional in his interviews: he usually sits in unexpected places (on the floor, or back of a chair) trying to look relaxed, and he asks his interlocutors to do the same. The whole structure of his interview, and in a broader sense his world views, is based on binary oppositions ‘in or out?’, ‘what’s up or ich don’t think so?’, ‘ach ja or nich, nich?’, ‘in oder aus?’ - and he asks his guests to take up a position along this binary frame.

He usually engages in two types of settings: one of them involves people that are linkable to identities/activities considered to be predominantly traditional and often masculine (he communicates with American football players, clergy - gay converters, wrestling teams), whose reactions are expected to be (and usually are) negative. Bruno poses homosexuality as a mainstream practice, while heterosexuality as a peripheral phenomenon: he asks a college football team player from Alabama state: “are you allowed to date other members of the team or do you have to wait until the season is over?”; he is totally surprised by the fact that a priest has been heterosexual his whole life. The openness of being gay (as a sexual orientation and lifestyle), the amorous advances he makes toward some of his interlocutors, and the reversed position in which he plays out these roles, brings out the homophobic attitudes of people. He triggers anger and not rarely aggression. When he compliments one of his interlocutor as being cute, he responds: “The interview is over! If you want to be a professional, be a professional, don’t be so fucking fag!”

Another setting where we find Bruno interacting with people, is the world of leisure and lifestyle – designers, public relations ‘gurus’, night club owners, stylists, hair-stylists, and other

people involved in the fashion industry and in a broad sense appearance. This scene is, stereotypically, linked to gay lifestyles, and is, thus, a space in which Bruno is 'at home'.

In this setting trivial becomes deadly important. After a fashion show, he asks the designer what the "philosophy of the show is?" He will claim that fashion saves more lives than doctors do and thus that costume directors are more important professionals than doctors and politicians, and he manages to make people from the scene agree with him. No matter how ridiculous the statements or questions are, a lot of people 'play along' and agree.

In order to give the fashion industry, labels, brands, names, and celebrities an air of legitimacy he draws parallels between the world of fashion and serious, 'real-life' historical figures and events, which have changed the course of history and have, in some way, influenced the lives of large numbers of people. For example, to achieve this, he finds a correlation between popular culture (house music) and the fall of an oppressive regime (Apartheid), and gets an agreement of his interlocutor:

Bruno-"Where do you see the future of clubbing?"

Club owner: "The future of clubbing, I believe, is in house music"

Bruno- "Do you think if house music was around in the 30ies that World War II would have happened?"

Club owner: "No I don't. I don't think it would have happened at all."

Bruno: "Why?"

Club owner: "Let's face it, music is the international language of love and that's what makes the world go around."

Bruno: "Let me ask you a question: the rise of club music - the fall of Apartheid - a coincidence or not?!"

Club owner: I don't think it is a coincidence at all. It is about creating good energy and, and love throughout the world...

In a similar manner he compares a celebrity's 'bad' outfit with the tragedy of 9/11, and claims it is a "mini 9/11". Again, his guest confirms and agrees - they are dealing with a "fashion terrorist." In a similar vein, he asks his interlocutor where Jesus and Ghandi – two important historical figures - would shop if they were alive today?



Bruno links appearance with personal traits - moustaches are a sign of craziness, because Husein, Hitler and Stalin all had a moustache, while people with long hair are 'good', since it is not a coincidence that Jesus, hippies and Rod Stewart had long hair. He continuously reveals the importance of appearance and the visual and draws direct links between these two spheres. Appearance is primary:

Fashion icon: "I am from New York and, and I come across a lot of people who are not from here, but who are from other parts of the world, who really have absolutely no fashion sense!"

Bruno: "They look ridiculous!"

Fashion icon: "There is no personal style!"

Bruno: "Why don't you just put them on a train, send them to a camp and say 'Bye, bye!'"

Fashion icon: (laughter) "...I would love to say 'Bye, bye' to most of them!"

As visible from the above example, Bruno brings in a 'Nazi' discourse: he represents the 'Fashion Polizei'; he asks his guests whether some individual celebrities should be 'kept in the ghetto' or sent on a 'train to Auschwitz'; should they be given a 'benign tumour or malignant tumour'; should they be given 'candy or cancer' – and he accompanies all these outrageous statements with a great laugh.

He also despises the poor, the homeless and the disabled. They are undesirable, and should be pushed aside and, if possible, made invisible. However, they are a good way to gain publicity and create a positive image, so charity as a social activity is seen as good for promotion purposes. Adoption of children from Third World countries, organising humanitarian concerts (for whatever population happens to be in the media spotlight at a given time), pleading for peace etc are all 'fashionable' activities and thus 'a must'. This involvement of celebrities in charity activities is a regular part of public relation strategies and thus, Bruno introduces a variety of charity activities to the show and asks his collocutors to contribute. For example, he asks his guest to send a message about sexual responsibility and safe sex for "deaf children", but without words because "they can't hear" etc.

Bruno wants his collocutors to be controversial because it is good for the show *Funkyzeit with Bruno* and appreciated by the viewers of the fake Austrian television channel:

Bruno: “Just say something controversial into the camera!”

Jonathan Antin (celebrity hairstylist): “You motherfuckers in the Middle East, God help you if I ever come over there, 'cause I'll take all you cock-suckers out!”

Sensationalism, and unscrupulous attention-grabbing of the media and the protagonists participating in its output, is identifiable in moments of the show in which Bruno simulates shootings of interviews in which he asks his collocutors to lie in order to make it more ‘interesting’ or ‘sexy’. The ease with which they agree to do so is extraordinary. Of course, at that given moment, they are not aware that the part in which Bruno asks them to lie will be served up to the audiences – they believe that some parts will be edited and cut out.

As an example, he asks a designer and shop owner to lie by claiming that Madonna shops there (even though she has never been there) because the audience of the show “loves Madonna”. In another section he tells his guests - who are supposed to comment on the dress codes of celebrities – that “the whole nice thing it's not what the audiences expect”, and asks them to “slam people”. They agree to do it, however when they starts to ‘slam’ Paris Hilton, claiming that she is ‘without class’, ‘only money’, ‘royal bitch’... Bruno transforms and is suddenly worried, and tells his guests...”The channel is, like, part-owned by the Hilton group... We just do that again...” So, in the re-take only a few moments later the guests change their approach completely, and depict Hilton as respectful and great. Thus, in this and other segments of the show, the real viewers are spectators of how the shooting of the show actually happens, while Bruno’s guests (the participants of the show) expect this part to be edited and cut out. Again, there is a ‘pact’ between real audience and the creator of the show.

Cohen is, in general, probing the question of political correctness. The character Ali G says:

*“'Respek' is important. But the sad thing is there is so little 'respek' left in the world, that if you look at the word behind me in the dictionary, you will find that it has been taken out (the word behind him is spelled 'respek' so naturally it is not in the dictionary). So if this show teaches you anything, it should teach you how to 'respek' everyone: animals, children, bitches, spazmos, (from spastic - insane or disabled people), mingers (unattractive people), lezzers (lesbians),*

*fatty boombahs, and even gaylords. So, to all you lot watching this, but mainly to the normal people, 'respek!' West Side*".

The whole concept of political correctness is related to the necessity to respect minorities, or the 'Other' - collectivities that have - in the course of history - been suppressed in a world dominated by white, Anglo-Saxon protestant, heterosexual, males. The change of attitudes towards these groups is reflected in the change of language, thus as an example - we do not use the term "invalid" because it implies that someone is 'not valid' which could be offensive to the inflicted individual. Instead we use the term 'disabled', which is claimed to be more neutral. What Ali G does is he adopts the principle of political correctness in that he makes reference to its claim to be respectful, and focuses on the collectivities that are in the centre of its concern - but then he annihilates it by using ultra-offensive terms for those same groups such as 'bitches' or 'fatty boombahs' and the like.

In the television comedy viewed as a whole, Cohen constructs the show around identity issues, by taking the position of subaltern identities. His characters impersonate the lower classes, the Blacks, Eastern or gays, and their use of 'uncivilized' language provokes the collocutors to express their prejudices towards these identity groups. It is only after the viewer has become involved in multiple viewing of the show and has become acquainted with the characters he impersonates, that a clearer picture of Cohen's critique is displayed. Because of this 'total' insight, it might be argued that the social commentary was more easily accessible in the television show than the movies, even though they were all three constructed around the same characters which he originally developed for the television show. The show not only includes all three scripted 'underprivileged' characters, immediately highlighting the whole debate on political correctness, exclusion and identity issues, but it also has more segments: it includes discussions in a studio, as well as field reporting; filmed both in the UK and in the USA; whilst including different persons - from celebrities to 'ordinary' people and various groups pursuing different activities and interests, based on unscripted parts; it did not have a specific narrative but was compiled from different short comic units. As opposed to that, the movies, in particular, *Borat* that brought Cohen success and recognition on a global scale, was compiled of sections of the television show, but it also included played out, scripted parts with real actors. The sections from the television show were organised around a narrative of an 'uncivilized' Easterner visiting America to learn about its 'glorious' culture - a topic that has - albeit from a

very different, more tame, perspective - been covered in the *Coming to America* (1988) and other comedies that develop humorous situations out of cultural diversity. Thus, viewing the movies only gives limited insight into Cohen's critique because the scope is much more narrow and it thus merely unveils a more narrow perspective of his work. Yet another dimension of his concept is that it took several years for him to appear in the media as himself and outside of the scope of one of his characters. Cohen developed this appearance in the media in character as a successful marketing strategy, but it was also a way to subvert identity and to erode borders of 'real' versus 'fictional'. Thus, Cohen's concept included the television show, the movies and the 'real life' appearance in character – segments that overlapped and all formed part of his work, even though the television comedy initiated all of it, and represents the richest and most complex text.

### **7.1. Subversion of genre: the interplay - journalist, collocutor, audience**

Cohen is parodying the genre of talk show, in which he invites one or more guests to the studio (if it is a group then they usually hold different opinions on a specific matter in focus) to discuss a specific topic. On these occasions, he brings up issues that are commonly raised in talk shows, such as the impact of science and technology on everyday life, media and violence, democracy and the problem of citizens' engagement in the political process, education and upbringing of children, drug addiction... However, the 'normality' is disturbed by his image (dressed as a hip-hopper), and to a certain extent by the setting (a studio with graffiti on the walls).

After an 'expected' start, where he raises a specific topic, he continues in a completely atypical manner. For instance, in the discussion about the importance of family he starts with the question whether the way children are brought up in contemporary society is changing, and how to tackle the delicate issues of sex and drugs. But once he launches into the topic he does so in a manner completely unexpected and reversed: he asks whether parents should teach their children about sex by inviting them to the bedroom "while they are boning" or whether they should show them pornographic movies; he asks when they should give them the 'first spliff' etc.

He also parodies the form of interview. Various people are interviewed - both publicly known (where he usually has a problem in pronouncing their names right, a core prerequisite when

conducting a professional interview (Boutros, Boutros, Boutros Ghali) – and ordinary people associated with particular institutions. When he interviews publicly known people, he usually asks absurd questions, mixes up historical events and facts, and in addition, in one way or another, attacks the status they have as ‘important’, reputable, knowledgeable...As an example, an interview with Gore Vidal follows in which Ali G is completely unprepared for his guest:

Ali G: Let’s chat<sup>73</sup> about slavery. Ain't a lot of movies about slavery basically racist? Like, whenever they need to cast a slave, they always chose a brother!

Vidal: Well there were no white slaves ...

Ali G: What!?

Vidal: In.. America... In the United States.

Ali G: So couldn’t it be argued that slavery is a bit racist?

Vidal: Well it was... *totally* racist.

Ali G: So, you is an amazing guy. You ain’t just a historian and... a writer and a speaker you iz also a world famous hairstylist so let's ...

Vidal: (surprised, smile)

Ali G: ...just ask a couple of questions about that.

Vidal: That’s Vidal Sassoon, that’s not me.

Ali G: But that’s what you go under as well?

Vidal: No, no, no, that’s somebody else. I know him too...

Ali G: All right...so...

Vidal: Very nice man.

Ali G: All right, well these next few questions may make a little bit less sense, but bear with me...

Ali G: So if you could cut any First Lady's hair, which one would it be (here Cohen cannot hold his laughter so he hides his mouth with his hand)?

Vidal: No, I’d...I’ve never cut any...hair... That’s Vidal Sassoon...

In addition to genre conventions of talk shows, interviews and reportages, the show carries elements of reality television (recognisable in the unscripted parts of the show). The guest and topics are carefully chosen, and the part played out by any of the three characters is scripted,

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73 The choice of the term 'chat' -as opposed to 'talk' or 'discuss'- is deliberate, as it has connotations of dealing with light-hearted and trivial topics, -- here the term is used in the context of an interview on a serious subject such as slavery.

but only to a certain extent. The unscripted part occurs because the other protagonists in the show are not aware that they are dealing with a fake character/journalist, so he needs to improvise depending on their reactions. Thus, the reactions of people in the show represent the unscripted part which urge for improvisation on the part of the performer. The reactions of the people involved, that can be in the studio - as a formal setting for conducting interviews, or in the 'field' involving various settings (such as a farm, a police academy, or the UN Headquarters) varies. Most of the interviewees are surprised but play along, a role-play in which the camera is an important factor, since they are aware that the interview is being recorded and will eventually be broadcast on some channel. Sometimes this element of surprise, which is a constant, is accompanied by various reactions ranging from witty, humorous responses, or shock and disbelief to outrageous break-ups of the interviews by the offended interviewees.

This lack of knowledge on the part of the people Cohen interacts with in the show, enables him and us, the audience, to form a pact. As an audience, whom he directly address, we know that people are being tricked into various situations, and we enjoy the irony – him claiming to be one thing but being something different; him expressing attitudes we know are not 'real' or 'truthfully his'. He has a goal concealed from his collocutors, but revealed to us, which gives us, the television audience, an important advantage. This very fact preclude us from interpreting the text as if the pact were non-existent, as if irony, parody and satire were not used in the programme as strategies of communication; as if the three characters were 'for real'.

The uncivilised language and behaviour is acceptable, because it is played out, scripted and exaggerated to a great extent, however when he makes other people take up a similar position, revealing their elitism, ethnocentrism, occidocentrism, prejudices, patronising behaviour, xenophobia or other attitudes/actions that are evaluated as undesirable, we are aware that they are 'real', 'unscripted', and through this game, we both get a laugh out of it, and, at the same time, we become aware of the social implications. However, it needs to be emphasised that when Cohen reveals racism, sexism, homophobia...or any other type of intolerance, these types of reactions cannot unquestionably be viewed as 'real' attitudes of people. On some occasions they certainly seems to be just that: when Bruno, for instance, dances with the cheerleaders before an American football game, the aggression and hatred expressed by a part of the audience is most likely genuine. However, in other situations we have to take into

consideration that intolerant attitudes are expressed on the spur of the moment, as a reaction to the intolerance of the character. Thus, they can be viewed either as a genuine attitude that comes out as a result of the liberating context, in which his collocutors feel free to express what they think and feel without inhibitions, or they can be interpreted as a way to adjust and conform to the attitudes of others (whatever they are), and/or a hypocrisy in which conformism is blended with some external interests. Needless to say, neither is desirable.

## **7.2. Progressive-regressive or beyond?**

The target groups he ‘invites’ or visits as a ‘journalist’ are diverse – public figures (such as politicians, economists, scientists etc.), celebrities, activists, representatives of various firms, civil society associations etc. He embodies three types of subaltern identities linked to race, ethnicity and sexual orientation which all form bases for collective identities. He constructs the ‘Other’ based on stereotypes created by legitimate taste, occidocentric exclusivity and heterosexual normativity. The ‘Negative Other’ is then confronted with their Antipodes – a situation in which intolerance, arrogance and exclusivity is revealed.

He takes the opposite stance to the one he is confronted with and this position is completely in line with the characters he has created. The choice of collocutors is made precisely on the basis of difference, the opposition to whatever it is he is representing – low class-high class, uneducated-educated, irrational-rational, vulgar-sophisticated, uncivilized-civilized, East – West, distasteful-tasteful, poverty-wealth, deviant-normative, illegal-legal, frivolous-serious, unconventional-conventional... The only exception he makes, in this respect, is with his character Bruno, whom he confronts with his own reflection – the wannabe celebrity and fashion scene (as opposed to Ali G and Borat who rarely confront people with the same identity as their own). Bruno is, as mentioned before, both set in a structure of opposition and in a structure of sameness. This is, perhaps, due to the relative power of the identity groups Cohen chose to ‘represent’ with his alter egos: Ali G is a citizen of the West, who is a low class, powerless, deviant character confronted with upper class, powerful, mainstream and the legit; Borat is a citizen of the East, the ‘uncivilized’ in confrontation with the ‘civilized’ West, while Bruno is a citizen of the West, middle class and relatively powerful, confronted with homophobes but also engaging with ‘fashion extremists’. The Janus-faced game he plays with this character, on the one hand, is aimed at the homophobic and heterocentric nature of the West, while on the other, is aimed at the world of fashion, celebrity and power and its

exclusivity. It exposes the frivolous nature of one part of the scene, its artificiality, shallowness, recklessness and lack of any substance.

Cohen is constructing the show according to binary oppositions and confronts the chosen collocutors with what they fear or counteract the most. It does not matter how attitudes or types of behaviour are evaluated – they can be seen as progressive or regressive, good or bad. Regressive attitudes, such as ethnocentrism, racism, sexism (intolerance toward others) – that are so vividly exposed in this show – are to a certain extent expected and, as viewers, we might feel a satisfaction because the ‘real’ attitudes have come to the fore, usually hidden behind political correctness. However, the unexpected moment is, when the supposedly ‘progressive’ positions are confronted with their own prejudices – a context in which manifest tolerance and openness – characteristics that usually go hand in hand with progressiveness - are substituted with intolerance, exclusiveness and elitism. The educated counteract lack of knowledge, the masters of etiquette counteract the unsophisticated, the emancipated feminist counteracts the sexist chauvinist, animal-rights activists counteract the fur-coat wearer etc.

By looking at the three alter egos and their characteristics, it cannot be claimed that the show holds a clear political position. We might ask ourselves: Who is the target of its irony? Who/what is satirized? The marginal identity groups his alter egos represent or the power structures he confronts them with, the ones that build and perpetuate stereotypes? His choice of collective identities represented by his characters, is undoubtedly linked to left policies emerging in the 60ies, identity politics, and the protection of minorities. However, the *way* he depicts them can be seen as perpetuation and confirmation of existing stereotypes. Thus, the text cannot be linked to a concrete political position if we only look at the alter egos and the values they supposedly promote. However, if one takes into consideration the binary structure and the confrontation of supposed antipodes, then the focus moves from the three scripted characters to the unscripted reactions provoked by their appearance, which then reveals how exclusion and inclusion operates in contemporary Western societies. It is in respect to hierarchical relations of power that this show might be seen as progressive.

Another way this text can be viewed as closer to a progressive position is in regard to freedom of speech because it obscures the limits to what can be uttered in public, and does so by attacking traditional values. However, in a general sense, this text moves beyond political



positions and tackles the underlying assumptions and norms, the deep “fundamental” dogmatic beliefs and taboos in our society, and ridicules these splits and separations as particular interests of different social actors. It attacks exclusivity and firm, inflexible, rigid positions regarding identity and values of different social actors regardless of their political leanings.

## 8. The extra-textual environment

Advertising, posters, fanzines, web-sites, articles, editorials, interviews and academic writings, all contribute to the systems of signification; however the interests in taking part in the system of signification are diverse. The industry markets the product with a view to attract audiences and to make a profit resulting from this interaction. The production of ads, posters, trailers is used to target and attract audiences and these are subsequently also offered merchandise, i.e secondary products that are linked to the primary text (such as T-shirts, socks, DVD-s, posters, postcards, and in the case of this text the swimsuit that Borat wore etc). In the case of *Da Ali G Show*, the movies that accelerated its popularity were heavily marketed as a cultural product. This was especially true in relation to the second film, *Borat* as well as the third, *Bruno*, while the first film– *Ali G In Da House* was more low profile; with a much more modest marketing campaign and hence the attention it received was not on the same scale as was the case in the other two films.

The profit-oriented logic is also evident in the way contemporary media will always give priority to the controversial, the extreme and the sensational. however, the media system and the way it operates is too complex to be explained just in terms of profit interests, i.e their objective cannot be said to be dealing with mere products, since what the media really deal with are in a sense ‘cultural commodities’ which also includes the circulation of ‘meanings, pleasures and social identities’ (Fiske 1987, 311). In this respect, they provide a forum to negotiate ideologies, moral and ethical values of different social actors, of which the more powerful have a considerable advantage in respect of being heard, read and/or seen.

Different actors engage in the system of signification for a variety of reasons. Simplistically put: scholars engage in matters they consider to be of social significance and decide what is relevant and worth researching; politicians might get involved if it concerns matters of public interests and contribute to the collection of political points from the electorate, civil society groups attempt to pursue their particular interests, while fans might want to share their experiences with other members of their community...the list of possible contributions and motivations for engagement is endless...However, the structural position of different actors plays an important role in the signification processes There is an imbalance in defining, estimating and evaluating different social phenomena between those who have or lack power. To access, encode and communicate ideas through multiple channels, to target a larger audience

and to occupy a structural position that guarantees legitimate authority (the elite that has access and skills) is the privilege of a minority compared to the majority who operate on the micro-level and have little or no access to these privileges. Internet has changed this to a certain extent, and has enabled direct access to communication channels and the development of networks on a global scale. However, there are limitations here too that include the control of the business corporations involved in new media and regulatory policies that develop in order to control this area. In terms of reach, the internet enables interactive communication that includes elements of interpersonal communication but also mass communication. Because of the myriad of different usages of the internet however, (including one-to-one emailing, one-to-many blogs, web sites etc.) and the convergence trend that blurs the line between mass media and new media, it is difficult to assess the 'encoder', the 'decoder' the 'reach', the 'influence' - all these being categories that were more easily accessible before the internet. The abundance of information circulating via internet also potentially creates an overload that easily paralyses users and there is no way to anticipate whether, for example, a blog will generate huge interests or will remain a type of monologue. In this realm, the question of who speaks and with what authority is perhaps even more relevant, even though the processes of identifying and selecting various types of content are more complex.

The power divisions in terms of legitimate authority and access to multiple communication channels are visible in the split between institutionalized production (such as the media industry, academic institutions) and individual production (chat, YouTube etc). I have chosen to research institutionalized production (academic articles and newspaper articles) in the extra-textual environment, as powerful formations in the dissemination of meaning.

### **8.1. An outline of academic writings**

The power of academics stems from their structural position; they form a part of the elite based on the form of cultural capital that Bourdieu refers to as the 'institutionalized state', that implies that they have obtained the highest academic qualification. This enables them to play an important role in the definition of social reality and hold the power to define what is relevant and what is not. Their authority is reflected in that they are usually trusted as sources of 'truth' and 'knowledge' even though their specialized codified language speaks more to other members of the academic community than to the general public. In respect of media research,

academics are concerned with more in-depth, specialized issues that are not all of interest to the average person who is not engaged in media research.

Even though academic debate is oriented towards a relatively small circle of experts in the field, it is, of course, relevant in this case, since this research forms a part of academic debate on media audiences, and popular culture texts. It is also important in the light of the fact that popular culture texts had not yet emerged on the horizon of academic interest only a few decades ago. What ‘mattered’ was media texts that were considered as having a role to play in democratic projects, or linked to the function of media to inform and educate (mainly news, current affairs programs and documentaries), Today media scholars show interest in popular texts, the ‘trivial’, pleasure and entertainment, a shift that indicates that this too is now a legitimate subject matter of research, as it deals with something that permeates and shapes everyday life.

In the evaluation of *Da Ali G Show* the analysis of articles showed that the interest in this text was due to its polysemy – the fact that it could be interpreted both as offensive, politically incorrect stereotyping or a brilliant social commentary, which was connected to the question of how it was read by audiences. In the articles included here, the text was subjected to praise as well as harsh critique. While the television show initiated academic debate only in the UK in the beginning, a wider breakthrough appeared with the movie *Borat*. The articles outlined here were mainly written within the British, American and Canadian academic communities. The outlined scope does not, of course, exhaust everything written within the academic circle worldwide, however this selection was made in view of the articles' accessibility, English being a language I was familiar with and also in view of the fact that they could be accessed online or else could be got from The British Film Institute.

The academic debates focused on the text's controversiality which has been both positively and negatively evaluated within academic circles. Even though the character of Ali G appeared in 1999 in the UK, the first (to my knowledge) academic articles were not written before 2005 (six years later). The article that appeared in the UK on the television show was linked to identity politics, most notably race. Michael Pickering and Sharon Lockyer held a critical view of the show. They focused on the ambiguity caused by the impersonation strategy of Cohen, which was unclear, so the “distinction between person and persona” is blurred (Pickering and Lockyer

2006, 193). This makes it impossible to “separate the stupid from the sly Ali G” (Pickering and Lockyer 2006, 196). The authors claim that Ali G balances on the “edge between social satire and racist buffoonery, leading inevitably to contradictory responses and contradictory sources of laughter” (2006, 197). Contrary to that, Richard Howells (2006) evaluated the show as a critical commentary that had positive repercussions in breaking a form of self-censorship prevalent in Britain related to race. The author refers to the show as “intelligent, sophisticated and constructive” (Howell 2006, 171). He claims that Cohen’s ‘humour of transgression’ - in which the outspoken is less important than the circumstances within which it is uttered – was crucial for his success. By looking at the British context, Howells emphasizes the positive reception of the show and claims that the ability of the British public to speak and laugh about race is a way to “break out from one of our most constraining social taboos” (Howell 2006, 172).

Later, in 2009, Tara Atluri<sup>74</sup> (2009), in writing about the television show, argues that with the ambiguity at play in the show, Ali G succeeds in unmasking firm fixed identities regardless whether they are linked to race or gender. She argues that racism, or any kind of oppression cannot be made humorous, however, the attempt to essentialise racial, masculine or any other kind of identity can, and should therefore be unmasked. Atluri claims that the character “ridicules appropriations of assumed authenticities, rather than subjects themselves” (Atluri 2009, 204). However, the ambivalent discourses also potentially reinforce stereotypes, which is why Atluri rejects its possibility for political subversion. As she claims, it “leaves one with no final political or moral feeling, but does leave one laughing” (Atluri 2009, 209).

Following the release of the movie *Borat* an explosion of publications ensued. In 2007 a whole issue of the American journal *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education* (Vol. 11 No. 1) was devoted to *Borat* and the idea of ‘cultural learning’ which emerged in this film. Most of the authors who contributed to the issue, working or studying at American or Canadian universities, had a negative take on the film, criticizing it as offensive and responsible for perpetuating stereotypes of Easterners, Kazakhstan, Muslims, and representing an extension of the colonial discourse of the West:

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74 London School of Economics, UK.

Torosyan Gayane<sup>75</sup> argued that the film reinforced racial and ethnic stereotypes of Middle Easterners (Kazakhstan as an “over-generalized Eastern-Europe location”) (Gayane 2007, 9). He conducted an empirical study which included a student population, showing that the students did not recognize the critical commentary of the film and it also failed to awaken an interest in becoming more familiar with eastern countries (former members of the Soviet Republic) (Gayane 2007, 13).

Similarly, Pauline Carpenter (2007) claimed that Cohen exploited and mocked people who were underprivileged compared to him. She argues that Kazakhstan is the victim of Cohen’s humour since the representation of that country is believable for people that did not know anything about the country.<sup>76</sup> In addition, the character of Borat could be viewed as a Muslim and is thus responsible for further deepening the conflict between the West and the Muslim world. Last, but not least, the way the movie was filmed, with the involuntary participation of people and the exploitation of the Romanian villagers was wrong.

The same discourse is recognized in the writing of Christopher D. Stonebanks and Ozlem Sensoy (2007) who argue that *Borat* brings nothing new in terms of social commentary, but is simply an extension of the portrayals of the generalized Eastern Other (brown-face, black-face), which vividly reaffirms the colonial roots of the West. As they claim: “...Borat depends upon a classical, gendered Orientalist discourse to tell the story of a backward Muslim man, oppressing Muslim women....” (2007, 49). *Borat* is a further continuation of oppression „articulated within a global, colonialist vocabulary of difference” (Stonebanks and Sensoy, 2007, 50).

Yet another author with a similar approach, Ghada Chehade<sup>77</sup>, claims that the real victim of Cohen's humour is Borat, which is why the film is a representation of anti-Muslim racism, thus perpetuating Islamophobia as the „only acceptable racism left” (Chehade 2007, 71). The author concludes that instead of glorifying this movie, we need to create positive images of Muslims.

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75 Assistant Professor of Communication Arts at the State University of New York at Oneonta, USA.

76 Carpenter gives an example of the repercussions Cohen's humour had for Kazakhstan. As a geopolitical entity it had real problems based on the fictional character. As an example of this repercussion, the author stated that Cohen’s original website for Borat with a Kazakhstan domain was eliminated in Kazakhstan which, in turn, had repercussions on the report on freedom of expression in that country, a report conducted by the Reporters Without Borders (Carpenter 2007, 20).

77 Ghada Chehade, PhD Student, McGill University, Canada.

While most of the articles in this journal issue were troubled by identity issues linked to offensiveness, political correctness and exploitation, another concern voiced by the authors writing about the movie *Borat* in the special issue was whether the social commentary given through satire, irony and parody, would be recognized by the audiences:

Bronwen Low and David Smith (2007)<sup>78</sup> focus on the ambiguity of the movie in its use of communicative tools which makes its interpretation unclear. The authors expressed their concern that this is a type of satire that departs from its old function to attack the powerful, and to give a critical commentary; instead it creates divisions among those who get the joke and those who do not. As they claim, even if the unexpectedness in *Borat* and the subversion of genre is what makes it pleasurable to watch, it also makes it problematic as „cultural pedagogy, for its messages and meanings are as slippery as its genres”. (Low and Smith 2007, 38). Similarly, Miranda Campbell<sup>79</sup> (2007) and Roymieco A. Carter and Leila E. Villaverde (2007) raise the issue of ambiguity which arises due to the communicative strategies Cohen uses. Campbell claims that genre and irony employed in the text positions the audience in a way that forms divisions according to whether they get the joke or not. The entire text creates a framework for „justification of feelings of superiority“ (Campbell 2007, 55) while Roymieco A. Carter and Leila E. Villaverde<sup>80</sup> (2007) by focusing on Cohen’s comic style, ask: What is the direction and aim of laughter in *Borat*?

In the end, two articles in the issue dealt with the movie in the context of post-modernity, diagnosing the state of the art in contemporary cultural production. Michael Hoechsmann and Giuliana Cucinelli (2007)<sup>81</sup> focus their attention on genre recombination and the merging of conventions of documentary and fiction in the context of narcissism and new media platforms in a hyper mediated world, while Antonio Lopez<sup>82</sup> (2007) deals with the text in a broad way, incorporating concepts such as remediation, hoax genre and post-irony, tactical media, deconstruction, camp and lack of authenticity – all of which are related to post-modern theory.

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78 Bronwen Low, Assistant Professor, McGill University; David Smith, film director and producer in Montreal, Quebec.

79 Miranda Campbell, PhD Student at McGill University, Canada.

80 Roymieco A. Carter, Assistant Professor at Wake Forest University, USA; Leila E. Villaverde, Associate Professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA.

81 Michael Hoechsmann, Assistant Professor at McGill University, Canada; Giuliana Cucinelli, a lecturer in communications at Concordia University, Canada.

82 Antonio López, Rome, Italy.

In addition to this entire volume being devoted to *Borat*, the movie was also explored from the point of view of international relations. In 2007 Robert Saunders<sup>83</sup> (USA) (2007) explored the controversy of the character of Borat and Kazakhstan, as a threat that weakened the country's brand and was potentially harmful for the creation of its national identity. Felix Stock (Germany) (2009) too focused on *Borat* and Kazakhstan in the context of branding a nation and the importance of reputation for economic progress. He argued that there is a differentiation between a nation's actual image and the image it believes to have. In order to show this he made an analysis of Kazakhstan's image troubles that were enforced with Cohen's movie.

Further publications that gave an affirmative evaluation of *Borat* showed interest in genre and the way it was subverted:

Viv Aitken<sup>84</sup> (2008) wrote about the technique of unsignalled roles in drama teaching, and draws upon the movie *Borat* as an “unsignalled ‘filmmaker-in-role’, in order to criticize the technique. The paper aimed at criticizing miss-framing as a teaching technique because it is usually used in the context of education and involves children as opposed to the film in which the author showed more consideration for this sensitive cohort (children) than teachers using this technique in teaching.

Leshu Torchin<sup>85</sup> (2008) focused on the genre of documentary. He claimed that the “refusal of stable ground and clear referents does not encourage detachment and irony—the failsafe position for those fraught with doubt. The epistemological impasses of *Borat* instead taunt audiences as they struggle to know more than their basest impulses will let them see.” (Torchin 2008, 61). The author concludes that Cohen manages to play with the traditional conventions of documentary and yet detain the most valuable in documentaries – life as it evolves, or in this case: “what Americans fear most about themselves” (Torchin 2008, 61).

Subversion of fixed identities and the ability to be self-critical and self-reflective in terms of one's own identity were also evaluated as positive aspects. Alexei Lalo<sup>86</sup> (2009) discusses the film *Borat* in the context of Anti-Americanism. He argues that, in addition to the issue of race

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83 Saunders also published the book *The Many Faces of Sacha Baron Cohen: Politics, Parody, and the Battle Over Borat* (2009).

84 Waikato University, New Zealand.

85 University of St Andrews, UK.

86 University of Texas, USA.



and political correctness, it is an attempt to mock not only Americans but also the prejudices about them. In an affirmative note, the author claims that this type of text encourages the audience to be self-critical.

With a focus on audiences and new media, Martins Kaprans (2010) is interested in Cohen's intended social commentary in relation to *Borat* and the reception of *Borat* by the audiences. He analysed the internet comments on YouTube and focused on whether the social commentary was recognized. The preliminary results showed “that the potential effects of social commentary are in various ways downplayed by the commentators”.<sup>87</sup>

As visible from the short review of academic articles on Sacha Baron Cohen's text, the controversial status is recognizable here too. The first publications discussing the television comedy were issued in the UK where the show originated. While the show was evaluated both positively (Howell and Atluri) and negatively (Lockyer, Pickering) the articles were concerned with identity issues, most prominently race. The argumentation evolved around the ambiguity of the show and its polysemy that, according to one view, perpetuated racial stereotypes (Lockyer, Pickering) and, according to another, questioned identity and initiated the suppressed debate about race in Britain (Howell) and worked to destabilize essentialised identities (Atluri).

After the movie *Borat*, the extra-textual environment exploded. It generated a long list of academic publications, again split in their judgement about the text. The American and Canadian academic community (especially involved in the journal *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education* issued in 2007) mainly condemned the movie. The predominant critique was that it was offensive and reinforced racial and ethnic stereotypes. The ‘victims’ of Cohen's comedy were Eastern Europeans, former Soviet republics, Kazakhstan, and what was interesting: Muslims. This was explicated in a few articles in which it was argued that the text deepens the conflict between the West and the Muslim World, and that it is a perpetuation of the orientalist discourse oppressing Muslims, and perpetuating islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism.

Framing the character of Borat within an anti-Muslim discourse is an example of preferred reading (Hall 1973) overpowered by contextual decoding, but it is also an example of wrong

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<sup>87</sup> University of Latvia. This is from the abstract „Did we miss a social commentary? The reactions on Borat in YouTube“ given at the 3rd European Communication Conference held in Hamburg, 12-15 October 2010.

decoding that is, following Eco, not contextually legitimated (Eco 1990). The Islamophobic environment in the West and the new geopolitical divisions caused by the ‘war on terror’ developed after the terrorist attack in New York on the 9<sup>th</sup> September 2001, and has, since then accelerated. This is most likely the background of reading Borat as anti-Islamist by American and Canadian scholars. However, the character of Borat was developed before that; it was shown in Britain in year 2000, and if the interpretation had presented itself at that time this dimension would most probably not have come to the fore. Also, due to the lack of this occurrence, Cohen could not have played with this aspect of humour. If one moves away from knowledge about the author and the time in which the text was publicised, and considers the aspect of knowledge about religion, the reading of Borat as a Muslim, and the framing of the text as an anti-Muslim text could be claimed to be wrong. Anyone familiar with the basic characteristics of Muslim rules of conduct, would rule this option out, since Borat’s attitude and treatment of women, and his alcohol drinking clearly shows that no connections can be made in that regard. Thus, as Klinger (1994) claims it is the external social and historical factors that influence the way a text is read. This is clearly visible in the example of the post 9/11 context in the USA, but it also allows one to single out what type of interpretation is or is not contextually legitimate (Eco 1990).

The articles that were critical towards the text and concerned with identity issues carried a common denominator- the generalised ‘Other’: in the British context it was apparently race, in the American and Canadian contexts, it was the Muslims who were seen as ‘victims’. The focus on these particular identities appeared as a need to ‘pin down’ the deliberately unstable identities that Cohen developed. The focus on identity was accompanied by a widespread condemnation of scorning ‘the underprivileged’ (less powerful) and perpetuating stereotypes about them.

The scholars that engaged in the same discourse on identity but were positive about the text pointed out the attempt to destabilize fixed identities, to subvert essentialising discourses and to develop a form of self-criticism. The positive aspect of the function of comedy viewed in a Bakhtinian way as a ‘free investigation’ of distant objects was visible. In this particular case it was related to the possibility to laugh at racial issues in Britain, which was heretofore considered to be a social taboo.

In summary, a considerable part of the scholarly writings engaged in a discourse on ‘identity and political correctness linked to the interplay between powerful and subordinated identities, the privileged and the underprivileged. The one arguing in favour of the text claimed that it subverts stable identities, genre and initiates discussion of taboo topics and self-criticism while the other argued that it perpetuates stereotypes and is politically incorrect and offensive.

Another issue that occupied scholars writing about this text was its ambiguity and a concern about how it would be decoded by the audiences. The ambiguity of the show arose in the context of conventions and communicative strategies of the text and while genre subversion was praised as amusing, irony and parody, which enforced the polysemy, were not. The authors expressed fear as to whether the readers would have the cultural competence to read the text in ‘the right way’. The underlying assumption of this discourse is that the text *is* a repository of meaning but that, because of its deliberately confusing communicative strategies and lack of cultural competence, the audiences will not be able to recognise its preferred meaning (Hall), i.e. social commentary, but will omit it. In other words, there is a possibility that they will read it in the wrong way. The questions that implicitly arise are: How much faith do we have in the audiences? Are they capable of recognizing the subversion and the social commentary, or will they decode it in the ‘wrong way’? Will it boost further stereotyping, prejudices etc.? Is this text ‘dangerous’?

In the end, a third discourse that emerged was the post-modern ‘diagnosis’ of contemporary cultures, that, in line with one of its main features – distance, did not assume any particular position either in terms of *pros or cons* of the text, but immersed the text in signifiers of hyper-reality, remediation, post-irony, deconstruction, campness, narcissism etc.

The analysis of the academic articles dealing with the text showed that it was inseparable from the audiences. The ‘Identity and PC discourse’ and the ‘Cultural Competence Discourse’ were, in the bottom line, concerned with media effects: how this text might influence the audiences, and what consequences it might have for society as a whole. Amongst the positive aspects were the notions that the text had the power to generate a self-critical audience that can rethink questions of identities and is capable and ready to open up social taboos and discuss them. In the negative vision it perpetuates stereotypes, further suppresses the marginalised, underprivileged, and offends various groups or individuals. Both positions give considerable

power to the text. As different to this, the third, 'Postmodern diagnosis', was more involved in assessing the conditions of contemporary society, the mediascape.

## **8.2. The newspaper articles**

Newspaper articles written by journalists and critics are part of the media industry production of texts. Regardless of the way a text is approached, the mere fact that it is picked up by other media, or in Fiske's term 'secondary texts', makes it a part of the agenda. The role media play in the construction of reality is profound and the discourses that circulate in the media environment comprise a big part of the 'order of reading texts' (Couldry, 2000). Even though the textual environment is complex and includes a broad range of actors and different voices, the encoders of texts (Hall) within the media industry occupy a powerful position in the circulation of meaning. Journalists and especially editors who are engaged in media production are 'gate keepers' and have a powerful role in the dissemination of meaning - due to their own particular position (of being journalists in the media organisation in which they work) - which allows them to highlight and raise awareness of social issues, which means that they play a key role in deciding what is 'relevant', 'interesting' and so forth. I chose to include a limited number of newspaper articles published in the two countries (UK and Croatia) in order to place the individual interviews of actual readers in a context and to facilitate a more thorough analysis and rough-casting of the meaning-making process. The articles published within these nations – or as Anderson (1991) calls them - 'imagined political communities'<sup>88</sup> (UK and Croatia) - are created by and for these imagined communities; they are written in the respective domestic languages, and involve issues that are familiar and shared between the members of a nation. They perpetuate a sense of interconnectedness and reveal the predominant discourses that circulate within them. Thus, by comparing the differences and similarities in the way this text has been written about in the UK and Croatia, one can sketch out the specificities of both contexts within which the text is read.

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<sup>88</sup> This sense of community that develops within the nation is an "imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991, 6).

### 8.2.1. Inter-textual references in the extra-textual environment

The newspaper articles in both countries typically contained numerous inter-textual references referring to what is previously known and experienced, and this vividly showed that, regardless of the fact that some texts might seem innovative, they always rely on the previously expressed, the previously known and experienced. Thus a text never stands alone; it is connected to the past and the present.

In the UK, the journalistic writings were centred around the dichotomy that forms the basic element in the definition of genre – repetition and innovation. The innovation and success of the show was linked to its realistic setting which was made possible due to the inclusion of recognisable people, people who might live next door and this gave the show authenticity. The familiarity of characters facilitated recognition of elements present in one's own life experience. Another thing that explained its success was its unexpectedness and spontaneity, and the fact that familiar settings were disrupted by unexpected, unusual elements. The fact that Cohen was both interviewing and acting, at the same time, was also pointed out as an ‘innovative hybrid’.

However, while pointing out the innovative aspects of the text, it was the format of repetition, and the inter-textual references that dominated the journalistic writings. Viewed at its most direct and explicit level, the show was connected to the production process and the influences that shaped the work of the author. The direct references that Cohen himself made were linked to other British comic actors that served as an inspiration such as Peter Sellers, Monty Python, Derek and Clive with Peter Cook and Dudley Moore.

The reports and critical reviews of Cohen’s work drew on previous texts, and made reference to texts from the past or present which were seen to be related to this show/author and the type of humour expressed. In this respect the debate evolved around whether the show was offensive or not, racist or not and in this regard comparisons were made with Al Jolson<sup>89</sup>- an entertainer who performed in the first half of the 20th Century. At the time, Jolson used to perform with black face makeup, which was a usual practice in the 19th Century, as well as in the times when

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89 As John Kenrick claims in Al Jolson’s biography (2003) „Blackface was not considered racially offensive in the early 1900s. White men smearing their faces black and imitating African Americans had been common on American stages since the 1830s, and this was just one form of the coarse humour that all racial and ethnic groups were subjected to at that time. We have no reason to believe Al Jolson's use of blackface was motivated by anything other than a desire to entertain. He was never known to express racist attitudes and often went out of his way to befriend black performers who were subjected to segregation in theatres, hotels and restaurants.” In: Kenrick, John. 2003. Al Jolson: A Biography. Available at: <http://www.musicals101.com/jolsonbio.htm>. (Retrieved 12.12.2010.) .

Jolson performed. Transferred into contemporary settings, his work is considered to be racist, and parallels were drawn between Jolson and Cohen.<sup>90</sup>

Concern that its ambiguity will cause misinterpretation of the meaning was explicated and linked to past texts as well: the provocative songs ‘*Throw the Jew Down the Well*’ that Cohen sang in a bar, supposedly can be traced back to the work of Randy Newman, and his song ‘*Short People*’ - a song in which he attacks short people, but – as interpreted by a section of the audience - actually wanting to refer to the problem of prejudice towards them. In a similar vein, the character was linked to Alf Garnett from the sitcom *Till Death Us Do Part*, created by Johnny Speight. The character was a bigot, racist and misogynist reactionary, and one part of the audience took him at face value, and positively identified with his position. *Saturday Live*, especially the character Loadsamoney, created in the 80ies by Paul Whitehouse and Henry Richard Enfield was frequently compared to Cohen’s show, especially in relation to its main character, Loadsamoney, an unbearable figure obsessed with material assets, a programme which emerged as a critique of the Thatcher period in Britain. Due to the fact that he became a ‘hero’ seen in a positive light, the authors decided to cut him at the end of the 80ies, since this mode of decoding was at odds with their originally intended concept and this is yet again evidence that contextual decoding is detached from the preferred, originally intended meaning.

References to the transgression of boundaries, and being a repository of bad taste were made and cross-referenced with the work of Lenny Bruce - a controversial stand-up comedian daring to unpack taboos in the 50ies and the 60ies; Max Miller - a British comedian operating between the 30ies and the 50ies who was known for his risky innuendos for which he often got into trouble with the censors; Julian Clary, also known for his sexually explicit jokes or innuendos, the most memorable of which was a serious controversy in 1993 when he used strong language before the 9 o’clock watershed.<sup>91</sup>

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90 To place Al Jolson’s performances in a contemporary context is to make him out to be racist, but clearly, this is a case in point that shows that past texts developed in different historical contexts should be evaluated against the background of the historical circumstances within which they originally emerged. The normative is subject to changes and there are numerous examples of texts popular today that were unthinkable just two decades ago. One case in point is the mainstreaming of television comedies with gay/lesbian themes (such as *Will and Grace*).

91 Wikipedia. Available at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian\\_Clary](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_Clary) (Retrieved: 24 January 2010).

In drawing parallels between this text and other previously created texts, the discussion on originality and innovativeness did arise but in the context of contemporary production. The elements of Cohen's work were compared and measured against Chris Morris's work, a comedian who is claimed to be a pioneer in this field of entertainment. He subverted the sketch show with the unconventional series *Jam* which subverts the structure completely and is characterised by a grim mood, similar to horror, and his originality is also linked to *The Day Today* and *Brass Eye*. In addition to Morris's original work, other comedies that are considered to be breaking with tradition are the above mentioned *League of Gentlemen*, *Spaced* (sitcom) – all of which are considered to be 'real innovations'.

The text defined as a prank-show was also compared to the show *Game For A Laugh* – a light entertainment prank show from the 80ies starring Jeremy Beadle, where members of the audience are exposed to practical jokes (which make people feel foolish) in a studio or on location. In addition, parallels have also been drawn to other previous texts in terms of their style and format – such as the spoof interview and hidden camera.

Parallels between Cohen's work and that of other authors have also been drawn in relation to the phenomenon known as separation of character, particularly to the work of Australian Barry Humphries, Dame Edna Everage (travesty included), and *The Mrs Merton Show* – a British mock talk show with Caroline Ahern, first appearing on radio and then transferred to television from the mid to end 90ies, in which the character Mrs Merton, a simple housewife 'roasts' her guests. Links were also drawn to Alan Partridge – a fictional radio and television presenter starring Steve Coogan, popular in the 90ies. Asking unusual and uneasy questions was, in addition to Mrs. Merton, linked to Dennis Pennies's style interviews – a character developed in 1995 by the English comedian Paul Kaye in *The Sunday Show*, known for putting down celebrities with his cruel questions.

Establishing references between Cohen's show and all these examples of previous texts are clear testimony to the interconnectedness of texts. In order to evaluate and position a text, similarities to and differences from other texts both serve as a template, a way to orientate and categorise in a complex world saturated with references. It is by these processes that texts are grouped into various categories. As visible from the examples above, *Da Ali G Show* was linked to very different types of entertainment – from live performances and stand up comedy,

to television texts of different subgenres – sitcoms, mock talk shows, comedy music shows, interviews, prank shows. While it has been related to very different ‘outer forms’ of comedy, the ‘inner form’ that Warren and Welleck (in Neale 2000) define as attitude, tone, purpose, subject and audiences - seems to be more relevant in relation to the interconnections between this and other texts: offensive racist remarks, sexual innuendoes, unconventional texts, controversial reactions and fear of misinterpretation were what made it possible to establish a direct link between this text and other, previously produced texts.

In these articles parallels are drawn between this text and other past and present ones and in the case of the UK articles it is evident that there is a rich culture of comedy production and consumption. The inter-textual references that arise also indicate that innovation and originality are something that is viewed as crucial for comedy as a genre. Frequent attempts were made to pinpoint what was genuinely new in *Da Ali G Show*, but it is evident that most of its features are mirrored and can be recognized in previously made comedy texts. The analysis didn't however just focus on its comparison with a considerable number of former and contemporary texts, all seen to be somehow connected to it, but it also engaged in discussing broader concerns, namely the way it would be decoded, whether it would be misinterpreted by the readers, whether it was offensive and so on.

In Croatia the television show did not attract much attention in the Croatian press at the time of broadcasting. It was the launch of the film *Borat* in 2006, that was to bring huge popularity and subsequent to that the press started to cover it more frequently. Before *Borat*, the articles were linked to *Da Ali G Show* or the movie *Ali G Indahouse*, but only in terms of short commentaries; and Borat as a character was the one who, even at that stage, got most of the media attention. Once the film was launched most of the articles dealt with the movie *Borat* and particularly with its connection to Kazakhstan. This can be explained in the context of differing marketing strategies used for marketing films and television products; the movie was heavily marketed as a product worldwide with a goal to attract as large an audience as possible within the relatively short-lived life span of it being shown in the cinema. From the point of view of Croatian audiences, it was particularly important that it included stereotypes about the East (former socialist states) and the way the East was depicted in the West, which made this text/alter ego particularly familiar to the cinema going audience in Croatia. It enabled the readers to understand the communicative codes, to feel connected because they could recognise



them, but at the same time to distance themselves from it as something that is not part of 'their own' identity.

As opposed to the UK press, which covered the text in more detail and with longer articles, the Croatian ones were shorter, with fewer references to all the variables involved in the analysis. Inter-textual references made in the article were very few compared to those found in the UK press, explainable by the fact that this type of comedy was seen as very innovative and different to anything ever produced or imported and displayed in Croatia. Thus, the Croatian articles had a visibly smaller pool of reference points in writing about the text. They were also quite different from the ones made in the UK articles. References were made to the character; in this respect Cohen was linked to Ozzie Osbourne and Tom Green. Parallels were also drawn to the well established path of popularisation by moving from television to the movie theatres – in this context the example of Rowan Atkinson and the movie '*Mr. Bean.*' (1997) was mentioned. Cultural differences that appeared as the motif in *Borat* were compared to John Landis's movie *Coming to America* (1988), starring Eddie Murphy in which comic situations arise due to cultural differences. The matter of culture was also raised in evoking old Yugoslavian movies such as *Sakupljaci perja* (1967, Aleksandar Petrović), and *Dom za vešanje* (1988, Emir Kusturica) which both, in different ways, depict gypsy cultures or poor Roma villages, accompanied by the music of Goran Bregović.

By comparing the inter-textual references in the articles it was visible that there was a noticeable inter-textual abundance in the UK articles, while the Croatian articles indicated a form of inter-textual scarcity as regards the way in which this show was written about. There were less known references that were familiar to the Croatian readers that would allow for connotative connections close enough to the primary text. This indicates that textual production occurs in the form of iterations, in which previously known material is built upon and generates a combination of old and new ideas. It is not a coincidence that this text was produced in the UK and became broadly accepted and popular, since it built and expanded on the familiar, the already uttered but with some modification. This was not the case in Croatia, and this manifested itself in the lack of inter-textual references concerning the production and reception of this type of comedy.

### 8.2.2. Framing the text: cultural commodity or repository of meaning

The newspaper articles both in the UK and Croatia covered the show in a twofold way which represents the way cultural products are typically covered in the press: on the one hand as a commodity on the market, and on the other as a cultural commodity being a repository of meaning.

In writing about the **product** - the role of marketing campaigns, popularisation and the media industry was given a lot of consideration. In this respect, criticism was directed at the television industry as a whole and the show was seen in the context of the contemporary trend to „talk up, hype up and mark up a show a frightening degree.”<sup>92</sup> In this process efforts are made to launch a persuasive campaign which suggests that here we have a new, original and funny product, and the overall goal is to make it a money-spinning cult. Television was heavily criticized in this respect:

*“In keeping with television's pathological need to reproduce a successful idea until the life is wrung out of it and it is finally put out of our misery, both Channel 4 and BBC2 now appear to be rapidly pursuing youth, and only youth (...) Accordingly, the limits of what can be said and done have been stretched more than ever in search for new talents that become famous almost overnight. This continuous need for new and innovative texts also emerges as there becomes increasingly more time to fill in a multi-channel environment.”*<sup>93</sup>

In this context the show was evaluated as something “Gone to the sacrificial altar where hype turns to cinders, gone to television's black hole, which consumes talent mercilessly and tests it to destruction.”<sup>94</sup> Thus viewed, this text (as any other) will become the latest in a long line of victims consumed by television's enormous appetite.

The criticism is directed at the ever increasing speed of the process of popularisation where everything moves rapidly, from stand-up to radio, from radio to television, and - particularly popular - from television to film. This speed was not only applied to mainstream comedy but to comedies which in the past had to fight their way towards the mainstream to make an impact. The process of popularisation was (moving from TV to film) forced through aggressive

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92 Collins, Michael. 2000. Hold on to your hats. The Guardian. April 27.

93 Collins, Michael. 2000. Hold on to your hats. The Guardian. April 27.

94 Barnard, Peter. 2000. The weekend's viewing. The Times. April 03.

marketing campaigns, but resulted in a decline of quality. Aggressive campaigning and huge investments enable the product to become a hit long before its actual launch and regardless of its quality.

The articles showed that, in accordance with Bourdieu (1984), the process of popularisation that implies a large audience and earning profit, where a text moves from a fringe to mainstream and is widely distributed – implies a loss of quality. When Cohen got his own show, and moved from the *11 O'Clock Show*, there were a series of criticisms regarding the quality of his comedy in the new show, compared to the positive evaluation of the past when it was viewed as alternative, was not widely known and had a small audience. With the incorporation of the show in the TV program and schedule, it lost its marginal position – a move which was seen as devastating. By entering mainstream media he committed himself to that mainstream, and with that he ‘betrayed’ the pioneering audience. The mainstreaming processes are generated by the industry and (sometimes) the authors that aim for such success. Apparent from the newspaper articles, when the ‘cult’ status (Hills 2004) emerges from the quality of the text defined as such by a small audience, it is of authentic quality, however, when the cult status is produced by the industry and becomes a mainstream consumerist practice, this is condemned as unappealing due to the superficiality of profit interests.

The discussion about the show also revolved around the level of originality and innovativeness, amusement and boredom. While some claimed that Cohen and his comedy is “the biggest phenomenon in global comedy”, others claimed it is nothing new and already seen. In this respect, his material was characterised as being superficial and repetitive and derivative. There was nothing particularly distinctive or innovative in the actual style or formats used in this comedy, despite attempts by the industry to show it as such, original and new - the contention was there that it is merely a reflection of current television trends and thus not half as productive or funny as people think. As one journalist wrote: “I am already bored of Ali G, the one-trick pony whose trick was to ‘interview’ famous –and famously self-important-people in the manner pioneered by Chris Morris years ago.”<sup>95</sup>

It is evident, however, that the text was presented within the culture industry most and foremost as a cultural commodity, i.e. most articles in Croatia and the UK were concerned with the

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95 Flett, Kathryn. 2000. Staines past. The Observer. April 2.

**meaning** of the show and its controversial status was never disputed – advocates and opponents held opposing views about the show – some argued for and some against it. The advocates mainly claimed that it was an example of brilliant comedy, intelligent social satire with a positive impact. Opponents, on the other hand, raised concerns - both individuals and social groups - claiming that their reputation had been destroyed, and that their reputation was negatively impacted - loss of reputation, stress, worry, physical pain, humiliation, shame, mortification and hurt feelings or indeed claimed that their business had been ruined. This also resulted in numerous law suits ranging from libel, slander, invasion of privacy, fraud, breach of contract, negligent misrepresentation and negligent infliction of emotional distress. The opponents of the comedy were either attempting to protect their own individual rights, to protect the rights of members of particular identity groups, or being politically correct and speaking in favour of ‘Others’, even if not directly targeted through their belonging to these groups.

Groups such as anti-racism campaigners, Jewish advocacy groups<sup>96</sup>, British rabbis, black observants and comedians, and formal organizations such as the Kazakh Embassy in Britain, the Anti-defamation League, the Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC)<sup>97</sup> and the association Scope, are examples of groups that raised complaints in the media, claiming that this type of comedy was offensive. The criticism was directed at its potentially bad influence on parts of the audiences, especially vulnerable groups such as teenagers. Concerns also centred around the humiliating and offensive discourse that was harmful for specific identity groups. Examples that were raised in order to support these arguments were linked to specific ‘delicate’

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96 The Jewish community claimed that Cohen – as a Jew – was a bad role model, disseminating the wrong values to young Jews. In addition, British rabbis claimed the Cohen’s comedy was of ‘poor taste’, conflicting with Jewish laws and moral ethics which among other things included speaking badly of another person, or humiliating another person. In addition, it was ‘offensive and immoral’ and an embarrassment to the Jewish faith. This was seen as damaging, especially in the context of Middle East tensions and a visible increase of anti-Semitism in contemporary societies. His comedy was seen as giving people an excuse to further harass Jewish people.

97 The Broadcasting Standards Commission claimed that his appearance in character in various media broadcasts was outrageous since his language was inappropriate for the time of transmission and the respective audiences who had different expectations. (The watershed (safe harbour) is the defined time slot in television schedules where content suitable for adults only can be broadcast (i.e. sexual intercourse, violence, strong language and other content not considered appropriate for children ). In Britain the watershed is, according to Ofcom, 9:00 pm, +15 age wise). Cohen's appearance on BBC radio as Ali G in a morning slot, raised heated debates, especially since many children were listening at the time. The result was that the rules concerning broadcasting in general were tightened and guidelines were changed to prevent similar outbursts: before a broadcast the presenters and contributors were briefed in terms of „taste and decency issues“ The ITC, the statutory watchdog with the power to fine broadcasters for breaking controls on "language, taste and decency" and to impose substantial penalties, especially with regard to a programme's suitability in terms of transmission times and expectations of the relevant audiences.

issues that seemed to be replicated in both Croatian and UK articles.<sup>98</sup> These were the ‘old’ taboos of sex, bodily functions and bad language – all considered to be of bad taste. It was also clear that the nation state is viewed as a sacred formation, expressed by the appeal to leave state symbols and national tragedies out of the field of humour and jokes. Another important topic which was frequently raised as sensitive were jokes about the Holocaust and Jews as the world scapegoats. In effect, there seemed to be as shared understanding of what constituted sensitive jokes in both imagined communities.

### **8.2.3. Evaluating comedy: relevance of the author**

Media research on the text-audience relationship has moved away from the author and his intention as irrelevant compared to the meaning the text has for the readers. However, the author is important in the meaning-making process, especially in the context of humour, when something is uttered on account of someone else. This was reflected in articles in both imagined communities. They focused on the author to a great extent, especially on his identity. This was an important mechanism in judging and evaluating the appropriateness of the joke. The identity of the author seemed to be a reference point in evaluating whether his humour was appropriate. A lot of coverage was given to Sacha Baron Cohen and his “real” personality.<sup>99</sup> On the one hand, the common signifier that emerges repeatedly in almost every article is the fact that he was Cambridge educated – which reflects the continuous importance of higher education but also tradition – seeing Cambridge as a prestigious brand and the second oldest university in Britain. An analysis of the articles shows that this was the most frequently mentioned fact. In that regard, the following was stated:

*“The Cambridge-educated spoof rapper, hailed for his iconoclastic humour...”*<sup>100</sup>

OR:

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98 The examples were naturally guided by the show and its content, and did not include all possible topics considered to be potentially sensitive (most notably religion).

99 In the description of his personality it was interesting to observe how the media constructed completely contradictory stories, invisible to the audience consuming them on a daily or occasional basis. Cohen was granted completely oppositional traits from article to article – from an introvert depicted as guarded, shy, bashful, mildly autistic, quiet, little geeky, indecisive and hesitant, pensive and ponderous, with a very simplistic take on life, normal, courteous, polite, mild-mannered, to quite a stubborn extrovert described as cool, tenacious, fearless, provocative, weird and eccentric, but very clever and creative, successful, confident, self-critical, a perfectionist, incredibly quick on his feet, a gifted satirist and clown, funny, clever and talented with an IQ measured at genius level. And in addition to these two quite different pools of characteristics he was ascribed negative traits such as a person who loves to hone, arrogant, ambitious, fake, and without identity (obviously the last is accurate for his media-constructed personality).

100 Milmo, Cahal and Logan, Victoria Logan. 2001. MTV faces a Staines massive fine over Ali G's lack of respect for the stars of pop music. The Independent. November 10.

*“The Cambridge graduate said...”*<sup>101</sup>

or:

*“His reps point out that he is smart, Cambridge educated and fired by a fierce ambition. He is a star.”*<sup>102</sup>

Another characteristic that appeared frequently was his ethnic background and the fact that he is Jewish. His ethnic background was mostly connected to education and intellectual capacities:

*“This, after all, is a Jewish comedian posing as an Asian wannabe rapper...”*<sup>103</sup>

or:

*“..He went to Haberdashers’ Aske’s, a public school in Elstree which despites its Anglican roots, has become a firm favourite of the Jewish community for their smart, academically inclined sons”*<sup>104</sup>

According to social background a confusion on whether he attended private or public school was visible, however there was no mistake in that he was – as mentioned previously - a Cambridge graduate, being from a middle-class affluent family in north London, and coming from a solid, comfortable, achingly bourgeois home. His class position was also confirmed through depictions of him as a gent, courteous, polite, a person that goes on a lot on manners. In terms of nationality it was made clear that he was British, having “a sober British purr”<sup>105</sup>, and speaking with a “deep, gentle English accent.”<sup>106</sup>. In terms of political orientation he was categorised as having a left-wing background and as a campaigner against racism and for the cancellation of Third World debt. Finally, as mentioned before, his religious/ethnic affiliation was also clearly emphasized - having a Jewish background, keeping kosher and Sabbath.

Similarly to the UK press, the most frequently mentioned detail about the author in Croatian articles was that he was Cambridge educated and a member of the Jewish community, brought up in an orthodox family. In addition to the often reiterated information on his educational background, he was referred to as intelligent – even described as an “intelligent manipulator

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101 Simpson, Richard. 2002. Ali G rudes the world and becomes king for a night, Evening Standard. March 21.

102 Bart, Peter. 2007. Kazakh chameleon shows true colours. Variety. January 15.

103 Jeffries, Stuart. 2000. Channel surfing, The Guardian. April 1.

104 Rayner, Jay. 2002. Mutha of invention. The Observer. February 24.

105 Goldstein, Patrick 2007. Police, Camera, Action. The Guardian. January 10th.

106 Strauss, Niel. 2006. Interview with Cohen, The Guardian Extra. November 21st.

from Cambridge.”<sup>107</sup> His Jewish identity was much more often mentioned than the fact that he was British. This information on his background was stressed in the context of being constitutive of his identity, exemplified with the information that he was involved in the Zionist movement Habonim, and had written his thesis on the Jewish involvement in the civil war in the USA, which finally put a stop to claims that he may be an anti-Semite.

In the context of comedy as a genre, this seemed particularly important since comedy implies jokes, and jokes are made at someone’s expense. In order to be able to evaluate a joke and ‘properly’ react to it in line with one's own world views and the normative setting, the identity of the speaker (in this case the author) and the context of utterance is crucial. In this respect information about class, ethnic identity, nationality, age, and gender were important in both imagined communities.

#### **8.2.4. Race versus nation as bones of contention**

The dominant discourse in the UK articles was related to the meaning of the text linked to identity and power relations.

The debates in the UK articles were to a great extent focused on the issue of race. The character of Ali G was most debated, and the ways in which the character was interpreted in relation to race were numerous: he was depicted as a white wigger’ - pretending to be black; as a black Jamaican; a (British) Asian who wants to be black; a white man playing the part of an Asian who wants to be black; A British Afro-Caribbean Asian, a crossover between Islamic and Afro Caribbean; British - Afro-Caribbean man; a middle-class Jewish white boy pretending to be black; and surely the most accurate - an "unpindownable" sonic hybrid.

The analysis of the articles that reflected the discussions raised and the various ways in which this show was interpreted showed that the context of racial issues was highly prominent in the UK press. It was clear that race was considered a matter of importance, because the way Cohen's race was understood determined whether the show would be deemed offensive or not: if he represented a white guy (like the author) from the home countries who pretends to be black, then it was argued that it is not racist, because he mocks more powerful, white people

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107 Pavičić, Jurica. 2006. Borat: politički nekorektno? Pa što kad je smiješno. Jutarnji list. November 1st.

because of their attempt to appropriate a culture that does not belong to them. However, if he represents the black, lower class, uneducated guy, then it was argued that it was racist since it created stereotypes and made fun of black culture.

In Croatia, as in the UK, the dominant discourse was that of identity and power relations -- the difference being that this time it was not concerned with race and issues of multiculturalism, but rather with national and international relations. Signifiers such as West, East, Western supremacy, colonial culture, America, Kazakhstan, Austria, Croatia, Balkan ... featured prominently in the Croatian articles. References were made to Kazakhstan as having fallen victim to his humour, and the country's reactions to this fact, while it was suggested, albeit most often implicitly, that the target of his humour could just as well have been Croatia.

In this context, Austria was frequently mentioned in relation to *Bruno*, and various arguments were made that the Austrians were concerned as to whether *Bruno* would have the same negative effect on their image in the world as *Borat* had on Kazakhstan. According to the press, the Austrian tourist board went so far as to put a strategy in place, because they panicked and feared for the consequences, especially the repercussions Bruno's Nazi attitudes would have.

Another country which featured prominently was America and it was stated that it was frequently depicted as a country in which a lot of groups were angry, in particular groups "who did not understand the jokes on the account of politically incorrect and uneducated Americans..."<sup>108</sup>

Further implicitly nation-state led discourses mentioned in Croatian articles in this context firmly place Croatia in the epicentre of world celebrity culture. Namely, one of the participants in Cohen's show was a Croatian pop-fingerboard player, Belinda Bedeković, and the Croatian media picked that up and informed the public that Sacha Baron Cohen was writing a book about his alter ego Borat and in it "a photograph of our pop-fingerboard player Bedeković will be published" as claimed by the journalist. The performer Belinda Bedeković was quoted: "Sacha contacted me today related to his new project. As a matter of fact, he is writing a book

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108 Jutarnji list. 2007. Boratu sve više amerikanaca prijete smrću. January 15.



with the working title “Borat” in which he will include me too. There you go; the two of us are inseparable.”<sup>109</sup>

And similarly, articles discussing her links to and participation in the show:

*“Belinda will perform as a guest in the world wide known late-night talk show, with that she will join the impressive list of stars who have sat across the famous host such as Tom Cruise, Jennifer Lopez, Julia Roberts and numerous other stars.”*<sup>110</sup>

These efforts to position Croatia in the global world of celebrities are again linked to nation-state and represent a desperate attempt to demonstrate the emancipatory role of the national body in a global world of ‘success’ and power.

Thus, the difference between the Croatian and the British press was mainly in the fact that the British press focused on racial issues while the Croatian was predominantly concerned with the relation between Cohen/alias Borat and Kazakhstan as a former socialist country. Every society interprets and picks up those codes which are more relevant to its everyday life and reality – in Croatia the newly created nation state and the similarity with Kazakhstan in terms of having emerged in the context of the recent fall of socialism are factors which are at the core of the national experience and this was clearly evidenced in the “it could have been us” statements that appeared in the articles.

Thus, the way the Croatian press dealt with the show was partially determined by the context within which the newspaper media operate, i.e. in that of a newly formed nation state – the discourses on reputation, image, affirmation in an international context, inferiority based on the size of the country, and discourse on the colonized and the colonists; of East and West, and Cold War divisions - these were all crucial in interpreting the show. What is more, the semi-periphery striving to belong, to inscribe itself culturally into the Core (to use Wallerstein’s terminology) was also visible in the wannabe-included-in-the-world-of-celebrity narratives that appeared in some of the articles – mentions of the fact that a local musician “made it” in the World, by playing with Cohen, was given undue prominence in the Croatian press.

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109 Jutarnji list. 2007. Belinda Bedeković: Borat piše knjigu o svom alter egu. August 21.

110 Jerković, Iva. 2006. Borat: Ozenio bih Hrvaticu. Jutarnji list. October 27.

The whole idea of race was not problematised at all in the Croatian press, because the issue of race is completely remote from this homogenized culture, not only from the point of view of race, but also from that of ethnicity and religion. Croatian society being a uniform society in which a small number of Roma people represent the 'Other', in the aftermath of ethnic cleansing which occurred during the war in the 90ies, the issue of diversity, or the multiculturalists' debate simply doesn't arise as an issue. The concept of a white *wannabe*, and white appropriation of black culture is a concept only available in the context of mediated texts or through mediated interactions. The UK - on the other hand - has numerous ethnic identities that all form part of British culture and in that context the problem of exclusion and inclusion arises in a dominant way.

#### **8.2.5. Modes of decoding**

Although Cohen's text deliberately uses ambiguous communicative strategies that open up various modes of interpretation, the way in which the text was decoded reveals that although different attitudes and readings were expressed – these were limited to a few different types.

In the UK the overall evaluation of the show was guided by the gaze – for some of the readers the main focus was laid on what he represented with his characters. The definition of this was used to draw conclusions as to whether the show was offensive or not. For others, the main aspect was not who he pretended to be, but what the people whom he confronts in his interviews thought he was, because their vision of what he represented would largely determine their behaviour.

The people who feature in the show (or the participants in the show) would usually come across badly because of the way they reacted (most of them) and this was criticised by both journalists and critics. The people he makes fun of are typically seen as belonging to the upper classes and as such they represent a legitimate target from the point of the viewer simply because of their success and powerful position. The reactions of the featured guests, typically representatives of the establishment either lay bare their prejudices or else they manage not to let their guard down and show such patience and respectfulness - typically a "stiff upper lip" type reaction which the British upper class is well known for and this of course indicates their perceived

superiority.

The other participants - who also come across badly - were not people in power, but the mainstream. They are exposed as being conformists who want nothing more than to be liked by the host and to get his approval and the approval of the group they thought he represented. They were thought of as wanting to appear cool, or as persons who would compromise their dignity to appear on television. They were claimed to be dumb conformists, bigots who bare prejudices and stupidity. In rare occasions the participants were seen as victims – in these cases they were seen as such mostly due to the fact that they didn't know what they were dragged into.

As mentioned before, ways of decoding were limited to only a few, and some of them overlapped in the Croatian and UK articles. However, there were also a few versions that were distinctive in both settings.

The modes of decoding in the UK can be narrowed down to the following:

**1. The show is offensive because it stereotypes black people** - One mode of interpretation that evaluated the show negatively was primarily based on racial issues. The opponents of the show claimed that it was racist due to the fact that it perpetuated an offensive, insulting and negative racial stereotyping of black people. It was an example of one race laughing at members of another. Cohen was seen as exploiting the stereotypical connection between black people and drugs and violence in the making of his comedy. In the condemnation of the show the actual identity of the teller was crucial. It was claimed that because the author is a white Jewish Cambridge graduate, stepping into black culture was racism – and was not funny. From this perspective it was held that the objective was to laugh at black street culture in a way so that the liberal middle classes (similar to the author) could participate in the laugh.

**2. The show is offensive because it scorns vulnerable groups** - A shift from the issue of race towards the protection of other vulnerable marginalised subaltern groups; in an attempt to build a better understanding of the problematic position of these groups in contemporary society, views were put forward stating that laughing at these groups (people with disabilities or other) precluded them from ever being able to change their position and to achieve a broader

understanding of their problem. The problems associated with these groups should not be used to ridicule.

**3. It is not racist because it scorns white people** - The advocates of this view argue that it was not racist because it was mocking white people who try to adopt elements of black street culture. Implicitly racism – as an ideology of supremacy of any racial group – was equalised with white racism, and in this scenario the race of the teller is seen to be crucial. In this sense, the advocates claim that the programme is not racist and they also claim that Cohen represents a white wannabe.

**4. The show accurately portrays the debasement of Blacks in Britain** - A positive evaluation of the show linked to race was that the show is “an accurate portrayal of the debasement of black culture in contemporary Britain“, as claimed by Darcus Howe (who is a Black liberal, as pointed out in the press).

**5. It is potentially harmful because a section of the audience will not recognise the satire** – In this type of decoding, a negotiated position was taken: it points to both positive as well as negative aspects of the show: although the show tries to highlight some problems in our society (such as the ignorance of youth in contemporary society – a claim made by the Jewish community), concerns arose that, instead of reading it as satire, it might inflame bigotry; that this type of humour was too sophisticated for its own good; and that the irony was lost on a section of the audience who accepted the statements at face value.

**6. The show is exposing prejudices** - The advocates of this view claimed that the show was an important social commentary, pointing to important problems such as how easily people conform and to exposed latent xenophobia, homophobia, anti-Semitism etc. According to them, no one is permitted to define what should be or shouldn't be allowed to laugh at, because to proscribe what people can or cannot laugh at is more sinister than the mocking of any particular thing or phenomenon. In this respect, mockery and fun exclude offensiveness.

**7. The show is make-belief - it is just comedy** - this view held that it was considered nonsensical to be offended since it was ‘only comedy’ and all the characters were fictional.

The number of possible modes of interpretation was limited and they would typically re-occur in a wide variety of articles. As is evident from these seven modes of reading the show, the controversial status of the text was never in doubt and it gave rise to quite opposing decoding and evaluations. The issue of identity and power relations set in the context of politically correct discourse seemed to be dominant in the UK newspaper articles, focusing in particular on the issue of race. In addition to the debate as to whether it was harmful and offensive or good satire that exposed prejudices, there were also concerns that the ‘real’ meaning of the text – which is satire, would not be recognised by the audiences who could potentially take it at face value. In addition, the show was also decoded as ‘only comedy’ which was not supposed to be taken seriously.

In the Croatian articles, the same divisiveness in arguing for or against the text was also present, albeit with a somewhat different focus and argumentation. The movie and character *Borat* stirred more attention in Croatia, and those articles that contained a more detailed argumentation for or against the text were mainly written and dealt with the phenomenon of *Borat*. Again, this can be explained easily in terms of not only the aggressive movie campaign but also in terms of the content which was perhaps closest to the Croatian imagined community. It was the familiarity of cultural codes, especially the antagonism between the West and the generalised East (which Croatia also forms part of) that enabled the readers to relate to this text in a more profound way. Thus, the Croatian articles mainly considered the differences between the East and West, Kazakhstan (potentially Croatia) and the USA, uncivilized/backward and civilized/ progressive...

The Croatian articles carried the following modes of decoding:

**1. The show is insulting and of bad taste** - a negative view of the show which claims that it is populist toilet-humour, distasteful, violent, stupid and offensive. The potential social critique was admitted in that Cohen did scorn American conventions, prejudices and in a general sense political correctness, but the view is that the way in which it was dealt with was inappropriate and simply not funny.

*“He plays on “cheap laughs” and exploits the lowest common denominator in order to attract the audience, with all that “tongue in cheek” humour... Washing his face in the toilet, clumsily demolishing valuable antiques and uses populist ‘toilet humour’ and clownish behaviour. (...) Borat sings an offensive ostensible Kazakh anthem to the tunes of the American anthem, and provokes rage at the rodeo stadium. When viewing that scene, one has to wonder how a Croatian, Italian or Czech person or any other audience would react if some idiot started singing an offensive song to the tunes of their anthem.”*<sup>111</sup>

**2. Western supremacy and portrayal of the East as a target/victim** – Another type of negative evaluation was linked to its offensiveness and unfairness in openly portraying Kazakhstan as a state in which prejudices rule, political repression and religious intolerance flourish, and in which stereotypes are so brutally misused. The cohort of this negative evaluation focused on world power relationships and in particular it was linked to notions of nation-state and class in which Britain’s history of colonial domination was often recalled:

There is a lot of unfairness in his humour:

*“I don’t like that Cohen - a rich, privileged Englishman from a middle class Jewish family, with a PhD in History from Cambridge University –is mocking people who are neither rich nor privileged, people who are easy targets and who are inevitably subjected to prejudice. Essentially, his victims, the real Borat Sagdiyevs can never be afforded the chance to reciprocate because they do not have at their disposal the powerful tools that Cohen has: access to strong media, and the power of a dominant colonial culture.”*<sup>112</sup>

Furthermore, the hypocrisy of the West was pointed out:

*“The target of Cohen’s racist satire is Eastern Europe (the territory of the former USSR and the Balkans), and in this respect I am less angry with Cohen’s hyperbolic humour itself and more upset by the fact that none of the western analysts – otherwise ultrasensitive to the politically incorrect outbursts of comrade Borat - never so much as commented on this aspect. For*

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111 Tomić, Živorad. 2007. Borat. Jutarnji list April 5.

112 Pavičić, Jurica. 2006. Borat. Jutarnji list. October 28.

*western commentators the relevant topic is whether Cohen is offensive to black, Jewish or gay people – and that in itself is a relevant topic, but the question of whether he is insulting to Kazakhs, Romanians or Croats, unfortunately does not seem to be on their radar at all.”*<sup>113</sup>

**3. America is the target and they deserve it** - According to this type of interpretation Cohen provokes and insults America and its people and attempts to expose any elements of chauvinism, racism, homophobia and in that regard he is very successful. Borat's America discovers that the “most democratic nation in the world” is actually burdened with a vast array of prejudices and exclusions ... “Kazakhstan has nothing to learn from America – is the unspoken but evident conclusion of Borat's travelogues.”<sup>114</sup>

**4. Politically incorrect satire, but all-inclusive** - Cohen has insulted everyone – the Kazakh people, the Roma people, Americans, homosexuals, Balkan people, black people...His comedy is politically incorrect but funny, a cynical political satire that reveals the dark atavisms of modern cultures, especially the Americans. Even if the most obvious victim is the Eastern European the comedy is so surreal that nobody can take it seriously.

**5. It's only comedy** - An affirmative evaluation which has been linked to the mere fact that he is funny. The show was seen as silly, made for young people, a programme in which the author makes fun of his guests by covering topics such as sex, drugs, guns...and in which he manages to “shock even the most liberal ones.”<sup>115</sup> In this pool of interpretation the focus was placed on the distaste that was provocative and funny, something infantile and reserved for the youth – a disrespect for good taste, with sexual allusions, provocative, politically incorrect, sexist, stupid etc. Its potential to be offensive was simply overstated - it was just seen as childish humour that is simply funny - at the end of the day it is 'only comedy'.

Regardless of the deliberately ambiguous communicative strategies of the text, the modes of decoding were limited only to a few, and some of them re-occurred in both Croatian and UK articles. For example, the idea that entertainment should be allowed remain just that, was voiced, advocating that entertainment, in this case comedy was ‘unserious’ and as such had no role to play other than to entertain, distract and amuse.

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113 Pavičić, Jurica. 2006. Borat: politički nekorektno? Pa što kad je smiješno. Jutarnji list. November 1.

114 Hrgović, Maja. 2006. Crni humor koji nikog ne šteti. Novi list. October 22.

115 Vranjković, Anita. 2002. Seks s pudlicom i kraljicom majkom. Slobodna Dalmacija. September 19.

Yet another viewpoint voiced in both countries was the position which sets out that this type of comedy has an important role to play in exposing contemporary imperfections in society. The satirical dimension is highlighted as positive, while the targeting of different groups was approved as long as everybody was targeted indiscriminately – saying that making a point is justified once everybody is treated equally. In this respect, the right to offend was viewed as less harmful than the right to define where the limits to humour should be set. In that context, it was maintained that the freedom of speech argument was more important than the protection of particular groups or individuals.

The positions that decoded the text as negative and offensive in both Croatian and UK articles were concerned with identity and power relations. The similarity was that the subjects viewed as less powerful should be protected, and that jokes should not be made on the account of those whose identity is not shared with that of the narrator. In this respect, the identity of the author/narrator was again seen as important in evaluating the text and the predominant discourse was that criticisms or any negative depictions could not be voiced at the expense of others, but, solely directed at one's own identity group.

An important difference was that Croatian and UK journalists and critics had different definitions of the 'powerless'. While UK articles were concerned with the concept of race within the context of multiculturalism and respect for other identity groups – regardless of their nature, the Croatian articles, on the other hand, were concerned with geopolitical discourse in which Eastern Europe (including Croatia), sharing a socialist past, were viewed as powerless compared to the power of the West (Cohen as a representative of the West) based on the colonial past. Of course, the respective positions of power in the global context significantly altered the platform from which the text was criticized. The modes of decoding that appeared in the UK articles engaged in a politically correct discourse and aimed at protecting others, talking from a 'superior' position, one of 'awareness' of past 'sins' and inequalities. On the other hand, the modes of decoding that emerged in Croatia were clearly written from the position of the 'victim', generalised on a national level and embedded in the generalised geopolitical construct of the East. This position resulted in the avoidance of the aspect of political correctness by Croatian journalists and critics, who instead focused on the earlier mentioned power relations. This was particularly evident in the predominant, more overtly rough discourse which held that



Cohen's text gives Americans as the targets of his humour just desserts, i.e. what they deserve, or adversely that Cohen does not have the right to scorn the less powerful since he is himself the representative of a rich and privileged culture.

## 9. Researching the interpretive community

### 9.1. Cultural consumption and taste hierarchies

Comedy is quite a complex genre to research since it includes humour that is elusive to research. In the case of *Da Ali G Show* it is even more difficult because of the type of humour used which allows for multiple ways, and some times even opposing ways, of reading the text. Due to the openness of this text it speaks to many. It is not - as is the case in more straightforward genres and texts - quite clear whom it speaks to in terms of socio-demographic data and position in the social structure or indeed what the readers derive from the readings.

According to the quantitative data<sup>116</sup> the share<sup>117</sup> ranged from 18-20 percent in the UK<sup>118</sup> and 8,30 percent in Croatia,<sup>119</sup> while the television rating (TVR)<sup>120</sup> was 6 percent in the UK and 1,75 percent in Croatia. In the UK the highest percentage was based in London (6-8 %). It was more popular among adults compared to children (below 16) (adults, 6-7 %, children, 4-5 %), however this is partially determined by its rating as a restricted program. It was also slightly more watched by men than women (7 % men, 6 % women).

More detailed information about the viewing audience was available in Croatia: 60,69 percent of the viewers were urban, while 39,31 percent were rural. The highest percentage of viewers was based in the capital of Croatia - Zagreb (26,58 %). The gender category shows that 47,87 percent were males and 52,13 percent females. According to age categories, the percentages were evenly distributed along the categories with a slightly higher percentage of teenagers (4-19 – 29,41 %; 20-34 – 24,05 %; 35-49 – 23,83 %; and 50-65+ - 22,71 %)

Overall, it seems to be more appealing to urban and young people in both Croatia and the UK. Other than that, little can be inferred from the quantitative data.

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116 The data from the UK and Croatia are only displayed in order to illustrate socio-demographic categories of the respective audiences. However, they are not comparable since the categories differ.

117 The percentage of the total viewing audience watching over a given period of time, as defined by the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (BARB). Available at: <http://www.barb.co.uk/about/glossary>. (Retrieved: 19 November 2010).

118 Source Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (BARB); British Film Institute (BFI) .

119 Source: AGB Nielsen Media Research. The Total Individuals Universe was 4.161,532, cases: 1854 (all individuals above 4 that live in a household with at least one television set).

120 TVR (Television Rating) is the measure of the popularity of a programme by comparing its audience to the population as a whole. One TVR is numerically equivalent to 1 % of a target audience as defined by the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (BARB). (Available at: <http://www.barb.co.uk/about/glossary>). (percentages on gender, area and age, TVR) .

The interpretive community that took part in this research was quite diverse, ranging from members of the West and members of the East, from a member with a PhD level of education, to a member with primary education only; from young to middle aged, male and female...all the interviewees were able to find pleasure in some aspects of the text.

### **9.1.1. Genre and comedy preferences**

By applying Bourdieu's theory on taste, and the process of distinction, I was interested to see what type of comedy and genre the interpretive communities in Croatia and the UK respectively liked, but even more so, I was interested in what they disliked. As outlined by Bourdieu "In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation; and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance ('sick-making') of the tastes of others" (Bourdieu 1980, 253).

In a wider genre context, the UK interpretive community expressed a preference towards genres which were – in a hierarchy of genres - usually classified as texts of a higher quality, notably the documentary which was most frequently named as the favoured genre (in the case of Stephan, James, Sophia and Rose) while drama was clearly the most frequently pointed out from the pool of fictional programs (George, Henrietta, James, Sophia). In addition, factual programmes were pointed out as the preferred genre (Melvin, George), and lastly films in general (George, Anne). Comedy was also held in high regard, however this was probably conditioned to some extent by the topic of the interviews (Anne, Albert, George, Stephen, Rose), even though it also indicated that, as has already been pointed out, comedy is quite a diverse genre and can be quite difficult to place in the context of hierarchies of genres. Only Albert outlined his preference only for 'urban comedy.

By the same token, genres which the interviewees claimed they would 'never watch' clearly followed the same pattern – reality TV (George, Melvin), soap opera (Stephen, Sophia), chat shows (James), game shows (Sophia), children's programmes (Sophia), and sports (Anne, Stephen, Rose) were amongst those most frequently mentioned. Two of the interviewees did not give an answer to this – Albert left it blank, and did not know what was meant by the term 'genre', while Henrietta stated that she would like to think she'd watch "good stuff in any genre."

Genre preferences expressed clearly mirrored conventional perceptions of genres of ‘high value’ and ‘low value’. Documentary, drama, factual programmes and film were preferred, while reality, soap, chat and game shows were dismissed as less attractive. The genre that did not fit into the category of ‘low value’ was sport.

In addition to genre preferences, I was also interested to find out what the patterns of viewing preferences with regard to comedy were, and in the questionnaire I asked the interviewees to specify comedies they liked and particularly comedies they specifically disliked. The UK IC expressed a general preference for comedies in the realm of edge comedy; often described as satirical, cynical, dry sarcastic humour, surreal, cult comedy, intellectual sitcom etc. This preference was expressed in relation to all interviewees except Albert who expressed his preference for a mainstream sitcom called *My wife and kids*<sup>121</sup>. George declared having mixed preferences, on the one hand for the somewhat cynical and black, but that he equally liked mainstream sitcoms such as the *Big bang theory*,<sup>122</sup> the sitcom *Outnumbered*,<sup>123</sup> and *The IT crowd*.<sup>124</sup>

There were also comedies that several interviewees mentioned among their preferences, such as *The peep show*,<sup>125</sup> *Spaced*,<sup>126</sup> and although there was more diversity than overlapping in the comedies listed, it clearly showed preference for edge comedy or ‘alternative’ comedy which can be counterposed with mainstream comedy with its idealised, romanticized elements). Other comedies mentioned were *Never Mind the Buzzcocks*,<sup>127</sup> *The Mighty Boosh*,<sup>128</sup> *Family Guy*,<sup>129</sup> *American Dad*,<sup>130</sup> *Lead Balloon*,<sup>131</sup> *The Flight of the Conchords*,<sup>132</sup> *I'm Alan Partridge*,<sup>133</sup> *The*

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121 American sitcom on ABC, featuring an Afro-American family (Wikipedia; IMDb).

122 American sitcom on CBS, stereotyping science and scientists (Wikipedia; IMDb).

123 British sitcom on BBC One, depicting a couple with three kids who bring their parents into awkward situations by asking them questions about profound life topics such as belief, religion and human kind. (Wikipedia; IMDb).

124 British sitcom on Channel 4, about geeks and computers (Wikipedia; IMDb).

125 British sitcom on Channel 4, described as cynical cult TV (Wikipedia; IMDb).

126 British sitcom on Channel 4, with elements of surrealism, recreational drug use, frequent pop culture references and jokes (Wikipedia; IMDb).

127 A comedy panel game on BBC, with dry sarcastic humour (Wikipedia; IMDb).

128 A comedy troupe, broadcast on BBC, with elements of surrealism, including fashion victims, fantasy (Wikipedia; IMDb).

129 Adult cartoon, on Fox, described as satire and black humour; a parody of American culture (Wikipedia; IMDb).

130 A satirical American cartoon on Fox (Wikipedia; IMDb).

131 A sitcom on BBC 4, characterized by cynicism and misanthropy (Wikipedia; IMDb).

132 Comedy on HBO. A social satire with music, categorized as alternative comedy (Wikipedia; IMDb).

*Black Books*,<sup>134</sup> *The Larry Sanders Show*,<sup>135</sup> *The Office*,<sup>136</sup> *The Inbetweeners*,<sup>137</sup> *Curb Your Enthusiasm*,<sup>138</sup> *Smack the Pony*,<sup>139</sup> *South Park*,<sup>140</sup> *The Thick of It*<sup>141</sup> and *Brass Eye*.<sup>142</sup>

According to the answers received when participants were asked to name a television comedy which they specifically disliked, mainstream sitcoms on romance and/or family relations were disliked (Anne: *Gavin and Stacey*, Henrietta: *My Family*, BBC). In this context it was also suggested that all ITV comedies were horrible (George). Other comedies that were disliked were *Little Britain* (BBC) – a perverse character comedy sketch show parodying and stereotyping British people and ways of life (Stephen, James); *Two pints of Lager* (BBC) a sitcom with basic humour linked to pubs, hornyness and drinking (James, Melvin); and *The Office* (Rose) a ground breaking mockumentary/sitcom show (BBC 2) described as cult TV and a prank show. While the exclusion of romance and family relations, and the distaste for basic and vulgar humour was somehow expected, if one looks at the liked comedies, it was relatively more surprising that *Little Britain* and *The Office* were disliked by some, since these comedies both could be categorized as edge comedy.

Thus, the UK IC clearly showed a preference for edge comedy, satire, sarcasm, the surreal, black humour etc., while they showed distaste for mainstream television comedy like romantic comedy and family matters. It was also pointed out that rough, male, raw humour was disliked. However, a couple of comedies typically categorized as edge comedy were also disliked for reasons I did not have the opportunity to explore. However, in a general sense the taste for provocative, edge comedy was clearly visible.

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133 Comedy on BBC. Featuring a fictional television and radio presenter; a parody of media genres (Wikipedia; IMDb).

134 A British sitcom on Channel 4, with surreal elements, protagonists drinking and smoking; cult TV (Wikipedia; IMDb).

135 A satirical television show on HBO (Wikipedia; IMDb).

136 A television mockumentary/situation comedy show on BBC Two (Wikipedia; IMDb).

137 A British sitcom on E4, a realistic portrayal of the tragedy of teenagers in sixth form??? school (Wikipedia; IMDb).

138 An American comedy television series on HBO, loosely scripted with improvised dialogues; cult TV (Wikipedia; IMDb).

139 A British sketch comedy show on Channel 4, a surreal, female comedy (Wikipedia; IMDb).

140 A satirical adult animation on Comedy Central (Wikipedia; IMDb).

141 A British comedy television series on BBC Four, that satirises the inner workings of modern British government (Wikipedia; IMDb).

142 A satirical spoof documentary on Channel 4 (Wikipedia; IMDb).

Similarly as was the case in the UK IC, the Croatian IC, expressed a preference for 'respectable' genres, namely documentaries (Tereza, Marija, Katarina, Karlo, D Mitar); drama (Ignjat, Matija, Držislav); film (Tereza, Katarina, Matija, Domagoj); and also comedy (Domagoj, Tereza, Karlo). In addition one of the participants expressed a preference for a 'low-value', namely quiz games (Katarina).

Similarlry to the UK IC, genres that they would never watch were also genres of 'low value', these however were more diverse than in the UK IC and included reality television (Ignjat, Držislav, Katarina, Tereza, D Mitar); soap opera (Katarina, Karlo, Držislav, Ignjat, Tereza); lifestyle shows (Tereza); music festivals (Karlo); horror movies (Matija); domestic comedy (Karlo); romantic comedy (Držislav); pornography (Ignjat) and tarot readings (Domagoj). Whilst all those mentioned genres are generally considered as being of 'low value', there was one example also where a genre of high value was listed as never watched, namely political programmes as was listed by Domagoj who incidentally occupied the lowest position in the in-group hierarchy. Only Marija (occupying the second highest position) stated that she watched everything as a professional deformation (Marija being a television journalist).

Thus, in terms of genre preferences, liked genres that were specified were mostly those of high value, while the ones dismissed were generally low value ones. However, the two interviewees holding the highest position in the in-group hierarchy showed a more diverse taste – Marija watched all types of genres (explained by her profession) while Tereza showed a preference for very diverse comedies. On the other hand, Domagoj, occupying the lowest position, also showed a taste for different comedies, but also a dislike of political programmes, generally seen as a genre of high status.

There was more overlapping in the Croatian interpretive community than in the British one, probably due to the fact that the spectrum of various comedies was not as wide in Croatia, as in the UK (I am referring to the most frequently watched television channels with national reach in Croatia – the PSB, Nova TV, and RTL). Some of the comedies mentioned by the Croatian interviewees were very old, broadcast a long time ago, and this also seems to point at a limited number of comedies of a kind that would be preferred by this interpretive community, such as *Seinfeld*<sup>143</sup> (Marija, Katarina, Karlo, Matija, Držislav, D Mitar and Domagoj). Other comedies

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143 An American sitcom on NBC, a 'show about nothing', with elements of immorality, featuring 'neurotics' (Wikipedia; IMDb).

that were referred to in both interpretative communities were *South Park* (Marija, Katarina, Ignjat); *Monty Python*<sup>144</sup> (Ignjat, DMITAR, Domagoj); *The Simpsons*<sup>145</sup> (Marija, Karlo); *Malcolm in the Middle*,<sup>146</sup> (Katarina, Domagoj); *The Office* (Marija, Karlo). The older texts, that are nowadays considered to be classics, differ substantially from the above stated. One of these comedies was *Only fools and horses*<sup>147</sup> (Karlo, DMITAR, Domagoj, Držislav) - the male interviewees in both ICs particularly liked this programmes and it can be assumed that this is due to the familiarity with the characters and setting and the similarities that these have with perhaps their own acquaintances and local neighbourhoods – as well as the idea of hanging around in pubs, socialising in the pub, with the ‘lads’ - an activity typically engaged in by the Croatian mainstream.

The other comedies favoured were also more mainstream oriented: *The Big Bang Theory* (Tereza); *Friends*<sup>148</sup> (Tereza); *Scrubs* –<sup>149</sup> (Tereza); *30 Rock*<sup>150</sup> (Marija); *Faulty Towers*<sup>151</sup> (Matija); *Alf*<sup>152</sup> (Držislav); *Jackass*<sup>153</sup> (Domagoj); *How I Met Your Mother*<sup>154</sup> (Domagoj).

The Croatian comedies mentioned were *Bitange i princeze*, a Croatian sitcom shown on HRT, inspired by *Friends* (Tereza, Domagoj); and the comedian Željko Pervan (Karlo) who has been on the comedy scene in Croatia for several decades. In addition, during the interviews the local program *Normalofobija* (DMITAR) was mentioned as well as Nela Erzišnik<sup>155</sup> (Matija). However, all interviewees were very critical of Croatian comedy.

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144 Broadcast on BBC. innovative, highly influential surreal sketch comedy (Wikipedia; IMDb).

145 American animated television series on Fox; satire, featuring a dysfunctional family (Wikipedia; IMDb).

146 A comedy broadcast on FOX; black, dry humour, satire, featuring a dysfunctional family (Wikipedia; IMDb).

147 A British television sitcom on BBC1, featuring two brothers, working class with a cockney accent, engaged in the black market in Peckham, London (Wikipedia; IMDb).

148 An American sitcom on NBC on romance and friendship (Wikipedia; IMDb).

149 An American comedy-drama television series on NBC, a tragicomedy with surreal elements presented mostly as day dreams (Wikipedia; IMDb).

150 An American sitcom on NBC, about the world of media and celebrities (Wikipedia; IMDb).

151 A British sitcom on BBC2; a classic; a farce about class and Englishness (Wikipedia; IMDb).

152 An American science fiction sitcom on NBC, with a sarcastic alien in the main role (Wikipedia; IMDb).

153A reality television comedy on MTV with a cast performing various dangerous, crude, ridiculous, and self-injuring stunts and pranks (Wikipedia; IMDb).

154 An American situation comedy on CBS, featuring yuppies in NYC and their friendship (Wikipedia; IMDb).

155 Nela Erzišnik a Croatian actor famous in Yugoslavia for her stand-up comedy and television sketch comedy as the alter-ego Marica Hrdalo (and later Baba Ikaca)– representing an old rural woman, that dealt with themes of corruption, state bureaucracy, the position of Yugoslavia in an international context.

In the Croatian IC, again, a preference for dry humour, black humour, satire was expressed by most of the interviewees. However, a more eclectic approach than in the UK group could be seen particularly in the way the interviewees tended to express preference for totally different comedies. For example, amongst comedies such as of *South Park*, *The Simpsons*, *Monty Python*, *Malcom in the Middle*, and *The Office*, one could also find classics such as *Only fools and horses*, and *Alf*, as well as mainstream sitcoms such as *Friends* and *Scrubs* amongst the preferred ones. Of course, most of the mentioned comedies are characterised by an air of cynicism, selfishness, unscrupulousness and, to a large extent, they still differ from the domestic family sitcom, such as the *Cosby Show*, or *Full house*, *The Nanny* or the like. This however, could be explained by the fact that with the exception of a few already mentioned comedies edge comedy is not a sub-genre broadcast much in Croatia.

It was interesting to observe that the interviewee holding the highest position on the in-group hierarchy and the interviewee holding the lowest both most showed a very broad taste spectrum in terms of comedies they preferred or liked. It was evident for instance that Tereza liked a very broad spectrum of types of comedy, including mainstream comedy such as *Friends*, but also the Croatian comedy *Bitange i princeze* which is very similar to *Friends*. Domagoj too confirmed he liked a variety of comedies including classics such as *Only fools and horses*, *Monty Python*, but also *Jackass*, *How I met your mother* and the Croatian *Bitange i princeze*.

The interviewees from Croatia were clearly critical of Croatian humour. When asked to name a few comedies that they specifically disliked, most of them proceeded to dismiss Croatian products in general with statements such as ...“and the rest of domestic comedies” (Marija), or simply “Croatian comedy” (Domagoj) or “Croatian humour” (Ignjat). In this context they also mentioned specific Croatian comedies such as *Nad lipom 35*<sup>156</sup> (Tereza, Marija, Karlo, Držislav); *Lud, zbunjen, normalan*<sup>157</sup> (Marija); *Bibin svijet*<sup>158</sup> (Dmitar); the Croatian remake of *Married with children*<sup>159</sup> (Dmitar). The foreign comedies mentioned were *The king of*

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156 A Croatian sitcom on NOVA TV, featuring everyday problems set against the background of a local bar, with guest appearances from local singers (Wikipedia; IMDb).

157 A Bosnian comedy originated on FTV, broadcast in Croatia on NOVA TV (Wikipedia; IMDb).

158 A Croatian comedy on RTL TV, on everyday life humorous situations set within the context of a cash register work place (Wikipedia; IMDb).

159 The Croatian version of *Married With Children* broadcast on Nova TV about a dysfunctional family (Wikipedia; IMDb).



*Queens*<sup>160</sup> “and similar American bullshit” (Katarina); *Red dwarf*<sup>161</sup> (Matija); *Family matters*<sup>162</sup> (Ignjat, Tereza).

The comparison of the interpretive communities in the UK and Croatia, showed that there was a more coherent overlap in terms of comedy preferences in the Croatian interpretive community than in the British one, and this is probably because the spectrum of various comedies accessible to the average viewer was narrower in Croatia, so they basically had less of a choice, and this resulted in them sometimes watching very different types of comedy since they were perhaps the only ones available and although an interviewee might have expressed that he or she preferred dry humour, black humour or satire, they may still have viewed comedies outside the spectrum of their preferred category. All members of the Croatian IC expressed a very negative view towards Croatian comedy in general.

As we have seen Bourdieu’s theory on taste hierarchies is still applicable in that specific types of texts are seen as more worthy than others. As others have argued (like Morley 1986; Taylor and Willis 1999) in the hierarchies of genre, ‘quality’ programmes are usually deemed to be those dealing with unmediated events or ‘the real thing’ such as the documentary, news, sports, or texts providing information and ‘knowledge’. Genre preferences clearly mirrored these hierarchies in both interpretive communities whereby documentaries and factual programmes were frequently given preference. In addition, a number of participants also expressed their preference for “quality genres” such as film and drama which both come under the scope of fictional genre. Comedy was also frequently mentioned as a preferred genre, but I do suspect that in this respect interviewees may have been guided by the interview topic. In this context it is also important to note, as mentioned earlier, that comedy is in and of itself very diverse and while some comedies are seen as ‘intellectual’, or of a “high quality” other comedies are described as ‘trivial’, idealised’, ‘stupid’ or ‘vulgar’.

In both interpretive communities, participants expressed a dislike of genres seen as less worthy and trivial such as the reality show, the soap, as well as chat and game shows and they tended to disassociate themselves from these. This trend was particularly evident in participants positioned in the middle of the in-group social hierarchy. The members positioned lowest in

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160 An American sitcom on CBS featuring the suburbia, marriage, working classes (Wikipedia; IMDb).

161 A sci-fi sitcom on BBC; cult comedy (Wikipedia; IMDb).

162 A black sitcom on ABC on family relationships (Wikipedia; IMDb).

both interpretive communities typically did not adhere to this principle (Anne – sports; Albert – empty; Domagoj – political programmes and tarot). Interestingly members higher positioned on the hierarchical scale would not commit to liking any particular genre, but instead they would state things like “I like to think I’d watch good stuff in any genre” (Henrietta); while Marija (occupying the second highest position) claimed that she watches everything, i.e. being non-discriminatory in her viewing habits and she explains this in the context of her "professional deformation" as she puts it (being a journalist) Tereza (occupying the highest position) also expressed mixed preferences: she liked both documentaries and sitcoms, and her list of preferred comedies reflected a very broad spectrum of comedies, in fact she declared a liking for a wider variety of programmes than that of any other Croatian interpretive community member. This fact may be explained in the context of Peterson and Kern (1996) and DiMaggio (1987) who all claim that the elite taste is no longer exclusive (as opposed to what Bourdieu argued), but that there has been a shift whereby the elite have developed more eclectic, 'omnivorous' consumption practices which is seen to reflect an openness to a variety of types of cultural forms. As Peterson and Kern argue, "omnivores" are hostile to snobbish isolation and the question is not so much what is consumed, but how the consumption of various forms it to be understood and interpreted. This openness and rejection of snobbish isolation reflects a civilized discourse that is inclusive of all aspects of social life (declaratively).

The interpretive community in both settings clearly showed a preference for edge comedy, satire, sarcasm, provocative, black humour and dry humour and this suggests that the categories of comedy texts are more connected to the inner form of a genre that reflects attitude, tone, purpose and subject. In this context it was abundantly clear that there was a general disliking of mainstream television comedy such as romantic comedies, and the family sitcom as well as trivial or idealised circumstances. However, it also became apparent that some comedies which would typically have been described as examples of edge comedy were rejected despite their belonging to this preferred category. These particularities cannot be explained merely in the context of the survey answers but require a more in-depth analysis.

### **9.1.2. What is good comedy?**

There was unanimous agreement among all members of the interpretive community that good comedy should offer a new experience to the audience in question. It had to be original, unpredictable, and provocative. My analysis further showed that they generally felt familiarity

was a necessary ingredient when it comes to good comedy -- i.e. either familiarity in terms of the characters or familiarity in terms of the settings so that viewers could identify with them. They had to be able to recognise specific cultural references and they had to reflect reality so that one could relate the text to one's own everyday life experience. Reality also meant that there had to be a connection with real life as it evolves in all its complexity, a true reflection of all the burdens and troubles a human being goes through in a life cycle - in this respect, it was evident that the participants preferred reality to idealistic settings and that the latter tended to be dismissed as trivial.

Dmitar: *"I tell you, Bibin svijet, to me it is just not real, it is not real....what can I say, a salesperson cannot be happy, cheerful, beautiful, having time for their family, having an understanding boss, everything is too perfect (...) My ex girlfriend was a salesperson and I know she worked long hours from morning until late at night, you know, every day, seven days a week, 30 days monthly, 362 days in the year..."*

In order for comedy to reach its full potential there was the presumption that it had to do more than simply just make us laugh, otherwise it would not have the depth required to be more than just a superficial laugh. In addition to making us laugh - although admittedly this is a core function of comedy - it had to inspire the audience to think about issues and discuss them, it had to have a certain depth, and it had to provide food for thought, working on multiple levels, as opposed to cheap one-dimensional, shallow and simple humour.

As for who should be the subjects of comedy, there was a general feeling that making fun of people in power was a good thing (whether they were politicians, celebrities...). In the UK interpretive community, it was generally felt that politicians in particular constituted good subjects of comedy:

George: *"...there is nothing we like to see more than people in authority being made fools of in a humorous and gentle way."*

Stephen: *"Mm... everyone likes taking the mick out of politicians."*

As opposed to the UK interpretive community, the concept of laughing at people in power, particularly politicians as subjects of comedy was not as prominent and desirable as a key element of good comedy amongst the Croatian interviewees (one exception being Držislav, who expressed clear contempt for politicians and celebrities, albeit within a broader critique of society). Instead, the Croatian interviewees had a more generally negative attitude towards society and human kind in general. This quite brutal critical view of society was noticeable in most of the Croatian interviews in which mainstream, conventions and human weaknesses were seen as justifiable targets or subjects to scorn:

Marija: ...*"he is criticising human stupidity which is endless."*

Ignjat: ...*"he provokes and ridicules in order to expose the world we live in (...) everything is artificial, we cherish the wrong values..."*

Dmitar: ...*"he laughs at human stupidity and shows just how far people are ready to go to protect their inherently conservative views."*

During the course of discussions about comedy and humour, the interviewees not only pointed out what they liked but also what elements they felt were undesirable. In this context, predictability, unoriginal conventions and framed scripted situations were some of the elements seen as ruining a good comedy:

James: *"To be honest with you ... the only thing that starts to lose its appeal to me is when I feel that there is a set formula and predictability and you kind of know and you have heard it before in another interview or you sort of know what someone is going to say next or you know how they are going to react...."*

Vulgarity and rudeness were also listed as negative characteristics in both interpretive communities. Particular emphasis was placed on this aspect by interviewees who were higher on the social hierarchy and this was true both as regards the UK and Croatian interpretive community - and this was especially true in the case of the female interviewees (Tereza, Marija).

Melvin: *"his humour is vulgar (...) [it needs to be] more in depth, it should be working on more levels than just the level of toilet humour, body parts or sexual orientation..."*

Tereza: *"Those types of jokes linked to sex are not really...I mean, when I talked to people who watched Borat, that sexual scene was exclusively criticized by women, women told me it was simply too much (...) For me, it was simply bad taste, really I could hardly watch it, some sort of physical...he goes to far and it's just too much"*.

As opposed to that, two interviewees, both from Croatia (Držislav and Domagoj) stated that they liked sexual jokes and innuendos and both were positioned on the lower scale of the in-group hierarchy.

Domagoj: *"It is simple. He talks about the simplest things, you know - he throws one out about sex, and there you already have a joke that you can laugh at..."*

One spoiler that was pointed out only in the UK interpretive community was popularity (versus marginality, alternativity). The process of mainstreaming made a text lose its appeal. This was pointed out by participants who occupied a higher position in the in-group hierarchy (Stephen, Rose and Henrietta). When a text was viewed as exclusive, alternative or on the fringes it was regarded more highly. The role of the media industry was also viewed negatively, in particular the way it would launch a product with only one goal in mind - that of maximising profit. Thus, moving from a fringe time slot to prime-time, moving from local media to national, moving from the original medium of transmission to other media (in this case from television to movies) tended to be perceived as negative.

Rose: *"I feel there is a degree of saturation and I am quite cynical now 'cause there have been the movies, and I think it is a terrible thing when someone gets really big, you know, we tend to like the underdog and then when someone is really popular it pisses us off..."*

Henrietta: *"I think the trouble was that everyone knew Ali G so it didn't work and I think he kind of got...It must be hard when you suddenly get very famous...Suddenly get money...And then you feel the pressure of the network people telling you what to do ...them saying 'do it like this or do it like that. Have this guest come on the show'..."*

The way in which the interpretive community talked about comedy revealed that although Bourdieu's (1984) theory may not be directly applicable in terms of assessing cultural consumption of different texts based on class divisions, he is still relevant in relation to defining the way in which a text becomes devalued – through popularization. As mentioned above, this was specifically emphasized in the UK interpretive community in which members occupying higher positions claimed that popularization had a destructive affect on the valuation of a comedy. This view was not as prominent in the Croatian interpretive community's discussions relating to *Da Ali G Show*; this; might be explained by the status of the television comedy which was marginal and alternative in the Croatian context and never made it to a larger audience. The idea that something is lost when a comedy becomes widely popular was however reiterated in relation to very popular Croatian comedies - there was clear contempt towards these texts. In addition to popularization, vulgarity was also something that devalued comedy – this seemed to be determined by social position to a certain extent, and in Croatia particularly by gender. Two of the highest positioned female members of the Croatian interpretive community listed vulgarity as a vital reason why a comedy might be classed as being of poor quality (Tereza, Marija), and incidentally two of the male - also higher positioned members of the UK interpretive community – agreed that this was the case (Stephen, Melvin). In contrast, two males in the Croatian interpretive community expressed their preferences for sexual innuendoes and vulgar jokes (Domagoj – the lowest positioned, and Držislav, positioned on a lower middle position). The divisiveness in terms of gender is perhaps more pronounced in Croatia, it being quite a conservative society in which male and female roles are specifically organized in accordance with traditional gender divisions.

What seemed to be a common positive evaluation of comedy was scorning politicians, celebrities and people in power but also human weaknesses, conventions, extreme political positions. Also, being original and unpredictable, being familiar and realistic, even brutal, provocative and controversial were embraced while predictability, repetition that invokes boredom and unrealistic (idealised) settings were seen as negative in both interpretive communities.

### 9.1.3. The limits of humour

The definition of what should or should not be joked about is quite complex because it draws on a variety of social rules of conduct that range from informal pressure to formal regulation. The control of this area is, in a broader sense, twofold. Censorship tools are regulated through legal provisions, balancing between freedom of speech and the limits of this freedom, strictly confined by hate speech. The more ‘soft’ form is self-censorship achieved through informal social pressure that aims to control inappropriate utterances. This is conveyed through various negative evaluations and condemnation of such expressions. In a broad institutional framework liberal democracies cherish the freedom of speech as one of its postulates. Questions such as: What constitutes sensitive material? Who has the right to interfere? Should the state regulate this field or not? Are forms of self-censorship desirable? These are all interconnected issues and there is this constant polarised sway between freedom of expression and its limitation.

As mentioned earlier, there are two main positions with regard to the limits of humour: the first is that this area should under no circumstances, no matter how offensive, be constrained, while the other is that humour “cannot be cleaved off in that way from moral, ethical and political considerations associated with the ‘real world’ (Lockyer and Pickering 2005, 13). This split was visible *within* both the Croatian and UK interpretive community.

The advocates for unconditional limitless humour use a variety of arguments to support their position, and one of these arguments simply states that comedy is a specific form (as well as jokes and humour in general) – which should be set apart from other forms of expression.

A further example of argumentation in favour was that it was related to the ‘only entertainment’ argument. This very fact makes it all right to utter a joke no matter how delicate it might be. Even if some topics were pointed out as problematic they were only thought of as such if it was a matter of direct insult, but comedy as a form of expression nullified that possibility. This ‘only comedy’ position was taken by two members occupying the lowest position in the hierarchical structure (Anne, Albert).

Another view held that humour should not be restricted in any way but under one condition that the multiple-target approach applies. In this respect, any issues, topics, or groups can be joked about as long as everyone is a potential target; limits should only be imposed if it is outright

discrimination of particular groups:

James: *"He steps close to the line in a lot of politically correct issues...But that kind of stuff never bothers me, as long as he's kind of taking the piss out of lots of different people and he treats them equally and not picking on a particular group, you know, whether it is like Jews, gays, or whatever...And I think he does seem to do that to be fair... there is certainly no one that escapes him (...) The more limitless the humour in terms of the more it kind of appears to cross boundaries, the more funny it is..."*

Another argument in favour of limitless humour was linked to the social role of comedy as a way to discuss and debunk important questions. From this perspective there is nothing that cannot be subject to humour because humour is a way to highlight important questions that are difficult to raise and discuss. It is precisely the taboo status of certain topics that needs to be demystified – and this is done through debate – humorous or other.

Melvin: *"Yeah, yeah, absolutely! I think that if you can you should be able to take the piss out of everything (...) making fun of it brings it out of this place where nobody can talk about it, and it becomes bigger than it really should be..."*

Another important argument which emerged was the question of the organisational aspect of setting up limits and prohibition with regard to the subject matter of the humour. Although some limits can be seen as desirable in that respect, there is a huge problem here: which social actors should one delegate this crucial responsibility to? The question is: who gets to decide what can be joked about and what not? Who defines the border? In this respect interviewees from the UK interpretive community were of the view that the State definitely should not have the right to interfere in any case (Rose, Henrietta), and that if limits should be posed this should come from a responsible individual – this argument is in accordance with the neoliberal ideology which favours minimal state interference and is characteristic for Britain.<sup>163</sup>

Henrietta: *"But I think there shouldn't be any censorship from the state, 'cause it doesn't seem to work if that stuff gets banned....I think people should self-censure in particular issues. I*

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<sup>163</sup> For an overview of the connection between political systems and media systems in Europe and the USA, see Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.



*don't know...I find this issue really difficult...'cause who gets to decide what is right and what is wrong?"*

In the Croatian interpretive community the argument was that there should be no limitations or boundaries to humour coming from the political system: it was held that democracy guarantees freedom of speech. In this respect, whatever might be potentially insulting for someone was a personal matter, an individual problem which should not be taken further in a democratic political system where freedom of speech should be guaranteed for everyone. This simplified explanation of democracy and its institutions is quite common in Croatia - a former socialist state that has implemented democratic changes in the last two decades, which is a relatively short period, and where the entire normative system built upon by generations has suddenly been replaced by a new one. This resulted in confusing and often contradictory discourses and practices with regard to democratic values and institutions.

The issue of setting boundaries to what can and cannot be joked about is often dealt with in terms of considering the entire communicative circle which includes the talker and the target, and deals with issues such as identity and communicative intention in the context.

*Tereza: "If I listen to a sexist joke it can be funny if I perceive the person telling it as someone who is attempting to criticise reality rather than reproduce it. So, I can tell a joke with a totally different intent than some guy who really thinks a women is [inferior to men]. If this is told by a man who has [a sexist view] then it becomes problematic, if it is told by someone who is emancipated and who thinks of it as a funny critique of stereotypes then it becomes funny and acceptable (...) In deciding on this you take into account why that person utters something."*

In this respect a joke can only be evaluated properly by taking into consideration the identity of the talker and matching it to the identity of the target. This was closely related to the idea that laughing at one's own expense (whatever the identity base) was desirable and seen as a positive personal quality. This view was apparent more or less explicitly in both ICs, but the prevailing attitude was that the comedian can make fun of his own 'kind' but when he crosses that line, then the whole thing starts to be questionable. If we apply this argument to Cohen's, humour we note that his background was constantly referred to, Cambridge educated, from a middle class family, and what was most important for the limits of humour – he was Jewish, so that meant it

was okay for him to play with the otherwise ‘prohibited’ topic of anti-Semitism.

Having a laugh at others, especially less empowered individuals or groups or at those those of other identity (especially with regard to race, gender, sexual orientation) immediately puts the narrator into a problematic position. This perception was particularly pronounced discourse offered by members of the UK interpretive community (George, Stephen, Sophia).

*Sophia: "I think it is okay to make fun of anything, i.e. any subject should be allowed but it all comes down to the context and who is doing it. For example, some racial groups... Not every person from that group has got the skills to poke fun of that group in a way that is okay, but I think there are very few people from outside of that, that can do it in an okay way. So, in general, you kind of got to have walked a mile in someone's shoes, really, before you have the right to be able to poke fun of those people..."*

The only interviewee from the Croatian interpretive community who held a similar position and engaged in a politically correct discourse was Tereza (highbrow). However, even if she was aware of groups that were protected through politically correct discursive practices, she defined powerless groups differently: while the UK based interviewees frequently held racism (black), sexism (female), and to a lesser extent homophobia (gay/lesbian) in focus, the member of the Croatian based interpretive community referred to people that were stigmatised and excluded from society and who, for various reasons, did not have the capacity to realise that they were being laughed at - the mentally disabled, children, and people who were on the margins of society -poor people, prostitutes and uneducated people as well as the disabled (none of the other Croatian interviewees referred to any of these categories).

The Croatian interviewees more frequently raised issues or events that they found problematic to joke about: recent historical events – in this case connected to the concept of nation - causing pain should not be ridiculed, because of the very real experiences that people might have from a traumatic event (this was clearly linked to the Croatian war and collective trauma caused by it). However, a historical distance opens up the possibilities because the wheel of fortune changes and the position of victims and perpetrators changes throughout history (Ignjat). Also, jokes made on account of forms of contemporary, real, collective long term ethnical/religious conflicts which are volatile in terms of the possibility of triggering further escalation of

violence should be avoided (Israel/Palestine) (Držislav); These topics, notably religious and ethnic conflicts - whilst they were raised in the Croatian interpretive community were not referred to at all in the UK interpretive community. This again points to issues of importance in the Croatian context in view of its recent past: religion, war, nation-states.

And last but not least, both the UK and Croatian interviewees isolated topics which required boundaries to be set, notably in reference to sensitive comic material such as sexual violence (paedophilia, associated with the vulnerability of children as social cohort, and pornography), Jews as the world's scapegoats (Holocaust), extreme violence (child abuse). Other topics often referred to in newspaper articles such as sex related jokes, toilet humour, violation of national and state symbols, offensive language and illegal activities (drug abuse) were not mentioned in this context by either interpretive community. Thus, by comparing the views on limits vis-à-vis sensitive issues expressed in newspaper articles with those of the interpretive communities – it is clear that the interpretive communities, who favour a politically incorrect texts (both in the UK and Croatia) tended to have a more relaxed, liberal approach to what should be regarded as sensitive.

All the interviewees shared one common view and that is that limits to humour should have regard to the level of individual insult and the existence or absence of malicious intentions (especially if not anonymous) and this in itself is seen as more problematic than the stereotyping of groups (whatever their characteristics) or society in general. It would seem that Aristotle's ancient postulate that comedy shouldn't be painful or destructive nor should it include personal derision still holds true (Aristotle, Part 9) - an individual attack on a real person, where their name and their surname is known was commonly seen as being negative, the one exception to this being that laughing at powerful people - most notably politicians and celebrities - was quite acceptable.

## **9.2. Reading *Da Ali G Show***

### **9.2.1. Discourse on practices**

#### **9.2.1.1. Viewing practices**

The viewing practices of *Da Ali G Show* were significantly different in the interpretive communities in Croatia and in the UK respectively. In the UK, viewing practices were largely

determined by age, but overall the show was usually watched in the company of others. Young people who were in secondary school at the time usually watched with brothers and sisters or alone, and in one case they watched it with a friend over the phone and more rarely with parents. Some of the interviewees stated that their parents did not like the programme and that it was a kind of a 'teenage thing' to watch it when they were pupils. The older participants, who at that stage were at university or working used to watch it alone or with friends, and usually made specific efforts to watch it, typically with a group of friends.

Watching the show was also set in a broader frame of viewing practices that implied watching television at a specific time slot. In the case of the show it was a part of watching television within the Friday night time slot:

Stephen: *"It would have been part of a whole evening, just a routine thing at home on a Friday night, and there would have been other things on as well (...) You would go in on Monday and you would be talking about what you saw, and you could really identify with it (...) I think you can identify certain periods of school through whatever television program was watched at the time. Aaa...it was probably not long after Ali G, when everyone got some sort of taste for the provocative I think later South Park came along after that, and before that the Simpsons..."*

One common characteristic of the London-based interpretive community was that watching *Da Ali G Show* was important in the context of socialising. It was important to be 'in the know' as regards the text, so much so that it became almost a compulsory activity, because "everyone watched it, everyone I knew watched it..." (Sophia), almost regardless whether you enjoyed it or not – watching it had a conformist note, it was worth watching only to be able to take part in a peer conversation, to exchange and discuss the jokes.

Albert: *It actually came up in talking to a school friend. I was in secondary school at the time - and everybody was going around with the famous saying 'boyakasha, boyakasha', 'boyakasha', and I was confused and I didn't really know what it was... 'Ali G is coming on C4'!" So I thought: what is this Ali G thing? As a school kid you, kind of, want to be 'in' so I did my research, found out about Ali G, the programme was [on] broadcast on Fridays on Channel 4 so...I started to watch it (...) with me and my two brothers, we used to watch it and we used to*

*laugh about how funny it was and then it was back to school on Mondays and we would discuss what had happened...*

The show became part of everyday life practices not only in terms of talking about it but also in terms of retelling the jokes, using the the catch phrases, and mimicking the body movements in the programme.

James: *"I was in university doing my undergrads. Aaa...and it was a kind of thing that basically you would always sort of discuss with your mates, you know, like afterwards (...) It would be a kind of bonding thing because you could just kind of laugh at it (...) And to be honest, he has a brand of humour, this is the thing with a great comedian it infects or influence your own humour, so even if you are not talking about him specifically, you know, the kind of jokes that you make with your friends, your whole kind of humour becomes influenced and you can, when you think about it, you can pick it up, even if it is totally not referenced at all, there is a clear connection between the joke someone tells or the way someone said something that makes you laugh."*

Watching practices in Croatia were quite different from those in the UK. While watching Ali G was widespread in the UK, and almost a matter of 'must', the Croatian watching experiences were more obscure, more solitaire. Members of the Croatian interpretive community often stated that this type of comedy was not something everyone could enjoy or understand:

Ignjat: *"I like to watch good things alone.(...) but it depended on the company...if the company liked that type of humour, then it was okay, but if it was someone who didn't quite get it, then it was a bit..."*

Držislav: *"Alone. Because nobody else wanted to watch it (...) because people I know didn't like it (...) My mum, my sister are not on that level, really, she is on the level of Beverly Hills, Red Carpet, Dynasty and soaps...this is not for her..."*

If the show was watched in company it was talked about as a 'fringe' experience, often watched whilst enjoying a joint or a drink:

Karlo: *"We used to watch these things stoned, just to intensify the sensation and to enjoy it more..."*

Katarina: *"Well, I used to watch it with my female friends, mostly with my gang, and we would usually use some relaxing opiate (laughter ...)"*

These examples illustrate that the show was very popular in the UK, and was watched as a matter of course, especially among young people in the context of keeping up with the latest hip thing. The Croatian context was quite different, the show was marginalized, not many people noticed it and not many people watched it, and those who did watch it had the perception that it would not be accepted or understood by the majority. The television show had an alternative, marginalized status.

#### **9.2.1.2. Fans and fan practices**

The move from thinking about fandom as a form of pathology to celebrating fandom as a mode of empowerment has occurred within a relatively short period of approximately two decades. The interest in researching fans and fan practices has been boosted by the active audience tradition, claiming that audiences are creative, engage with the text, author it, change it and appropriate meaning that is relevant for them. Grossberg refers to fan relations to a text as 'something that matters'; however, the way a text matters can be quite diverse, and includes not only different types of involvement with the product, but also involvement with other like-minded groups including various practices. *Da Ali G Show* had - at least when it first appeared - elements of what Hills (2004) calls 'cult TV', i.e. anti-mainstream, not-industry lead, emerging over time, ahead of its time, textually innovative or unusual elements, which make it a text that is likely to attract a fan audience. Consequently, I was interested to see how the interpretive community who engaged with this particular text understand fandom as a practice.

Most of the UK based interviewees claimed they were fans of Cohen and *Da Ali G Show*; however, when they were asked to describe what fandom meant for them, they conditioned it to a certain extent, and talked about it in a dichotomous, way describing what their fandom amounted to and simultaneously emphasising what they would never do - in a sense they wanted to make it clear that their fandom was moderate in terms of their allegiance with popular culture texts, that they were not engaging in extreme fandom which they saw as having

negative connotations indicating over-the-top worshipping practices.

Fandom was related to *watching* the text - to be more precise, watching it on television as the primary medium where the text could be accessed when broadcast; however the frequency of watching it was important in this respect – since there is a difference between watching something occasionally, and watching something by default and looking forward to it as well.

Further replications of the text on other mediums were seen as a step forward in fandom practices, ranging from renting a DVD (which is cheaper and does not imply a public engagement), or going to the cinema, which was seen as a practice that indicated engagement, since it meant one had to be up-to-date with a new product, and it also implied more expense than to simply just wait for it to be released on DVD. Watching it on YouTube was also seen as a fandom practice that indicated a need to repeatedly watch something.

Apart from consumption practices of the primary text in various mediated forms, fandom was linked to buying products related to it – DVD-s, books, posters etc. This mode of fan practice was not so much embraced by the interpretive community, except by Albert to a certain extent:

*Albert: "To be a fan means that I would go to YouTube and type in 'Ali G' and watch certain things. I own the Borat DVD, so there you go, that would be me as a fan. Yeah, that's it. I wouldn't go to for an autograph or go and see him (laughter)..."*

The interpretive community was more inclined to use the text in everyday socializing interactions, i.e. talking and debating with friends about it, using catch phrases and jokes, mimicking and passing it out. It also meant having high expectations with regard to the author's subsequent texts and being aware of his further professional steps. However, following someone's private life or being involved in a form of celebrity culture was deemed as inappropriate by several interviewees.

*James: "...I am not the kind of person who kind of worships anything or anyone in terms of fandom celebrity or anything... To me, you know, I would never kind of - now aside from just watching and listening and consuming the actual product that an author creates I would never...You know, I wouldn't go to his website, I probably wouldn't even go and see him do*

*stand up..."*

Fandom was also seen as a concept that had changed status with the emergence of the internet, but which was nevertheless still associated with the original meaning of the word, the etymological root, in the sense of 'fanatic' – which was perceived as something with bad connotations:

Henrietta: *"Fandom has changed meaning (...) The internet has change fandom a bit...All the fan communities, all the fan fiction, all the YouTube where people re-edit their favourite shows... I don't think I am a fan like that, I pretty much find it...aaa...I occasionally read a little bit of fan fiction...but, I am a fan in the sense that I talk to people about it...I find it funny, I like it...aaa...and 'fan' has bad associations, doesn't it? All the, kind of, freaky fan movies and thing... I think fandom is associated with going online and blogging about it or pulp-kind- of-fictioning<sup>164</sup> it...and I don't want to subscribe to that (haha)...but I think I am a fan.*

Only one interviewee was engaged in 'extreme' fandom practices; however, she was the only one who claimed not to be a fan of Cohen or his show; she did nevertheless embrace some practices that were seen as being extreme:

Anne: *"No, I wouldn't say I am a fan of his, but I like the stuff he does. I find him funny. No, there's other people I like better (...) A fan is (...) kind of being immersed and kind of loving something... It is being slightly obsessed by something and loving it so much that you want to get really involved in it and it takes up, you know, a part of your life ...I mean, I am a Tolkien fan ...And I got this (showing a tattoo)... it shows on my hand. So that... I am obsessed with that. I can call myself a Tolkien fan. It is when you just love it very much you go to extremes, to have it in you life..."*

The Croatian interviewees also emphasised that their fandom was moderate. Most of them – except Držislav - described themselves as fans (if not of Cohen's text then certainly of other media texts). However, they were careful to disassociate themselves from some practices which

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164 Pulp fiction stems from pulp magazines or pulp fiction that was published in the late 19th to mid 20th Century. Pulp fiction was cheap due to the poor quality of the paper this material was printed on. Magazines such as *Weird Tales* and *The Strand* with work written by A.C.Doyle, J.R.R. Tolkien etc. often linked to science fiction, fantasy, adventure, horror and the occult. (Source: Wikipedia. Available at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulp\\_fiction\\_%28genre%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulp_fiction_%28genre%29)) Retrieved: 15 August 2010).



they viewed as extreme. Fandom as a phenomenon was still viewed in the old sense of the word, by some, seen almost as a mental disorder - being obsessed with one particular text, mad about something, having a fanatical attachment to something. The interviewees all sought to make clear that they did not subscribe to any radical fanaticism themselves but that they practised their fandom moderately:

*Ignjat: "Well, I am a fan, but to be a fan, I don't know...maybe it is different for different persons, some people are totally mad about something, and others simply love it, but it is not like they will go to any extremes, so maybe I am a fan, but only in the sense that I like it and enjoy watching it but it is not like I will cut my veins or anything like that.."*

Other interviewees talked about fan practices linked to the primary text, where, again, watching texts and perhaps discussing the text with others was the main practice of appreciation. As opposed to doing that, interviewees had no interest in the private life of the author or any personal information and did not consider it relevant to them.

*Tereza: "Would I say that I am a fan? Well, yes, I would call myself a fan, not in the sense that I follow everything he does and all the projects he is engaged with [which being a fan also means] but that I will download the episodes I didn't watch on television, from the internet... I think I watched most of them in the end, but the things that are not a part of his work - the show or the movies - that aspect I wouldn't be so interested in. For instance interviews, where he appeared, what awards he got, that would not be relevant to me unless I came across it by accident, but I will not search for details about his life, his love life or what he is doing, whether he gives to charity – that is something I wouldn't be aware of."*

Some of the interviewees did subscribe to a broader fandom practice and they made no attempts to distance themselves from more 'hands-on' fandom practices. These interviewees were committed not only to watching the programme but also connecting with other fans and communicating with them or perhaps posting the jokes on the internet:

*Katarina: "Yes, I am. I have to watch it – because it is more important than to watch some things that I perhaps haven't seen. When talking to other people, of course I will touch upon something that made me laugh or that I was fascinated by (...) Other things that I am a fan of,*

*like South Park, I used to buy the small figures, pendants, notebooks that were available. This was while I was at school, while now, I would engage with some fan e-mails, especially in relation to the jokes..."*

The comparison of interpretive communities in Croatia and UK showed more similarities than differences. The question of whether the IC members were fans and how they understood fandom showed that they all engaged in a type of 'moderate' fandom. The way they talked about fandom was more oriented towards the product than toward fan communities, even though, especially in the UK it was often discussed with friends in every day conversations, and it was also mimicked, and this practice represents a shift from being a spectator to being a participant (Jenkins). However, most of the members of the IC were not engaged in anything other than appreciating the program, even though they called themselves fans. This suggests that fandom is different for different communities and does not necessarily imply that fans go beyond simple appreciation of the programme, or embracing the associated values by applying them to their everyday lives, as argued by Ehittenberger-Keith.

The practices embraced by almost everyone involved making efforts to regularly watch the primary text, and to show an interest in the future work of the author. The majority tried to distance themselves from the type of fandom they thought of as extreme and inappropriate and this need to disassociate oneself varied in terms of what was outlined in the context – whether it meant simply going to the cinema to cutting one's veins. Despite this variety in range, the discursive process of distancing oneself did appear to be something most of the interviewees would subscribe to.

Implicitly it could be inferred that negative aspects of fandom were foremost linked to worship of something or someone, being immersed, being obsessed; and being part of a celebrity culture, following the private life of the object of worship. Thus, the majority of the members of the IC openly claimed that they were fans, however their fandom did not involve anything more than an interest and appreciation of the primary text.

## 9.2.2. The construction of meaning

### 9.2.2.1 Cultural competence – legitimate or untutored?

One of the most debated issues about *Da Ali G Show* was whether the text would be read in the ‘right way’, expressing an underlying fear that the audiences would not have the cultural competence required to decode the text as a satirical social commentary (which is one way to decode it). While Bourdieu (1984) links cultural competence to legitimate knowledge acquired in formal schooling and interrelates this to class and specific cultural forms (high versus low), new ways of seeing cultural competence have emerged where ‘competence’ has been unlocked from formal social hierarchies and connected to ‘ways of living’ of different groups, which means that particular skills have to be employed in the decoding of any cultural product. As Bennett (2007) claims, these forms of interpretations are ‘untutored’ and involve any type of skills needed in reading a text.

Cultural competence is essential in reading comedy as a form which relies on shared cultural codes in any type of interpretive community: if you have to explain a joke, it is no longer amusing and in that sense, comedy comprises a moment of silence, a moment saturated with meaning that relies on the taken-for-granted communicative codes, both on the encoding as well as on the decoding side.

In addition, the process of reading irony, parody and satire as communicative strategies also requires cultural competence – catching the unsaid in order to make irony ‘happen’; understanding the conventions of a particular genre/style in order to understand its subversion through parody; understanding broader social issues or specific political contexts to ‘get’ the satirical remark. Thus it makes demands on the reader related to the unspoken, covert meaning, and the more sophisticated it gets and the higher the demands, the more exclusive it becomes.

In the case of *Da Ali G Show* it is unquestionably a product that forms a part of popular culture (as opposed to ‘high culture’); however, the text has multiple layers, as visible from the controversy it raised. This is why the question of cultural competence is important for the analysis of the text-reader relationship.

In reading *Da Ali G Show*, language is particularly important; primarily because the poor English the characters supposedly speak allows for the creation of numerous humorous

situations. Bruno mixes English with German, Borat uses quasi-Kazakh language and English, and Ali G uses slang instead of formal language, and has a very basic knowledge of English grammar. For the audience, knowledge of English is a competence that enriches the interpretation process, and knowledge of slang used in the London area adds to this richness; however, it is not crucial to locate something humorous in this text. Regardless of language, recognizing difference and hierarchy (of taste, values, nations, classes...) is something members of numerous societies understand which is why this show is successful on a broader level and why it speaks to a broader audience and is able to transgress locality.

Knowledge linked to various fields, such as arts, politics, science, history, expert terminology, language and popular culture, enables the viewer to engage with the text; however, the information linked to these areas is general and accessible to the wider audience (in accordance with the genres he parodies (like the talk show), also accessible to a wider audience). What is, perhaps, more specific and less accessible is knowledge about the wider socio-political contexts (such as knowledge about the New Left, Post-colonialism, political correctness, human rights movements, identity politics etc), and the power relations in contemporary societies.

However, as emphasised before, the interpretive community represented in this research was quite diverse and obviously the text provided pleasure for all of them. The question that opens up is whether they decoded it as a social commentary, a matter frequently raised in the academic and newspaper articles. Is the text 'doing something else' other than providing the pleasure of laughter? What is the aim of the text?

In the UK interpretive community most of the interviewees thought the main aim of the text was to expose prejudices towards minorities that attempted to gain positive representation, racial prejudices and prejudices of people in general.

*Sophia: "I found it interesting and funny as well because some of the people he chose to interview allowed him to get away with things that he did, and trying to go along with it and not be offended by it...I think. It was almost as if they were trying so hard to show that they weren't racist by accepting his behaviour, because either they thought he was black or they thought that it was, kind of a black culture - but they were exposing how inherently racist they really were."*

The show was evaluated as being political due to the fact that it raised issues about difference. It disclosed people with prejudices, and its aim was to make people discuss things, reflect upon social matters and be critical of self-censorship:

Henrietta: *"He wants us to talk about things, and he got that. He managed to provoke, he always chose interesting political figures to interview... if he just wanted to make people laugh I don't think he would go into like that stadium like he does in that Borat movie and sing that anthem. I mean that is really funny, we are laughing now, but I don't think you do that just to laugh, I think he's got political points to make...'Cause it is always a question of people and polit...Particular issues around difference (...) He questions [self-censorship] and tries to go against it. Cutting/stopping self-censorship is my reading of what he is trying to do."*

Melvin: *"...it takes a subject that is very political, I guess, maybe in a certain sense in terms of aaaa... how people are viewed, how minorities are viewed and how women are viewed, and how gays are viewed...And by making fun of it he brings it out of this place where nobody can talk about it."*

The show was also seen as 'only comedy' that just made fun of celebrities:

Albert: *"He uses his intelligence to sound stupid and get away with stuff...I really find that quite amusing how nobody said anything but when he starts a joke, it is like he is trying to be innocent in a terrible way, that is what amused me the most (...) He just gets away with murder (...) How can this urban character get away with making money by getting at celebrities!?"*

The majority of the Croatian interpretive community had quite a different way of talking about the show. It was seen as a critique of two extremes – the low class (or 'underclass' - being raw, violent and stupid, versus 'high class' – being arrogant, self-centred and ethnocentric (Karlo). The programme was also viewed as an attempt to criticize human narrow-mindedness and perhaps to broaden people's minds and to make the audience think:

Ignjat: *"He manages to achieve his goal, which is to deal with some themes and taboos in society that nobody wants to talk about, and deal with. It is not a big step, but you have to be brave and stand against others. [The] aim is to shake the world and the human state of*

*mind(...) He tried to broaden people's horizons a bit, to make them see things...even though people who are limited will react in the opposite way."*

In one case, the text was placed in a broader context which included the West and the European East (and other semi-peripheries). She claimed that Cohen definitely aimed at giving a critique of political correctness; however the efficiency of this was questioned since some states (such as Croatia) were not ready for this:

*Tereza: "The main thing in Ali G is anti-political correctness, right? Which is great if you look at it from the perspective of England and America, or the Anglo-Saxon culture where you have... aaa... political correctness which is imposed and is, in principle, not constructive because it is a 'hush, hush' [approach] which means: we don't talk about the fact that you are black and I am white, or that you are gay and I am not, but instead we supposedly respect everyone, so I will say 'the man in the blue pullover' even if he is the only black person among us. In that sense I think it is OK to joke about the fact that we should call things by their right name, but perhaps not in our culture where we still have not reached the PC era. (...) Cohen just throws it out there, and leaves society to cope with it, but what if the society does not have the mechanisms to cope with it, then what?"*

A third way of decoding was expressed by one of the participants who attributed no specific 'underlying meaning' to the text. It was not seen as anything other than entertainment and a way to earn money.

*Držislav: "I don't think he wants to achieve anything. He is just making fun of things and has earned a lot of money doing it. But then again, why would he touch upon such topics? I have no idea (...) But I don't think it will change anything, there will always be things like that ...for me it is enough that he laughs at people (celebrities)."*

The fear expressed in the discussions about the text, that the show might be taken at face value was to a certain extent justified, as shown in one of the decodings in the Croatian IC. According to Domagoj it was just comedy and money earning. *Bruno* was viewed as a well placed critique of the gay lobby, while the depiction of the way Kazakhstanis lived, was viewed as real by Domagoj:

Domagoj: *"I don't think Cohen is a benefactor...that he did it to give insight into something, it is a show, you know. He just wanted to make fun of things and to earn some money (...) ....maybe he did something good, in that he pointed at something but if he did it was unintentional (...) such as pointing at the poor people [the 'Kazakhstani' village] I don't know...but it is all the same, like we are Europe, we look down at others, and we are surprised, like 'look how they live', 'look a horse drags a cart', you know (...) But it is not as if he helped them. Realistically he didn't, the only thing is that you may ask yourself a bit, in a particular scene, because if you don't see it, you will not ask yourself about it."*

In summary, the majority of both the UK interpretive community and the Croatian interpretive community viewed the show as something more than mere comedy. The intention was not only to make people laugh, but to do something else, to give a type of social critique. In the UK it was a critique of exclusion, of political correctness, and the aim was seen as exposing prejudices, making people discuss things and making people more relaxed about themselves. In the Croatian interpretive community it was viewed as a critique of extreme positions, as an attempt to broaden people's perspectives; expose narrow-mindedness and stupidity of people, and in one case a critique of political correctness.

As opposed to this broad way of looking at things, the interviewees occupying the lowest levels of the in-group hierarchy in both the UK and in Croatia had one thing in common, namely that they did not see this additional dimension of the show. For them, it was primarily 'only comedy' with the purpose of making people laugh. However, while the members of the UK interpretive community pointed out that it was make belief, there was also a case in the Croatian interpretive community which gave credence to the fear of some critics of the show who stated that the show might be taken at face value.

The way in which interviewees saw the purpose of the show was determined by their class. There was a clear difference between the members positioned lowest in the in-group hierarchy and the rest. While the majority saw the show as doing something other than merely initiate laughter, the minority, lowest positioned claimed it was one-dimensional - only comedy. The argument that it was 'only comedy' without references to an additional layer or purpose was expressed by the interviewees occupying the lowest position on the in-group hierarchies both

that of the UK and of Croatia. Thus, while the text might be relevant (Fiske 1987) for everyone in different ways, regardless of position in social structure, it was visible that the least privileged were deprived of the other ‘layers’ of the text and which were visible to the others (social critique).

The way in which the majority of the interpretive community viewed the purpose of the show, could be said to be close to Bakhtin’s view of comedy which enables one to *turn [an object] upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its centre, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it* (Bakhtin in Berger 2005, 78). The purpose was explained as twofold: not only did it make the audience laugh, which is the glue that holds comedy texts together as a genre, but it was also to expose, to open up questions, to initiate debate, to make people relaxed about themselves, to make people think... However, as different from Bakhtin who focused on what a text does to its object of scorn, the interpretive communities talked about what the text ‘did’ to the audience – in this respect the Croatian interpretive community emphasised opening horizons of the otherwise narrowminded audiences, while the UK interpretive community frequently mentioned that it opened up debate, which again points to the prevalence of forms of self-censorship. Debate is not only seen as important but obviously as something that is suppressed, which seems to be a reaction to the political correctness rule imposed upon people in the UK.

Thus, the way the text was decoded with respect to its social commentary was diverse. While most interviewees did ‘find’ this in the text, a few did not. The comedy enabled readings on different levels and did not require cultural competence as legitimate knowledge as defined by Bourdieu. However, class did seem to be important from the point of view of ability to place the text in a wider context and to view it from multiple perspectives, to enjoy its richness and to multiply its function going beyond the purpose of merely making you laugh. In addition, class is most certainly important to the ability to articulate one's position – for what it’s worth.

#### **9.2.2.2. The construction of the viewing audience**

In an attempt to understand the way the interpretive community discursively constructed the audiences of the show, and thus, indirectly positioned the text as a cultural form carrying specific characteristics, I asked the interviewees who they thought watched this kind of



program. The answer to this question given by everybody in the UK interpretive community without exception was that age was discriminatory. It was for young people, teenagers to thirty something. It was pointed out that the young population had a shared sensibility towards other popular culture references and which differ from generation to generation, i.e. its references to music, videos, movies etc. brings a generation together. It was emphasised that the older generations were different and would not understand the reference points. The age of the interviewees also determined their understanding of the perceived audience, because they linked it to their peer groups, which is especially visible in George's (aged 56) answer.

George: *"I personally think that good comedy is universal. I use again the example of Monty Python, I mean, at the time I suppose it was directed at young people, which it was. Did older people watch it? No they probably didn't. Probably with Sacha Baron Cohen it is the younger age group, teens through to late 30s. Maybe I am an exception, I don't know, but I don't think so, I know [that] plenty of my contemporaries think he is also uniquely funny."*

Except age, another socio-demographic variable that frequently emerged was that it was more a 'male thing', which was explained by the fact that Cohen was male, but also that this type of programme had a 'cultish' cling to it, which was seen as a gender thing:

Henrietta: *"It might be more male than female (...) There seems to be a different way in which men and women relate to popular culture. But again it is a generalisation, but the kind of cultish association of these shows (...) The cultish attachment particularly to comedy shows that is more of a kind of male personal identification. I am not quite sure... [It] brings me back to music, knowing it in detail, being attached to collecting, all that is a little bit more male in society."*

Vulgarity and disgusting scenes were also seen as more appropriated to men, and more in line with that childish, school-boy type humour. In addition, car references and the 'pumping music' also contributed to the construction of the show as a 'male thing'.

Class divisions were not agreed upon. While one interviewee claimed it was for the lower classes:

Anne: *"I think he tries to target lower classes, and kids who dress the same and talk the same. I don't know... I think the young generation really and yeah definitely lower classes."*

Most participants claimed it was for the middle classes, and connected this to the identity of the author:

Henrietta: *"I would imagine it to be someone very like Sasha Baron Cohen actually - white middle class male, well educated, probably at least in their 20ies....yea!"*

In addition, some pointed out that class divisions were not applicable to this television show, because television was a medium of the masses and the show was *"Something that is so clearly young and popular. You know, all young people watched it."*(Sophia)

The issue of nationality also came up, in that the show was viewed as a specificity of English culture:

James: *"I always thought there was something quite peculiarly English about that kind of humour. It is just the awkwardness of it... the fact that there is no kind of real sort of slick jokes, it is just...what is funny is just the awkwardness, the discomfort that you can feel, you know, in the interview situation and sometimes even within the audience. I was amazed that it had such a wide appeal."*

Apart from socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, age, class and nationality interviewees also made reference to personal traits, where again Cohen's characteristics were related to the audience that might watch the show, i.e. they were likely to be skillful, clever and intelligent:

James: *"I guess just people like himself...[he]has got skill, pretty clever, pretty intelligent, and he created these characters that somehow become monsters each in their own right."*

The audience of this type of comedy was seen to be one that had knowledge about specific topics and competences to 'read between the lines' which enabled it to find meaning in his comedy. It was seen as a text that required an intellectual inclination and an interest in political

issues:

Melvin: *"[Someone who] maybe has more of an understanding about world topics, I suppose... The humour is a bit more in-depth. Like is working on more levels than just the level of, you know, toilet humour or humour related to sexual issues or sexual orientation. Especially Borat, his humour was working on several different levels. It's a bit more subtle in a way, the way his comedy works, that is why I kind of think he has a broader audience, maybe slightly more intellectual possibly... He is certainly talking about political issues most of the time."*

Rose: *"I suppose it is someone who likes comedy and someone with quite- maybe a leaning towards a dark sense of humour or risky sense of humour, someone who doesn't take things too literally, I suppose."*

According to one position, the only characteristic required of the audience is that it has to have a sense of humour:

Albert: *"It is for people with a sense of humour - that is who the show is for! If you don't have a sense of humour, then don't watch it!"*

The analysis of the interviews showed that the majority of the UK IC mainly moved within the traditional socio-economic categories of age, gender and class. Age was the most important in defining the audiences. However, the description of the audience as they see it was mostly measured against the socio-demographics of the comedian (and implicitly themselves) – young, male, middle class (and in one case – white, even though race was not brought up as important in any event) (Rose, Henrietta, Stephen, James). As mentioned before, when class appeared as a determinant of the audiences, it was not agreed upon. It was also not considered to be relevant according to some views (Melvin, Albert, George). Albert did not touch upon any socio-demographic category. According to him, a lot of people watched it, and these were people with a sense of humour. On the other hand, Melvin expressed that the audience were people who had an intellectual, broader understanding of the world (also mentioned by James and Rose). While most of the interviewees expressed similar ideas in terms of trying to define the audience only Anne and Albert had a different view in relation to this. Anne saw it as aimed at a teenage and lower class audience only, while Albert stated that it was intended for people

with a sense of humour (both interviewees occupying the lower position on the in-group hierarchy).

One important similarity between the Croatian and UK interpretive community was that age was an important variable in determining the audience of the show. The show was seen as being for the younger generation since the older generation might not be able to understand this type of humour or enjoy it. However, young age was also linked to an English speaking population that is in contact with the Anglo-Saxon culture' and 'modern' people who watch MTV and are used to new media usage - something viewed as inherent only to a small portion of the population in Croatia. In the Croatian interpretive community, the audience was thought of as a small niche that was more progressive, a part of the population alternative to the 'mainstream', and this is why interviewees state that the show is not suited to the broader viewing population:

Držislav: *"I don't think this is watched by the average person. Perhaps an average person would go to the cinema because they saw the ads, so they go to watch it, but I don't think that this type of humour is for the majority of people."*

Marija pointed out that she thought the show was meant for an open-minded or 'normal' audience, expressing that this, in her view, was a rare epiphany:

Marija: *"I think it is younger people, open minded, I don't know. I suppose older people also who are open minded [watch it] (...) A small, small group of normal people, I would say it is a small group of normal people... Even though we are not normal to other people, but hahah, you can't please everyone... otherwise I think the audience is totally diverse."*

The audience was also seen as having a more liberal world view:

Dmitar: *"People who are not church goers and are not burdened with religious beliefs and national issues. It is not for conservative people, older people and conservatives influenced by the church and the current political establishment."*

And people who are not easily influenced by predominant values in society, but are able to critically engage in social matters:

Katarina: *"I think it is a mostly young crew, urban (...) A generation that is open, that watches MTV and uses new media, who enjoys new types of humour not found within strictly chartered forms and clichés present in most TV series, especially American ones. People who have a mind of their own are the audience, at least out of those who watch it regularly."*

This minority is seen as being rebellious, against conventions:

Karlo: *"I think it is a diverse audience. From my perspective the only thing that linked them was the joint... Meaning, a crowd that is not burdened by... aaa, norms, such as eating healthy, getting regular sleep, eating regularly, going to the gym, holding on to a regular job, advancing in your career, I don't know... going to decent places... People who don't care about [conventions] and are open minded."*

Urban and civil:

Ignjat: *"I think every urban person, I mean not every, surely we are not all the same, but I think urban people understand more and are in favour of that type of humour (...) I think the difference between provincial and urban is important for that type of humour. It is a minority more typically found in larger cities, as far as that type of humour is concerned and that type of world view."*

Intelligent and liberal:

Matija: *"Hm, that is an interesting question... it is very hard... I think that Ali G is watched by a very wide spectrum of people (...) I think the common denominator is intelligence; as far as I am concerned - intelligence. Because, in order to be able to laugh truthfully at his jokes, you have to be able to understand the global aspect, the entire context. [It is not for] conservative people, as far as I am concerned, these are groups or individuals that have a more narrow view of the society in which they live."*

Educated and informed:

Držislav: *"According to my logic, perhaps I would say that more educated people watch it... but then again, maybe it is not so much about education, but about people who have a broader way of looking at things. So not... I don't want to say something stupid... but according to my view, it will not be watched by a poor worker, a construction builder, that kind of person will not watch Ali G, he will buy a beer and go listen to folk music or something like that. It is not for everyone, not for everyone... You have to be able to understand his humour, right? Why would anyone watch, when perhaps most people don't know what is happening in Palestine."*

The interpretive communities constructed the audience in accordance with the way they saw themselves as readers in the wider context. In describing the audience they also, in a way, described the interpretive community they themselves took part in and this was, to a certain extent, a reflection of themselves. The UK interpretive community mostly related it to socio-demographics, of which age was the most important one, followed by gender (more male) and class (mostly middle class). It was basically measured in terms of their own position, and linked to Cohen and his place in the social structure – a young, middle class, white male. The Croatian interpretive community defined the audience as a small niche, a minority (which they too formed a part of), constructed through specific traits that were seen as the opposite of the Croatian mainstream: to be urban, English speaking, modern, liberal (meaning not burdened with issues of nationality and religion), unconventional, open-minded, knowing etc.

It was interesting to observe that the Croatian interpretive community - as opposed to the UK interpretive community who did not relate the show to a particular political orientation - repeatedly stated that the show was not for conservative people. Class was not viewed as important, except the dimension of education (Dmitar, Držislav) - instead, personal traits such as intelligence, thinking with one's own head, and having an open-minded world view was more relevant to the way the audience was constructed by the Croatian interpretive community. The exception again, was Tamara, who mentioned socio-economic categories in this context and placed emphasis on age and gender, and an awareness of Anglo-Saxon globalised culture.

### **9.2.2.3. Modes of decoding: ambiguous or not?**

The decoding of the show was assessed with a specific focus on its communicative strategies (irony, parody) that created ambiguity – something that lay at the heart of the show's controversy. The prevalent view that dominated in this interpretive community was that

Cohen's show was unambiguous, in the sense that, even though he impersonated different characters, the joke was on the people he dragged into his show (George, Rose, Melvin, Albert, Anne) which proved to be a successful way of appreciating the show and remaining politically correct:

George: *"They [people with prejudices] treated him as someone very simple, **and thought that they were having the laugh, whereas, of course, the opposite was the truth...**"*

Rose: *"I think they should, kind of, read between the lines and see, that he really isn't, as far as I can tell, he is not homophobic, he is not racist he is not any of these things it is not what he is trying to do... He is not trying to poke fun at them, **he is trying to poke fun at the people who view these groups in a certain way...**"*

Melvin: *"Its specificity was to do with a stereotyped individual who was a kind of... He would be seen as somebody who is a bit stupid... aaa... a bit of a gang member, and maybe lived on the fringes... **and he was ultimately denigrating the people who were in power while he was interviewing [them] and made them seem stupid and silly.**"*

Albert: *"In Ali G he said: 'all right I can see these urban kids, I wanna use that, and do comedy about it'. **But when he was Ali G – it wasn't as if he was getting at kids, but he was actually getting at celebrities, and that was genius to me... How can this urban character make money of getting at celebrities!?**"*

Anne: *"I don't think anything he did was actually offensive, people would find it offensive, but I don't think he meant it like that, **he just wanted to point... to make all the people look stupid, [and] what they were doing, rather than make himself look stupid.**"*

As different from the interviewees who directed their attention towards the collocutors who were dragged into the show – a focus that enabled them to remain politically correct – others pointed at its ambiguity but in a positive manner, or at least interpreting it as neutral. Henrietta and James claimed that the show had multiple issues, but had a positive view on that. However, while Henrietta saw it as a useful way to deconstruct the forms of censorship and make people think about injustice, James did not want to justify the show as something having a positive

intention or function – he claimed that it did not matter what you read into it as long as it made people more relaxed about themselves:

James: *I mean, you can look at it two ways – either he is pointing the finger at the characters he is impersonating and the people meant for those characters to represent or he is pointing the finger at the people who fall for the joke... and therefore actually somehow believe this character is real... In the end, there are all kind of great answers, you can read into it whatever you want, but in the end I just think he just wants to be funny... **I think it makes people laugh and that is a good thing, you know, people are just a little bit more relaxed about themselves and about other people and if he breaks down barriers in that way then that is a good thing.***

Last but not least, two interviewees pointed at the ambiguity as potentially offensive since it was questionable who the target of the comedy was: people in power or powerless minorities. This was especially seen as problematic having in mind the identity – especially socio-economic background – of the author (Sophia, Stephen).

As can be seen from the above, most of the members of the interpretive community evaluated the show in a completely positive manner, while two of them – Stephen and Sophia – had mixed feelings about it. They claimed that the ambiguity which they saw was potentially offensive and harmful, since it was not clear who the target of his comedy was. The targets should not be minorities or people that are below the comedians' socio-economic status. The ambiguity was also explicated by James and Henrietta, albeit Henrietta saw it as a means to make people discuss and question social taboo-topics while James had a more cynical attitude in claiming that whatever one reads into the text, it did not really matter as long as it made people laugh and thus contributed to them feeling more relaxed about themselves. In addition, the fact that everyone was a target justified it: in that way it could be read as satire and not as a form of discriminating against a particular group.

The other interviewees focused more on the receiving end, i.e. the people who Cohen confronted with his characters, through which he managed to expose prejudices towards different races, classes and sexual orientation (everything his characters represented). However, while most of the interviewees moved discursively within issues of political correctness, stereotypes, inclusiveness and exclusiveness, minorities, representation etc. and decoded them within a context of the social role of comedy, two of the interviewees had a one-dimensional



mode of decoding unconnected to an intention other than making people laugh ('it's only comedy'). Anne claimed that the show was exposing the stupidity and naivety of people, albeit without explicating it further. She claimed that the show was basic and adjusted to teenagers because it was rude and a bit silly, but that people should not get offended because it was only comedy. Albert found the show to be positive and pointed out that it was 'only comedy' that aimed to make fun of celebrities. In these two cases wider social implications were not articulated.

Overall, the ways of decoding the show could be split into four types of decoding, out of which three were also present in the secondary text (the UK articles):

1. **Unambiguous – it's just comedy – affirmative position** – focuses on the people confronted with [Cohen's] characters; the show is funny, it makes fun of celebrities and makes people who deserve it look stupid. It is not offensive in any way because it is make-believe. The intention is only laughter (Albert, Anne).

2. **Unambiguous – exposing prejudices – affirmative position** – interpretation with a focus on people confronted with the characters – the show exposes prejudices towards less powerful minorities (Rose, George, Sophia).

3. **Ambiguous – exposing prejudices but potentially offensive – affirmative/critical position** – the show exposes prejudices; however, it is also problematic in that it makes fun of people with less power and is done by a privileged person (Sophia, Stephen).

4. **Ambiguous, all-inclusive scorn – satire – affirmative position** – it is political satire, it pushes people to think and discuss things (Henrietta) such as tolerance etc. or, at least, it makes people more relaxed about themselves (James).

The Croatian members of the interpretive community had quite different decoding strategies. It was not easy to assess the issue of ambiguity in the Croatian interviews, because there was no sense of the violation of a norm if one made fun of the characters Cohen represented. It was not seen as a victimization of the powerless – the fact that scorning gays, Eastern Europeans or Blacks (as well as any other identity groups) was not pointed out as particularly problematic,

which is why there was not a clear separation between the impersonated characters versus people's reactions in the process of decoding of this show. However, more attention was implicitly paid to the reactions of the people (most notably Americans) in the interviews.

The idea that it might be offensive to some groups was discarded, and the idea of a 'victim' of Cohen's humour did come up: it was mainly related to individuals who turned up in the show/movie without knowing what was at stake. This sense of imposture was pointed out in several cases, while the group identities and their potential 'victimization' were not seen as problematic at all. Cohen scorned politicians, the aristocracy, overnight celebrities, stars, reality shows, Jews, Kazakhs, Britishmen, human hypocrisy etc. – everything that deserved to be mocked. However, he also made fun of himself, which is important.

The idea that he ridiculed everyone came up as positive, and the identities that he impersonated with his character were viewed as a successful critique of 'reality' in which the raw, superficial and backward on the one hand and the uptight, starchy, high class on the other were both viewed as negative.

Karlo: *“Look, the man is black, he is black under quotation, and you cannot say that he is not a black guy – from the slang to the manners and gesturing, movements of hands, body and everything – he is black! (...) In a way, he scorned black stereotypes. Black stereotypes in music videos is that they have tits and ass, every black video has tits and ass, fancy cars, gold and [the type of communication], you know, 'mother fucker' stuff... He [also]scorned the characters that came to his studio, the 'serious' guys, [with] good manners (...) class and norms, social norms... he scorned that side as well...according to my view, he wanted to show the two extremes – one is the tits-and-ass kind of thing and the other is the 'stuck-up' [the starchy].”*

To make fun of the identities he impersonated with his character was not viewed as problematic at all. Borat was viewed as an Eastern European, someone similar to a specific type of Croat, however this was considered to be legitimate:

Dmitar: *“Everybody thinks of themselves as if they are something. [We] In Croatia as well. We want to be great, but we are nothing. (...) And he comes across as such, as a petty guy from*

*Kazakhstan to America where they think of themselves as the 'world police', that everything they have is the best, that other things suck, and it is there that he drags them onto thin ice. It is here that he shows how stupid they are... There is no difference between us and them, we all have our East. Look, we are eastern for the Germans, Bosnia is our east, Slovenia talks about southerners, the Serbs thinks of Bulgaria and Romania as gypsies, you know, we all have our East..."*

The scorning of the identities he represented was particularly viewed as justifiable with the character Bruno: The way homosexuality was talked about revealed a considerable amount of homophobia:

Domagoj: *" [When he played Bruno] he pointed at the gay lobby, because, aaa... there is a bit to much of that nowadays, you know... Nowadays they say that it is normal, 'it is normal', realistically speaking, I don't think it is normal, you know...He is mostly making fun of the gay lobby, because all of that is the gay lobby, the fashion shows, stylists ..."*

Ignjat: *"I don't know, but as far as fags are concerned, fags who are effeminate are hated by normal fags, because they send a totally wrong picture of themselves into the world, and Bruno scorns the ones that are like that, the pansies... but all of them are not like that..."*

Držislav: *"It is their [gays'] own fault that people think of them in that way (...) I don't think all that is really normal (...)Maybe it is not a disease, but it is some kind of disorder (...) But it is definitely not natural..."*

There was only one approach that considerably differed from the majority, and was more similar to the positions taken in the UK interpretive community, especially linked to the critique of political correctness that the show pushes forward:

Tereza: *"He is exposing the insane and a-logical things that people preach with huge passion, like the case with animal protection, I mean, I am an advocate of such rights, but I am awfully annoyed when... when people go to the extreme (...) [He] has that kind of 'we cannot move forward if we don't call a spade a spade', and if we don't have the guts to say that a black person is black, then we cannot do anything anyway..."*

She said she saw Ali G as a rapper (which she didn't explicitly link to race) and claimed:

Tereza: *“His parody of Ali G was totally OK, it has been around long enough, so that you can say 'aha!', and understand that he is scorning that type of talk, acting and these values (...) there are not, especially in our generation, prejudices towards rappers, while there are prejudices towards eastern and poor people, and gay people...which makes it a bit on the edge... on the edge of being funny...”*

Even if these negativities were pointed out, she still thought of it as useful and a work of an artist that exposed what was being suppressed.

Tereza: *“The question is to what extent the critics, that are mainly from – how should I put this – from the mainstream, can recognize this as an art form, because if you don't view it as an art form, then it is really gay bashing and making fun of everything, but if you see it as art, then it is a very sharp, intelligent critique of the contradictions and stupidities in society...”*

A part of the Croatian interpretive community decoded the show as mainly scorning the people he confronted with his character, but there were no attempts to remain politically correct by 'protecting' the identities he represented. The show was decoded as scorning universal human traits, ridiculing human flaws, *“criticizing human stupidity which is endless”* (Marija) – without getting into the problem of specific groups, political correctness, minorities or any other divisions in society.

The show was also seen as justifiably targeting conservative people, but not only in the traditional sense, but targeting people who are dogmatic in their views, or radical in their approaches (vegetarians, animal rights protections, nationalists etc.). In addition, it scorns groups that are in a sense exclusive, extremely sensitive, and are pussyfooted around by others (like the high class, gays, Jews etc.). Thus, Cohen's humour was seen as targeting groups that considered themselves and their attitudes to be the most important thing. Because everyone is a target, Cohen is not scorning a particular position and worldview but the intensity of keeping your own position in the centre of the universe whatever it was (Katarina). It was also viewed

as a critique of societies and their weak spots, such as conventions and tradition in Britain, and American provinciality and conservatism (Matija).

The analysis of the interviews conducted with the Croatian interpretive community showed that the whole ambiguity issue created by the characters he represented and the people he confronted was bypassed. Only one interviewee engaged in a politically correct discourse and pointed out its ambiguity and potential offensiveness (Tereza). Other members of the Croatian IC either implicitly focused on the people he confronted (without pointing out the ambiguity) or they explicitly emphasized that he scorned everybody and pointed at both the characters and the people they confronted as legitimate targets for the jokes. To sum up, by analysing the positions that appeared in the Croatian interpretive community, the following positions appeared:

1. **Unambiguous – it's just comedy – affirmative position** - he scorns everyone without a particular aim, except making people laugh and gain profit. However, this was different from the UK interpretive community position, since the focus was both on the characters and the people he confronted (Držislav, Domagoj).

2. **Unambiguous - exposing human stupidity and narrow-mindedness – affirmative position** - with an implicit focus on the people confronted with the characters. The show exposes provincial mentalities, extreme positions, human stupidity (Marija, Katarina, Matija).

3. **Unambiguous – it makes fun of everyone – affirmative position** - it broadens perspectives, exposes taboos. It scorns the characters and the reactions of people (again, different from the UK position – it was encompassed with a politically incorrect discourse) (Karlo, Ignjat, Dmitar).

4. **Ambiguous – a social critique but potentially offensive – critical position** - the show is an intelligent critique of political correctness but it is potentially problematic in that it makes fun of people with less power (Tereza – similar to Stephan and Sophia in the UK IC albeit the definition of 'powerless' was a bit different).

The differences between the UK and Croatian interpretive community in decoding the show were profound. The UK interviewees talked about exposing prejudices towards the minorities

and the positive aspect of pushing people to discuss things as a way to bypass intolerance. Because of the inherent need of the majority of the interpretive community to remain politically correct, it was important to keep the focus on the reactions of the people from the West towards the characters representing the 'Other'. Of course there were exceptions (James) who refused to make a difference between these two levels, claiming that everyone is scorned, and Henrietta who claimed that the show was potentially offensive and might be misinterpreted, but that the end (which was to open up discussion) justified the means. However, except from this declarative rejection, they all remained within a politically correct discourse.

On the other hand, the majority of the Croatian interpretive community did not try to divide the characters from the people they confronted. They primarily saw the show as scorning human weaknesses in general – especially the extremist positions, provinciality, conservatives, stupidity, narrow-mindedness (all of which was pointed out as characterizing the mainstream in Croatia). The show was decoded as making fun of everyone regardless of the structural position of particular groups or identities. And even though three of the interviewees focused more on the people confronted by the characters, they did not explicitly raise the issue of ambiguity of the show. Also, the interviewees that saw the show as mocking everyone also showed prejudices towards the characters he represented. The only exception in viewing the show as ambiguous was Tamara who engaged in a discourse similar to the one developed in the UK community, but instead of defining powerless groups through race, sexual orientation, gender etc, she was more concerned about groups that were marginalized, disabled, and lived on the fringes of society (the extremely poor, mentally ill, alcoholics, prostitutes...).

The polysemy of *Da Ali G Show* was yet again confirmed, even though the interpretive community was homogeneous in that they evaluated the show and this type of humour in a positive manner. However, the number of possible ways of decoding was limited. Thus, the modes of interpreting the show were few and were repeated in the interviews. The comparison of the two settings showed profound differences particularly in respect to civilized, politically correct discourse. In addition, although it was impossible to assess which interpretation was right, it was – as pointed out by Eco (1990) – definitely clear which was the wrong one – especially by taking into consideration the communicative strategies employed in edge comedy: the interpretation in which the show was taken at face value (as scorning gays and as depicting real poor people from Kazakhstan/Romania) - given by the interviewee who occupied the

lowest position in the micro-hierarchy (Domagoj).

In the UK interpretive community, the show was decoded in only a few ways as well as in the Croatian interpretive community. What was interesting was that the decoding of the show as ambiguous, all-inclusive scorning – which basically meant to reject a politically correct discourse – only appeared with one of the interviewees in the UK interpretive community situated at the highest position in the micro-hierarchy (James), and did not appear in the newspaper articles in the UK, while the ambiguous, critical position carrying a politically correct discourse only appeared with one of the interviewees in the Croatian interpretive community who was also situated on the highest position of the micro-hierarchy.

It was apparent that the interviewees occupying the highest positions in the micro-hierarchies had the competence to absorb various and different perspectives, which can be viewed as progressive in the respective contexts: In the UK interpretive community the declarative breach of political correctness visible in Henrietta's and particularly James's approach might be viewed as a step forward in a society that self-censors and suppresses the matters of injustice on a discursive level, whereas in the Croatian IC the ability to articulate and situate the show in a broader context of the political correctness debate, as done by Tereza, might be viewed either as a step forward in a society saturated with prejudices towards difference or as an early step closer to the internalization of Western values appropriated by the local elite.

#### **9.2.2.4. The West and the East: imagined communities as point of reference**

The discourses in which the interviewees engaged when talking about the show were quite different between the Croatian and the UK interpretive community. Similar to the journalists and critics, the Croatian interpretive community more frequently engaged in a discourse that held the imagined community or the nation in focus. It served as a reference point in the meaning-making process. The fact that Cohen was from the UK made his critique so much more appealing, because it was seen as a critique coming from the inside, as a self-reflection of the West and its weak points (Tereza, Karlo):

*Tereza: “I think his success is based on the fact that it is perceived in the context of all our critiques of global American culture **and then you have someone from that culture that makes fun of it completely.** Meaning, we are stupid, uneducated, racist, apolitical, we have totally*

*wrong values and we are fighting against wrong things, and he criticizes the American, Anglo-Saxon globalised value system – as someone who is from there, of course people found that appealing. ”*

The British were depicted as conceited, distant, extremely polite, conservative and traditional but also as having a great sense of humour. Britain was measured against the USA by which a superior position of Britain was justified on the grounds of their tradition, while the dominance of Americans was questionable, because they did not have the qualities required.

A considerable amount of anti-Americanism was noticeable: America was depicted as being inflexible and backward (Marija, Karlo, Ignjat); primitive, stupid (Katarina); musty (Domagoj), provincial (Matija).

Karlo: *“I watch them [Americans] and I can’t believe what I am seeing - fuck America and everything, their century long democratic tradition and what not, when I see the morons!”*

Katarina: *“Borat exposes the American society, their primitivism, a high percentage of Americans is like that... I haven’t been to America, but the way I experience them, and the way he depicted them is that there is a huge percentage of horribly primitive people... a small part is somewhat urban - which is not to say that if you aren’t urban that you are primitive - but most of them are, somehow, empty-headed, they don’t think with their own head, they are not educated and they are not interested in anything.”*

The dominance of the American culture worldwide was perceived negatively, and popular culture – especially the film industry – was seen as a propaganda tool to sustain their dominance (Dmitar). Cohen’s text was seen as a critique of the USA because he distorted the false picture they wanted to send out to the rest of the world (Katarina).

Dmitar: *“He shows what things are really like, you know... meaning that Americans are, I don’t know, smug, egoistic, imperious, that they are the only existing people in the world, along with all the American movies. They are saving the world in every movie... Now it is the Islamist, for a while it was the Balkan, Serbian terrorists (...) All these movies... and they are always the ones saving the world...you will rarely see a French, Russian or Japanese being able to think of*



*something smart. It is always the Americans. They are saving the world from aliens; they are saving the world from everything....”*

The West, more specifically the USA and to a lesser extent Great Britain, were not the only criticized nations. The interviewees were also very negative towards the East. The unity of this entity was visible in the way Kazakhstan and Croatia were interlinked – Croatia was seen as a country that could have been used instead of Kazakhstan:

Karlo: *“Look, I am glad Croatia wasn’t involved in all that, because I believe some wise guy would appear to file a suit like, for the obstruction of the tourist season, or shit like that...”*

Ignjat: *“Perhaps, if Croatia was involved instead of Kazakhstan, a lot of people here would, you know - especially since we are so conservative, a conservative state and conservative people - I am sure millions of associations would rise when he would scorn [Croatia]...”*

Croatia was talked about as being a ‘wannabe important state’, pretentious, conservative, hypocritical and provincial:

Dmitar: *“We all have an idea about ourselves as if we were something special... that is a problem in Croatia as well. We suffer from a type of delusion of grandeur, as if we were important... in principle, we are nothing, we are just a slum god knows where... we always think we are the best, the most whatever, but in principle – we are nothing! (...) We [Croatsians] are pretentious, you know, pretending to be fucking cultivated, the culture of the Austro-Hungarian kind...you know, we think of ourselves as something special...”*

Marija: *“We [Croatsians] are immeasurably conservative - conservative, hypocritical, you know... you can do all kind of horrible things but [we] do it quietly. We are extremely conservative... ‘Jesus, look at the tattoo!’ – while that same person dresses in chains at home and whips his child or whatever... hypocrisy rules, and reverse values...”*

Matija: *“The topics he uses in his show are, in some way, near to us here in Croatia, since we are faced with provinciality and conservatism at every corner...”*

Jews were seen as too sensitive and as an ethnicity that always had to be exempt because of the historical circumstances:

Katarina: *“They are really extremely sensitive, much more sensitive than any other victims of anything else... black people who also suffered, historically speaking...”*

Ignjat: *“Self-pity is the worst thing ... I mean, Jews suffered a lot in WW2, but they cannot always, on account of that, demand extra points for the next hundred years...”*

Marija: *“You know, I like the fact that Jews always remind people of what happened (Holocaust). I like it; even though they are a bit boring and arduous, like, common for fuck sake, get over it, even though it is probably ok to remind people what happened, so it doesn't happen again...”*

In contrast to the Croatian interpretive community, which had a quite openly critical view both of their own nation as well as of other nations and ethnicities, the UK interviewees were much more politically correct in their utterance.

With regards to nationalities and stereotyping practices, the UK interpretive community was not much concerned with this topic, the nation state discourse did not appear much and when it did it was only in relation to the USA (albeit without a negative attitude towards Americans) due to the fact that Cohen made a good part of his show there. On the few occasions Kazakhstan was mentioned in that nobody had ever heard of the country. In this respect, the show was seen as useful in raising awareness of its existence (even though the representation, except for the signifier, was totally inaccurate). However, here too no explicit negative stereotype or critique could be noticed, except for slight ignorance:

George: *“Honestly, most people don't know where Kazakhstan is, he could have used any country in that direction and no one would be any wiser really in the West, it wasn't until the film came out I learned that Kazakhstan is the size of western Europe, I didn't know that before, I didn't know it is mineral rich... And of course the film was made in Romania anyway and they took offence, too, didn't they, by the way...”*

Henrietta: *“I think Borat is probably the best, my favourite...I think the Borat movie is really... Where did he say Borat is from?”*

The lack of knowledge about Kazakhstan was connected to a lack of reference points: people didn't have anything to compare the representation of Kazakhstan with, which made the show/movie the first source of information, and since it was a negative depiction, the consequences were potentially damaging:

Sophia: *“When they first said that Kazakhstan was up in arms about what Ali G was saying about their country I first thought: ‘Oh, come on it is only a joke! Anyone can say anything about a country; it is not the end of the world, especially one person. Rise above it and laugh about it!’ (...) I don't know why I am not offended about a whole country especially if they're feeling offended... I mean... I think maybe as well because I have never heard of Kazakhstan before. I didn't know whether it was really a place or... [and] it only worked because no one had ever heard of it, so they could imagine that maybe people from there did all that ... there was nothing established, and he just established that as, you know, a stereotype for that country. (...) It is not like, you know, making a program about France, and being negative... like some of the things that English people say about France - they are all being froggy, smell of onions, or whatever- because there are so many other positive things that can be balanced out 'cause everybody knows where France is... They have got more foundation to understand mocking ...”*

Otherwise the discussions mostly triggered debates about the show and the specificities of English humour that was attached to it, especially in the light of its global success, which came as a surprise because of its typically English characteristics, especially linked to the Ali G character. The English were viewed as having a specific, awkward sense of humour (Melvin, Stephen, James):

Melvin: *“That is a very English humour [in the sense that] the English are very good at laughing at themselves, and, yes, he was doing that, because even though he was taking the mickey out of the individual, the person that he was interviewing, he was also taking the mickey out of himself as well...”*

James: *“I was very surprised that it was so successful in America, because I always thought there was something quite peculiarly English about that kind of humour, Just the awkwardness of it...”*

Overall, while the UK interpretive community engaged in the discourses that revolved around the opposition between the powerless and the powerful, the ‘Other’ and the ‘Same’, reflecting the heated social issues in the UK linked to multiculturalism, minorities (especially race) and political correctness that accompany it. The Croatian interpretive community engaged in a ‘politically incorrect’ discourse with specific references to the nation-state as an important formation and to the opposition between the West and the East,

The UK interpretive community discussion evolved around tolerance and the problem of ridiculing groups that attempt to gain positive representation – minorities, most notably Black, but also gay, women etc. The Croatian interpretive community engaged in a discourse of power relations between nations and supranational formations to a large extent (What is our position compared to the West? How do we view other nation-states?). It was also quite clear that prejudices and stereotypes were openly uttered without a self-censoring impulse that would communicate an awareness that it is no longer desirable or even ‘allowed’ to utter an open negative statement regarding a specific group (even if you hold a negative opinion).

In the Croatian interpretive community this explicit politically incorrect discourse was something everyone engaged in, with the exception of the interviewee holding the highest position in the in-group micro-hierarchy (Tereza). Anti-Americanism was also noticeable by the entire interpretive community, even though, again, Tereza placed it in a wider context and linked it to collective opinion. Other prejudices and negative opinions about different subjectivities were also present: about Jews, Blacks, Croatians, and most notably gays. Homophobic views were openly uttered, to a higher or lower degree, by almost all the males in the Croatian interpretive community.

However, if we take a general look at how the interpretive community was formed according to their preferences for politically incorrect humour it is interesting to notice how two totally different discourses evolved within the respective cultural settings: the UK interpretive community engaged in a completely clear cut politically correct discourse during the interviews

– and this was applicable to all the members interviewed, regardless of the position they occupied in the in-group hierarchy. The only uncomfortable discourse that could be traced back to the UK interpretive community was a slight ignorance about Kazakhstan (the East).

A complete opposite, politically incorrect, or uncivilized discourse appeared in the Croatian interpretive community – regardless of interviewees’ in-group hierarchy position. The only exception was Tereza – who partially engaged in a politically correct discourse (criticizing it but still aware of it). All the others openly expressed negative attitudes towards gays, Jews, Americans, Croats, human kind in general, Blacks, the East...

This suggests that politically correct discourse has not been interwoven into the dominant discourse in Croatia. Instead, an openly critical view of other identities (including nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation...) indicates that this is not considered to be a transgression from the norm. Croatians were also negatively depicted, but the members of the interpretive community clearly detached themselves from this imagined community. The difference in the engagement in a politically correct discourse was partially determined by the perceived structural unequal position of the respective countries. While the UK interpretive community talked from the position of the superiority of the West, the Croatian interpretive community spoke from a perceived under-privileged position of the East. Only one interviewee had a different view and she was the one highest positioned within the in-group hierarchy (Tereza). A bold application of Elias’s theory of the civilizing process, in which he claims that the spiral of civilization includes the “spread of civilization” or the standards and institutions of the West to other parts of the world (Elias 1994, 461) either by “settlement of Occidentals or through the assimilation of the upper strata of other nations” (Elias 1994, 362) might be applicable here. Politically correct utterance, as an element of being civilized in the contemporary West, has not yet been mainstreamed in Croatia. However, the upper class is familiar with its rules and is slowly appropriating this element of what counts as civilized. Of course, further research is needed to confirm this hypothesis; however, the findings here points in that direction.

## 10. Conclusion

This research explored the audience reception of a television comedy that I labelled edge comedy which has the properties of being ambiguous and controversial. The show deliberately used strategies that created ambiguity and was constructed around identity issues, by taking the position of subaltern identities. The ambiguous communicative strategies resulted in very different, often oppositional ways of decoding the show.

Even if the transgression of norms and values is expected in comedy, edge-comedy balances on the border between acceptable and unacceptable utterances, which is why this particular text raised so much controversy. More specifically, the humour is politically incorrect which, this study claims, presents a new dimension of being civilized in the West. Limits to humour are by no means anything new: certain forms of censorship and self-censorship in comedic discourses are constant, but what is changeable – in a historical and cultural context – is the target and the theme of scorn. *Da Ali G Show* stirred up debate on a global level. The overall discussion about the show – whether in the extra-textual environment (which in this study included academic articles and newspaper articles), or the interpretive community that favours this type of humour but is not voiced in public – evolved around the same dualities: was it offensive, or did it give a brilliant social commentary?

### The extra-textual environment

The analysis of the extra-textual environment including the newspaper articles in Croatia and the UK showed some similarities. The way the show was written about exposed the dual character of cultural products – the show was either framed as a product or as a cultural form carrying message and meaning.

The attitude towards the text as a product was similar in both imagined communities. The role of the media industry in the production and promotion of media texts was quite negatively evaluated. Marketing campaigns were condemned as more aggressive than ever. It seemed that the profit interests in the field of cultural texts were not accepted as legitimate. The fast cultural production and creation of ‘overnight stars’ that are interchangeable was ascribed to the greed of the industry, but also to the new-born celebrities that accepted this subsumption of the

market and conformed to the profit-logic uncritically.

The meaning of the text was much more debated, and in the ‘unpacking’ of the show, there were a few similarities in Croatian and UK journalist articles. Firstly, they seemed to share an understanding of topics that were considered to be too sensitive to be the subject of a joke. Even though there were different standpoints about whether humour should be constrained or not, there was a shared understanding about what topics were potentially sensitive. These were linked to sex related issues (masturbation, obscenities, animal sex, gerontophilia, incest, adultery, sexual violence such as rape, paedophilia, trafficking), bodily functions (faeces, bodily fluids), violation of national and state symbols and the scorning of national tragedies (war, terrorism), discrimination of the powerless (homophobia, sexism, mentally or physically disabled, Roma, Black, torturing animals), Jews (anti-Semitism, holocaust), bad language (sexual innuendoes, swear words), illegal activities (promoting drugs).

There was also a shared understanding of the complex process of evaluating a joke. In this respect, the whole communicative context was important – this included the identity of the author, the estimated intention of the uttered, and the identity of those on whose account the joke was made. The identity of the comedian was considered as especially important, in order to determine who he had the right to scorn. In this respect, the most important identity signifiers that were pointed out in the articles were education/class, ethnicity/race and religious affiliation, but also gender and political orientation. This is why the analysis of text-reader relationship cannot be de-linked from authorial intention - at least when controversial comedy is in focus and the identity of the author is crucial in determining the appropriateness of his/her work. Surely, this does not imply that the *actual* authorial intention is important but it does imply that the way the authorial intention is constructed by the audiences plays an important role in the meaning-making process. If it is perceived as being malicious it is condemned. The identity of the author is important because of the fundamental principle that jokes on one’s own account are the best jokes. The ability to be able to put yourself on the windward side is considered to be a virtue. Alternatively, scorning others, especially individuals or groups with less power than the speaker, is viewed as problematic. The definition of who has more or less power is changing – it can range from individuals with more or less rhetorical abilities or hierarchies created in everyday interactions, to the definition of powerless groups that emerged with the political correctness debate, initially defined as the ‘other’ of the successful white,

heterosexual, Anglo-Saxon, male, with the potential of expanding this category to include other formations viewed as powerless.

Despite the many similarities in the way the show was written about in the UK and Croatian articles, there were significantly more differences in the approaches to the show.

In both countries articles were written which attempted to contextualise and situate the primary text and its author in a web of texts. The way the text was discussed in the extra-textual environment (including academic articles and newspaper articles) indicated the interconnectedness of texts – the show was frequently compared and measured against other texts. This was done with references to identity marks, other media products, and modes of interpretations. In the UK the references brought up were much more rich and diverse. The text was linked to previous texts that the journalists and critics saw as related to the show, and by the different texts raised it was obvious that the grouping of the show according to Warren and Welleck's definition of the separation of the "inner form" which includes attitude, tone, purpose, or subject and audience (Warren and Welleck 1956, 260 in Neale 2000, 13) was more appropriate for this text. The references that were many and quite diverse in the UK indicated a form of 'textual abundance' – a richness of different cultural products that enabled a constitution of new ideas built on the ones previously created. As Hall claims, "There is no notion of any originating moment (...) so what the media pick up on is already a discursive universe. (...) The [author] is picking up on the presignified world in order to signify it in a new way again..." (Hall in Cruz and Lewis 1994, 260-261). This environment enabled the text to be created in the first place. It also enabled a more rich associative chain even though it also prevented the reader from enjoying it as truly original.

On the other hand, the Croatian newspaper articles did not really pick up on the television show, it remained a marginal thing. In stark contrast, the movie *Borat* triggered a more frequent production of articles. Firstly, because of the huge promotional campaign that presented the movie as a hit, a must-see, which was, of course, picked up by a large conformist audience that wanted to be up-to-date with the newest thing. However, what is more important, the narrative of the movie enabled a recognition of cultural codes and a space opened up for Croatians to feel familiarity, but also to feel indirectly targeted. Thus, most of the articles focused on the movie and the character of Borat. However, this, too, indicates that the context frames not only the



modes of decoding but also that which will be decoded in the first place. In the newspaper articles the references to previous texts were much poorer – it seemed as if there was a deficiency in the pool of references, a type of ‘textual scarcity’ that did not move further than linking the text to forms of the ‘clash of cultures’ previously depicted in movies.

Whether the text was praised as superb satire or condemned as offensive, its identity marks and power relations were at the heart of the discussion. These were linked to race (white, black...), national identity (Kazakhstani, Croatian, American, British), gender (men, women), religion (Muslim, Protestant), sexual orientation (homosexual, heterosexual)... However, different power relations were in focus. While the UK articles were predominantly concerned with race framed within the context of multiculturalism and respect for other identity groups – regardless of what forms their grouping – the Croatian articles were immersed in a nation state discourse that either focused on geopolitics in which Eastern Europe (including Croatia) and Russia (sharing a socialist past) were viewed as powerless compared to the power of the West (Cohen as a citizen of the West, and most notably the USA), or on the holiness of the nation and nation-state in general, in which scorning this was not considered appropriate.

The engagement in a politically correct discourse in the UK that supposedly aimed at protecting others, was a demonstration of the self-reflexive, self-critical ‘awareness’ of past ‘sins’ and inequalities. On the other hand, nation-state discourse visible in Croatia was written from the position of the ‘victim’, generalized on the national level and inscribed in a generalized geopolitical construct of the East. This nation-state discourse was predominant in Croatia in relation to this text and is a result of recent historical turbulences in a nationalist movement which resulted in state formation. Croatia has, since the 90ies, relied heavily on nationalistic sentiments which are still very strong. By the same token, the UK press was immersed in racial issues, as its multicultural state is burdened by problems of exclusion and inclusion based on race and ethnicity. This indicates that the meaning-making process is strongly related to the familiar, the area that feels the closest in the respective context.

This was also visible in the differences in defining the identity of Cohen’s character Borat who signified a ‘generalized Other’: several American and Canadian scholars thought of him as a Muslim while the British referred to him as a representative of a remote socialist country, similarly to the British journalists and critics. The Croatian journalists and critics drew parallels

between Kazakhstan and Croatia, with an implicit fear of being a target of the joke.

In opposition to the Croatian newspaper articles which did not really dwell on the ambiguity of the show, and with this the potential misreading, the UK articles engaged in the ‘cultural competence discourse’ in which fear was expressed about the possible repercussions of the show due to the fact that the audiences would not recognize the ‘real meaning’ – which implicitly delegates an essence and power to the text. The following questions arose: would the audience recognise the social commentary? Did they possess the cultural competence to read it as an ironic, satiric, parodic text, or would it perpetuate stereotypes about collectivities that were struggling to gain positive representation? From the analysis of the academic articles as well as the newspaper articles it was clear that the central concerns were linked to media effects – to the ways in which this text would influence the audiences, and to the possible consequences it might have for society as a whole. In its positive outcome, the text was viewed as generating a critical audience that could re-think the questions of ‘fixed’ identity and self-censorship and engage in a debate about these issues. The negative outcome was perceived as the possibility that the text would perpetuate stereotypes and further suppress the marginalized.

### The actual readers

The interviewees in Croatia and the UK were quite different in terms of socio-demographic variables; however, they all had a positive take on the text, which is what links them together as an interpretive community. The research on genre and comedy preferences showed that the majority preferred and appreciated those genres more which were seen to be of a higher quality in the genre hierarchy (documentary, drama, factorial program, movies) than those seen as being of ‘low quality’ (reality show, soap, chat shows...).

Comedy preferences explicated by the interpretive community in both Croatia and the UK clearly showed that edge comedy can be defined as a sub-genre of comedy. They showed a preference for texts that are provocative, satirical, sarcastic, which included black humour, dry humour etc. They also showed distaste for mainstream television comedy, such as romantic comedy, and family sitcoms with trivial or idealized circumstances. This indicated that, regardless of the supposed diminishing of the division between high versus low culture, there were clear hierarchies within what was traditionally considered to be a lowbrow area – such as

television as a medium (Bourdieu 1984). However, while these hierarchies of cultural products were recognized by the majority, the ones higher positioned within the in-group hierarchy expressed preferences for more omnivore tastes (in accordance with Peterson and Kern 1996) – both in relation to genre as well as types of comedy.

One interesting difference was related to the preferences in comedy explicated by the Croatian interpretive community. There were a considerably lower number of comedies that they referred to when stating their preferences. Some examples were quite different, but this also indicates the already mentioned textual scarcity in the Croatian imagined community. Due to the fact that texts such as *Da Ali G Show* or similar were not broadly available and consumed, the choices were reduced and resulted in more overlapping, and on the other hand an inclusion of texts that were perhaps of more diverse types.

Most of the interviewees claimed that in order for a comedy to be appreciated it needed to be provocative, original, familiar and realistic. Vulgarity and raw rudeness were seen as negative in both the UK and Croatian interpretive community, even though this was clearly gendered in Croatia: while the interviewees pointing this out as negative were females, the two male members occupying the lower position of the Croatian interpretive community clearly stated their preferences for this type of humour. This can be explained by the conservative values still dominant in Croatia where this type of jokes is considered more “appropriate” for males, but it is also connected to class position.

The depreciation of comedy as genre in the UK interpretive community was clearly connected to growth in popularity and its transformation from fringe, or what Hills refers to as ‘cult-status’, comedy to the mainstream. This was clearly visible in the way they talked about the Ali G character: it started in a fringe time slot in the *11 O’Clock Show* when it was highly appreciated as ‘alternative’. Its move from the alternative status towards a highly popular one was viewed as a step backward. While the popularization trend was not explicitly mentioned in the Croatian interpretive community, it was clear that popular and mainstream comedy nearly provoked disgust (Bourdieu 1984) which was visible in the contempt for Croatian comedy. This was a position commonly held by everyone, and it also indicated an alternative self-positioning of the Croatian interpretive community. Disliking the mainstream was also visible in that the Croatian interpretive community had a quite critical view of the general population: this came

up in the discussion of what is appropriate to joke about. The dominant view was that mainstream human kind is in general easily duped, narrow-minded and backward, which again confirmed the construction of an alternative status. The UK interpretive community, on the other hand, was more inclined to be critical towards people in power, which again pointed at an awareness of the political correctness debate. A group that seemed to be a particularly justifiable target was the politicians.

While the interpretive community that favoured ‘incorrect’ comedy was very diverse in terms of socio-demographics and structural position, they all sustained a similar position with regards to the limits of humour. Regardless of the fact that some of them argued for and some against the limits of humour, they had a similar view on which topics were not easily transformed into comic material. They also had a narrower list of themes that were seen as sensitive, compared to the one found in the secondary text (newspaper articles), which suggests a more liberal, relaxed take on life.

The arguments that accompanied the position according to which humour should be limitless appeared to be similar in both interpretive communities – one way of seeing it was as ‘only comedy’ – this was raised by the lowest positioned in the in-group hierarchy. It was also argued that the limitation of humour was problematic because it was unclear who should set it and where that limit should be set. In this view, everyone should be targeted without exception. Even if this implied offense on the part of the target, it did not follow that people should limit themselves or that they should be limited. Democracy as a political system that should enable the freedom of speech was raised in the Croatian interpretive community (as different from the previous system) while the unacceptability of state censorship was pointed out in the UK interpretive community. In the UK, it was claimed that limitless humour debunked certain topics that were sensitive which was seen as a positive thing, which was not raised in the Croatian interpretive community. Obviously, the need to engage in ‘debates’ and to talk openly about problems was a manifestation of the self-censoring normative to be politically correct.

The limit of what can be joked about was drawn at the level of individual insult, which is in accordance to Aristotle’s ancient postulate. This was viewed as more problematic than the stereotyping of groups (whatever their characteristics) or society in general. Similar to the extra-textual environment, it was also pointed out from both pools that the identity of the

speaker is crucial when it comes to comedy, because whether something is offensive or not can only be assessed within a context. This was closely related to the idea that making fun of oneself (whatever the identity base) was desirable, while scorning others, especially individuals or groups with less power than the speaker was perceived as problematic. However, the definition of powerless groups differed to a large extent. While the UK based interviewees frequently held racism (black), sexism (female), and to a lesser extent homophobia (gay/lesbian) in focus, the Croatian base did not refer to these groups as unacceptable targets of scorn. Only the member positioned highest in the in-group hierarchy engaged in a politically correct discourse but defined powerless groups differently: they were defined as people that were stigmatized and excluded from society (such as the mentally disabled, prostitutes, alcoholics etc). Other members of the Croatian interpretive community thought of the powerless in terms of victims of violence that were mainly linked to war or conflicts.

### Da Ali G Show

The television text had a different status in the respective imagined communities which was reflected in the discourses on the viewing practices of the interviewees. While it was a ‘must-see’ in the UK – especially among the young people, the Croatian context was quite different. The show was marginalized, not many people noticed it and not many people watched it, and it was perceived by those who did that it was not understood by the majority. This can, again, be connected to the textual scarcity in Croatia, in which the show represented something very different from other available texts. This enabled the interpretive community to inscribe themselves into an exclusive group that knew how to appreciate ‘good things’.

Fandom was accepted as a part of contemporary popular culture, and the interviewees did not seem to mind to inscribe themselves into this category. However, they were cautious about defining the level of engagement of their appreciation. In this respect they showed a visible attempt to distance themselves from demonstrating an overwhelmed emotional attachment. While fandom was mainly linked to the material aspects of fandom, especially to the primary product, there was also an attempt to distance themselves from worshipping the author, exemplified by the fact that seeking an autograph or seeing him/her in person was seen as silly. Obviously fandom did not imply forms of empowerment or creativity but simply appreciating the primary text. In the Croatian IC the empowerment stemmed more from the possibility to

construct an alternative group of likeminded people that ‘understood’ this type of humour seen as exclusive and different. In the UK interpretive community it was to conform to the majority of the young population.

The show was frequently referred to as having more layers and being a social critique. While the targets of Cohen’s critique were differently discursively constructed, the identification of this ‘layer’ of the text was visible by the majority of the interpretive communities in both Croatia and the UK. The way it was decoded with respect to its social commentary was diverse – hence, the lowbrow seemed not to be equipped with the knowledge that would enable them to situate the text in a wider context or create a more rich understanding of its function that went beyond laughter. At least the interviewees positioned on the lowest level within the in-group hierarchy did not manage to articulate such a position. In this respect, Bourdieu (1984) seems to still be accurate in pointing out the importance of class in consumption practices. Even though this text is a popular culture text accessible to a wide audience, and does not require any form of cultural capital (Bourdieu), cultural capital does come in handy when finding multiple pleasures in a text.

### The decoding of the show

The audience research showed that the broader social context was important in shaping the meaning that the show had for the readers. There was an obvious difference in the position the text itself had in these respective communities. This was most notable in the way the readers constructed themselves as audiences. The UK interpretive community constructed the audience in relation to socio-demographics, of which age was the most important one, followed by gender (more male) and class (mostly middle class). It was basically measured against their own position, and linked to the author (Cohen) and the way he was embedded in the social structure – as male, young, middle class, white. Since the show was very popular in the UK, it was almost obligatory to watch it, especially among the young people, as a way of being trendy. The Croatian interpretive community defined the audience as a small niche, a minority (which they too formed a part of), constructed through specific traits that were seen as the opposite of the Croatian mainstream: being urban, English speaking, modern, liberal, unconventional, open-minded, knowledgeable etc. This reflects the marginal position the text had in Croatia, viewed by a small niche that considered themselves to be alternative to the

Croatian mainstream.

The way the interviewees talked about the show revealed two totally different discourses within the respective cultural settings. The UK interpretive community engaged in a completely clear-cut politically correct discourse; in the Croatian interpretive community, a politically incorrect discourse was dominant. The majority of the Croatian interpretive community explicitly expressed negative attitudes towards gays, Americans, Jews, Croats, human kind in general, Blacks, Eastern Europeans etc. This was also reflected in their decoding of the show. In the UK interpretive community mechanisms were found in the process of meaning-making which enabled one to appreciate the show and still remain within a 'civilized' discourse. This 'window' was provided by the ambiguous communicative strategies. It was seen as exposing hidden prejudices towards marginalized groups, but also as being a welcome provocation in order to open up debates on the issues of identity and exclusion in Britain that seemed to be suppressed by the politically correct discourse. The mechanisms visible in the UK interpretive community were absent in the Croatian interpretive community, since there was no sense of a violation of the norm if one engaged in a politically incorrect discourse. The appeal of the text for the Croatian interpretive community seemed to lie in the already mentioned all-inclusive scolding that was in accordance with a somewhat cynical worldview of the Croatian interpretive community. However, it was also due to its subversion of the superior image of the West which showed that the supposedly inclusive, civilized, politically correct conduct of the West was fallacious.

Neale and Krutnik's (in Neale 2000) argument that the social significance of comedy is not universal and that it has to be analysed attached to the local level is important because the (potential) subversion of political correctness and the initiation of a debate can be defined as affirmative in societies in which political correctness signifies a problem, because of a collective suppression of open debate. However, in the societies in which this has not (yet) happened – in which there is no self-censorship linked to offensive language – the text can obviously not generate the same meaning and serve the same function. It cannot subvert something that has not yet been mainstreamed, something that – although brought into a discursive existence – has not been internalized. For the Croatian interpretive community the text was more empowering in its subversion of narrow-mindedness as opposed to open-mindedness, and was more important in sustaining an idea of belonging to a 'progressive

minority'. This was visible in the way the interpretive community discursively formed the audience of the show – something that was, as already mentioned, heavily guided by the position the television show had in each country – while it was very popular in the UK, it was a marginal text in Croatia.

Finally, framed within media theory, the findings suggest that the meaning-making process is shaped by the social context. The way a text is interpreted is always in relation to the broader systems of signification. External agencies, such as dominant ideologies, institutions and values that circulate in the discursive environment guide the way a text is read. These external agencies determine both the way a text is encoded as well as decoded. Together, the interconnectedness of these parameters is what shapes the way texts are read. This is what limits the possible decodings within a specific historical context, and it is also what enables one to draw conclusions about the modes of decoding that are contextually not legitimate.

This research also shows that the text is frequently viewed as powerful. It is seen as a repository of meaning, reflected in the frequently expressed fear that the text will be 'misread' by the audiences. It is also reflected in the discussions which imply that the text influences the audience – regardless whether it does so in a positive or negative manner. The identity of the author and his intention as viewed by the reader is quite important – at least when comedy and humour are concerned – since it guides the process of decoding and evaluating the comedy. However, this might be specific to comedy and more generally to humour – especially if it balances on the border of what is considered to be a socially acceptable utterance. Last but not least, the constraints caused by structural positions are still visible in the consumption practices and meaning-making, as has been exemplified in several cases throughout the text. All this indicates that the old paradigm might not have been exhausted yet in the assessment of the complex relationship between the text, audiences and context.



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## Appendix A: Questionnaire

I would be grateful if you would answer the questions on this form. This questionnaire is related to the PhD dissertation that I am conducting about the television comedy Da Ali G Show. The data will be used *only* for the purpose of this research, and your identity will remain anonymous. Feel free to skip any question that you don't want to answer.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Helena Popović

University of Ljubljana

Please fill in with block capitals.

Name or nickname \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Please name some other television comedies that you like:

Please name a television comedy that you specifically dislike:

What kind of television genre do you prefer to watch?

Name a television genre you would never watch:

Age

Gender: M            F

You are:

A) Working full-time (including self-employment)

B) Working part-time

C) Unemployed, looking for work

D) In school

E) Retired

D) Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

If you have a job, what is your occupation?

How many persons live in your household?

What is your total (shared) household income per month?

Do you own or rent your home?

How many years of formal schooling have you completed? NO: \_\_\_\_\_

Education of mother:

- a) Primary
- b) Secondary
- c) Sixth form College
- d) Bachelor's Degree
- e) Master's Degree
- f) PhD

Education of father:

- a) Primary
- b) Secondary
- c) Sixth form College
- d) Bachelor's Degree
- e) Master's Degree
- f) PhD

What is your religious preference?

None

Protestant

Catholic

Eastern Orthodox

Muslim

Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

THANK YOU

## **Appendix B: Interview questions**

How did you use to watch it?

The context of watching - with whom; alone, with friends?

What do you find amusing in this television comedy?

What character do you find most amusing? Why?

Are there some things you don't like about it?

Are these types of television comedies good or bad in any way? (If so, why and for whom?)

What do you think is the aim of this comedy? What does it want to do?

What do you think about the controversies it raises?

Are there topics that cannot be joked about? If so, can you give an example?

Who do you think watch this type of television comedies?

Would you say you are a fan? (yes or no - why?)

What does fandom mean for you?

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## **Povzetek**

Namen raziskave je raziskati družbeni sprejem spornih oddaj televizijske komedije v primerjalni perspektivi med Hrvaško in Veliko Britanijo. Raziskava odnosa besedilo-občinstvo je uokvirjena znotraj teorije medijev, ki se je preselila iz "stare" v "novo" paradigmo ter vključuje različne vizije moči besedila in občinstva, kakor tudi različne vizije o tem kako raziskovati to področje. Domneva, da kulturni izdelek nikoli ne stoji sam, ampak se nanaša na prejšnja besedila in se množi v zunaj besedilno okolje, pomeni da se proces ustvarjanja pomena nahaja le v bolj zapletenimi povezavami med besedili, občinstvi ter v kontekstu kodiranja in dekodiranja (Hall). V skladu z domnevo recepcijske teorije, da je razlaga in pogajanje o pomenu vedno družbeno, sem poskušala določiti, kako je pomen proizveden in kakšni zemljevidi pomena se pojavljajo v zvezi s komedijo z vsemi njenimi generičnimi posebnostmi.

Družbeni kontekst, v katerem so omenjeni zemljevidi pomena nastali, je pomemben, ker pospešuje nekaj interpretativnih repertoarjev ter zavrača druge in s tem pokaže, katere vrste idej prevladujejo v določenem družbeno-kulturnem kontekstu. Na ta način je namen raziskave raziskati sprejem televizijske komedije postavljene v okvir med "staro" in "novo" paradigmo, da bi razumeli, kako se razvijajo procesi ustvarjanja pomena. Čeprav besedilo zagotavlja namige za njegovo branje, je ustvarjanje pomena družbeno določeno v širšem družbeno-kulturnem okolju in določa kontekste, ki napeljujejo k pomenu besedila za občinstvo. Poleg tega, čeprav je "nova" paradigma na novo osvetlila odnos besedilom-občinstvom, "stara" paradigma še ni povsem izčrpana pri presoji odnosa med besedilom in občinstvom. To bo ponazorjeno s primerom televizijske komedije *Da Ali G Show* in njenega sprejema v dveh različnih družbeno-kulturnih kontekstih – Veliki Britaniji in Hrvaški.

## **Teoretični okvir odnosa besedila in občinstva**

Raziskava o odnosu besedila in občinstva znotraj medijskih in kulturnih študijev je bila v veliki meri razvita s Stuart Hallovim modelom kodiranja in dekodiranja, ki se pojavlja kot kritika do takrat prevladujočega linearnega modela komunikacije. Hall je ponudil bolj zapleten pogled na komunikacijski proces, katerega obravnava kot kompleksno strukturo odnosov, v katerem "sporočilo strukturiranega prevladujočega položaja" ni nujno rezultat uniformiranega dekodiranja, ki naj bi bil v skladu z ponujenim pomenom enkoderja. Novost je, da je bila s tem

dovoljena bolj zapletena perspektiva strategij dekodiranja, ki so določene s pozicijami v družbeni strukturi, kakor tudi z družbenimi diskurzi. Ta je bila uporabljena tako za popularno fikcijo (Lewis, 1992), pa tudi za dejanske žanre (Morley, 1980), in predstavlja preobrat v načinu teoretiziranja in raziskovanja medijskih občinstev v odnosu z besedilom. Vendar pa so ta poudarek na pomenu, ki je v odnosu z ideologijo in odporom podrejenih skupin, kmalu nadomestila vprašanja užitka in karnevala, ki so prispevala k skupni ideji o občinstvu kot heterogeni interpretativni skupnosti z aktivnim potencialom uporniškega položaja v razmerju do popularnih besedil.

Premik k vprašanju družbene spremembe ali področja političnega v smeri užitka je bilo tako hvaljeno kot korak naprej pri uresničevanju drugih razsežnosti popularnih besedil, ki so bistvenega pomena za razlago njihove narave, vendar pa je bil ta premik tudi zavržen kot umik iz emancipatorične dimenzije, ki naj bi bila najpomembnejša razsežnost pri raziskovanju tega področja. Čeprav ni soglasja o tem, kako raziskovati to kompleksno področje, razvoj raziskovanja odnosa besedila in občinstva v zadnjih dveh desetletjih nakazuje nekaj pomembnih sprememb perspektive, in lahko pritrdimo, da je prišlo do premika od "stare" k "novi" paradigmi.

Poenostavljeno povedano, prve spremembe so tako publiko zasnovale v smislu moči, ki jim je pripisana v procesu dekodiranja. Namesto percepcije občinstva, ki je omejeno z strukturno pozicijo (predvsem razredno), se je na občinstvo začelo gledati kot na močno in aktivno – sposobno, da ogrozi namene kodiranja (Fiske, 1987; Ang, 1985, Joke Hermes, 2005). Ta prehod od zamisli, da je občinstvo omejeno z strukturo, k ideji aktivnega občinstva zmožnega subverzije in upora, je tesno povezan z konceptom "kulturnih kompetenc" (Bourdieu, 1984). Kulturna pristojnost "stare paradigme" se nanaša na tip znanja prenesenega po šolskem sistemu in akademiji (Bourdieu, 1984), medtem ko se nove perspektive kulturnih kompetenc – znotraj katerih je besedilo "brez tutorja" (Bennett, 2007) – nanašajo na usposobljenosti, ki niso vezane na formalno, institucionalno znanje, ampak za vse vrste pridobljenega znanja doživetega z življenjsko izkušnjo različnih skupin.

Druga sprememba v študiji odnosa besedilo-občinstvo vključuje "kraj", kjer prebivajo pomeni. V zvezi s tem je prišlo do premika od raziskovanja besedila kot odlagališča pomena, brez sklicevanja na občinstvo, kar pomeni, da besedilo ima objektivno bistvo, v smeri perspektive,

ki se osredotoča na samo občinstvo, in trdi, da besedilo ne obstaja zunaj razlage bralcev. Ta premik pomeni tudi premik od pomena avtorjevega superiornega branja na tisto kar je pomembno za dekodirja. To pomeni tudi, da načini dekodiranja niso omejeni – kot je zahtevano v "stari" paradigmi, vendar neskončni kot trdi "nova" paradigma.

Medtem ko bodo zgoraj navedene uganke preizkušene brez apriorno eksplicitnih pozicij glede "stare" in "nove" paradigme, bomo sprejeli dve pomembni spremembi v raziskovanju odnosa besedila in občinstva in jih v tej študiji uporabili kot izhodišči. Ena je potreba po raziskovanju konteksta – bolj zapletena mreža, v kateri besedilo sebe reproducira, saj je kontekst v katerem se kodiranje in dekodiranje (Hall) dogaja pomembno pri določitvi pomena. To pomeni, da besedilo nikoli ne stoji samo, vendar se potaplja v zapletena razmerja bralnih odnosov in ga ni mogoče obravnavati zunaj mreže besedil, v katero so potopljene avtor, inštitucije, industrije in občinstva. Couldry (2000) trdi, da je besedilo še vedno pomembno, vendar je potrebno njegovo analizo dopolniti z analizo širšega tekstovnega okolja. Tako pri raziskovanju besedila in občinstva ni več dovolj raziskovati besedilo kot zaprto enoto in občinstvo kot njegove tolmače, ampak je potrebno tudi vključiti raziskovanje tekstualnih dogodkov (Couldry, 2000, Klinger, 1994). Couldry predlaga, da raziskovanje tekstualnih dogodkov mora vključevati več ravni raziskave: posamezno besedilo in njegove značilnosti (žanr, zapleti, liki ...), industrije strategij in diskurzov o besedilu, ki so v obtoku, ter način, kako je besedilo prebrano s strani dejanskih bralcev.

Druga sprememba se nanaša na način, kako je zasnovano občinstvo. Pri razvoju teorije medijev je bilo občinstvo konceptualizirano na različne načine, kot mase (razredi), skupine, tržne niše, glede na sociodemografske spremenljivke, itn. Občinstvo je bilo videno kot objektivna formacija, ki jo je mogoče oceniti na podlagi empiričnih raziskav, kar je bilo znotraj "nove paradigme" zavrnjeno kot konstrukt ustvarjen s strani akademikov, industrije in drugih zainteresiranih strani. V takšnem raziskovalnem pristopu, ki spremlja Morleyev argument (1997), so občinstva obravnavana zunaj obstoječih diskurzov, vendar so lahko spoznana le skozi diskurze. Tako je bil dan poudarek na načinu, kako občinstva diskurzivno gradijo svoje sodelovanje z besedilom. Diskurz je opredeljen kot telo "jezikovne rabe/oblike družbene prakse", ki povzema hierarhije moči s pomočjo jezika in prispeva k gradnji družbenih identitet, družbenih odnosov, sistemov znanja in prepričanja ter subjektivnih pozicij (Fairclough, 1995),

drugače kot "izjava", ki je uporabljena v tej študiji, in kaže na takojšnje govorno dejanje, ki se lahko poveže z ravno posameznika in se omeji na čas in prostor.

Druga sprememba načina konceptualizacije občinstev pomeni prelom z uporabo tradicionalnih načinov na katere so občinstva bila zgrajena, v smislu družbeno demografskih ali razrednih odnosov, ter premik v smeri konceptualizacije občinstva v skladu s tem kar občinstva počnejo (Fiske, 1994). V tej raziskovalni tradiciji so občinstva koncipirana kot interpretativne skupnosti, ki so v skladu z tezama Stanley Fisha (1980), opredeljene kot skupnosti katerih interpretativne prakse so usmerjene s skupnimi kulturnimi kodi. Fish poudarja, da je proces ustvarjanja pomena predvsem družbeno dejanje, v katerem je interpretacija nenehno pogajanje. Tako so interpretativne skupnosti v tej študiji opredeljene v skladu z njihovim skupnim odnosom do besedila (raziskovanje navijačev in občudovalcev je en primer konceptualizacije občinstva kot skupnosti s skupnim odnosom do besedila).

### **Razmejevanje konteksta**

Za oceno "skupnega kulturnega koda" interpretativne skupnosti sem raziskavo postavila na dva okolja, Veliko Britanijo in Hrvaško, z namenom omejitve družbeno-kulturnega konteksta. V tem smislu se mi zdi Benedict Andersonova (1983) vizija naroda kot "zamišljene skupnosti" uporabna, saj gre za konceptualizacijo naroda kot družbenega konstrukta v katerem člani skupnosti "zamišljajo" pripadnost skupnosti. Gre za misel enotnega polja komunikacije, standardiziranega jezika, ki predstavlja jezik avtoritete, ter za smisel skupno izkušenega družbenega sveta. To razumevanje skupnosti je bilo razjedeno zaradi medijsko-tehnoloških sprememb, ki omogočajo "globalni kulturni tok" (Appadurai) in drugih globalizacijskih povezovalcev, ki so zmanjšali vlogo nacionalne države, medtem ko so nad-državne in pod-nacionalne formacije pridobile več pozornosti. Tudi če je ta erozija sprožila razprave o smiselnosti, da se narod in njegove politične organizacije, država, kot skupnosti postavijo v osrčje raziskave, je tem dan ustrezen status zaradi specifičnosti besedila, katerega obravnavam v tej raziskavi – gre za komedijo in humor. Smešne zgodbe, šale o drugih narodnosti (običajno gre za sosedne "druge"; Irci za Britance, Norvežani za Švede, Bosanci za Hrvate, Srbe, Slovence, itn.) so pogoste reference za opredeljevanje nas samih v odnosu do drugih in za ustvarjanje občutka identitete. Jezik je pomemben za razumevanje subtilnih razlik v humorju. Poleg tega so teme zasmehovanja, satire, šale in podobne pogosto povezane z javnimi osebami,

z nacionalno politiko in drugimi vprašanji javnega interesa, ki zahtevajo "notranje" informacije, da bi bile razumljene, kaj šele cenjene kot uspešne šale.

Dve "zamišljeni skupnosti", na kateri sem se osredotočila, sta Hrvaška in Velika Britanija, dve evropski državi, ki sta si zelo raznoliki glede na zgodovino, družbene in politične organizacije, gospodarsko moč in strukturni položaj v svetu: Velika Britanija je del Zahoda in Hrvaška je del Vzhoda. Delitev sveta v smislu razmerij moči v svetovnem merilu je bila poudarjena v številnih teorijah z različnimi pristopi, od ekonomske teorije svetovnega sistema Immanuela Wallersteina o medsebojno povezanimi centrom (Zahod), pol-periferijo (med drugimi tudi države Vzhodne Evrope) in obrobjem ali periferijo; kulturološkega pristopa Edwarda Saida o razmerju moči med Zahodom in Orientom; kulturološko izključujoče Huntingtonove teorije o "spopadu civilizacij", ki temelji na kulturnih posebnostih, predvsem na veri ([1993] 1997); do sociološkega pristopa Norberta Eliasa o civilizacijskem procesu s katerim Zahod "civilizira" druge dele sveta, čeprav so kolonizacijski procesi in razvoj samozavedanja o zahodnjaški prevladi v navezavi z vedenjem, znanostjo in umetnostjo. Čeprav se svetovni red in razmerja moči spreminjajo v zadnjih nekaj desetletjih, Zahod (pri tem so v ospredju Zahodna Evropa in ZDA) še vedno odreja prevladujoče diskurze o tem, kaj je "civilizirano" in kaj ne. Skupni imenovalci, ki ohranjajo pojem skupne civilizacije na Zahodu kot široke kulturne formacije, normativno vključujejo demokracijo kot politični sistem, liberalno tržno gospodarstvo, zavezo glede človekovih pravic, večkulturnost, svobodo govora, definicije deviacij in kriminala, itn. Seveda to pomeni, da se iščejo skupne točke, medtem ko se ignorirajo velike razlike, ki so prisotne znotraj te kulturne formacije, vendar je to koristno, saj začrtuje razmerja moči med Zahodom (britanske oblike tega) in Vzhodom (hrvaške oblike tega). Ne da bi se širil je Vzhod zožen na nekdanji vzhodni blok ali na območje, ki je izvajalo socializem kot politični sistem v času hladne vojne. Čeprav je politični sistem uradno propadel leta 1989 in je velik del vzhodnega bloka prevzel vrednote Zahoda, kar ima svoj konkretni izraz v integracijskih procesih Evropske unije, ta še vedno služi kot platforma za razlikovanje med Vzhodom, ki "sledi" in Zahodom, ki "vodi".

Nekatere razlike med Vzhodom in Zahodom, pomembne za to študijo, saj povzemajo kontekst znotraj katerega so kulturna besedila kodirana in dekodirana, so tiste na Zahodu, ki zajemajo dolgo tradicijo svobode govora, kar pomeni, da država ne bi smela sodelovati v kakršni koli obliki cenzure. V tem smislu je vloga države manjša pri zahodnih demokracijah, ne samo zaradi

preteklosti hladne vojne, v katerih je strah pred etatizmom (prisotnem v vzhodnem bloku) bil nenehen, ampak tudi zaradi prevlade ideologije prostega trga, kjer se omejitve individualnih iniciativ obsoja, še posebej če gre za nadzor države. Namesto "zunanjih" sil, ki določajo naša dejanja, je pozitiven poudarek na samoregulaciji in samo-refleksivnih ukrepih, ki ležijo v jedru individualizma. Ena med pomembnimi oblikami samocenzure se je pojavila z razpravo o politični korektnosti, ki se je izkazala kot posledica gibanj Nove leve v šestdesetih letih. Gre za obdobje v katerem so politike identitet, enakopravnosti in multikulturalizma zajele Zahod, procese v katerih so prej nemočne in marginalizirane skupine postavile zahteve za svoje pravice in zahtevale priznanje kot ustrezni družbeni akterji. V temelju te ideje je bil poskus, da se izpostavijo globoke neenakosti in močne hierarhije na Zahodu, vgrajene v jezik. S priznavanjem teh neenakosti in poskusom, da se jih spremeni, je bilo potrebno spremeniti konceptualna orodja, ki so bila do tedaj v rabi. Politična korektnost ali "vključujoči jezik" je še danes eden izmed pomembnih civilizacijskih elementov (Elias) na Zahodu danes.

Za razliko od zgoraj omenjenega imajo post-socialistične države tradicijo državne ureditve, v kateri so bile oblike cenzure legitimne, nekaj kar je v sodobnih družbah pomešano z novimi vrednotami liberalne demokracije in svobodnega trga. To ima za posledico pogosto zmedo o tem kaj je sprejemljivo in zaželeno in kaj ne, še zlasti če izhaja iz političnega sistema. Tipično za Hrvaško v devetdesetih letih, v obdobju prehoda iz cenzure in avtoritarnega režima v smeri političnega pluralizma, so bili javno izražanje sovraštva in skrajni nacionalizem tolerirani in pogosto legitimirani s "svobodo govora", argumentom, ki je bistvenega pomena za liberalno demokracijo. Vendar je bila ta pravica zagotovljena le če je bila izjava v harmoniji s politično ideologijo režima. Po drugi strani je v neki meri v sodobni Hrvaški še vedno mogoče zaslediti odvisnost povezano s cenzuro v nekdanji Jugoslaviji, katere pravna interpretacija je v členu 133. uvrščena pod pojmom "verbalnega delikta" (gre za obdobje, v katerem kritična misel ni bila dobro sprejeta). To je še posebej vidno na področju politike, kjer kritika establišmenta ali močnih družbenih skupin v "resni" ali satirični obliki, še lahko ima morebitne posledice, čeprav pravni okvir zagotavlja široke svoboščine.

### **Raziskovati komedijo**

Razlike in neenakosti v smislu moči, razmerja med temi velikimi kulturnimi formacijami (Zahod, Vzhod) in nacionalnimi državami, ki so njihov sestavni del (Velika Britanija, Hrvaška)

so pomembne, saj začrtajo okvir znotraj katerega je medijsko besedilo, na katerega se osredotočamo, kodirano in dekodirano (v Hallovi terminologiji). Tekst, ki je v središču pozornosti tega raziskovanja, izvira iz Velike Britanije, in je znan po zelo značilni vrsti humorja, vključujoč satiro, črno komedijo, itn. To je razvidno skozi široko priljubljenost britanskih komedij, ki se izvažajo na svetovni ravni (Monty Python, Benny Hill, Only fools and horses, Mr. Bean, Blackadder, New Statesman, Absolutely Fabulous, če naštejemo le nekatere) in so bili uvoženi tudi na Hrvaško. Osnova teh televizijskih programov je bodisi na uvozu ali na lastni produkciji, vendar domači proizvodi niso široko izvoženi (razen nekaj tekstov »izvoženih« znotraj regije).

Uspeh komedije kot žanra je težko predvideti, saj je precej zapleten. Naš jezik in konceptualna organizacija, kakor tudi kontekst, v katerem se pojavljata in na katerega se sklicujeta, bogatijo naše razumevanje besedila. Lokalno proizvedeni programi so na splošno, ne glede na žanr, verjetno bolj priljubljeni, čeprav se posebne zvrsti s temami, kot so nasilje in kriminal ali pornografija, bolj uspešno primejo v drugih kulturah. Komedija je za razliko od njih posebnost, saj je "proizvedena iz snovi prevladujočih kulturnih predpostavk in vsakdanjosti" (Stott, 2005:8) in se opira na implicitno razumevanje kulturnih kodov. Zato je bolj verjetno, da bo uspešna, če se proizvaja lokalno. Vendar pa "uspeh" ne pomeni nujno smeh in zabavo (to je veliko bolj zapleteno), ampak pomeni, da so komunikacijski kodi poznani in da je razumljiv namen šale. Zanimiva so tudi besedila, ki prestopajo lokalne kraje in uspešno migrirajo na globalni ravni, saj so uspela povezati izkušnjo različnih družbenih skupin iz zelo različnih kulturnih okolij, čeprav sta njihov sprejem in prilastitev na lokalni ravni lahko od primera do primera različna.

Pri tej študiji nas še posebej zanima televizijska komedija kot žanr. Kot pri vseh vrstah tekstov, komedija sproža interese določene vrste občinstva in je, glede na njene značilnosti, uvrščena znotraj hierarhije okusov v okviru kulturne potrošnje (Bourdieu, 1984; Peterson in Kern, 1996; DiMaggio, 1987). Glede na splošno dostopne in amortizirane oblike medijskih produktov in obrazcev, ki so zavrženi v družbi (kot so gnus za vulgarno, čustveno, izrazno, itn.), lahko sklepamo na to, katere forme oblikujejo legitimen okus v določenem kontekstu. Kot žanr je komedija iz tradicionalne, elitistične perspektive opredeljena kot vulgarna in plitka. Vendar pa je, kot je že omenjeno, žanr komedije zelo raznolik: vključuje različne oblike, ki predstavljajo različne vrste humorja. Z klasifikacijo komedije (ali v širšem smislu vrste humorja) in



izražanjem zadovoljstva ali odklona do specifične komedije/humorja, oseba komunicira svoj družbeni položaj.

Zanima me poseben tip komedije, ki je kritično angažiran. Kot sem to razvozlala, gre za poskus "resne" izjave, ki koristi obliko ki je ponavadi navedena kot trivialna, banalna ali eskapistična in/ali smešna, saj se nahaja na področju zabave, ki naj bi začasno odvezla, ali v najboljšem primeru zmanjšala, možnost obvladovanja "resnih" tem. Podzvrst televizijskih komedij, ki jih uporabljam v študiji, so robne komedije, ki uporabljajo surov črni humor, nimajo običajnih vrednot, strmoglavljajo avtoriteto, uporabljajo "slab okus", so proti moralnemu varovanju, ki opredeljuje "zdravje" družbe in so "politično nekorektne". Prav tako so satirične kar pomeni, da izražajo družbeni komentar. Vendar imajo jasno izraženo dvoumnost, saj angažirajo ironijo in parodijo kot komunikativni strategiji,. V smislu razreda so proti establišmentu in ciljajo na elite, ampak tudi ciljajo na družbo kot celoto: *mainstream*, establišment in družbeno sprejete norme in vrednote, ki so dogovorjene, pogosto kot samoumevne in nesporne. Za ta besedila ni mogoče trditi, da so politična v ožjem smislu, jih opredeliti kot konzervativna ali liberalna, saj nastajajo nad temi razpokami. Namesto tega se lotevajo temeljnih predpostavk in norm, globoko "temeljnih" dogmatskih prepričanj in tabujev v družbi, tem kot so religija, rasa, vojna, politične inštitucije, telesne funkcije/motnje, seks, deviantno vedenje... Ker provocirajo, so na meji sprejemljivega in nesprejemljivega, s čem se začnjenja razprava o njihovi primernosti. Razprava se razvija okoli stare mitične delitve na dobre ali slabe: trditev zagovornikov je, da one odpirajo razpravo in sprožajo vprašanja, o katerih drugače ne bi bilo govora, a je o njih potrebno razpravljati, medtem ko nasprotniki trdijo, da je to žaljivo in se norčuje iz zadev, ki so pomembne in ne smejo biti izpostavljene preziru. Temu ponavadi sledijo obtožbe, da so sadistične, nesmiselne, infantilne in neokusne, da spodbujajo sovraštvo, nasilje, krutosti in asocialno vedenje. Ta razdelitev v vrednotenju te vrste tekstov prispeva k njihovemu spornemu statusu, še dodatno okrepljenem s komunikativnimi strategijami, kar jih naredi dvoumne in še dodatno otežuje proces izdelovanja pomena.

Svoj sporni status besedilo, ki me zanima v tej raziskavi, dolguje "politično nekorektnemu jeziku", ki je pomemben element zahodne civilizacije danes in je rezultat samo-refleksivnega diskurza, ki je nastal znotraj Zahoda – politična korektnost. To spominja na koncept "civiliziranosti", na nov način in v novem kontekstu. Biti "politično korekten" je v sodobnih družbah pomembna lastnost, pomeni "biti civiliziran", čeprav je izraz redko sporen in zato tako

pogosto uporabljen. Lahko bi rekli, da je "politična korektnost" trajna razsežnost vsake družbe, če je le-ta opredeljena do tabujev, ki naj ne bi bili izraženi, ali kot pozicije/svetovni nazori, ki so kaznovani s strani politične oblasti in pravno preganjani (kot nacionalsocializam v Nemčiji po II. svetovni vojni, ali kritike režima v nekdanjih socialističnih držav). Vendar pa menim, da je politična korektnost nov pojav, posebna oblika samocenzure do katere je prišlo z pritiskom, ki ga je razvila zgornja plast zahodnih družb. To je oblika samorefleksivne kritike, ki je uvedla občutljivost v jeziku, še posebej povezano z manj močnimi, podrejenimi skupinami, med katerima so nekatere bile ustanovljene kot oblike novih kolektivnosti v šestdesetih in sedemdesetih letih. Zaradi dejstva, da robna komedija napada to dimenzijo – "biti civiliziran" – se poraja polemika. To povzroča nezadovoljstvo v delu občinstva, medtem ko drugi odobravajo njen obstoj.

### **Metodologija**

Izhajajoč iz predpostavke, da kulturni proizvod nikoli ne stoji sam, ampak da se sklicuje na prejšnja besedila in se množi v zunaj besedilno okolje, sem se, kot je navedeno v naslovu moje disertacije, odločila strukturirati preučevanje socialnega sprejema tega dvoumnega, kontroverznega teksta v treh med seboj povezanih delih: tekst/žanr, zunaj besedilno okolje (vključno z akademskimi in časopisnimi članki) in raziskovanje interpretativnih skupnosti, ki jim je vseč ta vrsta besedila.

Raziskava se osredotoča na robno komedijo in recepcijo v dveh različnih socialnih kontekstih – Veliko Britanijo in Hrvaško, znotraj teorije medijev, ki se ukvarja z relacijo besedilo-občinstvo. Vključuje tri med seboj povezane dele, ki tvorijo "tekstualni dogodek" kot to opredeljuje Couldry (2000): raziskovanje določenega besedila, diskurze, ki krožijo okoli besedila v zunaj besedilnemu okolju, in dejanske bralce (Couldry, 2000: 83-87).

1. BESEDILO – To vključuje mojo analizo *Da Ali G Showa*, ki je izbrani primer televizijske komedije in reprezentira robno komedijo kot podzvrst. V tem delu sem predstavila svoje branje besedila, in sem se osredotočila na šaljive teme in načine, kako le-te odražajo sodobno kulturo, na strategije v besedilu, ki ustvarjajo dvoumnost in na kulturne kompetence, ki so morebitno potrebne v procesu dekodiranja.

2. ZUNAJ BESEDILNOST – Analiza zunaj besedilnega okolja se je zožila na akademske in časopisne članke. Ta del je namenjen iskanju diskurzov, ki krožijo v navezavi z besedilom in načinov, kako so le-ti bili dekodirani s strani medijskih znanstvenikov in novinarjev/kritikov. Poudarek je na diskurzivnih strategijah, ki jih najdemo v tem kar Fiske imenuje "sekundarna besedila", Couldry se sklicuje nanje z "zunaj-tekstualnostjo", in Hills govori o "med-besedilih" – v vseh primerih gre za imenovanja tekstov, ki spodbujajo kroženja izbranih pomenov primarnega besedila. Sekundarno besedilo vključuje strokovne članke, ki se ukvarjajo s to posebno komedijo, napisane v angleščini in na voljo bodisi v *British Film Institute* ali na spletu. Vključeni so tudi britanski in hrvaški časopisni članki, povezani s to posebno komedijo in avtorjem (Da Ali G Show, Sasha Baron Cohen). Analizirala sem 49 člankov, objavljenih v britanskih dnevnikih: *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph* in *Sunday Telegraph*, *The Observer*, *The Guardian*, *The Evening Standard*, *The Independent*. Obdobje analize vključuje članke objavljene v Veliki Britaniji od 1999 (2), 2000 (16), 2001 (1), 2002 (16), 2004 (2), 2005 (2), 2006 (6), 2007 (4). Obdelani so bili naslednji hrvaški dnevniki: *Jutarnji list* (30), *Novi list* (8), *Vjesnik* (13), *Slobodna Dalmacija* (3), *Večernji list* (1). Oddaja je predvajana na Hrvaškem v letih 2003, 2004 in 2006, in tako se je obdobje analize začelo z letom 2002 – ko se je pojavil prvi članek (2 članka), 2003 (3 članka), 2005 (5 člankov), 2006 (33 članka), 2007 (12 člankov).

3. OBČINSTVO – Zasnovano kot interpretativna skupnost, ki temelji na njenem skupnem pozitivnem odnosu do tega kulturnega izdelka. Tako zasnovana raziskava je vključevala osebe, ki so gledale omenjeno televizijsko komedijo, in katerih interpretativni repertoar obsega pozitiven odnos do nje in do vrste humorja, katerega oddaja promovira.

Izvedla sem 18 polstrukturiranih intervjujev: 9 v Londonu, Velika Britanija in 9 v Zagrebu, Hrvaška, z intervjuvanci izbranimi s pomočjo metode *snow-balla*. Pred anketiranjem so intervjuvanci izpolnili vprašalnik. Namen vprašalnika je bil zbrati sociodemografske podatke z namenom ocene njihovega razrednega položaja ter da bi čim več izvedeli o njihovih preferencah in odporih glede televizijske komedije in televizijskih žanrov. Intervju, ki je sledil in je trajal približno 30 minut, je vključeval tri širša interesna področja, povezana s televizijsko komedijo:

1. njihov odnos do komedije kot žanra zasnovanega znotraj hierarhije okusa (Bourdieu) in omejitve glede humorja

2. ustvarjanje pomena konkretnega besedila (Da Ali G Show)

3. prakse gledanja in občudovanja konkretnega besedila (Da Ali G Show)

Zunaj besedilno okolje, ki je vključevalo strokovne in časopisne članke ter dejanske bralce, ki podpirajo izbrano komedijo in so zasnovani kot interpretativna skupnost, je bilo določeno v primerjalni perspektivi. Ta primerjava je namenjena pojasnjevanju podobnosti in razlik v smislu procesa odločanja, do katerega je prišlo v kontekstu Hrvaške in Velike Britanije, ter je povezana s "starim" in "novim" paradigmi v teoriji medijev.

## **Prispevek**

Procesi ustvarjanja pomena so vedno bolj zapleteni kot je to mogoče zajeti v kakršni koli konceptualni in teoretični konstrukciji. Vendar pa bo ekstrakcija ene dimenzije in njena analiza zagotovo prispevala k razumevanju razvoja teh procesov. Študija je namenjena analizi družbene recepcije televizijske komedije, ki poskuša biti ne samo zabava in je izzivalna v smislu preseganja meja tistega, kar se lahko pove v sodobni družbi. Posebna pozornost je namenjena načinom dekodiranja posameznih dvoumnih besedil, na katere sem se odločila osredotočiti (Da Ali G Show), in diskurzov, ki obsegajo njen pojav in odsevajo njen sporni status. Načini dekodiranja in diskurzi, ki so ustvarjeni, se nahajajo v zunaj besedilnemu okolju in oblikujejo interpretativno skupnost glede na njihove pozitivne ocene te vrste kulturnih besedil. Upam, da bom z raziskavo natančno določila pomen procesov odločanja znotraj kompleksnega tekstualnega okvira, občinstva in konteksta, in s tem ponudila izvorni prispevek k teoriji medijev in medijskih raziskav, še posebej glede sporov med "starimi" in "novimi" paradigmi v zvezi z raziskavo odnosa besedilo-občinstvo. Poleg tega upam, da bom prispevala k razumevanju zelo kompleksne narave komedije, ki ni bila, zaradi njene zahtevnosti, dovolj raziskana.

## **Besedilo**

Moje izhodišče je besedilo kot tako. Odločila sem se za raziskavo televizijske komedije *Da Ali G Show*, katero sem brala kot družbeno kritiko, ki cilja na nekaj drugega kot da izzove zgolj smeh. Izbor oddaje je narejen glede na globalen uspeh, vključno z nastalo kontroverzo zaradi njegovega "politično nekorektnega" humorja. Ni treba posebej poudarjati, da s tem ni izčrpan

seznam možnih predstavnikov robne komedije; vendar ni veliko televizijskih tekstov, ki so predvajani na Hrvaškem, ki bi spadali v to kategorijo. *Da Ali G Show*, ustvarjen s strani Sasha Baron Cohena, je televizijska komedija, ki izvira iz Velike Britanije. Oddaja je razvita iz *The 11 o'clock show*, ki je predvajan leta 1999, kje se karakter Ali G-a pojavlja kot dodatni član. *Da Ali G Show* je bil prvič predvajan na *Channel Four* leta 2000 v Veliki Britaniji in na Hrvaškem leta 2003 (Nova Tv). V *Da Ali G Show*-ju, Cohen pooseblja tri izmišljene like, ki predstavljajo podrejene identitete: homoseksualno (Bruno), rasno črno, nižje razredno, subkulturno (Ali G), generalizirani vzhod (Borat). Vsi trije liki so sleparski novinarji, ki bodisi vabijo gostje v studio, ali se gibajo na terenu z namenom poročanja o določeni zgodbi. Ta pokrov omogoča Cohenu, da povabi ljudi k sodelovanju v oddaji, ne da bi vedeli, da gre za ponaredek, saj pričakujejo, da bodo v stiku s "pravimi" novinarji. Šaljive razmere se razvijajo iz njihove nepripravljenosti, da se soočijo z liki, ki jih pooseblja Cohen in iz niza vprašanj, ki jih postavlja.

### **Zunaj-besedilno**

Oglaševanje, plakati, fanzini, spletne strani, članki, uvodniki, intervjuji in akademsko pisanje, vse prispeva k sistemu označevanja. Vendar pa strukturni položaj različnih akterjev ima pomembno vlogo v procesih označevanja. Obstaja neravnovesje pri opredeljevanju, ocenjevanju in vrednotenju različnih družbenih pojavov med tistimi, ki imajo ali nimajo moči. Delitve moči v smislu legitimne oblasti in dostopi do različnih komunikacijskih kanalov so vidni v razdelitvi med institucionalizirano proizvodnjo (kot je medijska industrija, akademske institucije) in individualno proizvodnjo (spletne klepetalnice, YouTube, itn.). Odločila sem se, da raziskujem institucionalizirano proizvodnjo (strokovni in časopisni članki) v zunaj besedilnem okolju, kot primere močnejših formacij pri širjenju pomena.

Strokovni članki v glavnem izvirajo iz britanske, kanadske in ameriške akademske skupnosti. Ugotovljeni so trije tipi diskurza, prevladuje pa tisti, ki je posvečen *identiteti in politični korektnosti* – povezan z prepletanjem med močnimi in podrejenimi identitetami. Vendar pa so "žrtve" Cohenove komedije različno definirane: črnici, vzhodni Evropejci, Kazahstanci, muslimani. Drugi diskurz, ki se je pojavil, je bil *diskurz kulturne kompetence*. V tem primeru so bile konvencije in komunikacijske strategije besedila predstavljene kot dejavniki, ki povzročajo zmedo. Osnovna predpostavka tega diskurza je, da je besedilo skladišče pomena,

ampak da zaradi njegove namerno nejasne komunikacijske strategije občinstva morda ne prepoznavajo "pravi" pomen, oziroma družbeni komentar. Tretji diskurz pa je bil označen kot *postmoderna "diagnoza"* sodobne kulture – ta pa je v skladu z eno od njegovih glavnih značilnosti – oddaljenostjo, ki ni izvedla noben poseben položaj, prednost ali slabost besedila, vendar je potopljena v kontekstu označevalcev kot so hiper-realnost, remediacija, post-ironija, dekonstrukcija, "camp", narcisizem, itn.

Analiza akademskih člankov napisanih o tekstu je pokazala, da je tekst neločljivo povezan s publiko. "Identiteta in PC diskurz" in "diskurz kulturne kompetence" sta bila zainteresirana za medijske učinke: kako naj bi določeno besedilo vplivalo na občinstvo in kakšne posledice bi to lahko imelo za družbo kot celoto. Pozitivni vidiki možnih vplivov so bili ustvarjanje samokritičnega občinstva, ki prevprašuje vprašanja identitet in je sposobno ter pripravljeno razpreti družbene tabuje in razpravljati o njih. Kar zadeva negativne vidike, gre za ohranjanje stereotipov, dodatno zaviranje marginaliziranih, revnih in žalitev različnih skupin ali posameznikov. Oba položaja dajeta veliko moči besedilu. Drugače od njiju pa je tretji diskurz – "postmoderna diagnoza", že vključen pri ocenjevanju razmer sodobne družbe in medijskega prostora.

### **Časopisni članki**

Časopisni članki, ki so jih napisali novinarji in kritiki, so del medijske industrije produkcije besedil. Ne glede na način pristopa k tekstu, že samo dejstvo, da je tekst pobran s strani drugega medija, ga naredi za del zgodbe. Vloga medijev pri konstrukciji realnosti je močna in diskurzi, ki krožijo v medijih, zajemajo velik del "vrstnega reda branja besedil" (Couldry, 2000).

Med časopisnimi članki je bilo veliko med-besedilnih referenc kot povezav med sedaj znanim in izkušenim, kar je živo pokazalo kako so, ne glede na dejstvo, da se nekaj besedil morda zdi inovativnih, ona vedno zgrajena v skladu s predhodno izraženim, prej znanim in izkušenim. Tako besedilo nikoli ne stoji samo, ampak je povezano s preteklostjo in sedanostjo.

Drugače kot v Veliki Britaniji, kjer je televizijska oddaja takoj zanetila razpravo, na Hrvaškem televizijska oddaja ni izzvala posebne pozornosti v hrvaškem tisku v času oddajanja. Premik se je zgodil s filmom *Borat* leta 2006, ki je doživel veliko popularnost in je tisk začel pogosteje spremljati izdelek. To lahko razložimo z razlikami v tržnih strategijah filmov in televizijskih oddajah: film je bil močno reklamiran kot svetovni izdelek s poskusom, da bi pritegnili čim večje občinstvo v razmeroma kratki življenjski dobi njegove kino-produkcije. Še bolj pomembno, film je vključil stereotipe o vzhodu (v socialističnih časih) in način, kako je Vzhod konstruiran na Zahodu, kar je naredilo ta tekst za del domačega kino občinstva na Hrvaškem.

S primerjavo medbesedilnih sklicevanj v člankih je bilo razvidno, da obstaja določena oblika medbesedilnega obilja v britanskimi članki, medtem ko so hrvaški članki pokazali obliko medbesedilnega pomanjkanja razvidnega skozi načine kako je o oddaji pisano. V njih je bilo manj znanih referenc, ki so bile znane hrvaškim bralcem, da bi omogočile konotativne povezave, dovolj blizu primarnemu besedilu. To kaže, da se tekstualna produkcija dogaja v oblikah iteracije, v katerih je prej znano nadgrajeno, in ustvarja kombinacijo starih in novih idej. Ni naključje, da je bilo to besedilo proizvedeno v Veliki Britaniji in je bilo široko sprejeto in priljubljeno, saj je zgrajeno na znanemu, že izrečenemu, vendar z nekaterimi spremembami. Temu ni bilo tako na Hrvaškem, kar kaže na pomanjkanje medsebojnih tekstovnih referenc glede proizvodnje in sprejema tega tipa komedije.

Čeprav je medijska raziskava odnosa besedila in občinstva odmaknjena od vprašanj o avtorju in njegovem namenu, kot manj pomembnemu pri določanju smisla besedila za bralce, novinarski izdelki kažejo, da je avtor pomemben v smislu procesa odločanja, zlasti v kontekstu humorja. Identiteta (razredna, etnična, narodnostna, starostna in spolna) avtorja in zaznani namen sta bila pomembna mehanizma pri presojanju in vrednotenju primernosti Cohenove komedije, kar je bilo razvidno v pogostokrat omenjenih informacijah o Cohenovom ozadju – skupni označevalci, ki so se ponavljali skoraj vedno v vsakem članku so bila dejstva, da je bil izobražen na Cambridgeu ter, da je Žid iz meščanskega okolja.

Razlika med hrvaškim in britanskim tiskom je bila predvsem v dejstvu, da se britanski tisk osredotočil na rasno vprašanje, medtem ko je bil hrvaški predvsem obrnjen na vprašanje odnosa med Cohenom/alias Boratom in Kazahstanom kot nekdanjo socialistično državo. Vsaka družba razlaga in poudarja oznake, ki so bolj povezane z njenim vsakdanjim življenjem – na Hrvaškem

so to novoustanovljena nacionalna država in podobnosti s Kazahstanom glede nedavnega padca socializma, kar naredi bližnjo izkušnjo razvidno v časopisnih zapisih kot je "to bi bili lahko tudi mi". Velika Britanija – na drugi strani – ima številne etnične identitete, ki so del britanske kulture in reprezentirajo problem izključevanja in vključevanja.

Tudi če besedilo namenoma uporablja dvoumno komunikacijsko strategijo, ki odpira različne modele interpretacije, način na katerega je bilo dekodirano to besedilo je pokazal, da čeprav so bili izraženi različni pristopi in branja – oni so bili omejeni na nekaj različnih zvrst. Tisti interpretacijski modeli, ki so bili prisotni tako v Veliki Britaniji kakor tudi na Hrvaškem, so naslednji: prvič, to je bila "le komedija", obravnavana kot "neresna" in brez pomena, razen da deluje kot igriva oblika odvrčanja; drugič, to je satira, ki da ima pomembno vlogo razlaganja sodobnih nepravilnosti v družbi; tretjič, to je žaljivo, manj močne bi bilo potrebno zaščititi, šale ne smejo biti na račun tistih, s katerimi identitete ne deli govorec. Pomembna razlika je v tem, da so hrvaški in britanski novinarji in kritiki imeli drugačne definicije "nemočnosti". Medtem ko so se britanski članki ukvarjali z raso uokvirjeno znotraj konteksta multikulturalizma in spoštovanjem drugih identitetnih skupin, so bili hrvaški članki potopljeni v geopolitični diskurz, v katerem Vzhodna Evropa (vključno z Hrvaško) deli socialistično preteklosti in je bila videti nemočna v primerjavi z močjo Zahoda. Seveda, pozicije moči v globalnem kontekstu so močno spremenile temelje iz katerih je bilo besedilo kritizirano. Načini dekodiranja, ki so se pojavili v britanskih člankih so bili odrejeni s politično korektnim diskurzom in so bili namenjeni zaščiti drugih, govorili so iz "superiornega" položaja, kot ena oblika "zavesti" o preteklih "grehah" in neenakostih. Po drugi strani pa so bili načini dekodiranja, ki so se pojavili na Hrvaškem vidno zapisani s položaja "žrtve", posplošeni na nacionalni ravni in vpisani v splošen geopolitični konstrukt Vzhoda.

## **Raziskovanje občinstev**

### **Kulturno potrošništvo in hierarhija okusov**

Interpretativne skupnosti na Hrvaškem in v Veliki Britaniji so bile precej različne glede na socio-demografsko sliko, vendar pa so vse imele pozitiven odnos do besedila, kar je tisto, kar jih povezuje kot interpretativne skupnosti. Raziskava o preferencah žanra in komedije je pokazala, da večina ima raje žanre, ki se v hierarhiji žanrov razumejo kot višje kakovostni



(dokumentarni filmi, drama, faktorski program, filmi), in so bolj cenjeni kot tisti "nizke kakovosti" (*reality show*, *soap opere*, klepetalne oddaje ...). V smislu komedije so interpretativne skupnosti v obeh primerih jasno pokazale preference za satiro, sarkazem, provokacijo, črni humor, suh humor. Prav tako je bil jasno pokazan gnus glede na *mainstream* televizijskih komedij kot so romantična komedija in družinski *sitcom*, trivialne ali idealizirane razmere, itn. To kaže, da ne glede na predpostavljeno zmanjševanje delitve med visoko v primerjavi z nizko kulturo, obstajajo jasne hierarhije na področjih, ki naj bi bila že vnaprej "preprosta" kot je televizija kot medij (Bourdieu). Kljub temu, da so bile te hierarhije kulturnih izdelkov prepoznavne pri večini, pa so tisti ki je so bili višje postavljeni na hierarhiji skupine, izrazili željo po bolj raznovrstni potrošnji okusov (v skladu z Peterson in Kern) - tako v odnosu do žanra kakor tudi do vrste komedije.

### **Komedija in omejitve humorja**

Da bi cenili komedijo mora bila provokativna, originalna, poznana in realna. Vulgarnost in surova nevljudnost sta bili ocenjeni kot negativni tako v britanski, kakor tudi v hrvaški interpretativni skupnosti, enako kot tudi *mainstream* proces. Ustrezne interpretativne skupnosti so tudi sprejele podobna stališča v zvezi z omejitvami humorja. Ne glede na to, da so se nekatere med njimi zavzemale za nekatere omejitve humorja, so imele podobno stališče o tem, katere teme niso bile zlahka spremenjene v humorni material in so kot interpretativna skupnost, ki predpostavlja "politično nekorekten" humor, pokazale bolj sproščen, liberalnejši pristop kar se tiče občutljivih tem kot so seksualno nasilje, holokavst, skrajno nasilje in nacionalna tragedija. Argument podan kot mejnik humorja je bil orisan na ravni posamezne žalitve in je obravnavan kot bolj problematičen v primerjavi s stereotipi o skupinah (ne glede na njihove značilnosti) ali družbo na splošno.

### **Dekodiranje oddaje**

Raziskava občinstva je pokazala, da je bil širši družbeni kontekst pomemben pri oblikovanju pomenov, ki jih je oddaja imela za bralce. V tem je bila očitna razlika v položaju samega besedila v zadevnih skupnostih. To je bilo najbolj opazno v načinu, kako so bralci sami sebe gradili kot občinstvo. Britanska interpretativna skupnost je zgradila občinstvo glede na socialno-demografsko sliko, pri čem je bila starost najpomembnejša, potem sledijo spol (več

moških) in razred (predvsem srednji razred). To je v bistvu merilo glede na svoj položaj in povezovanje z avtorjem (Cohen) ter načinom kako je on vgrajen v družbeno strukturo: kot moški, mlad, pripadnik srednjega razreda, belec. Ker je oddaja bila zelo priljubljena v Veliki Britaniji, jo je bilo skoraj obvezno gledati, zlasti za mlade, kot način, kako biti v trendu. Hrvaška interpretativna skupnost je opredelila občinstvo kot majhno nišo, manjšino (oni so tudi bili del le-te), vzpostavljeno s pomočjo posebnih lastnosti, ki so bile videti kot nasprotje hrvaškemu *mainstreamu*: urbano, angleško govoreče, moderno, liberalno, nekonvencionalno, odprto, z vednostjo, itn. To odraža obrobni položaj besedila na Hrvaškem, opazovano s strani majhne niše, ki sebe definira kot alternativo hrvaškemu *mainstreamu*.

Način kako so anketiranci govorili o oddaji razkriva dva popolnoma različna diskurza znotraj posameznih kulturnih okoljih. Britanska interpretativna skupnost izvaja popolnoma jasen tip "politično korektnega" diskurza; v hrvaški interpretativni skupnosti prevladuje politično nekorekten diskurz. Večina je izrazila izrazito negativen odnos do homoseksualcev, Američanov, Židov, Hrvatov, človeške vrste na splošno, črncev, vzhodnih Evropejcev, itn. To se je odrazilo tudi v njihovem dekodiranju oddaje. V Veliki Britaniji so mehanizmi interpretativne skupnosti bili na voljo v procesu ustvarjanja pomena, kar ji je omogočilo, da ceni oddajo in še vedno ostane znotraj civiliziranega diskurza. To je bilo omogočeno s strategijami dvoumnih sporazumevanj. V hrvaški interpretativni skupnosti so pa ti mehanizmi bili odsotni, ker ni bilo nobenega občutka za kršitev norm, če nekdo opravlja politično nekorekten, neciviliziran diskurz.

Argument Nealea in Krutnika (2000), da družbeni pomen komedij ni univerzalen, ampak ga je potrebno analizirati pritrjenega na lokalno raven, je pomemben saj je lahko (potencialno) subverzija politične korektnosti in začetek razprave opredeljen kot pozitiven za družbo, v kateri politična korektnost pomeni problem, zaradi kolektivnega zatiranja odprte razprave. Vendar pa v družbi, v katero do tega (še) ni prišlo, in v kateri ni samocenzure povezane z žaljivim besedilom, tekst očitno ne more biti v isti funkciji. Besedilo ne more omajati nekaj kar še ni *mainstream*, nekaj kar je – čeprav prihaja v diskurzivni obstoj – ni internalizirano. Za hrvaško interpretativno skupnost je besedilo bolj predstavljalo premišljevanje o njegovi subverziji ozkosrčnosti – v nasprotju z odprtostjo – in je bilo bolj pomembno za ohranjanje ideje o pripadnosti "progressivni manjšini" povezani s svetovnimi trendi (na Zahodu). To je bilo vidno v

načinu kako interpretativna skupnost diskurzivno oblikuje občinstvo oddaje – nekaj kar je bilo, kot je že omenjeno, močno zaznamovano s pozicijo, ki jo je oddaja imela v vsaki državi: medtem ko je bila zelo priljubljena v Veliki Britaniji, je bila mejno besedilo na Hrvaškem.

Končno, ugotovitve znotraj ovira teorije medijev kažejo, da je proces ustvarjanja pomena oblikovan z družbenim kontekstom. Način interpretacije besedila je vedno v zvezi s širšimi sistemi označevanja, zunanjimi dejavniki kot so prevladujoče ideologije, inštitucije in vrednote, ki krožijo v diskurzivnem okolju in nakazujejo pot branja besedila. Ti zunanji dejavniki določajo tako način kodiranja besedila kakor tudi njegovega dekodiranja. Skupna povezanost teh parametrov je tisto, kar določa način branja besedil. To je tisto, kar omejuje možnosti dekodiranja znotraj posebnega zgodovinskega konteksta in to je tudi tisto, kar omogoča nekemu, da oblikuje zaključke o načinih dekodiranja, ki kontekstualno niso legitimni.

Ta raziskava kaže, da je besedilo pogosto obravnavano kot močno. Videno je kot odlagališče pomena, kar se odraža v strahu, da bo besedilo "napačno prebrano" s strani občinstva ter, da vpliva na publiko v pozitivnem ali negativnem smislu. Poleg tega sta identiteta avtorja in njegov namen, kot ju dojema bralec, zelo pomembna – vsaj ko gre za komedijo in humor –, ker to usmerja proces dekodiranja in ocenjevanja komedije. Vendar pa je to lahko specifičnost komedije in bolj splošno humorja. Na koncu, vendar nič manj pomembno, zadržanosti zaradi strukturnega položaja so še danes vidne v praksah potrošnje in ustvarjanja pomena, kot je bilo ponazorjeno na več primerih v tekstu. To nakazuje, da stare paradigme morda niti niso še izčrpane v presoji zapletenih odnosov med besedilom, občinstvom in kontekstom.