Theory: How Can Media Studies Make "The T Word" More User-Friendly?

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Setting out to teach a class on television comedy for the first time, I had a few key theses. First, that comedy as a genre is primarily defined by its attempts to create humor. Second, that the comic is a unique discourse, rhetoric, and form of address. And finally, that intentionally or not, comedy offers insight into cultural anxieties and conflicts that other more earnest genres do not.

There were challenges in terms of constructing a syllabus around these ideas. Of course, different work in television history accomplishes this work to greater and lesser extents and the field is experiencing growth in the tendency to apply humor theory to contemporary television. In many cases, however, the best historical work on a given show or era largely ignores humor.

Another challenge arose from my desire to organize the class chronologically so that student could get a sense of how different comedy traditions fed into one another and how changes in the overall formation of the industry inflected the comedy and humor (What do FCC guidelines, or the lack thereof, mean for fart jokes?). For example, Ethan Thompson's essay on the carnivalesque and *South Park* is useful in many ways, but comes rather late chronologically. And even then, it's focus is on the show and how it exemplifies aspects of Bakhtin's theory. As such, it is not a desirable replacement for understanding the broader implications of a ritualistic understanding of carnival.

To overcome these obstacles, I organized the class to give students an operational base of knowledge before delving into the history of television comedy. The students engaged readable secondary literature like Simon Dentith's book *Humour*. While Bergson and Freud are not necessarily accessible to undergraduates, secondary literature makes their work relatively approachable and accessible if for no other reason than it relies on more contemporary examples of jokes than those that circulated in turn-of-the-last-century Vienna. This literature also reaches beyond the "big 3" humor thinkers (Bergson, Freud, and Bakhtin) to engage more contemporary work by linguists and evolutionary psychologists. And, perhaps compared to certain other bodies of theory, humor theory is relatively fun for students and immediately applicable as it is not difficult to come up with gags that exemplify or complicate humor as superiority, relief, incongruity, benign violation, etc. In these cases, it became a fruitful exercise to have students think of examples that demonstrated each category.

Ultimately, the focus of this class was not theory. I wanted these theories to be useful to the student's understanding of how humor functions within the historical context of television comedy history. Giving them a shared base of knowledge before engaging the history of television comedy proved useful in a number of ways. It gave us a common language to which we could return and it acted as a go-to discussion topic when we needed a kick. And its use as a leitmotif across the course gave students the opportunity to master and re-master these ideas as they learned the history. More than that, students seemed to genuinely enjoy answering my stock question, "why is this funny and to what effect?" Their broad applicability across texts and time periods allowed for a deep and long-term engagement with theory. But more importantly, they demonstrated the point, in some ways, of theory: to be flexible as tools of understanding and explanation across multiple phenomena.

Because humor theory proved both approachable and applicable, I believe it may have demystified theory and perhaps lessened the fear with which my students regard this "T-word." For those students frightened by psychoanalytic theory, affect theory, ritual theory, other bodies of theory related to humor, or even theory as a category, I trust that they walked

away from my class with less fear and more confidence. This approach may not work for teaching all manner of theory, but I believe it to be a useful model for bringing undergraduates to the discussion.

Some thoughts for further discussion:
- Sometimes theory seems to be defined as "that which is difficult." Our students should be challenged, but we ought to think strategically about the hows and whys of these challenges. In terms of the difficulty of theory, what is productive and what is obfuscation? How do we teach productively?
- This class used theory to study history. How have others constructed effective classes that are more singularly focused on theory?