

Jokes and their Relation to Abjection

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The aim of this paper – through a look at the way jokes operate in the workplace and across cultures – is to elucidate the complex notion of abjection proposed by the psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. It will go on to suggest that, in current cultural, managerial, media and legislative concerns about joking at work, abjection, in a wider sense, relates to more pervasive anxieties about social structures and changes.

Abjection

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva develops the idea of abjection in terms of its role in the formation, maintenance and dissolution of subjective and social boundaries: it disturbs relations between self and other, inside and outside; it is associated with forces and affects central to yet threatening (psychic and symbolic) structures; it evokes intense responses like horror, nausea, repulsion, loathing. It signifies the expulsion of objects, energies, and emotions that shatter norms, bodily limits and cultural identity. Kristeva offers various examples of abjection, from food to filth, waste, excrement, bodily fluids, wounds, pus and cadavers. But abjection is not only tied to definable objects: it appears in intense emotional relations to selves, feelings and things: the intensities it evokes come from proximity and disruption since separation (from excrement, urine, vomit, death etc) is never absolute.

In the rituals and taboos which develop across cultures and religions in relation to food consumption and bodily wastes abjection marks a site around which cultural codes, customs and norms are established – symbolic, and arbitrary, divisions between pure and impure, clean and unclean; rites of passage, customs of inclusion and exclusion. Abjection is complex because it relates to things that stray from conventional places and to values and identities that are not as clear-cut as they are supposed to be. Kristeva notes that the intensities which take a subject to the borders of its existence – objects and affects of abjection – also form the ‘safeguards’ and ‘primers of my culture’; ‘spasms and vomiting protect me’, she writes, since, in and through abjection, what is abject can be thrown off, expelled, abjected: the sickness within is cast outside, temporarily restoring bodily boundaries. At the same time, it is ‘not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’ (4).

Abjoking

On an obvious level, jokes engage with abjection and otherness, relishing topics considered taboo or socially unacceptable, dealing in matters of sex, death, bodily corruption and filth, the ‘sick’ joke for example, straying into realms normally prohibited by cultural mores and norms. The fun of jokes, their ‘carnivalistic’ function, their release of energies, their (licensed) transgression, depends on crossing lines of demarcation, crossings that would be deemed inappropriate in other social

forms and interactions. Jokes also depend upon ambiguity, from the double meanings and wordplays of puns and riddles, to the juxtapositions of terms in wit and jests, the ironic reversals of expectation delivered in punch lines, or the incongruous comparisons forming the basis for humour. Jokes also play with a range of shared knowledge, from vernacular language and local idiom, to cultural assumptions, conventions and norms.

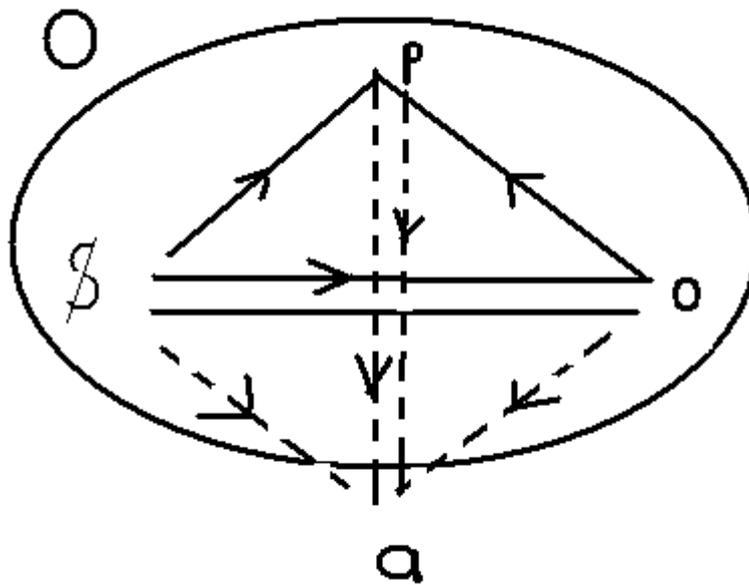
The ambiguity of joking is frequently noted in studies of humour in the workplace (Yarwood 1995; Collinson 2002; Lyttle 2007). On the one hand joking is seen to be a positive practice that should be encouraged to make the workplace a happier, more cohesive and creative environment: fostering less material advantages like team spirit and corporate morale, staving off boredom, defusing tensions, raising job satisfaction, enhancing trust between managers and co-workers, enabling more effective communication and leadership, joking is also seen to deliver direct economic benefits in terms of increased productivity and reductions in the costs of absence due to sickness or stress (Tracy et al 2006; Holmes 2007). The negative aspects of humour, more often cited in news stories reporting cases of compensation for unfair dismissal or harassment, are also discussed in terms of the way they bring play into work, can subvert managerial authority, waste time, break concentration, and reduce efficiency. Worse, joking can reinforce prejudice, discrimination and hostility (Gabriel 2000; Thaindian.com 2007). In this context, jokes perpetuate division, marginalising individuals and groups, usually in terms of gender, age, sexual preference and ethnicity and increasing the tensions that signal a fragmented and unproductive workplace. As well as the emotional and personal costs incurred in such situations, companies can face huge compensation payments (Wheatcroft 2004). It remains difficult to distinguish between productive humour and joking that has disruptive effects, despite the regulation, legislation or training courses designed to encourage the former and eliminate the latter (Hill 2007; Bayles 2008).

Butts

There is, in the ambiguity that permeates joking and studies of humour, another kind of ambiguity, a radical ambiguity confounding positions, refusing resolution, separation or decision, that is associated with anxiety and abjection. ‘Radically excluded’, abjection, writes Kristeva, ‘draws me to the place where meaning collapses’; its ambiguity ‘does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it

– on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger’; symptomatic, abjection ‘permeates me’ (in contrast to the sublimation that ‘keeps it under control’) (2; 9). In their relation to abjection, jokes evince undercurrents of anxiety, not just in respect of the ‘butt’, the object of the joke, site of exclusion and abject affects, but in the uncertainties running through their entire structure. In Freud, jokes display the work of unconscious processes, releasing aggressive or socially unacceptable energies in partially disguised or displaced form and thereby circumventing the censorship of social sanctions, shame and taboos (Freud, 1976: 146). There are different elements in operation, from mastery to hostility and anxiety, often evinced in barely disguised, sexualised, and ambiguous relationships. Different forms of bonding and division, patterns of disguise and displacement, also manifest themselves in themselves in internal dynamic of joking, which demonstrate the complexity and fragility of joke structure and its contexts and open them to uncertainty and interpretation (Oring 1992).

Fig.1 Joke Structure



- \$ speaker; teller of jokes (subject)
- o addressee; mirror; interlocutory complement (other)
- a butt; object of exclusion, anxiety, otherness (*objet petit a*/ ab-ject)

- p** point of signifying articulation, recognition (phallic signifier/
superego)
- O** signifying convention; context, norms; differences,
discriminations (Other)

Jokes manifest degrees of iterability, mobility and relationality between, teller, addressee, butt and generic and cultural context. They have also been related to the historical development of the organisation of work, and to specific concerns about working conditions in which ethnic tensions and jokes manifest a specific function (Davies). In the capacity to disturb relations and positions within structures of work, culture and meaning, joking opens up the incompleteness, arbitrariness and fragility of those systems, thereby exposing the permeability of borders and the insecurity of the subject him or herself. From this perspective, the ambiguity of jokes, and the anxieties on which they depend (and which they try to screen off), comes close to abjection. One may rephrase Kristeva's comments that 'the danger of filth represents for the subject the risk to which the very symbolic order permanently exposed, to the extent that it is a device of discrimination, of differences' (69) to read 'the danger of jokes represents for the subject the risk to which the very symbolic order is permanently exposed'.

Collapse of the Other

Abjection opens individuals (and cultures) to an uncertainty about boundaries, to their 'collapse' even, and to a pervasive sense of otherness within: 'abjection accompanies all religious structurings and reappears to be worked out in new guise, at the time of their collapse' (17). She goes on to refer to 'a world in which the Other has collapsed', a world 'that has lost its faith in One Master Signifier' (18; 209). Her position is akin to that of Lyotard, who notes that the postmodern condition manifests 'an incredulity towards metanarratives'. Hence it is difficult, individually or institutionally, to delineate boundaries or to make decisions or judgements (often delegated to the deferrals of experts, committees etc) on aesthetic, rational or moral grounds. Consumer culture can be understood in similar terms, with the pervasiveness of advertising and media unsettling distinctions between needs, demands and desires. There is a 'vicious cycle' at work in a society of affluence fuelled by anxieties arising in the gap between consumers being told what they want and knowing what they

really want (Baudrillard; Zizek). It results, not in a satisfied customer, or a rational being, but an 'abject consumer' (Lieberman). A cycle of dis-satisfactions, its affluenza and anxieties, has been identified in changing patterns of work (James 2007; 2008). Britons, so the story goes, work longer hours and are among the most stressed workers in the world. Not surprising given the multifarious demands of the managerialised workplace. With technological changes, the supposed liberation of working life from the office seems to have produced a counter effect. A cultural and economic context of shifting and permeable boundaries, with anxiety on the verge of abjection, surrounds all aspects of work and very much conditions the perceptions about humour at work, from increased legislation, policy, training, advice, and concern (Frean 2006; Purves 2003; Heffer 2004; Hill 2007). All of which return to the problematic ambiguity, ambivalence – and abjection – of joking on a cultural as well as workplace scale.

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