Humour and comedy

What is humour

- Researchers who study humour suggest it is a social phenomenon, a communication shared by individuals.
- The humour is intended to be humorous – which accounts for humour that may not have been originally produced by an individual but is shared by the individual.
- It includes all types of humour – sarcasm, puns, visual images,
- Diversity – sketch shows, narrative, cartoons, sitcoms, stand up.

- Origins in theatre
  - It has been argued that almost all television comedy has ultimate origins in the theatre (except animated cartoons which is film).
  - Two interesting aspects of comedy are the relationship that exists between performer and audience.
  - And that which exists between the individual members of the audience.
  - The performer requires a reaction from those who are watching and listening –
  - When the audience hear the canned laughter, its members are aware that it is occurring outside their own environment and are thus reminded that comedy is mediated.
  - Does this create a world of its own or does it rely on an outside world.

Parody

- Like the monty python’s flying circus
- A sketch show, which has its roots in traditional theatre.
- Most shows explore television within a conventional format and confine their attention to a single genre.
- Python intercuts sketches and graphics to parody a range of genres and modes and conventions – parody
- (A parody is generally understood to be a comic imitation of a well-known, identifiable text, genre or style of writing.
- A satire is a comic treatment or ridiculous portrayal of a person or a social institutions but it is not an imitation of a text, style or genre per se.
Humour theory

- **Three areas**
  - Humour theory is complex and often not clearly defined area and its application to television comedy has only been explored fairly recently
  - Traditionally, humour theory has been split into three separate areas – superiority, incongruity (disagreement) and relief theory
  - These offer different explanations for why people experience or express humour

- **Superiority – Plato and Aristotle (Hobbes)**
  - The superiority theory dates back to Plato and Aristotle in the fourth century BC
  - This idea suggests that laughter actually reinforces power positions
  - And is defined as a negative social phenomenon
  - Superiority theory views humour as arising from a feeling of superiority over others
  - Or over one’s own former position e.g. laughing after making some sort of mistake

- **Incongruity – Kant**
  - This theory is traced back to Kant in the late 18th century
  - Where laughter results from the clash of incompatible discourses
  - This theory describes the humour object – the stimulus of the humour such as a joke or cartoon
  - For an object to be humorous some kind of incongruity must exists
  - The incongruity can exist between what an individual expects and what actually occurs
  - What an individual expects is socially constructed and learned

- **Relief theory – Freud**
  - Relief theory is rooted in Freud – where humour functions socially and psychologically as a vent for repression
  - such analysis has been applied to broadcast comedy, satire and a range of socio-political comedians – the relationship between such a role and debates on media effects are clear
  - it is a defense mechanism by the ego and super ego to reject reality and protect oneself from suffering
  - e.g. a criminal making a joke before being led to the gallows
  - Freud also believed that humour was a means by which people could disguise and release their sexual or aggressive impulses without guilt, giving them relief from such desires

- **Trait perspective of humour**
  - Some researchers suggest humour is a way of looking at the world – it is a style, a means of self protection and of getting along.
  - The trait perspective considers humour to be an individual difference
  - Some suggest that humour is related to personality constructs such as sociability and masculinity
• Evaluation of humour
  • Recently a fourth theory of humour has been put forward
  • This is called comprehension-elaboration theory
  • Rather than explaining what motivates humour within individuals, this theory focuses on how people evaluate humour
  • Comprehension-elaboration theory explains why individuals might find some humour amusing but other humour not amusing or offensive
  • It takes context into account and can be applied to both social and non-social situations
  • A person may think more about the humour itself or may think outside of the humour
  • 1. The motives of the person who conveyed the story
  • 2. Whether the humour is socially appropriate or inappropriate – such as in the workplace
  • 3. Whether the humour is offensive to themselves or other groups

Background little Britain

• Otherness – at home in the programme
  • The authors intended to base characters and situations on examples they had themselves observed and experienced
  • Matt Lucas – believed that needed to leave intervals of no more than 15 seconds between laughs
  • And as different things appeal to different viewers, frequent changes of scene and character help maintain interest and enthusiasm.
  • Plots don’t need to develop – and easy to move onto something completely different
  • Most items are preceded by voice over announcements made by Tom Baker
  • The absurd, eccentric and grotesque can sit alongside the ‘normal’
  • However, it is argued that it goes beyond zaniness – when the ordinary people portrayed are often unpleasant characters whose behaviour is also unpleasant
  • Little Britain pays attention to surface realism – overtly using settings which give the impression of being authentic or familiar to the audience
  • Little Britain generally exploits the ambiguity of ordinariness and otherness in a more subtle way
  • It does this by juxtaposing the mundane and the unexpected

Applying theories

• Most people like to identify themselves as decent and respectable people
• Little Britain gives a different image
• Perhaps giving voice to what some people may think in private (relief theory)
• And also raising notions of superiority over others in relation to class (Superiority theory)
• There are moments when people do not act as we expect (incongruity theory)

The Office

• There are differences between the American and British versions of the programme
• But it highlights some of the contextual elements in terms of appropriateness
• The Brent character has no sense of shame in terms of restraint.
• It also highlights the character traits of people in relation to humour in the programme.
• You can also apply other elements of humour theories to this programme (and to other comedy programmes)

The Simpsons

• Incongruity applies to The Simpsons when a character has to deal with something new e.g. Homer being an ordained minister.
• The surprises can encompass a range of things such as things being absurd, ridiculous or illogical.
• This often happens in this programme.
• There is also superiority – where we laugh, for example, at Homer because we are smarter than he is.
• Characters also do this with each other to provide laughter e.g. the laughter when Lisa says something intelligent and no one listens to her.
• Superiority also includes the actual dialogue, behaviour and can include aggression and violence (physical and verbal) as long as these are temporary.
• We can also apply relief theory – laughing at things that make us uncomfortable or releasing nervous energy.
• Laughter as relief – in various situations and often connected with hidden desires and hostilities that are present in The Simpsons.

Hegemony

• Representation of class in the programme?
1. *Hegemony* refers to the ways in which the media encourage people to consent to status quo power structures.

2. Can we place Little Britain into this context – think about the representations of class – are there any representations of class that are seen as more ideal

3. Or does Little Britain represent all classes in the same way

**Dominant ideologies**

1. **Dominant ideology** – ruling class, enables ruling class to rule by controlling the consciousness of working class

2. These other groups outside the ruling class are subject to the ideas of the ruling class.

3. **Ideological domination** means prevailing system of class inequalities.

4. The media make inequalities appear natural but equally humour can be used to challenge these inequalities.

5. You can apply these notions to television programmes to see if any of the theories highlighted challenge/reinforce certain ideologies.