

Voices on the Border

Comedy and Immigration in the Scandinavian Public Spheres



John Magnus Ragnhildson Dahl

Thesis for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor (PhD)
University of Bergen, Norway
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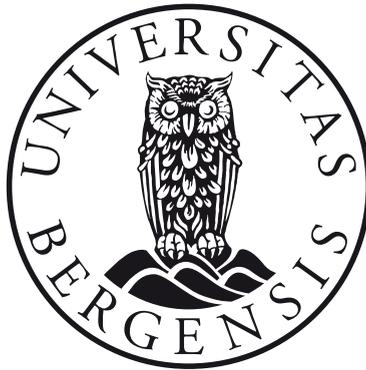
UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN



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Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to advance the understanding of the relationship between comedy and politics, as well as the relationship between the cultural and the political parts of the public sphere. Its main research question is *How can TV comedy thematising immigration contribute to public opinion formation on immigration in the larger public sphere?* This is investigated through a text-focused, case based historical study of comedy shows, actors and events in the three Scandinavian countries – Norway, Sweden and Denmark. The concept *immigration comedy* is used to refer to the special kind of comedy in question, in order to refer not only to ethnic humour, but also to satire about immigration policy or xenophobia. Two of the case sets in the dissertation focus on comedy shows, while the two other case sets focus on comedy reception in the mass media.

Drawing on insights from public sphere theory and humour theory, and with a broad orientation towards the Scandinavian immigration debates, it is argued that the cases analysed in this dissertation can be considered as manifestations of *boundary struggles* in various ways. Scandinavian immigration comedy, and the debates around it, have worked to preserve boundaries as *moral guards* against anti-immigrant positions in the public sphere; and to challenge boundaries by being means of *access* for immigrants. Furthermore, as attempts of *politicisation* of the issues of symbolic racism and the limits of humour, debates about immigration comedy have worked to both challenge and maintain boundaries. Finally, immigration comedy shows made by and for immigrants themselves, *diaspora humour*, have through their *playful recognition* of ethnic difference worked as *alternative spaces* beyond the borders of the more problem-oriented serious public sphere.

The main theoretical contribution of the dissertation lies in pointing out how different forms of boundary work were all done through the special characteristics of the humorous mode, characteristics conceptualised as *unsolvable and productive tensions*. These tensions are between humour's *unseriousness* and its *use for serious means*, between humour as *conventional, conservative and suppressive* and *creative, radical and subversive*, and finally between humour as a facilitator of both *emotional investment* and *emotional detachment* – which also includes a tension between *positive*

and *negative emotions*. The most central argument is that humour is not inherently conservative nor inherently radical, but works politically through balancing these two aspects.

The dissertation also makes a methodological contribution by advancing a *textual-historical view of opinion formation*. Departing from public sphere theory, it is argued that the best way to understand how public opinion is shaped is by textual analysis, where texts should be read as interventions in specific, historically located debates. Furthermore, it is especially useful to investigate historical *ruptures*, moments when the relationship between different kinds of discourses in the public sphere, for example comedy and immigration debate, intersect and interact in new ways, in order to detect ways that texts who not explicitly are part of the day-to-day political debate nevertheless can contribute to it.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

In 2019, the high school Stovner Videregående Skole, located in a suburb of the Norwegian capital Oslo, produced its first student revue in years. The revue, with a diverse cast mirroring the multicultural neighbourhood of Stovner, was widely acclaimed and acknowledged as important in the public sphere, but already on opening night, critical voices from the student body appeared on Facebook, claiming that the revue ridiculed Muslims and objecting to the use of blackface in one of the sketches. It took several weeks for these complaints to reach the national public sphere, but when some students eventually published an anonymously signed op-ed in the paper *Dagbladet*¹, it sparked a massive debate involving the principal of the school, professional comedians, activists, academics (among them the writer of the present dissertation) and even national politicians.

How could some sketches in a high school revue become a subject of national debate? Why is our view of humour, especially humour related to questions of ethnicity, race, and immigration, so laden with ideas of how it can do harm; but also with ideas of how it can do good? Such ideas were clearly central for respectively the critics of the revue and for those who stressed how important it was, but the latter rarely felt any need to substantiate *why* it was important. Both these views stem from a notion that humour has social and political impact. Most people would agree with this, but few can answer *how* humour has an impact. This question ultimately pertains to a larger question, which has been central in the humanities since Plato: Can the arts play a political role?

This dissertation seeks to advance the discussion of this question by narrowing it down, to be able to handle it theoretically and empirically. The object of study is the relationship between the serious immigration debate in Scandinavia and professional comedy about immigration on stage and television, what I call *immigration comedy*:

¹ <https://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/de-visste-at-vi-kom-til-a-bli-saret-men-valgte-likevel-a-bruke-blackface/70947049> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

Comedy – by immigrants or non-immigrants – that is about the immigration issue in one way or another. I will approach this from the perspective of public sphere theory, through a text-focused, case based historical study of shows, actors and events. This yields the following overarching research question: *How can TV comedy thematising immigration contribute to public opinion formation on immigration in the larger public sphere?*

1.1 Aims and Scope

This dissertation places itself within the framework of public sphere theory, where the arts/politics-problem can be formulated as a question of how the cultural and the political parts of the public sphere can be tied together in a meaningful way. This has been approached by many authors from many different angles (Balme, 2014; Benhabib, 1996; Dahlgren, 1995; Gripsrud, 2008; Hermes, 2005, 2006; McGuigan, 1996, 2005; Nussbaum, 1995; Nærland, 2015, 2019a, 2019b; van Zoonen, 2005) with stronger or weaker links to different versions of public sphere theory, and with different conceptions of culture. Some of them have tried to make a general theory of how the cultural public sphere has a function in liberal democracies, while others concentrate on how different aspects of the arts, or *expressive culture*, as Gripsrud (2008, p. 197) calls it in order to include popular culture, can contribute to the workings of the political public sphere. The latter is also the aim of the present dissertation. Rather than to develop a complete theory of the relationship between the cultural and the political public sphere, I will write a historical study of how a certain cultural form, humour, has played a role in this relationship in certain contexts. I argue that humour can fulfil many different purposes, or functions, in the public sphere, but that they are all based on certain particularities, or affordances, of the humorous mode. These particularities allow humour and comedy to do things in the public sphere that other modes and genres cannot. Hence, my contribution to the scholarly debate on the cultural public sphere is not to offer a model, but to use a set of diverse historical cases to reach a level of analytical generalisation of what makes humour politically efficacious.

Public sphere theory is not the go to perspective in research on humour and politics. In cultural studies, power-oriented perspectives inspired by the legacy of Althusser, Gramsci and Foucault have dominated (see for example Holm, 2017; Lockyer & Pickering, 2008; Pérez, 2013, 2016; Pickering & Lockyer, 2005; Weaver, 2010, 2011), while scholars from quantitatively oriented communication studies have taken an interest in the politics of comedy in the later years (see Young, 2018 for a literature review.). Although these studies have provided important insights, a public sphere perspective is in my view the most fruitful way to go to understand the politics of humour, as it has better tools to conceptualise politics. In a cultural studies perspective, politics tend to mean any process where power relations are at play, including in how we make sense of and engage with the world (Holm, 2017, p. 12). While this extended conception of politics certainly has its merits, there is a risk that the phrase “everything is political” makes the concept of politics an empty one. There is a substantial difference between the politics of the dinner table and the politics of parliament, especially when it comes to the power politics has to create social change. However, what happens by the dinner table might both influence and be a concern of parliament. Ultimately, how this journey goes on is an empirical question, which public sphere theory has the theoretical tools to analyse.

The essence of public sphere theory is the connection between democracy and discourse. Discourse is the central means of democratic participation used to reach political decisions that benefit the common good (Elster, 1986, pp. 127-128), and is by some even viewed as the core of the political in itself, as discourse is what constitutes human togetherness (Arendt, 1958, pp. 180-182). To put it briefly, what goes on in the public sphere has, and should have, an impact on democratic decision making (Habermas, 1996, pp. 298-299) – and a lot of what goes on in the public sphere is actually expressive culture (Gripsrud, 2008, pp. 197, 203), of which humour and comedy takes up a large part and is bestowed with high cultural value in late modern Western culture (Billig, 2005b, pp. 11-13; Holm, 2017, pp. 1-8; Pickering & Lockyer, 2005, pp. 3-4). Following this, a public sphere-oriented study of political humour contributes not only to humour studies but also to public sphere theory: understanding

humour is necessary to fully understand the public sphere, which again is necessary in order to fully understand democracy.

The relationship between humour and the public sphere is theoretically interesting for two reasons, echoing respectively Arendt's view of the public sphere as the arena where human togetherness is created (a view that also has influenced Habermasian democratic theory), and Elster's emphasis on how the public sphere ultimately has substantive decision-making as its end. The first reason pertains to how humorous discourse has an interesting social position. According to the *barometer thesis of humour*, jokes and comedy mirror society as a whole as they are very strong indicators of what preoccupies society at a given moment (Davies, 2011; Kuipers, 2015, p. 123). A less strong version of the barometer thesis postulates that humour and comedy thrive on tensions and paradoxes regarding social norms (Douglas, 1968; Eco, 1984; Frye, 1990, pp. 163-170). Humour becomes funny by playing with and transgressing such norms – “[humour] closely approach a social or cultural boundary and gives it a little push” (Kuipers, 2015, p. 123). However, even transgressive humour must be viewed as appropriate, which according to humour sociologist Giseline Kuipers is based on the *humour regimes*, complex “unwritten rules stipulating who can joke about what” (2011, p. 69), and *humour styles* (2015, pp. 102-120), which are based on taste in a Bordieuan sense, thus also on social boundaries. Humour and comedy is thus indicative of the social conflict potential in any given time and culture (Gripsrud, 1990, p. 192; L. O. Larsen, 1998, p. 40), and can even serve as a public arena where social rifts are demarcated and played out (Lewis, 2006).

At the same time, there seems to be no scholarly – or popular, for that matter – agreement about the social functions of humour beyond it being a social barometer: Humour mirrors society, but can it also change it? Both the canon of classical humour theories and contemporary psychological, sociological and cultural research demonstrate the complex, and often paradoxical, social workings of humour. On the other hand, humour has a very simple rhetorical structure – a joke teller entertains a joke audience, poking fun at her joke material or butt – and a straightforward perlocution: mirth and laughter. For a communication scholar interested in expressive culture, it is thus a handy form where complexity and simplicity are married, preparing

the ground for feasible yet rich research. To sum up, humour that appears in the cultural public sphere mirrors, in a particularly strong and accessible way, the social and cultural conflicts central to its participants, as well as the norms governing their discourse and the shared knowledge they are presupposed to have. The question from a public sphere perspective is if humour not only mirrors, but also plays a role in our creation of a shared world. It does indeed seem like humour has a great potential to be a forceful tool to “not only detect and identify problems but also convincingly and influentially thematise them”, as Habermas (1996, p. 369) states are central functions of the public sphere.

Second, politics is one of the most serious human activities that can be imagined – at least if we adhere to Elster’s emphasis on the goal-oriented nature of politics, where he also indeed often uses the word “serious” to characterise the workings of the public sphere (1986, pp. 126-127). Humour, on the other hand, seems to be the opposite of this, not only because of its uncivil sides like mockery and ridicule, but also – and more fundamentally – because of its character of non-commitment and non-telos. Humour is a non-serious activity, since it has a loose relationship to truth or ‘real’ intentions – it is not *bona fide* (Mulkay, 1988, pp. 22-26; Raskin, 1985, p. 140). A joke rests on the premise that it is not to be taken seriously, as well as that it is being told just for its own sake. However, humour and comedy being non-serious forms of discourse is the basis that allows humour to be used for serious purposes (Mulkay, 1988, pp. 90-92). This tension between the purpose of the public sphere and the particularities of humour is the main reason for why we should research the relationship between the two. Do its particularities mean that humour can only be destructive from a public sphere perspective, or can it do good as well? Perhaps these particularities can even allow humour and comedy to do something in the public sphere that other genres and modalities cannot, following Habermas (2006b) later ideas about a wild public sphere where also speech acts that do not comply with the ordinary normative criteria of deliberative democracy can contribute to democracy? This is where this dissertation aims to give a contribution.

1.1.1. Three main arguments

This thesis is composed of many case studies from three different countries, grouped together in chapters as they illuminate different aspects of the relationship between immigration comedy and the wider discourse on immigration. The cases are very diverse in various ways, and the role they play in the public sphere should be understood as highly contextual and contingent. They nevertheless form a whole through contributing to the three main arguments in this thesis, which are the dissertation's main contributions: A methodological, an empirical and a theoretical argument.

The methodological argument states that the relationship between the cultural and the political public sphere, when it comes to opinion formation, best can be analysed through historical studies that take the texts of the public sphere into account, what I call a *textual-historical view of public opinion formation*. Habermas' bourgeoisie public was a *reading public* (2002, pp. 34-41), and with the modern audio-visual mass media and the modern concept of text, modern publics are listening, watching, gaming, chatting, writing, sampling publics, to paraphrase Warner (2002, p. 89). It is through texts the actors of the public sphere have agency. To really understand public opinion formation, the study of texts is thus indispensable and even enjoys a privileged position. This does of course not mean that we should quit studying audiences or institutions, or that texts should be considered in some kind of social vacuum, but that studies paying attention to the *content* of what goes on in the public sphere, in other words text-oriented studies, have the strongest explanatory power when accounting for opinion formation. Paying attention to the text is also a strategy for understanding what texts of specific modes and genres, like humour and comedy, do *differently* than other texts and genres, thus being able to do analytical generalisations. That being said, my aim is not to conduct literary analysis for its own sake, but to understand how the texts were used to *do* things in the public sphere, how this was constrained by their context and how we can conceptualise any impact of the textual actions – in other words, a rhetorical and historical way of analysing texts. This also entails that I in some cases will be most concerned with the comedy texts themselves, in other cases with their reception – which of course also consists of texts. As these anticipatory

methodological remarks perhaps indicate, there will be few explicit mentions of this argument in the case studies. My hope is rather that the proof is in the pudding, and that the dissertation as a whole manages to defend this claim.

The methodological argument is powered by *the empirical argument*, which states that Scandinavian immigration comedy at large has played an important role in the treatment of the immigration issue as a part of *the contestation and negotiation of the boundaries of the public sphere*. According to Midtbøen, Steen-Johnsen, and Thorbjørnsrud (2017), the public sphere and free speech are characterised by constant boundary struggles of different kinds. They use a threefold approach where they discuss how different types of speech acts are deemed illegitimate, how different exclusionary mechanisms limit the participation of social groups in the public sphere (akin to the revisionist critics of Habermas, see Fraser (1992)), and how individuals themselves draw up boundaries as parts of inclusion or exclusion in the public sphere (Midtbøen et al., 2017, pp. 25-26). I will show that all these processes are visible in my material, in very diverse forms. In addition, I will argue that the manners in which these comedy events have been a part of different boundary struggles have been significant, for two reasons. First, because comedy seems to be able to do things that are rarely done in the serious public sphere. Second, supporting the barometer thesis of humour, all these events have played out on the background of important dimensions of the immigration debate, as well as on the background of important historical changes in the public sphere as large. To put it briefly, even if it is hard to point towards causal consequences, it can be argued that comedy and the cultural public sphere *mattered* by seeing *what kind of actions it did*, by doing a special form of work in the public sphere.

So, what is it that comedy can do that is so special? This leads me to *the theoretical argument*, which pertains to how humour in general works in the public sphere. Both academic and lay understandings of humour tend to label humour and comedy as either conservative or radical. My claim is that humour is both things at the same time, and that this is key to understand any special role it can play in the public sphere. This argument is based on the view of humour as essentially Janus faced: it thrives from a tension between the well-known, easily accessible, conventional,

accepted, conservative and perhaps even suppressive; and the novel, complex, creative, transgressive, radical and perhaps even subversive. It is impossible to succeed with a joke without basing it on the knowledge, and probably also values and attitudes, of your audience. On the other hand, the best jokes contain a real element of surprise. This again is based on a more fundamental tension between the unseriousness of humour as a communicative mode and how it through this is used to conduct serious actions in the world. Finally, these tensions bring with them a third tension between humour as emotional investment and as emotional detachment, which again is connected with how humour works both as a mediator of positive emotions, like joy and *communitas*, and as a mediator of negative emotions, like embarrassment and anger. Thus, it seems like humour is so diverse and complex that it can have many different functions in the public sphere, but that these functions typically are based on the interplay between humour's conventional and creative aspects. What I aim to show is how immigration comedy often uses well known and hegemonic ideas and representations from the public discourse on immigration and twists them a little bit in order to do something new, which in turn can have consequences in the serious parts of the public sphere. That being said, the political and social force of purely conservative comedy cannot be negated. I will show that humour's use of the well-known carries a potential for a pure reproduction of it, and also that any newness humour brings into the world is far from *radically* new.

1.1.2. The term “immigration comedy” and the dissertation's relation to migration studies

The object of study in this dissertation is *immigration comedy*. This is a concept I have coined myself and refers to comedy – by immigrants or non-immigrants – that is about the immigration issue in one way or another. Comedy should here be understood very broadly as an *entertainment genre with humour as its dominating element*. The reason I introduce a new concept, instead of using well-established terms like *ethnic humour* (Davies, 1990; Gillota, 2013) or *racial humour* (Lockyer & Pickering, 2008; Pérez, 2013), is that the comic material I am looking at first and foremost is related to the late modern phenomenon of mass migration with everything that it entails. Thus, the jokes

are not only about ethnicity or race, but also about xenophobia, the government's handling of immigration policy or well-meaning people from the majority who do not know how to behave around immigrants. This is also the background for why I from this point on (mainly) will use the word "immigration" instead of "migration", as well as "immigrant" instead of "migrant". Although migration and migrants are the preferred terms in both contemporary research and policy, and the terms that the UN body International Organization for Migration (IOM) advises to use, this has not been the case in Scandinavia's contemporary history. Until recently, migration has been seen from the perspective of the receiving countries, and thus as im-migration – people migrating to arrive *here*. This is also mirrored in my material: there are very few jokes about transnational relocation, but a lot about what happens when migrants arrive and settle in the nation state. The word "immigrant" is also a common term used colloquially both by the majority population and by immigrants and is thus useful in a historical study like this. There are certainly many important insights that have been made in the study of ethnic and racial humour, as well as in ethnic studies and migration studies at large, which I will make use of in this dissertation. However, this is not a thesis in migration studies: it is first and foremost about humour's role in the public sphere.

That being said, the immigration issue is not randomly chosen. In addition to quantitatively being an important issue in the Scandinavian public spheres, it is interesting due to its complexity. It touches upon many aspects of both the lifeworld and the realm of professional politics, linking geopolitics, cultural politics, economic politics, human rights, welfare politics, city planning and law, as well as evoking many dilemmas and causing public engagement. This is also visible in the large amount of immigration comedy that has been produced in Scandinavia since the late 1960s. Furthermore, although immigration comedy in Scandinavia has been scarcely studied, foreign studies of ethnic and racial humour tend to place themselves in two camps: Humour optimists, claiming that this kind of humour is normatively good, and humour alarmists, claiming that this kind of humour is normatively bad, often even inherently racist. Hence, comedy, and especially immigration comedy, feeds into the unavoidable normative dimension of public sphere theory in its own particular way. Immigration is

thus an interesting issue to use as a case to understand the relationship between the cultural and the political public sphere, as well as to understand how modern, mediated public spheres at large handle complex issues. This is also the aim of the mother-project this dissertation is a part of, SCANPUB, which aims at charting, analysing, and explaining the public discourse on immigration in the Scandinavian public spheres from 1970-2015 (Gripsrud, 2019).

1.2. Research questions and research design

The main research question of this dissertation is *How can TV comedy thematising immigration contribute to public opinion formation on immigration in the larger public sphere?* My central interest is what humour and comedy can *do* in the public sphere that other modes and genres cannot. The aim is thus not to empirically establish that immigration comedy had any causal consequence in processes of opinion formation, but to arrive at analytical generalisations of how humour and comedy can be used to do different kinds of work in the public sphere, which one theoretically can argue should be seen as contributions to processes of opinion formation. The word “how” is chosen as it points towards both the kind of work comedy can do, and how it can use the particularities of the humorous mode to do so. I will answer the main research question through a set of historical, text-oriented case studies of comedy and its reception in the three Scandinavian countries, Sweden, Denmark and Norway, and through the following sub-questions:

- 1. How can comedy events be historicised as parts of changes in the public sphere and its treatment of the immigration issue in Denmark, Norway and Sweden?*
- 2. How are questions of immigration addressed and negotiated in the comedy texts that are part of such events?*
- 3. How are questions of immigration addressed and negotiated in the public comedy reception that are part of such events?*

These three questions are thought of as complementary. The aim of RQ1 is to identify when comedy was a part of moments of change in the public sphere, which potentially influence the process of opinion formation as well. Such moments are therefore especially interesting cases for my purpose. RQ 2 and 3 are then aimed at understanding how respectively comedy texts and comedy reception have been used to intervene in the immigration discourse. Taken together, the questions show how comedy contribute to the public sphere as a part of various historical processes. Historicisation is a tool to provide a richer context than what can be done in a typical work of textual analysis, discourse analysis or rhetorical criticism. The question of how comedy's interventions can be seen as contributions to opinion formation can hence be answered with more solid empirical and theoretical backing.

A comedy event should here be understood as similar to a discursive event (Foucault, 2002), where the instance of discourse, or enunciation, both stages and alters the discourse system itself. Ultimately, this can lead to *ruptures*, changes, in the discourse system. I do not, however, follow Foucault precisely here, as I see a comedy event as something existing on a higher level than the single enunciation, for example the advent of immigrant comedians into an until then ethnoculturally homogenous comedy scene. In order to answer RQ 1, such comedy events were identified, which also included interpreting them in order to understand what they *meant* as changes. This has been done by using knowledge of the historical context in order to establish how the changes in the immigration comedy also intersected with other changes in the public sphere, for example how the advent of immigrant comedians was a part of the larger process where immigrants gained a voice. This kind of hermeneutic circle was thus also the background for my selection of cases: Interpreting my primary material in relation to its historical context made it clear which of the comedy events that were theoretically most interesting. It should thus be emphasised that this is not the history of how TV comedy on immigration has played a role in the Scandinavian public spheres. Instead of giving a comprehensive survey or a linear history, I will rather write a history of probes: moments in history that can be used to think about the relationship between comedy and the serious immigration discourse with a foundation in theory, and thus be used for analytical generalisation. This kind of locally oriented

st – in terms of focusing both on a moment in history and on certain theoretical problems – oriented study is of course also a historical study (Kjeldstadli, 1999, pp. 112-115): One can write history without writing a history.

The rationale behind the historical dimension in the project is thus to detect changes in the public sphere and identify comedy events that one can argue were contributions to processes of opinion formation². The original plan was to follow the SCANPUB project and start in 1970, but due to the character of my object of study, my first case is from 1989. Immigration comedy did exist in the 70s, actually in an interestingly large amount when taking the relatively low number of immigrants into account, but it was nevertheless a scattered affair, and this type of comedy became really visible in the public sphere from the late 80s. From this point, it is possible to spot significant comedy events across programmes and countries. Following this, the dissertation is structured in chapters that each discusses a set of similar cases that can be seen as such events, mainly one case from each of the three Scandinavian countries.

Two sets of cases concentrate on the comedy shows themselves, while two other sets concentrate on reception of comedy shows. The first two sets answer RQ 2. Texts are here viewed rhetorically: they are a way of doing something in the public sphere. Immigration comedy addresses the ongoing negotiations of the immigration issue, and their meaning – in a narrow sense, but also their social meaning as a part of changes in the public sphere – should be understood by explaining how they are interventions in these negotiations (Skinner, 2002, pp. 114-115). Since the comedy shows are very diverse, I will not have an over-arching analytical strategy for their analysis. Textual analysis is at its most interesting when one takes the particularities of the text at hand as a starting point. This does of course not mean that I will read the texts in a naïve, theory-free way. I have already mentioned the core assumption of my analysis: that texts *do* something. My second core assumption is that this is done *by means of* the particularities of the humorous mode, and the natural emphasis in the analyses will be on the particularities relevant in the text at hand.

² The exception is the analysis of the controversy on *Ali Reza and the Rezas* in chapter 5, which rather serves as a counterexample to make clearer the importance of the two other events discussed in the same chapter.

RQ 3 will be answered by analysing the reception of selected comedy events. The rhetorical view of texts is employed here, too, as each single instance of comedy reception of course is an intervention into the treatment of the immigration issue in the same way as comedy texts themselves are. However, serious texts in the form of news and debate are less complex than comedy texts, and the sum of them is more interesting than its parts. I therefore employ a more uniform approach here, namely Potter and Wetherell's notion *interpretive repertoires*, "a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterise and evaluate actions and events" (1987, p. 138). At the same time, the particularities of humour are central also in the analysis of these cases, where I include more than just the rhetorical and aesthetical devices of comedy: the social and cultural views and understandings of humour are important constituents of the interpretive repertoires that are used in the reception of comedy.

Regarding my material, television comedy is prioritised because it can be argued – as I do in the theory chapter – that the medium of television enjoyed a privileged position in Western, late modern national public spheres at least until around 2010. Comedy on TV does however not exist in a vacuum, and one of the chapters is mainly concerned with stage comedy. The material is drawn from the Scandinavian countries – Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. The aim is not to compare the three countries in a strict sense, but to use the small differences between the perhaps most similar nation-states in the world, both in terms of culture, political system and media system (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012; Gripsrud, 2019), as a tool to understand how fine-grained cultural and historical context matters for how the texts of the public sphere are put to work. In addition, the comparative dimension allows me to identify similar comedy events that have happened across different national contexts, and thus can be argued to be more significant. Finally, writing about my home country *and* two neighbouring countries is a fruitful strategy for handling my positionality as a researcher. Sweden and Denmark have the quality that anthropologists call *strange*: unfamiliar but not totally different. This produces more insight than what a focus solely on Norway would, as that would tap into my everyday life, habitus and silent knowledge to a much larger degree. It is easy to ignore the

obvious in cultural research, but distance might make what was once obvious conspicuous.

1.3. A short introduction to Scandinavia's political systems, media systems, immigration history, and comedy scenes

The three Scandinavian countries – Norway, Sweden and Denmark – have a shared history as well as many political, social and cultural similarities. They are all based on the so-called Nordic Model, characterised by a comprehensive welfare state and a labour market with collective bargaining, a model shared with neighbouring countries Iceland and Finland. Unlike these latter countries, the Scandinavian countries also have mutually intelligible languages. The three countries are small (at the time of writing with populations between 5 and 10 million), constitutional monarchies with multiparty, unicameral systems. Social democratic and liberal-conservative parties have been the de facto leaders of their respective political wings all over Scandinavia, although the dynamics between the parties and across political wings differ between the countries – for example, the Social Democrats have more often formed minority governments and collaborated with the political centre in Denmark than in the two other countries (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012, p. 11; Gripsrud, 2019, p. 134). Worth noting in the context of this thesis is that all countries have a right-wing populist party profiling themselves on anti-immigration – Fremskrittspartiet (The Progress Party, Frp) in Norway, Fremskridtspartiet (The Progress Party) and later Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party, DF) in Denmark and Sverigedemokraterna (Swedish Democrats, SD) in Sweden, but these parties have very different histories and have played different roles.

Scandinavia is characterised by a democratic corporatist media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), where particularly the high newspaper circulation and the strong position of the public service broadcasters – DR in Denmark, NRK in Norway and SR/SVT in Sweden – is important to mention. The three broadcasters had monopoly until around 1990, so their television channels were until then practically the only choice for the majority of the population that had no access to satellite or cable

television. This indicates that the national public spheres of the three countries historically have been strong, as they were able to connect audiences from various social strata and make them into a national public – which also makes Scandinavia a good (albeit perhaps a bit too ideal to be representative) context to study the workings of the cultural public sphere. It should also be noted that humour and comedy has been an important part of public service television in the three countries, as it has been seen as a way to both attract audiences to the channels and to fulfil their public service missions of creating socially relevant programming (Bruun, 2011, pp. 127, 146-149; L. O. Larsen, 2001; Sjögren, 1997, pp. 19-23; Ytreberg, 2001, pp. 236-238, 253-257).

When it comes to immigration history, we can spot some differences between the three Scandinavian countries. Both in terms of admittance and in terms of integration policy, Denmark has been more restrictive, Sweden more liberal, while Norway occupies a sort of middle position (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012, p. 4). This is also mirrored in the immigration discourse, as the Swedish press coverage appears most immigration friendly, Denmark least so – and Norway again in the middle (Gripsrud, 2019, p. 133). This is yet another reason for why Scandinavia is an interesting context for investigating immigration humour – as the three countries are so similar but nevertheless seem different when it comes to the public treatment of the immigration issue, both in discourse and material politics. That being said, the three countries also share many patterns here. This thesis is not the place to dig deep into these, but some need to be mentioned. Until WW2, all three countries were ethnoculturally very homogenous (ibid, p. 132), then labour immigration started to arrive in Sweden immediately after the war and to the two other countries from the mid 60s on. Yugoslavs and Finns were the major groups arriving in Sweden, while many Pakistanis arrived in Norway and many Turks in Denmark. In the 1970s, all three countries introduced a halt to labour immigration, but asylum immigration and family reunification, mainly from Asian countries, escalated from the 1980s on and was the dominating source of immigration until 2004, when labour immigration again increased as a result of the EU extension eastwards. In 2012, 19 percent of the Swedish, 10 percent of the Danish and 13 percent of the Norwegian population had an immigrant background (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012, pp. 8-9).

There are multiple patterns in the immigration discourse that are shared between the three countries, but I will only mention two here, which are interconnected: culturalization and the problematisation of difference. Culturalization pertains to how the immigration issue gradually has turned into a question of cultural differences between immigrants and the majority population, a tendency both qualitative and quantitative studies have demonstrated (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019, p. 145; Yılmaz, 2016). This can be coupled with the problematisation of difference: how this cultural difference is understood as a social problem. Many scholars using qualitative methods have argued that this kind of problematisation is hegemonic in the immigration discourse in all the three countries (Brune, 1998; Gullestad, 2002a, 2004; Hervik, 1999, 2004), and quantitative studies lend some support that at least problem-orientation indeed is dominant in the contemporary immigration discourse (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019). As we shall see, immigration comedy also digs into this issue.

The professional comedy scenes in the three countries have historically been dominated by revue, which in its Scandinavian version is a combination of literary cabaret and a more lavish variety shows. Content and aesthetic formulas have largely travelled between the three countries, and there has been an open door between the revue milieus and the entertainment divisions in the public broadcasting stations. That being said, a certain opposition has always existed between the conservative impulses of professional revue and the more radical and young television artists – who nevertheless have tended to have their comedy education from revue as well as work in revue later in their career. Revue is popular both as amateur entertainment and in its professional-commercial form, but has never gained a high artistic status in Norway and Denmark. In Sweden, on the other hand, artists like Povel Ramel and Hasse & Tage became critically acclaimed and ventured to some degree into the realm of fine arts. They also had a strong connection to student milieus through student revues, called *spex*. This is perhaps the reason why revue seems to have enjoyed a stronger position on Swedish television in the 70s and 80s than in the neighbouring countries, where formats developed especially for television, influenced by comedians working at the BBC, dominated – an influence that also was visible in Sweden (Bruun, 2011, pp. 32-35; L. O. Larsen, 2001; Sjögren, 1997, pp. 156-182). Since the early 1990s,

stand-up comedy became an alternative – and again an opposition – to revue, which also opened the door for new types of Anglo-American influence. There has also always been broadcast longer formats like sitcoms, comedy dramas, farces, and comedy films in Scandinavia, but the 1990s was nevertheless a period where sitcoms heavily inspired by the new sitcom-wave from the USA were introduced to Scandinavian screens as a ‘new genre’.

Television comedy is a popular entertainment genre in Scandinavia, but it should be noted that viewed from the production side, it appears more exclusionary. TV comedy has until recently been produced by self-organised, relatively independent editorial offices who have also been in charge of recruitment (Bruun, 2011, pp. 127-169; Sjögren, 1997, pp. 180-238; Ytreberg, 2001, pp. 79-114), which obviously is a way to reproduce the same tastes, sensibilities and production cultures of a small clique. Furthermore, the comedians largely have a middle-class background and tend to come from the nation’s capitals, a tendency especially strong in Sweden with its spex-tradition, and where the so-called “Gothenburg humour” in the 70s and 80s saw itself as an oppositional alternative to the hegemonic comedy scene in Stockholm. Ethnocultural diversity has been scarce until recently. On the content side, television comedy has not been too sensitive to the large oral folk culture of especially jokes, but also to some degree to amateur revue and humorous music, which mirrors a very different view of the immigration issue, as I will discuss later. Scandinavian television comedy thus seems to be a middle-class affair when it comes to the production side, even though it is popular in terms of ratings and audience figures.

When it comes to how immigration has been treated in comedy, I have as already mentioned found sketches and revue songs about the issue starting in the late 60s, but it became a stock topic for comedy in the early 90s and has in quantitative terms only become more prominent since then. Comedians with an immigrant background appeared in the stand-up scene in the late 1990s, as I will discuss in chapter 4, or in the late 1980s if one includes Lasse Lindroth, an adoptee from Iran who entered the Swedish comedy scene under the stage name Ali Hussein, and largely poked fun at stereotypes about immigrants. Since the late 2000s, comedy shows made by immigrants and targeted towards immigrant audiences have been a staple in the

public service channels, as I will discuss in chapter 6. However, the most prominent butt of the joke in Scandinavian immigration comedy is not immigrants, but those who oppose immigration, which will be discussed in chapter 3.

Regarding the public reception of immigration comedy, the standard response has been celebratory: comedy shows poking fun at issues related to immigration have been seen as valuable, important and often much needed. That does not mean that there has been no controversy, typically accusations of racism, of which I will discuss some cases in chapter 5. When it comes to scholarly attention, on the other hand, this has been scarce. There have been some mentions of comedy movies in studies on Scandinavian migrant and diaspora film (Bakøy, 2010; Hjort, 2005; Wright, 2005), where especially the work of Carina Tigervall (2005) should be highlighted as she draws on scholarly work on the Swedish immigration discourse at large in her analysis of popular comedy movies. Even less attention has been given to TV formats, with the recent exceptions of L. O. Larsen (2015), discussing the Norwegian sitcom *Ali Reza and the Rezas* as a space of in-betweenness and its reception as a broadening of the public sphere, Rosenfeldt and Hjarvard (2017), who analysed the debate about the Danish sketch show *Det Slører Stadig* as an instance where the cultural public sphere was a corrective to the political one by including more frames and voices, and Karlsson Minganti (2014), discussing how humour as a norm has been negotiated by young Swedish Muslim comedians. The main exception is Berglund and Ljuslinder (1999), who in their impressive work *Humor som samhällsmoral (Humour as societal moral)* textually analysed *all* instances of immigration comedy in the most popular Swedish humour shows between 1981 and 1993, as well as conducted focus group audience studies around these sketches. They demonstrated that Swedish immigration comedy at the time had a clear pro-immigration tendency, a finding I also did and that can be extended to Scandinavia as a whole, but questioned its power to challenge prejudice and established patterns of thought. *Humor som samhällsmoral* is clearly an important contribution, but lacks the social context of the immigration debate at large and is also of course a bit dated. With the exception of the above-mentioned works, the study of Scandinavian immigration comedy is hence a largely uncharted territory.

That being said, it seems peculiar to write about humour and immigration in Scandinavia without treating the obvious case: the Mohammad cartoon scandal. That is nevertheless exactly what I will do. One reason is that this event *is* thoroughly described and discussed in the scholarly literature, from multiple perspectives. More important is its status as an exceptional event. It certainly influenced how immigration, and especially Islam, was treated in Scandinavia. In this dissertation, however, I choose to rather focus on the everyday workings of the public sphere: less spectacular, at most including a *small* scandal, but probably not less important. After all, it is the many small changes and developments that typically alter public opinion and even history.

Chapter 2: The cultural public sphere, humour, and the writing of history: theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches

2.1. Public sphere theory as a framework for investigating the political role of expressive culture

In its Habermasian version, the public sphere is an independent social arena where citizens put forward demands of control and governance over the state, by means of public opinion generated through publicity. Democratic decisions should be based on domination-free discussions where everyone can participate and does so based on norms of rationality in order to reach an outcome that benefits the common good (Habermas, 1992, 1996, 2002). In my view, there are two main advantages of public sphere theory for the study of the relationship between politics and the arts. The first advantage pertains to how a democratic and an epistemic dimension are intertwined in public sphere theory: the public sphere is about the formation of attitudes and creation of knowledge with the purpose of making political decisions, and pivotal in this process is the participation of those who are influenced by these decisions. Any constructive, or destructive, potential expressive culture might have for democracy can be studied as part of this epistemic-democratic process.

The normative ideal behind Habermas' version of public sphere theory has not gone uncontested. Critics of Habermas writing from rhetorical and agonistic perspectives have argued that it is neither possible nor desirable to reach an agreement of what the common good is (Kock & Villadsen, 2012; Mouffe, 1993, 2005b). More interesting, in my view, are the revisionist historian critics of Habermas, who argue that the idea of a common good has served as a cloak to cover the power relations of a public sphere where white, bourgeois men were taken to be the universal standard, and that not only the standards of the common good, but also the understanding of what counts as matters of common concern was measured by this standard (Eley, 1992; Fraser, 1989; 1992, pp. 128-132; Johansen, 2019, pp. 472-475; Ryan, 1992; Warner, 1992).

This thesis is not the place to continue these theoretical debates, but they provide a background for my own normative position that will be used in this dissertation. I view the public sphere as an arena for participation and plurality, where the value of this participation is connected not only to its democratic merits, but also to its procedural epistemic merits. With diverse participation, different perspectives can be introduced, and this can be done through different means. This is valuable not only due to the non-ideal state of empirical public spheres, as they are not actually domination free and thus other means than rational discussion alone might have to be employed (Elster, 1986, pp. 119-120; Habermas, 1992, pp. 441-443; 2006b), but also because human lifeworld and experience, in all its diversity, will benefit from diverse representation in the public sphere also when it comes to form (Arendt, 1958, pp. 175-176; Fraser, 1992, pp. 125-127; Gripsrud, 2008; Warner, 1992; 2002, pp. 87-89). A rational-critical discussion is perhaps the best *final step* to reach agreement of the common good, but to understand the complexity of human lifeworlds, other means, like humour and comedy, might be better suited on the road to that point.

How to understand what should count as a step on this road is a second advantage a public sphere perspective has in research on the political relevance of the arts. Through the explicit connection between discourse and political action, public sphere theory has developed concepts to account for how this connection works in the empirical world. This is the tricky matter when studying human activity that not explicitly can be seen as political action in the sense of seeking to influence law-making and governance, for example expressive culture. The concept I will use is *public opinion formation*, which can be used as a heuristic tool to connect the micro and macro levels of the public sphere: explaining how what goes on in texts and cultural practices are relevant for larger social processes. Furthermore, I will, inspired by Hauser, Warner, and Skinner, concentrate on the texts of the public sphere, as it is through texts public opinion is accessible to publics, and advance a *textual-historical view of public opinion formation*. I will present this closer in a later section, and first elaborate how opinion formation is understood and how it has been dealt with in research on the cultural public sphere.

2.1.1. The public sphere as an arena for opinion formation

In Habermas' later works, an analytical distinction is made between *opinion formation* and *will formation* (Habermas, 1987, 2006a), where the former happens in *weak publics* that cannot make any binding decision (Fraser, 1992; Habermas, 2006a).

Opinion formation is the process of collective learning that yields a communicative power (Habermas, 1984, 1987), whereas will formation is the transformation of this communicative power into political decisions, mediated by deliberative discourse in the political system proper: governments, parliaments and courts (ibid, 2006a). This is the background for conceiving the public sphere as a sounding-board and a filter-bed that detects societal problems, feeds them into the loop of public opinion formation and eventually puts them on the agenda of deciding bodies (Habermas, 1996, p. 143).

In this model, the mass media play an essential role as a nexus that detects, filters and edits the wild flux of *published opinions* from all the different actors in the public sphere (Habermas, 2006a) – from politicians to activists to experts to artists. Although Habermas probably imagined quality newspapers as the typical executor of this function (Rasmussen, 2016, pp. 60, 92-93), it makes more sense historically and sociologically to view *television* as the central element of the media-based public sphere since the WW2. Television gathered the largest audience, it was (in Europe) partly integrated with the political system and the nation-state through the public broadcasters, and did also to a certain extent bring different social strata of society in contact with each other to a larger degree than any other medium (Dahlgren, 1995; Gripsrud, 1999, 2010; Murdock, 1999; Williams, 2003) – at least until the internet became really prominent. Furthermore, John Ellis (2000) argues that television, due to its form of production and phenomenological qualities for its audiences, play a central role in modern information societies as “a vast mechanism for processing the material of the witnessed word into more narrativized, explained forms” (p. 78), the process of *working through*. Compared to public sphere theory, working through is certainly a more open-ended process than opinion formation. This does not mean that it cannot be a part of opinion formation, as it, as Ellis argues, is a process that makes the unknown more familiar (pp. 85), constantly adds new explanations to difficult material (pp. 79-80) and returns repeatedly in new ways to the same social antagonisms (pp. 87).

Although the process of working through in principle never ends, it might of course influence other processes in the social world, and thus be one of many inputs into opinion formation. I will not actively use Ellis' notion in this dissertation, but it is an important reminder of how texts and practices that are less directly political nevertheless can be important in the shaping of our understanding and attitudes, and thus also an important part of the theoretical rationale for my emphasis on television comedy.

A problem raised by perspectives like Ellis', however, is that when looking at opinion formation in the media, it remains a problem to pin down the public opinion. It seems too all-encompassing to call everything broadcast on TV, *all* published opinions, public opinion. Although they are publicly accessible, each and every one of them cannot be representative for *La volonté générale*. On the other hand, it seems too limited to *equate* public opinion with the will of the people in the form of the political decisions that ultimately are made, as it seems like Habermas to some degree does in his later works, as do scholars working within the deliberative systems-paradigm (See for example Chambers, 2017; Habermas, 2006a). This would for example exclude vibrant and visible public opinions that nevertheless do not turn into policy – at least not evidently.

The best answer is probably a compromise: public opinion is something more than empirical published opinions, but also something more than an opinion which stands in a 1:1 relationship with policy. A good alternative is to view public opinion as a process rather than a product (Hauser, 1998), going on in a public sphere viewed as “a medium for the exchange of social experiences with the aim of developing a community of action” (Gripsrud, 1990, p. 35, my translation). This is how I understand public opinion in this dissertation. A benefit of this process-view for my purpose is how it creates an opening for understanding how public opinion formation includes more than the ‘pure’ process of deliberation and its outcome. It is likely that it is in the processes that need to precede deliberation that expressive culture can play a role.

One example is how public opinion formation entails a certain orientation towards if not the common good, at least towards matters of common interest (see also

Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2010), but that it is not pre-given what a matter of common interest is. This point has been central in the works of many feminist critics of Habermas, where especially Nancy Fraser (1989, 1992) has pointed out how issues that formerly were seen as private concerns, for example wife battering, have been politicised when different social groups have formed subaltern counterpublics, publics who in one way or another define themselves as opposed to the hegemonic public, for example the feminist movement. As we see, this process of *politicisation* is a matter of access to and participation in the public sphere by those affected by a concrete issue, but a central point for Fraser is that it also is a way to change the hegemonic means of communication, as new forms of discourse are necessary in order to understand new issues as political. This is an explicit opening for the value non-deliberative discourse, like expressive culture, can have in the public sphere.

Fraser is also concerned with how participation in the public sphere and the politicisation of needs also is a process that “involves the crystallization of new social identities” (1989, p. 303). This is similar to central ideas put forward by another public sphere theoretician, Axel Honneth (1995), who also has engaged in debate with Fraser (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Honneth attempts to describe the grammar of social conflict through different social groups’ demands of and struggles for *recognition* from society at large. According to Honneth, recognition is the basis for both social cohesion *and* for social change, as it is a way to define both individuals and social groups as parts of society on various levels, but also a mechanism through which one can claim that one has been *disrespected* and deserves to get this mended through recognition (Honneth, 2007). This way, new dimensions of human life and new social groups will eventually be recognised as an important part of the social fabric. There are clear overlaps between recognition theory and the idea of politicisation that Fraser advocates, but recognition theory provides a more sophisticated account of how turning an issue into a matter of common interest also is inherently connected with identity formation in the public sphere – and how social and individual identities are interdependent. For example, an important part of the history of the labour movement was also how the understanding of poverty changed from being a matter of the

individual's responsibility to a matter of the social order, and thus started to fuel social organisation around a shared identity: the worker (Johansen, 2019, pp. 376-385).

Honneth's understanding of disrespect was originally formulated as a lack of sufficient respect regarding the value of a social group's labour, but I see no problem in extending it to include symbolic expressions of disrespect like discriminatory rhetoric or hate speech. This also mirrors Taylor's (1994) conception of recognition, which is more explicitly geared towards living together in multicultural societies. In such cases, struggles over recognition will also be *boundary struggles* where different types of speech acts are deemed illegitimate in the public sphere. According to Midtbøen et al. (2017), institutional elites have the power to draw up and define the boundaries of free speech in different ways. This kind of boundary-work is continuously challenged, where the debate of what should be defined as hateful speech, or even inherently problematic political positions, and thus illegitimate are two relevant examples here. These contestations also happen in the public sphere through different means.

The reason for presenting these three different, but related, notions – politicisation, recognition, and boundary struggles – is that each of them can serve as a more precise concept that I will draw on to understand how comedy can contribute to opinion formation, since they can be used to understand how the process of public opinion formation proceeds before it arrives at the stage of deliberation³: It goes through the stages of understanding if the issue is political at all, determining the social identities of the participants involved and their relation to the public at large, and debating whether certain speech acts and political positions are legitimate. All these processes are also to some degree meta-debates about the public sphere itself. As such, they also have democratic and epistemic values beyond being preparatory stages for deliberation: Habermas underlines that the politically relevant workings of the public sphere not only consist of directly influencing the political system, but also “reflexively [...] revitalizing and enlarging civil society and the public sphere as well as confirming their own identities and capacities to act” (Habermas, 1996). Public

³ But they are not meant as an exhaustive list of such processes.

opinion formation is thus both a thematisation of societal issues and a continuous self-thematisation – a collective learning process considering both the problems we face and the question of who we are (see also Peters, 2008).⁴

The question for this thesis then becomes if, and how, the cultural public sphere is an arena for different pre-deliberative processes of opinion formation, a question which becomes more complicated as the cultural public sphere *by definition* exists for its own sake, not for any political function.

2.1.2. The cultural public sphere

In Habermas' account, literature, the arts and their institutions had a pivotal role in the development of the European bourgeois public sphere. A central part of this was the development of the artworld, where art became an independent institution disconnected from its earlier functions in court and church, which created the material basis for the idea that art exists for art itself. Due to this idea, art developed into a commodity closely intertwined with the market character of bourgeois society – a quality that did secure the profanity of art as well as the accessibility of art to everyone, at least in principle (see also Adorno, 2013; Bourdieu, 1993; Danto, 1964; Habermas, 2002). This made it possible to introduce new areas of the bourgeois life experience to artistic treatment, and to construct publics around works of art where anyone could discuss them and the lifeworld issues they were about.

The literary public sphere was thus constituted by autonomy from the other spheres of life. This seemingly creates a paradox: by being freed from politics and the

⁴ This interest in pre-deliberative processes is shared with an important strand in contemporary public sphere theory, *deliberative systems theory*, which aims to go “beyond the study of individual institutions and processes to examine their interaction in the system as a whole” (Mansbridge et al., 2012, p. 2). I will nevertheless not apply this theory, for two reasons: It provides no concrete analytical tools that can be used to analyse the *actual* processes of opinion formation in different parts of deliberative systems; and with its systemic emphasis focused on a specific outcome – solving political problems through deliberation – it does in my view reduce the different parts of the public sphere to the function they have towards the end-goal, and thus excludes reflection of how the public sphere also is an arena for self-thematisation regarding both subjectivities and the public sphere in itself. In addition, it rectifies public opinion by treating it as something that can be settled once for all.

day to day lifeworld concerns, the literary public sphere became a powerful area for examining these lifeworld concerns and even for conducting political action. Such a claim becomes less paradoxical when taking into account how autonomy was instrumental in creating independent institutions necessary for political critique. In addition, the activities in the literary public sphere – and perhaps in the public sphere in general – can be seen as having a certain play-character, meaning that being less goal oriented gave these activities a flair of freedom which again gave them creative and political potency (Høibraaten, 2002, p. XL). That being said, since the cultural public sphere is constituted by it being separate from the field of politics, there will always be a tension between the political and the apolitical aspects of expressive culture, with the consequence that we cannot a priori assume that the arts have a political function. Rather, we have the burden of proof to demonstrate it in each single case.

As Gripsrud (2008) points out, scholars interested in developing democratic theory have not cared too much about expressive culture, which probably is the reason for a lack of systematic theory building on the topic. There is, however, not a lack of contributions. One can sort these in three branches: Functions-oriented, audience-oriented and historically oriented.

Functions-oriented works on the cultural public sphere is probably the most diverse branch and seeks to make general theories of the political qualities of different modes, media and genres. It is thus characterised by a preoccupation of texts, often applying existing concepts from critical theory, visual culture, literary theory or rhetorical theory, but also occasionally developing new concepts. Humour and its related modes has been a field of interest here, where for example Willett (2008) and Hariman (2008) have argued the case for respectively irony and parody's power to provide vitality of free thought in the public sphere. One of the most prominent contributions in this branch, however, is about quite another genre, namely Martha Nussbaum's (1995) theory of *narrative imagination*, where literary fiction is seen as an important tool for civic education. To read fiction, according to Nussbaum, is a way to train the empathic and compassionate faculties of the reader, important civic faculties as they make it possible to understand how an individual's likelihood to fulfil

common human aspirations depends on their social circumstances. In addition, empathy and compassion are the basis of a different set of values than the economic-rationalistic one. Nussbaum rarely refers explicitly to democratic theory in this part of her work, but the many references to civic virtue, citizenship and the public sphere as well as her complete body of work indicate how the theory is grounded in a liberal republicanism (Alexander, 2008) where the public sphere and participation in it is seen as paramount.

Nussbaum's theory is clearly based on the particularities of literary fiction, where the linking of aesthetical features of the text and democratic values is especially interesting, as the virtue-ethical framework Nussbaum operates within makes a theoretical link between what goes on in the act of reading and the fostering of civic values, based on the affordances of fiction. In spite of this solid theoretical background, Nussbaum has been criticised for lack of empirical grounding in real-life contexts (Keen, 2006, pp. 214, 221-223; Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015, pp. 81-82; Moi, 2013, p. 62). Studies based on her ideas struggle to establish the link between narrative imagination and empathy happening in the act of reading, and the development of empathy and social awareness as a lasting consequence of reading – not to mention to demonstrate whether these faculties actually are put to work in a civic context or not – for example by changing, or maintaining, public opinion about marginalised groups. The same criticism can be extended to Willet and Hariman, although they have escaped the kind of critical attention given to Nussbaum, perhaps due to a combination of their lesser fame and the relatively sharp divide between humour pessimists and humour optimists. With these objections in mind, historical research (Hunt, 2007) makes points similar to Nussbaum in this respect by pointing out how the reading of fiction was what made possible the development of universal human rights. In other words, functional perspectives like narrative imagination cannot be simply debunked, but need to be supplemented by more empirically oriented research, for example *audience-oriented studies*.

In this second branch of research on the relationship between the cultural and the political public sphere, the most famous concept is probably *cultural citizenship*. As defined by Joke Hermes (2006), this pertains to the bonding and community

building, and reflection on that bonding, that is implied in text-related practices of popular culture. Hermes stresses that popular culture links the domains of public and private, as well as offering us an opportunity to ponder our fears, ideals and hopes for society – “how popular culture addresses us in our role as citizen” (Hermes, 2006, p. 28). This approach has – explicitly or implicitly – been used in multiple empirical studies (Hermes, 2005; P. Larsen, 2010; Lindtner & Dahl, 2019; van Zoonen, 2005, 2007; van Zoonen, Muller, & Alinejad, 2007), including a study on humour by Joanna Doona (2016). She suggests that comedy engagement amongst young Swedish adults fosters an important alternative route to cultural and political citizenship, that allows young people to deal with their experience of uneasiness regarding the media and political system while still staying connected to the world of politics.

The main merits of this approach are the focus on how the cultural pre-conditions for participation in the public sphere, and thus opinion formation, is constructed through text related practices; as well as the attention paid to the role of emotions as well as matters of power and exclusionary mechanism. The main critique towards the concept of cultural citizenship is that it is fuzzy and hard to operationalise in empirical research. As a consequence, the link between cultural engagement and political processes becomes spurious and opaque, as Torgeir Uberg Nærland (2019b) has claimed. He suggests *public connection* as an alternative theoretical approach, which refers to citizen’s possession of “an orientation towards a public world where matters of common concern are addressed” (Couldry et al., 2010) as a minimum requirement for functional democracies. Using qualitative interview data combined with media diaries as well as background data of his informants’ media usage and socioeconomic status, Nærland presents five functions of watching TV series for public connection (2019b) and highlights how this is interconnected with social background and media repertoires (2019a).

All these studies and approaches present important insights on expressive culture’s role in the public sphere. Common for all of them is, evidently, the focus on citizenship in its various guises. This is an important dimension of the public sphere, but not the only one. As citizenship is located in the individual, as a quality that enables us to participate in the public sphere, it necessarily coincides with opinion

formation, but cannot be conflated with it. Ultimately, opinion formation from a public sphere-perspective is a question of social change (or lack thereof), rather than a question of the qualities and capabilities of the citizens. The branch of research that covers this best is the *historically oriented*.

This kind of research has often been conducted within the realms of the traditional disciplinary fields like Nordic studies (Gripsrud, 1981, 1990; Østberg, 2018), Dutch studies (Nieuwenhuis, 2017), history (Townsend, 1997), or theatre history (Balme, 2014), but also within the broader umbrella of cultural studies (Kuipers, 2011; Zijp, 2018, 2019). As a consequence, this line of research is very diverse both theoretically and empirically. All the cited contributions do however share a combination of textual analysis – even if it sometimes is very rudimentary – and contextual analysis, which seeks to understand the nexus between the cultural event in question and the common concerns of the public sphere. For example, Balme (2014) and Kuipers (2011) look at instances where expressive culture itself – theatre and cartoons, respectively – has been the matter up for debate in the political part of the public sphere. Townsend (1997) and Østberg (2018) argue that satirical magazines were used to carve out a space for critique in the public spheres of the 19th century, while Gripsrud (1981, 1990) investigates how amateur theatre played a role in both the ideological and the organisational formation of counterpublics. Finally, Zijp (2018, 2019) discusses the ‘feedback loop’ between the cultural and the political public spheres through cases from the Dutch cabaret tradition, taking as starting points both cultural products and specific political debates.

Two of these deserve closer attention. Christopher Balme (2014) has as his central thesis that modern theatre best should be seen as a *private* sphere, despite being publicly accessible and legally defined as a public space. This is because modernist theatre rarely manages to engage with debates outside the small circle of its special interest audience. Although theatre often claims to be politically engaged by having political issues as the subject of performances, their treatment of these issues is rarely picked up again by the larger public sphere. Thus, the feedback loop is cut off and ends in the blackbox, so to speak. Another aspect of modernist theatre’s privacy is how it frequently transgresses boundaries of sex, violence and blasphemy, which

Balme claims is possible only because going to the theatre *in practice* is viewed as a private matter between consenting adults. In a real public space, these kinds of transgressions would be highly problematic. It is in fact on occasions when they *are* picked up in the public sphere outside the theatre that theatre manages to play a role in the public sphere as an indicator of social conflict, and sometimes even as a crowbar that changes public opinion. Furthermore, Balme argues that these debates rarely fulfil the criteria of rational-critical debate, but due to how they regenerate through the public sphere, and sometimes even seem to change public opinion, should be seen as a part of what Habermas (2006b) calls *the wild public sphere*, which resists organisation and where different forms of communication and expression far from deliberative ideals are permissible and even beneficial.

Balme's account is interesting, especially as a warning against celebratory accounts of the cultural public sphere. He defends his main claim through numerous historical case studies starting from the puritan anti-theatre movement in pre-Cromwellian England to recent debates over depictions of the Prophet Mohammad. He shows how, even though the theatrical texts themselves play little role in the debates starting in the theatre, the cultural status of theatre and its special location in society and the public sphere does play a role in how these debates play out. I will draw on this point when analysing the public reception of comedy, which clearly is structured by cultural views on humour's powers and value. Another of Balme's findings that also was visible in my material is how the debates in the public sphere, and thus the formation of opinion, also is an arena where different social groups try to seize an opportunity to exercise discursive power, for example an international Catholic movement in a case where a performance was accused for being blasphemous. Balme's study is exemplary as a demonstration of the value historicisation has in understanding how the cultural public sphere plays a role in opinion formation.

However, when arguing that the theatrical texts themselves have little value, he treats the theatre audience in a strange way. Although he mentions how theatre and other arts was a way of thematising private experiences of the bourgeois public in Habermas' original model, he does not seem to be open to the idea that something similar could happen with a contemporary theatre audience. Actually, it sometimes

seems like the only social role he imagines people who watch modernist theatre can have is the one of theatre audience. After they watch a performance, they go home, never to speak of or think about it again – or to do anything else in the public sphere, for that matter. This is of course an exaggeration from my side, but it nevertheless illustrates the problems of emphasising the feedback loop model of Habermas' later conceptions of the public sphere too much. It is indeed possible that expressive culture that does not generate debate nevertheless plays a role in the public sphere, but what this role eventually is needs to be grasped by different concepts and methods.

An important work in this regard, also with theatre as its object of study, is Jostein Gripsrud's (1990) study of amateur theatre in the New Norwegian language movement⁵ between 1890 and 1940. Although he never uses the concept of camp public, developed by Negt and Kluge (1993) and referring to a counterpublic that stands in a dialectical opposition to the dominant public sphere, it is relatively clear from his writing that he views the New Norwegian language movement as such a camp public, which is also supported by his earlier work on the Norwegian labour movement's amateur theatre (1981), where he explicitly uses the concept. From this perspective, he analyses both the comedies used in the amateur performances, relates them to the writings of Aasen and Vinje, the ideological founders of the New Norwegian movement, and situates them in their social context. Based on this, he argues that the amateur comedies should be seen as a way to process a set of social experiences pivotal to the New Norwegian language movement: The tension between modernity and tradition, the tension between the New Norwegian language movement and the dominant national public sphere, and the tension between the 'genuine'

⁵ *New Norwegian* or *New Norse*, *nynorsk*, is one of two written varieties of Norwegian. The original aim was to construct a written language that formed an abstracted unity from the different spoken dialects in Norway, as well as having a clear historical connection to old Norse, as if the Danish influence stemming from the personal union with and later colonisation by Denmark never existed. New Norwegian has since the beginning been a minority language, and its promotion is the key cause for the New Norwegian Language Movement, *målrørsla*, although together with other, associated cultural causes, from popular self-education to the promotion of other minority languages at home and abroad.

impulses from farmers and the refinement of these impulses by intellectuals and teachers. Furthermore, he argues that this processing of experiences both was a way to constitute and control what the New Norwegian language movement should be, as well as relating it to the wider, national public sphere.

Gripsrud's work combines close reading of texts with great sensitivity to historical context, with an emphasis on public debate in a wide sense. It is important to note that the social experiences he discusses cannot be conflated with political issues in the narrow sense, e.g. the matters that eventually could be put up for deliberation and turned into political decisions. Rather, the opinion formation he discusses is the formation of opinions about *who we are* and what the public sphere *is*. Gripsrud demonstrates how this formation can happen in the cultural public sphere, paying attention to both the particularities of texts and the particularities of their context, including the connection to the wider national public sphere. His work is also interesting in light of the barometer thesis of humour, as he argues that when a comedy piece mirrors social tensions, it also processes them for its audiences and thus contributes to opinion formation. While Balme demonstrates how the feedback loop of the public sphere can be useful when studying the politics of art, Gripsrud shows how an account of the cultural public sphere that takes one step back from the daily newspaper debates has its merits as well. They are both empiricists rather than theorists: although public sphere theory is their overarching perspective, they do not commit to rigid appliance of theoretical models but have the empirical material as their starting points: the texts of the public sphere, interpreted in their particular historical context. Their example will be followed in this dissertation, by taking a *textual-historical view of public opinion formation*.

2.1.3. A textual-historical view of public opinion formation

A text-oriented view on public opinion, and even on the public sphere per se, is visible in Habermas' earliest work. Here, public opinion is not manifest, but something that can be abstracted from the collective reasoning of the bourgeois public – a result of all the texts in circulation. This idea, which is not only an academic conception but indeed a part of the bourgeois public's self-understanding, is inspired both by Kant's theory of

public reason and Rousseau's idea of the general will. In this respect, it should be noted that public opinion here equates will formation legitimated by rational-critical discussion, through which the bourgeoisie put forward their demands of control over the state, what Hauser (1998) calls *the rational deliberation model of public opinion*, characterised by consensus and empirically tangible through its political outcomes. This model is also prominent in Habermas' late work, where he seems to argue that considered public opinion is only really manifested through voting (2006a, p. 418) – a strangely reductive view in light of the richness of his earlier thought on the subject.

As Hauser points out, it is indeed questionable to claim that there is, or ever has been, only one single public opinion. Such a view would in its furthest consequence remove the conflict dimension from politics and lock down one solution as the only correct one, which would privilege one hegemonic project rather than being an abstract common good, as Mouffe (1993, 2005a, 2005b) has contested in her critique of deliberative democracy. Hauser proposes the alternative of conceptualising public opinion as based on actual discursive practices (1998, p. 85). This would entail inferring public opinion from the rhetorical exchanges that goes on in all levels of the public sphere, although Hauser puts a special emphasis on vernacular rhetoric. He argues that a rhetorical model is the best in order to avoid reification of public opinion, and rather understand how it emerges and takes form, as well as how it is connected to empirical publics and their development of common understanding through dialogue with others. I would add that this perspective also allows one to distinguish between will formation and opinion formation, as opinion formation as a consequence of this thinking cannot be seen as the outcome of a process, but as the process itself, which goes through many stages before it eventually turns into 'general will'. A benefit of this conceptualisation is that it makes it possible to investigate how public opinion changes and is contested in the empirical world, taking the pluralism and differentiation of the public sphere into account.

This kind of rhetorical, text-oriented perspective is sensitive to process, context and contingency, and thus avoids the pitfalls Habermas was accused of in the development of his original theory: to ignore the tension between normative ideals and the empirical data these ideals are developed from, and as a result produce general

sociological categories that are too rigid when applied on the diverse empirical reality (DiCenzo, Delap, & Ryan, 2011, p. 196; Habermas et al., 1992; Lindtner, 2014, pp. 81-82; Tjønneland, 2018, pp. 3-17). Furthermore, Hauser's model of public opinion is actually conspicuously similar to how Habermas paints the development of a bourgeois public sphere and the public opinion(s) growing out of it. The bourgeois public was a reading public, indefinite in principle through the universal circulation of printed material, involved in a dialogue "with themselves about themselves". This makes it clear that the bourgeois public opinion was to be found in the process of writing, reading, and discussing – and it can even be argued that the public sphere was constituted by print material, as it was both the foundation for and the manifest demonstration of public opinion and the social activity that produced it.

Such a perspective has been advanced by Michael Warner (1990), who claims that not only public opinion, but also *publics* themselves always are constituted by rhetorical address. Publics cannot be conflated with empirical audiences or pre-given social groups: a public "comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation" (Warner, 2002, p. 50). This, Warner argues, is also the key for the ability publics (and public opinion) have to be drivers of social change:

A public might be real and efficacious, but its reality lies in just this reflexivity by which an addressable object is conjured into being in order to enable the very discourse that gives it existence.

A public in this sense is as much notional as empirical. It is also partial, since there could be an infinite number of publics within the social totality. This sense of the term is completely modern; it is the only kind of public for which there is no other term. Neither *crowd* nor *audience* nor *people* nor *group* will capture the same sense. The difference shows us that the idea of a public, unlike a concrete audience or the public of any polity, is text-based – even though publics are increasingly organized around visual or audio texts. Without the idea of texts that can be picked up at different times and in different places by otherwise unrelated people, we would not imagine a public as an entity that embraces all the users of that text, whoever they might be. Often, the texts themselves are not even recognized as texts – as for example

with visual advertising or the chattering of a DJ – but the publics they bring into being are still discursive in the same way. (Warner, 2002, p. 51)

Warner's conception of publics and the public sphere has the benefit that it reminds us that most of our activities in the public sphere consists in looking (or listening) rather than talking (2002, p. 63)– in other words, that we are lurkers rather than participants. This is in line with more recent critique of the so-called “participatory turn” in audience research (Carpentier, 2011; Livingstone, 2013), which has been criticised both for ignoring how people most of the time engage with the media (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015) and larger political and ethical questions on not only advancing, but also being responsive to political demands (Dreher & Mondal, 2018). For my purpose, it also has an advantage over Hauser's rhetorical model, as the latter is heavily based on an idea of the importance of vernacular rhetoric, meaning that ordinary people talk together and participate in other ways in the rhetorical exchanges that make up public opinion, similar to Mansbridge's (1999) conception of everyday talk, and more recent empirical studies of how talk sparked by other genres and modes can be considered as vernacular, political rhetoric (Andersen, 2020; Iversen, 2018; Vatnøy, 2017). Although it is established that comedy watching is a social experience of which talk is an important part (Bore, 2011a, 2011b), which also sometimes can be considered as political participation (Doona, 2016), there is namely little trace of this kind of talk in my empirical material. As it is drawn from historical sources, any informal everyday talk is of course lost, but there is also limited reception material to be found in form of letters to the editor, debate pieces, or comedy critique. The main bulk of comedy programmes – also the very popular ones – roll over the screens without sparking public conversation besides PR material. This makes it more pertinent to look see how the comedy texts themselves address their public, but also how they relate to other texts, comic and serious, and how they construct a common world – what Warner calls the poetic world making of publics. This is yet another place where the particularities of humour and comic discourse come to the forefront, as different forms of discourse have different qualities, which again provide their publics with different agency in this poetic world making – which ultimately have

political significance. To paraphrase Warner again: where a rational-critical discussion scrutinises, asks, rejects, opines, decides, judges; comedy ironicises, ridicules, mocks, fools around, plays, celebrates.

It should be mentioned that Warner stresses that not all publics have a connection to *the* public: the public which more or less is synonymous with the polity and thus is key to the governing power of the public sphere. This is an important precaution: many of the texts circulating in publics and counterpublics play no political role in the sense that they are directly or indirectly relevant from the perspective of dominant public, they do not contribute to the kind of opinion formation that again might play a role for will formation, also not in the indirect ways sketched above. Moreover, Warner questions if publics based on a different discursive agency than the one given by reading and possessed by the model bourgeoisie public can have any agency towards the state at all. These points serve as important warnings against overestimating the political power of e.g. expressive culture: not everything that goes on in the wild public sphere (Habermas, 2006b) has political significance and we need a method in order to determine what has.

Hauser's model can be useful in this respect. It is based on a dialogue around an *issue*, which clearly has a link to the public as a polity. This is also a theoretical motivation for concentrating on comedy that thematises one such specific political issue – immigration. Their differences aside, what Warner and Hauser has in common is their emphasis on how neither publics nor public opinion is to be found in single texts, but rather in rhetorical exchanges (Hauser) or concatenation of texts through time (Warner). What they both lack is a historical perspective. A useful complementary perspective for this project is therefore the historical close reading principle developed by Quentin Skinner (2002). He claims that the best way to explain ideas and utterances from the past is to understand them as parts of interventions in their contemporary debates, thus seeking the text's historical intention. Developed for the field of history of ideas, and not explicitly touching upon the question of public opinion and certainly not the interpretation of comedy texts, Skinner's insights might at first appear less relevant, but they are based on more general linguistic and historical principles and thus transferable to new contexts. Skinner claims that the understanding of any

utterance is dependent on the understanding of the utterance's illocutionary force, in other words, what the utterance was intended *to do*. The consequence of this is that the researcher has to understand the relevant context of the utterance, in order to grasp it as communication and thus a sort of intervention into this very context. Interpreting an utterance, or a text, thus involves "recapturing the presuppositions and purposes that went into the making of it" (p. 115). This is a *historical* way of interpreting texts, and a rhetorical way, interested in *intentions*. These intentions, however, are not a psychological or cognitive entity, they are "intentions embodied in their [utterances] performance" (p. 120). It is what the *texts* intend, their illocutionary force, that is interesting, not what their creators thought.

The insights of the three scholars discussed in this section are the basis for my textual-historical view of public opinion. Here, public opinion is viewed as created by texts, through their constituting of rhetorical exchanges around issues, addressing people as particular publics and contributing to poetic world making. The texts are thus *doing* something, a something that only can be interpreted by looking closely at the particularities of the texts themselves, but also at their historical context by relating them to other texts. My interest does thus not lie in the texts themselves, but how they are a part of the public treatment of the immigration issue. This has also served as a rationale to look after similar cases both within and across the countries: When different texts do similar things, it can be argued that they are indicative for historical change and important tendencies in public opinion formation. As opinion formation and will formation are forms of action that are carried out through texts, the *historical processes of doing things with texts* is where the process of opinion formation in the public sphere become manifest and can be studied.

Following this, one question that remains for the empirical researcher is to answer how very different texts, often operating within very different logics, can be meaningfully related in order to do a sound, hermeneutic exegesis of public opinion and opinion formation, which will be discussed in section 3 of this chapter. Another question, equally relevant, is the *how*-question: Not just *what* was done, but *how* it was done, by the main features of the texts that are the object of research here: comedy and

comedy reception. This makes it paramount to understand the rhetorical, cultural and social particularities of humour.

2.2 Humour and comedy: between suppressive and subversive, serious and unserious

Quite a lot of scholarly energy has been invested into developing a theory of what humour *is* and what social significance it has. In this dissertation, I use a working definition of humour as *a communicative mode in which something is interpreted as being funny, with the aim of provoking mirth and laughter*. “Mode” should here simply be understood as a particular means of communication that can be employed across different genres and media and that is located on a more general level than things like speech acts, rhetorical devices or techniques. Comedy, on the other hand, will be defined very broadly as an *entertainment genre with humour as its dominating element*. The reason for these broad definitions is that they allow me to avoid digging deep into, and especially to make a definite stand, in the debates over the ‘nature’ of humour and comedy. That being said, these debates contain important insights of the social, rhetorical and aesthetical properties of humour and comedy, which is where my main interest lies.

Going through the literature on humour, one soon realises that humour and comedies have been assigned many functions and qualities that often contradict each other. I find it fruitful not to eliminate such tensions, but rather view them as the main particularities of the humorous mode. For my purpose, I identify three interesting tension pairs that are fundamentally interconnected with each other. Most central in this thesis is the tension between humour as a conservative, even suppressive, social, rhetorical and cognitive force; and humour as radical, creative or even subversive. A tension more fundamental when it comes the ‘nature’ of humour is perhaps its character as an unserious mode of communication that can be used for serious means (Mulkey, 1988). Finally, humour often brings about emotions and affects normally thought of as contrary to each other, like joy and embarrassment or anger and light-heartedness, but humour is also at times associated with the lack of emotion. To sum

up, humour is characterised by ambiguousness and duality along multiple dimensions. In this section, I will first show how these tensions are present in the canonical theories of humour, and then dig deeper into how I understand them by clarifying how they are related to my own humour definition. The social significance of immigration comedy is however not just a matter of rhetorical or aesthetic affordances. The social and cultural position of humour and comedy is important as well and will be discussed in separate subsections.

2.2.1. Three (four) classical theories of humour

In classical humour theory, *superiority theory*, *incongruity theory*, and *relief theory* comprise the canonical trio. Sometimes, a fourth theory is added, often termed *carnival theory*, other times *phenomenological theory* or even *existential theory*. As many authors have pointed out before me, all these theories have problematic sides, and fall short if the aim is to answer what humour *is* or to explain *why* we laugh or *what* makes something funny. However, these traditions all have merit in casting light on the different social and psychological aspects of humour at work.

The oldest theory is *superiority theory*. Going back to Plato and Aristotle's treatment of comedy, the essence of this theory is that we laugh about the misfortune of others, we experience *schadenfreude* and feel superior. The classical formulation of this can be found in Hobbes' *Leviathan*, where he refers to laughter as something that rises from our experience of "sudden glory" (1991 [1651], p. 43) when we observe the misfortune or silliness of others. This view has also been connected with the ability to suspend empathy and emotional engagement – if not, we would feel pity instead of glory and mirth when we observe the misfortune of others – for example by Henri Bergson, who wrote about the "momentary anaesthesia of the heart" (1914, p. 11). As we can see, superiority theory places itself on the suppressive side: Humour is a way to express, and perhaps also execute, power and social division. As such, it is a serious mode. At the same time, superiority theory also tends to be based on humour's unseriousness, or at least detachment, when it is based on the premise that empathy needs to be suspended when interpreting something as funny. This also points towards how humour is based on suspension of some emotions, "a momentary anaesthesia",

but also on the propagation of other emotions – a sudden glory on the expense of others. This could also lead to *negative* emotions for the person laughed at, a view that has been most sophisticatedly advanced by Billig (2005b) in his contemporary version of superiority theory, where laughter essentially is viewed as ridicule.

Relief theory originates from the psychological theory where the original meaning of the word “humour” is to be found, referring to the four fluids that made up a person’s temperament. Relief theory followed the developments in psychology and turned first into a theory of how laughter served to release nervous energy, then into a part of Sigmund Freud’s theory of the unconscious. The basic point in Freud’s joke theory (1976) is that joke telling is a way to satisfy certain desires in spite of an obstacle – whether that be socially or psychologically. Psychologically, the obstacle consists of suppressing certain thoughts, or more precisely by occupying certain mental pathways – an inhibition. Maintaining such inhibitions demands psychological energy and thus creates tension, which is released when a joke is told. This sudden surplus of energy results in laughter and a feeling of joy, relative to the amount of energy that was used to create the psychological inhibition. It should also be noted that Freud distinguishes between non-tendentious and tendentious jokes. In the latter category, which according to Freud are the funnier ones as they release larger amounts of energy, jokes are a socially acceptable way to express socially unacceptable content, such as hostility or smut. Humour thus becomes a tool to treat social taboos in a safe way. The tension between negative and positive emotion in humour is obvious in Freud’s relief theory, as is the tension between serious and unserious – the joke is a free space where one can get away with things that normally would be inappropriate, and thus actually carry out aggression or sexual forwardness. The tension between conservative and radical is perhaps not as obvious, but the joke as a free space is the key also here: As a free space, escaping the rules, it is radical, but since this only is allowed in the context of joking, by using joke techniques, the joke is at the best irrelevant, perhaps even conservative as it serves as a safety vault for the uneasiness of civilisation, and therefore works to maintain social order by diverting any energy that could be used for change.

More prominent in modern psychological research, perhaps because of the dominance of cognitive perspective with its affinity for models of mental representations, is *incongruity theory*. Incongruity is here viewed as a necessary precondition for humour, where two normally disparate ideas, concepts, or situations are put together in an unexpected manner. In addition to psychologists, this theory is also popular among linguists (Raskin, 1985), and it also had its fair share of attention from canonical thinkers, from Aristotle over Cicero to Schopenhauer. Most famous is perhaps Kant, who defines laughter as “an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (1987 [1790], p. XX). Kant’s definition shows that also incongruity theorists have paid attention to the affective dimension, while the subversive/suppressive tension has been less central. An exception is Henri Bergson (1914), who argued that the source of humour is the incongruity between the organic, flexible human intelligence and habitual behaviour “something mechanical encrusted upon the living” (p. 49), which also includes a social correction where the inflexible and mechanical is the butt. The unserious, on the other hand, is central in incongruity theory, as the incongruous elements combined in humour would not be combined in ordinary and serious thinking or communication.

Besides this canonical trio, there exists a long tradition of a ‘humorous outlook of the world’, which thus can be named an *existential* (Lippitt, 1996) or *phenomenological* (Kuipers, 2008) theory. This tradition originally stems from the cynic philosopher Diogenes and was reborn in modern philosophy in the works of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. Influenced by Nietzsche, the most famous contemporary work within this theoretical perspective is probably Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and his world* (1968), which connects the renaissance writer Rabelais to a rich tradition of folk humour that culminated in the carnival, the background for yet another name of this theory family, *carnival theory*. In Bakhtin’s account, the humour of the carnival forms an alternative sphere to the official, serious everyday world. More contemporary theorists propounding some sort of phenomenological theory include Zijdeveld (1982), Mulkay (1988), Willett (2008) and Hariman (2008). What is shared by all these accounts is an emphasis on humour’s non-seriousness and ambiguity, and its

potential for fostering freedom and a special kind of community⁶. The unseriousness of humour is central here, which Mulkay (1988, pp. 22-38) understands as how the humorous mode is used to construct incongruity and congruity at the same time, what he calls interpretive duality, as opposed to serious discourse where one as a rule should strive to solve incongruities and ambiguities. Unseriousness in this account is thus something more than a sociological characterisation of joke telling situations: it is a special mode of communication that does something radically different than serious modes. This paves the way for an understanding of humour as radical, a position scholars like Koestler (1964); Zijderfeld (1982), Willett (2008) and Hariman (2008) have taken, arguing that humour has a potential to foster creativity. There has however also been proponents of the opposite view – Mulkay argues that humour is predominantly a conservative force in contemporary societies (1988, p. 211), and Bakhtin stresses that the logic of carnival is only temporal, and hence actually serves to confirm the official, serious everyday system. Phenomenological theories also provides accounts of the emotional tensions of humour, in different ways: These theories tend to emphasise how humour is saturated with joy and fearlessness, but this is at the same time connected with seemingly more gloomy aspects of the world, like the acknowledgement of the futility of all worldly efforts in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, or its connection with the grotesque and with brutal violence and death in Bakhtin. This seemingly extreme tension is rooted in how humour is seen as a way to elevate oneself above the negative emotions associated with these aspects of life – so we see that the tension between humour as affective investment and as affective detachment is important also in this kind of theory.

There is no reason to hide that I have an affinity for this kind of perspective. Although there are some issues with phenomenological theory, most notably problems in operationalising its insights in empirical research as well as an exaggerated belief in humour's goodness and power, it also takes humour's special features as a starting point in order to explain its social functions (Kuipers, 2008), to a much larger degree

⁶ The exception being Nietzsche, who true to himself focuses on humour's role towards the development of the *Übermensch* rather than any fostering of community.

than other theories. That being said, the other canonical humour theories, and modern versions of them, also highlight important social and communicative functions of humour.

2.2.2 Humour between serious and unserious, subversive and suppressive, detached and involved.

My definition of humour as a communicative mode in which something is interpreted as being funny, with the aim of provoking mirth and laughter, is a slight reworking of Ruch's (2008) definition, where humour is defined as an experience of the perception that something is funny. In this psychological definition, the unique experiential quality "funny" is associated with a perceived incongruity. Without entering into a humour-theoretical debate, I will suggest that when interested in humour's social and cultural aspects, *funniness* should rather be associated with *unseriousness*, and *interpretation* is a better concept than *experience*. This is because the experience of incongruities not always elicit fun and mirth, but often rather fear, disgust, or puzzlement. The curious connection between horror and comedy has often been discussed (Carroll, 1999; Ekeman, 2019; Morreall, 1983), which points towards the need to add an extra explanatory dimension to understand how some incongruities are funny while others are horrifying, or to say it with Nietzsche, how laughter can be a means for managing "to say a joyous Yes to life despite its negative side, despite its horrors and suffering" (Lippitt, 1992, p. 41). Understanding humour as an unserious mode of communication is helpful here. First of all, it stresses how funniness is not only an experiential, psychological quality, but an active, interpretive stance towards the world – it is something we can do with texts. Second, unseriousness is a way to bracket any serious implications of what is communicated. The illocutionary force of a speech act in the humorous form is ambiguous. Humour is both committing and not committing. If you say something offensive in the form of a joke, is it then really offensive? This points towards the relationship between humour and play (Boyd, 2004), recalling Bateson's (1972) account of how the playful nip of a playing animal per definition denotes "this is play", thus not a bite, but *also* denotes a real bite. This tension is what makes it possible to use the unseriousness of humour for serious

purposes, for example mocking or maintaining hierarchical relations at the workplace (Mulkay, 1988). At the same time, humour's family semblance to play is also the background for its creative and subversive potential, as freedom from serious, constraining logics give room for genuinely new meanings (Bateson, 1972; Huizinga, 1949; Koestler, 1964), but also as a space where the fear associated with serious world, where consequences are real and authorities have power, is absent (Bakhtin, 1968, p. 47; Hariman, 2008).

As we see, the tension between humour as a conservative or as a radical force goes hand in hand with the tension between humour's unseriousness and seriousness. There is however no 1:1 correspondence between seriousness and humour's conservative aspects, and on the other hand between unseriousness and its radical aspects. We remember that Bakhtin emphasises how the temporal unseriousness of carnival on the end preserved the dominant, official world. On the other hand, satire, which is exemplary use of humour for serious purposes, is at least in popular opinion viewed as radical – as “speaking truth to power”. Following Schwind (1988), satire is characterised by a satirical aggression towards something or someone who exists in the world outside the comical text, paired with a reference to social norms. Typically, satire thus function disciplinary and corrective towards someone by pointing out how they violate one or multiple norms, through different aesthetical means that serve to ridicule the butt of satire. This definition does not point toward satire's radical potential, but rather highlights it as a conservative genre, reliant on pointing out how existing social norms are transgressed. That being said, it is of course entirely possible for satire to be subversive by challenging figures of power who transgresses shared social norms. This indicates how the conservative/radical division is less clean cut in practice.

Satire, with its clear moral and topical commitment towards something in the world, is also an exemplary sub-genre, or sister genre⁷, of comedy in order to

⁷ Satire is typically viewed as a form of comedy, but it does not have to use humour as its main element or use humour at all. A better understanding of satire might thus be that it combines critique with entertainment (Declercq, 2017; Vigsø, 2019). Since it nevertheless frequently takes the form of

understand how humour, despite all its ambiguousness and unseriousness, is nevertheless always about *something* or *someone*. Jokes have a reference - something we laugh about, commonly called the target or the butt – and it is part of a social practice, where typically the joke-teller, or the comedian, tells a joke to the joke listener, or the audience – while the butt/target is a third person, or a thing. This simple tripartite joke structure was originally coined by Freud (1976), and is useful in order to discuss humour's social and communicative function, as this depends on who the sender, the audience, and the butt of the joke are. The challenges when moving from a relatively simple, interpersonal joke situation to mass mediated comedy, lay in determining who or what the butt actually is and who the implied audiences are.

Freud's model also included an affective response – in fact, this is a major part of his inhibition-theory. This points to the last part of my definition, how humour aims at provoking mirth and laughter. In spite of these well-known perlocutionary effects of humour, the mode is also often associated with emotional detachment. This has been mentioned above, in how superiority theories often include how humour presupposes bracketing of empathy and phenomenological theories underlines how unseriousness is a way to be detached, also emotionally, from the concerns of the serious world. Detachment is perhaps even more central in research on another sister mode of humour, irony, which has been associated with intellect and self-control as opposed to uncontrolled emotional investment, but also with cynicism and a total lack of emotion (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 41). While irony and humour cannot be conflated, there is certainly an overlap in how the two modes avoid the commitments of serious communication, which also includes an element of emotional detachment. Black humour is perhaps the clearest example of this, where misfortune is turned into a laughing matter. However, this is actually not complete emotional detachment, but a re-interpretation which also includes affective work and the intention to elicit a certain affective response from the audience. By creating a distance from some emotions, the joke-teller creates others. Mirth is the obvious candidates here, but it has been argued

comedy, and they both share the teller-target-audience tripartite structure, I find it useful to think of the two as sister genres.

that humour and laughter aim at an affective response from the butt of the joke, as well: the feeling of shame and embarrassment through being ridiculed (Billig, 2005b). The feeling of ridicule, as well as mirth's character of being on somebody's expense, is central in different versions of superiority theory, which has a strong position in different studies of humour's social function. Thus, perhaps a bit ironically, the joyous aspects of humour and mirth are often placed in the background. In this dissertation, I will make a case for the joy connected to humour and its social use – but also underline that it is necessary to understand how this joy works as a part of the tripartite structure of the joke.

The three pairs of tensions described in the start of this section – humour as conservative vs. radical, as serious vs. unserious, and as connected to negative emotions vs. positive emotions – or even no emotions at all – are, as we can see, intertwined and based on one another. Furthermore, they do not seem to be easily solved. If ambiguity is a central feature of the humorous mode, this also means that seriousness and unseriousness, emotional detachment and emotional investment, radical and conservative impulses are *present at the same time* in concrete, empirical instances of humour and comedy. A productive way to go for researchers interested in the social and political use of comedy is thus not to eliminate these tensions by for example determining if comedy is fundamentally radical or fundamentally conservative, but to investigate how these inherent tensions matter in real life contexts and are put to use in the public sphere as *unsolvable but productive tensions*. This is the main theoretical contribution this thesis aims to make. The humorous mode, with all its inherent qualities, does however not exist in a cultural vacuum, and how humour is viewed by its users – and adversaries – matters equally much for how humour can be used to do things in the public sphere.

2.2.3. Humour's cultural position in Western culture: Between damage and salvation.

There are multiple ways to approach humour's position in Western culture. There seems to be a general agreement that humour, as we know it, is a modern concept with roots in the enlightenment, when the earl of Shaftesbury connected laughter and mirth

to a certain human intellectual and emotional disposition – humour (Amir, 2014). This disposition has developed into a central part of the understanding of modern personhood (Wickberg, 1998), and Billig (2005b) argues that humour optimism, accentuating the positive sides of humour and of having a sense of humour, dominates late modern Western culture. This point has also been discussed in relation to how politicians include humour and self-deprecation as parts of their public ethos (Gaupås Johansen, 2020). It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to cover all sides of how humour is and has been valued in Western culture, or to contrast it to how humour is viewed in other times and places. I will instead first point out how the Western positive view of humour has been used as an exclusionary mechanism against Muslims, and then sketch two general positions, one humour optimist and one humour alarmist, that are relevant for understanding humour's role in the public sphere: Provocative humour as essentially valuable, or even salvific, and as essentially offensive and damaging.

In a paper about the Mohammad cartoon scandal, Kuipers (2011) summarises the discourse on Muslim humourlessness. She argues that it is repeatedly articulated in the Western world, with the cartoon scandal as its most dramatic peak, and that there are many examples of Muslims trying to fight this stereotype, for example through the comedy tour *Allah Made Me Funny*. Furthermore, she argues that the power of this Muslims-have-no-humour-discourse is connected to how labelling a group as humourless often is used as an exclusionary mechanism, how humourlessness is associated with religious fundamentalism, and finally how lacking a sense of humour is viewed as a fundamental personal shortcoming that makes one unsuited for modernity. The trope of the humourless Muslim is a clear background in much of the comedy reception in my material, especially connected to female comedians with a Muslim background. As such, some of the shows can also be read as answers to this strong cultural idea.

This often goes hand in hand with a cultural view of transgressive humour as essentially valuable, an idea that probably is older than the modern sense of humour, stemming from the work of the renaissance humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam, *In Praise of Folly* (1979 [1509]). In this tradition, the comedian is seen as a sage fool who dares to speak truth to power (Bevis, 2013, p. 66; Gilbert, 2004, pp. 2-3; Palmer, 1994, pp.

40-53). Humour is here given a special status and value both by virtue of its underdog position and as a special source of truth. In modern thought, this heritage lives as the idea of humour as fundamentally challenging the social order, and at the same time sharpening critical thinking and paving the way for genuinely new thoughts (Gaupås Johansen, 2020). We see how this view is connected to the creative and subversive aspects of humour, rather than its conservative aspects. American late-night show comedians like Jon Stewart and Steven Colbert are probably the clearest practitioner-proponents of this idea, and they also serve as vehicles for it through their public reception (ibid). It is also clearly visible in my material, where immigration comedy very often is celebrated as important, brave, and taboo-breaking – as a general rule without explicating these adjectives very much. The emphasis on humour’s importance also mirrors how humour after all is viewed as a serious business.

The position this idea has in intellectual life in Scandinavia is visible in the Norwegian book *Etter Charlie Hebdo: ytringsfrihetens krise i historisk lys* (*After Charlie Hebdo: A historical Perspective on the Crisis of the Freedom of Speech*) by historian Kjetil Jakobsen (2016), who makes the case for offensive and transgressive humour as a necessary part of democracy and freedom of speech. This is an important reminder of how humour optimism does not exist in a vacuum, but tends to go hand in hand with other cultural ideas, like appreciation for freedom of speech and rational thought. Although Jakobsen’s position is much more elaborate and better argued for than the typical mass media celebration of transgressive humour, he nevertheless mirrors their excessive humour positivity with strong claims like “Only humour makes a profane and rational view of the world possible” (pp. 249). There are few reflections in his book on the powerlessness of humour – for example on how humour is the weapon of the underdog because the underdog have no other means to fight with than the joke (Gaupås Johansen, 2020).

Jakobsen does however have an eye for the negative sides of humour, connected to how humour as transgression also often is offense. In the purest form of this kind of criticism, what I call *humour alarmism*, offensive humour is viewed as damaging. This view seems less prevalent in the mass media and in popular consciousness, and it is thus harder to identify its historical roots, but it seems to me

that it is connected to the development of the modern ideals of personal authenticity and human dignity, so that any offense, or misrecognition, of a person is potentially damaging to her personal identity (Taylor, 1994). This becomes especially potent when personal identities become intrinsically connected with collective identities, like gender, race and ethnicity (Fukuyama, 2018), so that poking fun at selected social groups is seen as not only damaging for the individual, but as violence against marginalised groups, reinforcing existing power relations. If less prominent in the public sphere, humour alarmism enjoys a strong position in the academy, visible in this quote from introduction of the widely used edited volume *Beyond a joke: the limits of humour*:

If a comic assault on someone's sense of themselves as individual subjects, or on the sense of social and cultural identity of a particular social group or category, proves to have seriously damaging results and repercussions, we should take this seriously (Pickering & Lockyer, 2005, p. 4).

Although few would disagree with the good intentions put forward in this excerpt, its rhetoric is interesting: Expressions like “comic assault” and “seriously damaging results” indicate a firm belief that humour can inflict real and serious harm, and it is also clear that this is thought in relation to social and cultural identities. This is typical for the humour alarmist view. Another important feature of this view is its emphasis on how difficult it is to talk back to humour, as it by virtue of its unseriousness is seen as a *carte blanche* for transgression – when accused of being offensive, the joker can always defend herself with “it was just a joke”. The tension between serious and unserious is thus at work in the humour alarmist view. Furthermore, those who actually speak up against offensive humour risks to be labelled as *killjoys*, people marked as deviants from the social duty of creating objects of happiness (Ahmed, 2010), for example humorous occasions. We thus see how humour is presented as dangerous because it both inflicts harm and is nearly impossible to defend oneself from. In the alarmist view, comedy becomes a weapon of the powerful rather than of the marginalised.

It is easy to see how these two views, humour optimism and humour alarmism, can form the basis for controversies over humour in the public sphere, and this has indeed often been the case in Scandinavian immigration comedy. Typically, these controversies start when someone takes offense, and other actors then rush to the defence of the show in question with arguments on how the show is important. That being said, humour optimism and alarmism rarely appears as pure, coherent ideological positions in the public sphere – and they are also not mutually exclusive: the actors defending humour on some occasions will criticise humour on others.

At the same time, when appearing in their more coherent form, as they sometimes are presented in academic research, these two views have incompatible accounts of what humour is, and thus arrives at different conclusions over what it can do. Humour optimists do take humour very seriously, but at the same time emphasise its radical potential for new thinking associated with its unseriousness. A tension they seem to ignore, on the other hand, is how humour can bring about not only positive emotions but also negative ones. Besides their view of humour, they also seem, as Jakobsen points out, to take a certain stance in the debate over freedom of speech where also crass and offensive utterances should be permitted, a stance that perhaps is based on an idealised view of the public sphere where the actors enjoy participatory parity and uncivil speech thus becomes less problematic. The alarmists, on the other hand, view the public sphere as infused with power, and offense and ridicule thus become much more problematic. Regarding their humour view, they do indeed take humour seriously, but seem to view its unseriousness only as a rhetorical *carte blanche* for transgression – so humour becomes as offensive and serious as other types of communication, perhaps even equal to violence. The positive emotions associated with humour, or its ability for creativity, is typically missing in the alarmist view – and if for example joy is discussed, it is discussed as *schadenfreude* infused in power relations.

As scholarly positions, these two are of course a bit overlapped from my side, meant to present a theoretical point rather than represent individual authors. The two views can nevertheless easily be recognised in the literature. Although few readily admit that they view humour as inherently good or inherently bad, both empirical

analyses and theoretical contributions often end up placing themselves in one of the two camps, and there is thus a risk for begging the question of how humour can work politically and socially. This polarisation seems especially strong in the literature on ethnic and racial humour.

2.2.4. Two typical views of ethnic and racial humour

In this subsection, I look closer on two typical examples of the two positions, in order to clarify their basic assumptions and what I view as their shared problematic aspects.

The humour optimists will be represented by the book *Ethnic Humor in Multiethnic America* by David Gillota (2013). Gillota views ethnic humour as a response to the increasing multiculturalism of American society, and is especially interested in comedy about ethnical relations rather than about ethnical groups in isolation. His book is a comprehensive textual analysis of contemporary Black, Jewish, and White American ethnic humour – to term comedy shows like *South Park* white ethnic humour is one of his original contributions. His view of ethnic humour is largely influenced by his choice to term it *ethnic* rather than racial: As ethnic boundaries in the scholarly tradition are up for negotiation, ethnic humour can be a tool for this negotiation. This is often done, according to Gillota, by subverting or collapsing ethnic stereotypes. The ultimate positive consequence of this is that comedians can challenge their audiences to view ethnicities as formable, and that their comedy can promote interethnic understanding and be the basis for a multi-ethnic civic identity. He does, however, not include any reflections or original research on how this promotion goes on in practice: His book is framed by theoretical macro perspectives on multiculturalism and ethnicity, as well as historical reflections on the changing American interethnic relations, while his method is textual analysis of multiple shows and comedians. There are no intermediary steps that can explain how the negotiation of ethnicity in comedy texts can serve as an input into the larger negotiations of ethnicity in American society.

Gillota's account is clearly influenced by important traits of the celebratory view of humour identified above, especially how humour can generate genuinely new thoughts. How comedy through this also foster community and understanding is a

typical topos in celebratory accounts of ethnic and racial humour. It is also worth to note how he builds on assumptions and research interests from the field of ethnic studies: how ethnic boundaries are constantly negotiated, and that the question of peaceful co-existence between different cultures is central. Finally, it is typical how the work with ethnic stereotypes is central in his book, where he sees humour about ethnic stereotypes by comedians with that very ethnic background as a means to subvert those stereotypes. The question of whether ethnic and racial comedy that makes use of stereotypes challenges or reproduces them is perhaps the most contested in the field.

On the opposite side of Gillota on this question stands Raúl Pérez, who here will be represented by a micro-sociological participatory study (2013) and a textual-historical study (2016). In both studies, he is concerned with showing how comedy is a way to perform and perpetuate racist discourse that otherwise would not have been acceptable. In the first study, he analyses how comedy students are taught rhetorical strategies that allow them to engage in overt race talk, and another central finding is how non-white students are encouraged to poke fun at their own ethnic identity. In the second study, he argues that the popular comedy character José Jiménez in the 1960s was a continuation of the blackface minstrelsy tradition at a time where this was deemed unacceptable in comedy about Blacks. Since José Jiménez was a Latino character, “brownface” could be used as a continuation of the minstrelsy tradition and thus serve as a reworking of racial ridicule in order to make it acceptable in public, a reworking that according to Pérez continues by different means in contemporary comedy shows today.

Pérez is like Gillota concerned with ethnic stereotypes but is sceptical to the idea that using them is a way to challenge them. He argues quite forcefully that any use of a stereotype most likely will reproduce them, and the power relations they are a part of, whatever the intention of the comedian might be. It is also clear that he views stereotypes as harmful, as they are seen as ultimately being dehumanising. Humour is thus mainly viewed as a rhetorical strategy to enforce existing racial domination. We see here how humour can do serious work by virtue of being unserious: one can get away with racism if it comes in the form of a joke.

At first glance, Pérez seems to be less preoccupied with humour as essentially damaging because it can offend than what the ‘typical’ humour alarmist would be. However, a closer reading reveals that this is because his project is how humour is a way to cloak offense and overt racial talk, and thus preserve the existing power structures that can withhold human dignity from different racial groups, of which offensive stereotypes are one among many means. Pérez uses words like “ethnicity” and “ethnic group” a lot, but prefers terms like “race”, “racial humour” and “racist humour”. This is indicative of his position in a field different from Gillota’s, where racial domination and fixation of individuals into culturally constructed races is more central than the fluidity of ethnic boundaries and peaceful coexistence in multicultural societies.

Pérez work is more sophisticated than Gillota’s when it comes to the question of how the microlevel of comedy is connected with macro levels of society, like racial relations. He does this by combining a view of comedy as rhetoric with sociological and historical insights, interpersonal sociology in his paper on comedy students, and sociologically oriented history of civil rights movement in the Jozé Jiménez-paper. However, his strong views on stereotypes seem to necessarily lead to the conclusion that racism always will be reproduced in any form of ethnic or racial humour. This is also mirrored in his theoretical tools for connecting the micro and macro levels, as he interprets both textual and pedagogical strategies as symptoms of the reproduction of racial power relations. Although he mentions rhetorical techniques for subverting stereotypes, he does not analyse such techniques closer, or relate them to other forms of racial discourse, in order to rebut them and defend his strong claim. Pérez may of course be right in his claim that comedy cannot change racial discourse, but the opportunity should at least be empirically investigated instead of rejected on the basis of theoretical assumptions.

Both scholars discussed here have presented important insights and reflections, but they nevertheless seem to have arrived at their normative conclusion on ethnic and racial humour before they embarked on their empirical studies. This is probably due to theoretical assumptions inherited from their respective scholarly fields as well as from the optimist and alarmist views on humour. In addition, their

theoretical tools to connect the micro and macro levels, to connect comedy with society, are insufficient: Gilotta's because such theoretical tools simply lack, Pérez' because they are tuned towards the reproduction of social structures and power mechanisms, not towards how these can change. I propose two solutions to this problem. The first is to work with the tensions in the humorous mode, especially when it comes to whether it is a conservative or a radical force, exactly *as unsolvable but productive tensions* instead of having to pick one pole. The second is to interpret humorous texts not in isolation or in the context of something as broad as ethnic or racial relations at large, but in the context of what else goes currently goes on in the public sphere. With this kind of meso perspective, taking into account the publicly accessible texts that after all are important parts of ethnic and racial discourses, it can become clearer how humour and comedy is a part of the opinion formation on things like immigration, multiculturalism, and racial relations, and how the particularities of humour are used to do things in these processes of opinion formation.

2.2.5. Cultural humour views put to work: Interpretive repertoires about humour in the Scandinavian immigration discourse.

The humour views I have sketched above rarely manifest themselves in pure, coherent forms, neither in scholarly work nor in debates in the public sphere. They are more likely to appear fragmented, sometimes mixed with each other, and to a large degree influenced by how they are used in different rhetorical context. Therefore, I find it useful to apply the notion of *interpretive repertoires* to analyse how the two views are the basis for how humour and comedy are treated in the public sphere. An interpretive repertoire is “a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterise and evaluate actions and events” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 138) The usefulness of the concept for my purpose lays in how it can be used to account for both cultural patterns and situational variants, structural constraints and the agency of actors. Interpretive repertoires have their foundation in cultural ideas, but can be tweaked and varied in order to be useful in different situations. Furthermore, they are based on recurrent, finite patterns of speech, and are thus based on discursive structures, but are nevertheless flexible enough to be used as strategic means for actors. Unlike how

discourses sometimes are thought, one single interpretive repertoire is namely rarely hegemonic: it always exists competing repertoires, and the same individual can perfectly fine use different repertoires on different occasions.

Interpretive repertoires exist on the level of language use, or rhetoric if one wishes, and are thus not on the same level, conceptually, as discourses or cultural ideas. They are however something more than for example *topoi*, commonplaces, talking points, arguments, metaphors, and tropes; as interpretive repertoires feature *all* these kinds of patterns in language use, structuring them around a certain logic – albeit not in a strict sense, like scientific models. Working with my material, I have inductively identified four major interpretive repertoires concerning humour that are common in Scandinavian comedy reception, which are presented in table 1. These repertoires are not meant to be exhaustive and the descriptions of them are not meant to be definite, but should be seen as a tool to clarify how the often very diverse instances of comedy reception actually can be seen as following certain patterns. The first column of the table shows the four major repertoires and the most important arguments they consist of, while the second column show what I see as adjacent repertoires, repertoires that cannot be subsumed under the major repertoires but tend to lend support to them in one way or another. I will not discuss each repertoire more closely here, as I hope the reader will recall my earlier discussions on the cultural ideas of humour, and see how they are mirrored in these repertoires.

Table 1 The interpretive repertoires of Scandinavian immigration comedy reception

<i>Major interpretive repertoires</i>	<i>Adjacent interpretive repertoires</i>
<p>Humour as a special kind of truth-telling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humour challenges taboos • Offensive humour has a shock effect that makes us see clearer 	<p>Humour as social glue</p> <p>Humour as the little man’s weapon against power</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humour is a way to freely express one's self • Humour builds bridges and thus removes mutual prejudice • Humour makes it easier to talk about difficult things • Humour is a way for the subaltern to speak 	<p>Humour criticism as political correctness</p>
<p>Islam as a killjoy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muslims have no self-irony • Muslims are against everything that is fun • Muslims are religious fundamentalists • Islam suppresses the life-forces 	<p>Islam as fundamentally non-Western</p> <p>Humour as a central part of modern personhood</p> <p>Religious fundamentalism as incompatible with joy and funniness.</p>
<p>Offensive humour causes real damage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offensive humour perpetuates dehumanising stereotypes • Offensive humour creates real pain • Offensive humour violates human dignity • Offensive humour endorses and encourages antisocial behaviour • Offensive humour is disrespectful • Offense conceals any well-meant satirical intent 	<p>Stereotypes are always harmful</p> <p>Offense damages the sense of self</p> <p>Media works as a hypodermic needle</p> <p>Some things are too serious to ever be joked with</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is impossible to defend oneself against offensive humour • Humour tends to go hand in hand with other mechanisms of suppression 	
<p style="text-align: center;">Humour criticism as political correctness.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criticism-is-censorship • People who criticise humour do so on ideological default • Critiquing humour means that one cannot take a joke • Those who criticise humour belong to a certain type of people 	<p style="text-align: center;">The nanny society</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The media advocate a multicultural agenda</p>

As one can see, the different arguments and commonplaces that belong to each interpretive repertoire interact with each other and form a larger whole. Humour can for example be seen as a special form of truth because it both challenges taboos and is a way for the subaltern to speak, while offensive humour can be seen as causing real harm because it can both inflict real pain and is impossible to defend oneself against. This does not mean that all the arguments and commonplaces that make up one repertoire depend on one another or always appear together, but that it is useful to understand how their use are structured by a shared logic, which is the name I have given to the repertoire. Thus, when somebody celebrates comedy that breaks taboos, it is often not because taboo breaking per se is postulated as being good, but because it is seen as a way to reveal a special truth. Similarly, when somebody refers to humour

criticism as being expected, this is something more than a mere statement of their personal anticipations: It is a way to label somebody as being politically correct.

As mentioned above, these repertoires are all based on different cultural ideas about humour. As one can see, many of them are also coloured by the immigration discourse at large. This type of intersections, between the discourses of comedy and the discourses on immigration, will be central in this thesis, and will be a part of the discussion in the next section where I will present my method for data collection and analysis.

2.3 Writing the history of immigration humour in the Scandinavian public spheres

My method, the writing of history through cases, posed two major challenges. First, I had to find instances of immigration comedy in the three countries. This was partly a practical question, but also a question of interpretation and classification: what should count as immigration humour? Second, I had to detect patterns and developments of immigration comedy and its reception. Third, I had to select appropriate cases and historicise them as parts of processes of public opinion, in order to answer my research question.

2.3.1 Finding immigration humour: the problem of definition and the archive situation

At the beginning of my project, I thought the collection of material would be a straightforward, although labour intensive task. I had a clear definition of immigration comedy, and a clear scope in empirical material: locally produced comedy that had been broadcast on television. I did know that there was no kind of inventory or catalogue of immigration comedy in either one of the three Scandinavian countries, but especially the three public service channels – SVT, DR and NRK – had archives that were available for the general public, either through their own platforms or through the national libraries. My plan was to make a list of all comedy programmes, and then watch through them in order to find instances of immigration comedy.

Starting with Sweden, I realised it was not that easy. Just making of a list of all Swedish comedy programmes became problematic. Although the national library of Sweden, Kungliga Biblioteket, has a very good and user-friendly interface for their database of audio-visual content, it is based on metadata from the television channels themselves – and this is of very variable quality. There is, for example, no consistent marking of genres. Thus, a search on “humor” would yield a large number of results where humour was the topic in a talk show or a factual programme, while searching for “komedi” would mostly yield numerous episodes of American sitcoms or movies that were assigned as comedy in their descriptive text. Especially older shows were not classified as comedy or humour at all, but put in the generic bag of “entertainment”, or not assigned to any genre. The Danish database, Mediestream, had the same problem combined with a (at the time of doing the research) less user-friendly interface and no systematic digitalisation of records prior to 2006, while the Norwegian national library does not have any public searchable database – one needs to know the title of the programme one wants to see. Luckily, NRK’s own web TV has a large historical archive with the best metadata I found in this project. Unfortunately, the interface is not made for research and it is for example impossible to do advanced searches or to sort your results – they appear sorted according to an opaque algorithm.

When contacting people working in national libraries or TV stations, they were all very helpful in providing me with concrete material – but nobody wanted to give me a list of all comedy programmes that had been broadcasted – understandably, as to their knowledge no such lists existed and making them would be very time consuming.

Luckily, such lists do exist somewhere: Wikipedia. At least for Sweden and Norway. Although I am well aware that this list is not complete, it was nevertheless a starting point. However, going through these lists and watching some of the material, I realised two things: first, assuming that each show had just one season of six 30 minutes long episodes, and that there were as many shows in Denmark as in Norway and Sweden, watching through all these programmes would for one person take 8 years without breaks – 37 years if complying with the collective agreement on working hours in Norwegian public sector. This was obviously not feasible. Second, I

ran into a number of classification problems. It was not too straightforward to decide on what should count as an instance of immigration comedy. Does a joking remark about immigration policy qualify, or a minor character with a funny accent? I found it impossible to apply strict systematic criteria here, but chose to collect only programmes where the topic of immigration or immigrants seemed central to the humour in an episode, sketch, or a scene as a whole. For stand-up shows, it should be central in the entire monologue or at least make up a longer stretch of it.

As a consequence of this, standup-offshots like roasts, news satire like humoristic talk shows, and the national versions of *Have I got news for you*, have been left out from the selection. This is somewhat unfortunate, as these programmes tend to be popular, and their orientation towards the political sphere is clear. However, it would have been impossible to collect all jokes about immigrants or immigration from these shows. The omission can also be defended from a more substantial point of view: this kind of explicit news satire has been extensively researched (see Holbert, 2005; Young, 2018), and a focus on humour that does not have as obvious a relation to the political sphere is both methodically tidy and theoretically and empirically interesting. The politics of humour that does not claim to be political can be as relevant for the public sphere as self-declared political humour.

More problematic was the omission of comedy on radio, stage and the internet. If I would only include TV material, I had to ignore the surprisingly rich early wave of humour ridiculing xenophobia on radio and revue scenes from the late 60s up to the early 80s, for example the popular Norwegian character *Stutum*⁸ or the Swedish revue monologue “Bunta ihop dom”⁹. I would also have to exclude Norway’s first immigrant stand-up comedian, Shabana Rehman, who never had one of her shows broadcast, as well as the Swedish youtuber Gina Dirawi, who became a well-known TV host, but rose to fame through her character *Syster Khadidje*¹⁰, a success on YouTube but rarely shown on television, and then in a very altered form. Thus, I chose to have my main focus on televised material, and conduct a systematic collection here,

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEg8RYdonjg&t=189s> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3HYrE32taAA> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d3xbO-kQmsM> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

but to include material from stage, radio and online if I found historical indications of its significance.

Something that I chose to totally omit, however, was what truly can be termed *vernacular* culture. Today, the main humoristic material of vernacular, or low-brow, culture consists of the anonymous internet culture producing remixes and memes, for example the Instagram-account “Utlendingumor”, Facebook humour pages like “Latterdøra” or the widely popular video remixes called “Laserturken”. In contemporary Scandinavian history, local revues as well as songs of uncertain provenience were important, for example a song I remember being played from burned CDs in school breaks during my rural upbringing, just named “Innvandresangen”, “The immigrant song”, basically consisting of nothing more than a list of racist stereotypes sung in an equally stereotypical accent¹¹.

While the stage, radio and broadcasting material practically always display an immigration-friendly stance, a lot of the popular material is hostile towards immigration, sometimes even overtly racist. This is less the case for a more professionalised form popular culture that is associated with rural working class – the local varieties of country music, which often have humorous lyrics. Songs like *Hellbillies*’ “Ein neger sto på Ål stasjon” (“A Negro was standing at Ål Station”) or *Vassendgutane*’s “Greit å vere Neger” (“OK to be a Negro”)¹² tend to display the majorities’ experience with immigration in a more poetic-humorous, non-hostile way, even with a critical attitude. Nevertheless, they clearly operate within different

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ax7UK4qWMM0> (Last checked February 11th, 2021). The song was apparently made as antiracist satire by a music teacher in 1999, with the title “Innvandrevise” but has certainly circulated as the opposite – besides being popular in school breaks, it was also used on the election stands by anti-immigration right wing populist party Frp in 2009 (<https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/--ille-at-Frp-bruiker-lata-mi-1.6644779>) (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

¹² These two bands are indeed very different in many ways, including their location in sociocultural taste hierarchies, where *Vassendgutane* passes as considerably more low-brow – but they do share country roots, commercial popularity and a connection with rural and working-class Norway that distinguishes them from the urban, middle-culture music scene, or cultural scene at large. See Breistrand (2013); Dyndahl (2013); Thedens (2001); Vestby (2019).

aesthetic worlds and humour regimes than the middle-brow mainstream comedy. *Vassendgutane*'s song, for example, is from 2011, when the use of the word "Neger" by a white stand-up comedian in Oslo or Bergen probably would have been considered highly problematic. This indicates a division between official culture, represented by the public broadcasters and the major stand-up clubs, and vernacular culture, represented by anonymous joke production and country music, a division that seems to be marked by differences in social class and the divide between centre and periphery. It should thus be noted that this dissertation cannot be seen as a history of *all* immigration humour, but rather as a history of the urban, middle culture, officially sanctioned version of immigration humour. This is not necessarily too problematic: as I write from a public sphere perspective, this becomes a history of the kind of humour that was allowed to work in the main fora of the national public spheres and thus have a privileged way to reach the national publics. It should, however, be noted that also in this case, complying with earlier studies (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2018), Scandinavian public service TV conveys a middle-class perspective of the world.

Even after all these omissions, my potential material was still too large. I therefore had to give up my ambition of being all-encompassing, and make a different strategy. First, I would use all kinds of sources – from online searches to asking people in the industry or academia to academic books – to find instances where immigration comedy had been discussed, mentioned or just remembered. From this, I developed a first priority list. Second, I used the lists available on Wikipedia, and for the sake of Denmark, the inventory of Danish programming that I, relatively late in the process, discovered in Hanne Bruun's (2011) book on Danish TV satire, to do online searches to see if the programme description of any of these shows had any reference to immigration. What I found here would form my second priority list. Finally, I used different kinds of sources to detect comedy programmes that had been very popular or seen as influential in one way or another. This became my third priority list. I would then watch through the available programmes on these lists in prioritised order – which was necessary not because of time, but for financial reasons. Swedish and to some degree Danish material could be watched for free in their national libraries, but then I had to

physically travel to Stockholm and Copenhagen, where lodging is expensive. Norwegian material from the national library could be sent to my local university library for viewing there, but most of it was not digitalised, and after a certain number of episodes I had to pay cost price for its digitalisation. Since my budget was limited, I therefore tried to find the material on open or cheap sources first – the web players of TV stations, streaming services, YouTube or DVDs, and then went to the national libraries to see the rest, in my prioritised order until my funds went dry.

These limitations aside, I managed to collect and view quite a large amount of material, and even though it is not a complete or representative selection of immigration comedy broadcast in the Scandinavian countries, it is an indicative selection which mirrors important trends in Scandinavian comedy as well as the instances where immigration humour was noticed in public reception or flagged by the TV stations themselves. Thus, it is likely that the shows constitute a saturated selection, as I have managed to cover a rich empirical distribution of different varieties of comedy when it comes to both topic and form, and also cover one of these shows most important contexts: how they are located in the national comedy scenes. Based on this final list of shows, I then collected reception material through searching in online search engines and the press databases Retriever, Mediestream and InfoMedia. This material proved to be relatively scarce, mostly consisting of PR material or very short reviews. I did however find indications of more substantial reception and even debate on some shows and comedians, which would be part of the background for selecting my cases for closer analysis.

2.3.2. Systematising immigration humour: finding patterns in the material

The next step was to find patterns and developments in my material in order to select appropriate cases for closer analysis. I planned to conduct a systematic coding, departing from the relatively simple “who is joking about what”-idea: determining if the sender (comedian) had an immigrant background or not, and who and what the butt of the joke was: immigrants themselves, politicians or policy, or the sentiments and attitudes of the majority population. I also added TV station and channel, the year it

was broadcasted (and rerun, if relevant), production milieu if possible, genre, and the ethnicities and nationalities that were part of the jokes.

This relatively simple coding soon became problematic. It was, for example, not always straightforward to determine if the sender could be classified as an immigrant or not. What about Norwegian Zahid Ali or Danish Omar Marzouk, who early in their careers played some sort of immigrant stunt reporter for their more famous creator-writer colleagues Otto Jespersen and Jan Gintberg. It is clear that they were comic actors, but to what degree were they senders? Was this a case of immigrants joking about immigration, or the majority population doing so by proxy? Another difficult case would be with adoptees playing a character who was an immigrant growing up in Scandinavia with immigrant parents, like Swedish Lasse Lindroth/Ali Hussein or Norwegian Lisa Tønne/Ali Reza. Should the status of foreign born be enough to classify them as immigrants, even though they grew up in the majority culture? My solution was to break down the categories and make both creative role and country background more precise. Similarly, the butt of the joke was often ambiguous, more particularly, there were many cases representing prejudice about immigrants where it was unclear whether the butt of the joke were immigrants or prejudices about them. I also had ambitions of coding for recurring motifs, topoi and humour techniques, but to reduce the aesthetical variance and diversity of the show down to fixed categories, albeit partly inductively generated, proved difficult, of little use and as an oversimplifying way to interpret texts.

These problems demonstrated that I needed a more hermeneutical method already in this stage, instead of a coding approach. As my basic hermeneutic principle, I adhered to Quentin Skinner's (2002) claim that the best way to explain ideas and utterances from the past is to understand them as parts of interventions in their contemporary debates, thus seeking the text's historical intention. The practical method thus became to, instead of coding the shows, annotate important features of the shows while I watched them. These features could be aesthetical, like attempts to describe humour styles, but also more content oriented, like clear quotes from the day to day immigration debate or use of tropes that also are present in the serious parts of the immigration debate, for example the veiled suppressed Muslim woman. There is a

significant step from the systematic approaches of social sciences to a hermeneutic, humanistic approach like this, and its outcome will depend to a high degree on my particular hermeneutical horizon. This is, however, possible to explicate to some degree and thus share how I arrived at my interpretations. First of all, my theoretical interest laid in understanding the comedy texts are *doing* something in the public sphere, and how humour was used to this means. These were the central theoretical principles guiding my annotations. Second, my contextual knowledge primarily consisted of having watched if not all, at least very much of what has been made of Scandinavian immigration comedy, thus knowing the tradition each text was a part of. Third, I also possessed a freshly created contextual knowledge about the immigration issue in the Scandinavian public spheres, as a result of following the work of the colleagues in my umbrella project SCANPUB, conducting my own qualitative readings of the representative sample of press material collected in this project, as well as familiarising myself with the existing scholarly literature on the Scandinavian immigration debate. Fourth, my reading of the texts was formed by my training in rhetoric and art history, skilled in analysing moving images and placing them within a cultural context.

Regarding the reception material, the process was much simpler. As already mentioned, there exists relatively little reception of comedy programmes, especially in form of debate or more thorough cultural journalism. In this second step, I made notes of each time similar topics, for example controversies over racism, appeared in comedy reception across countries, shows and actors, and constructed a tentative list of possible cases for reception studies.

Taken together, the process of watching and annotating comedy shows led me to find some interesting constants and differences. For example, the dominant butt of the joke – in all three countries, through the times and in different genres, is xenophobia in its various guises. This is quantitatively dominating, and I would argue that it is safe to say that immigration humour on Scandinavian TV is explicitly pro-immigration. This does of course not mean that there is no use of potentially demeaning language or ethnic stereotypes, but that the historical intentions of the show's jokes most likely support a liberal, even enthusiastic, view on immigrants and

immigration. Besides this similarity, there were also a few differences between the countries – where Sweden was the one standing out. While the anti-xenophobic humour in Denmark and Norway was without any class markers, xenophobic attitudes are clearly marked as belonging to the social, cultural, and geographical periphery in Sweden. Furthermore, religion was sometimes a topic in Norway and Denmark, but virtually never in the Swedish stand-up or television shows, although clearly important in Gina Dirawi’s popular YouTube-channel, based on the character *Syster Khadidje*, a devoted, strict Muslim woman who accuses everything of being haram. Finally, there is a much richer tradition of immigrants making immigration humour in Sweden, with more comedians and more programmes, and even an own word for it: “Blattheumor”, “blatte” being slang for immigrant.

Despite similarities and constants like this, my material was very diverse, and to detect developments or tendencies proved difficult. At the start of my project, I hoped to be able to periodise and make a neat, linear account of how immigration humour had played a role in the opinion formation of the public sphere, but it soon became clear that it was difficult to use my work so far *directly* as a way to write a comprehensive or totalising history of immigration comedy in the Scandinavian public spheres. What they were useful for, however, was as starting points for making a strategic selection of cases that enabled me to answer my research question as well as constituting an evidence-close and systematic reconstruction of the past, by locating important points of *difference* and *discontinuity* in my material.

2.3.2. Historicising immigration humour in the public sphere: selection of cases and principles of historical contextualisation

The methodological guidelines enabling me to do so are drawn from Michel Foucault’s work, mainly from the book *Archeology of Knowledge* (2002) and his inaugural lecture at Collège de France, “Orders of Discourse” (1971). Drawing on the French *Annales* school of history, Foucault proposes a *general history* as an alternative to the reductive *global history*, where the latter aims for causality and a story of development and logical connection synchronically as well as diachronically. Names of periods such as “the Renaissance” and stories like “the history of Western thought”

are all examples of such global histories – history as a *Bildungsroman*, so to speak. The alternative to this approach is to define different chronological *series*, and then describe the relationship between these series. This relationship is the real object of study for the historian, and also where the interest in discontinuity comes in. Rather than seeking causal relations, genealogies, and general laws, discontinuity allows the historian to understand the borders of the different series, which relations that are possible between the series, and how these are distributed in time – which “series of series” or “tableaus” one can create.

The core idea behind this is not to reject the existence of historical connections, but rather to call for caution when it comes to totalising explanations that press a grand narrative down on empirical reality – including the idea of historical telos. When writing a history of the cultural public sphere, I see this as a useful warning against interpreting the myriad of texts which comprise the public sphere as necessarily leading towards its ultimate political aim: rational will formation. Instead, Foucault’s concept of general history, and his specific take on it when writing a history of *discourses*, encourages to look for connections between the diverse texts in the public sphere, starting from observing the features of the texts themselves rather than looking for a pre-conceived type of connection – what Foucault calls a *positive* discourse analysis. It then becomes possible to see how the different texts – or *enunciations*, to use Foucault’s term – are distributed, not only chronologically but also according to their relationships with other texts – to find their location within a discourse.

It became clear for me that the annotations I had made about the comedy shows could be used this way. Features like style, genre and humour technique pointed towards the ‘inside’ of the comic discourse, the (seemingly) autonomous aesthetic laws governing it, while features like butt of the joke, recurring tropes, joker/sender and TV channel pointed towards the ‘outside’ of the discourse, how it is connected to other kinds of discourses, practices and institutions (Schaanning, 2000, pp. 200, 213-215). Instead of searching for tendencies and developments, the categories could then be used to search for discontinuities, which made it possible both to draw a strategic

sample of texts for closer analysis and to conduct this analysis in order to understand the comic texts as a part of opinion formation in the public sphere.

Searching for discontinuity meant looking for *historical ruptures* in my material. In Foucault's thought, the "series of series" or "tableaus" are not so much static texts as *events* or *interventions* that radically change a social system (Schaanning, 2000, pp. 303-313). This can happen as any enunciation, the smallest unit of discourse that exists as an empirically observable instance, *depends* on its discourse as well as *stages* it. The system of the discourse constrains what kinds of enunciations that are possible to make, but since this system should not be seen in a classic structuralist way, as something 'behind' empirical instances, but rather as the set of already performed enunciations, any enunciation will also create and alter the discourse. Radical ruptures happen when different discourses – different series – start to interact in a new way. One of Foucault's examples are when the discourses on criminal law in the 18th century started to intersect with the discourses about physical and mental discipline from schools, hospitals, factories and military camps, radically transforming the criminality/punishment discourse and thus also the thought and practice of criminal law (Schaanning, 1997, pp. 19-20).

It should be made clear that I am not using a Foucauldian method, but rather a Foucault-inspired one. For example, I treat each comedy text or reception text as an enunciation, the smallest unit of discourse, which needs to be carefully described empirically, with the purpose of finding its relations to other enunciations and thus to the wider discourse. It is not easy to understand what Foucault defines as an enunciation, as he explains it negatively by contrasting it to what it is not. It is not, for example, the same as a speech act, nor a logical or grammatical proposition, but since he mentions that a book or a prayer is comprised of many enunciations, it would probably be truer to Foucault to conceptualise a joke as an enunciation, and a comedy programme as a set or cluster of enunciations. In my research process, this does not make too much of a difference, as the main point is to stay close to the empirical units of the discourse when doing the analysis, rather than departing from a pre-conceived idea of the logic behind the discourse. The enunciations' status as things that exist in the empirical world (as opposed to being abstract concepts) is thus more important

than the exact *level* they are located on. A more substantial objection to the use of Foucault could be that he is interested in describing when discourse *radically* change. This is not the case in my material: it cannot be said that immigration comedy in the 2000s is fundamentally *different* from immigration comedy in the 1990s. This is a valid point, and the main reason for not claiming to write a Foucauldian history. Nevertheless, his combination of a discontinuity-oriented history writing combined with discourse theory is useful also to detect smaller changes, and for understanding the meaning these changes had for the public sphere.

With these reservations in mind, immigration comedy can already be seen as a “series of series”, as it by definition is a place where comedy and the serious debate intersect. However, this would be nothing more than a re-formulation of the barometer thesis of humour. To follow the research logic of ruptures would mean to look for instances when the relationship between the public sphere and immigration comedy *changed* in one way or another. Immigration comedy would then be one series which I describe carefully through my initial annotations about the comedy shows, annotations that make it possible to see how it enters into altered relations with other series. These altered relations would then have to be described closer in order to discuss how this might play a role for the opinion formation in the public sphere.

This principle was the background for my selection of cases, a selection I also tried to base on ruptures that happened in all three countries. These cases should then be seen as discursive *events* where comedy intervened in the public sphere’s treatment of the immigration issue in a new way. My collection of cases is however not exhaustive. There could have been other case sets, for example, the advent of comedy joking with Islam, the early topical satire on xenophobia in the 1970s – a rupture insofar as it was the first times satire was used in Scandinavian immigration debate – or the inclusion of immigrants in the sitcom genre, which changed aesthetically in the 1980s and 90s. There could also have been other cases within the sets – there are for example many more controversies where comedy has been accused of racism than those that I analyse in chapter 5. The choice of the case sets that ultimately became selected was partly based on my wish of covering cases of both comedy texts themselves and their reception, in order to understand the workings of comedy’s

aesthetical properties as well as humour's cultural position, partly by the theoretical interest in historicising these cases as parts of the process of public opinion formation. I thus used my knowledge of theoretical problems in public sphere theory and in humour research in order to see how these problems and my cases could mutually enlighten each other. The final selection of cases thus consists of those I viewed as most interesting to think with for the illumination of how humour and politics can be meaningfully related.

Going on and analysing these cases more closely, the two basic principles are also drawn from Foucault's discourse history. The first is that any comedy programme, or its reception *stages* as well as *alters* the discourse(s) they are part of. For immigration comedy, this would be both the immigration debate and the discourse of humour. The analytical questions would then be exactly *what part* of the discourses that are staged, and *how* this is done. To answer this, one needs to look for the relations the comedy show – or *event* – in question creates with the other texts that make up the public sphere. I see this as a fundamentally rhetorical way of analysing discourse, compatible with Warner (2002) and Hauser's (1998) understanding of how texts form publics and public opinion, or for that sake Skinner's (2002) historical close reading technique where texts are best understood as interventions in a debate. If an event stages and alters the discourse, it is used to do something, it is used to intervene. Again, how it seeks to intervene is the interesting question – both regarding the context of the intervention as well as its means. In my analysis of comedy texts, I concentrated on how the text put the tensions inherent in the humorous mode at work, but besides this, I used no readily mapped out close reading strategy. Complex, aesthetic texts are best to approach with concepts relevant for the text at hand, concepts that only can be chosen after an initial reading. These concepts were however of course drawn from existing literature on humour, film, television, and visual rhetoric, sometimes even from earlier research interested in the same text.

The reception material, on the other hand, was analysed by identifying interpretive repertoires, recurrent patterns of speech used to construct interpretations of the world (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 149), that could be related to cultural ideas about humour, but also to other repertoires important in the immigration debate, for

example of how Islam is understood as the opposite of Western and democratic values. The patterns of how these repertoires were used would then be the basis for understanding how debates over and journalism about immigration comedy could be historicised as events that staged, intervened in and altered the broader immigration discourse.

This far, I have argued that in order to answer my research question, how can TV comedy thematising immigration contribute to public opinion formation on immigration in the larger public sphere, it is useful to apply a textual-historical view of opinion formation. Public opinion formation can be studied by understanding how texts intervene in their contemporary historical context, where they do different kinds of work. To understand any potential significance of this work, how it might be a contribution to public opinion formation, it is useful to use different concepts developed by public sphere theoreticians for understanding how comedy and comedy reception feeds into the pre-deliberative processes that are part of public opinion formation. The significance of specific texts can thus be defended theoretically.

Furthermore, I have argued that in order to select comedy events that are particularly interesting in order to understand how humour and comedy contribute in the public sphere, it is useful to identify historical ruptures, moments where comedy and the serious public sphere intersected and interacted in new ways. Since public opinion formation is a process of change, such ruptures are moments where we clearer can identify how comedy events were a part of and fed into these processes. Finally, I have discussed the particularities of the humorous mode that makes it possible for comedy to contribute in its special ways. Humour's potential in this regard is given by its *productive tensions*, how it tends to do opposite things at the same time: Humour is both conservative and radical, both serious and unserious, both used for emotional detachment and emotional investment as well as juggling positive and negative emotions. These tensions are also important backgrounds for two prominent cultural views on how humour works politically and socially, *humour optimism* and *humour alarmism*, which are manifest in comedy reception through various *interpretive repertoires* used to endorse and criticise humour. Both the particularities of humour 'in

themselves' and how these particularities are understood and valued culturally are of equal importance when seeking to understand what kind of work comedy can do in the public sphere. In the following, the usefulness of these theoretical and methodical claims will be demonstrated by the analysis of four sets of cases: Two sets focusing on comedy texts themselves, and two sets focusing on comedy reception.

Chapter 3: Ridiculing the racists: Sneering irony and biting satire against xenophobia.

Bullying has many positive sides. It is the start of an exciting life for the bully, but more important, bullying is a way to weed out the losers early on.

Otto Jespersen on Torsdagsklubben, October 10th, 2002.

Anti-immigration attitudes and the people propounding them have been the most prevalent butts of the joke in Scandinavian immigration comedy. This includes everything from light-heartedly poking fun at angst for the cultural change brought about by immigration, like Galenskaparna & After Shave's revue song "Pappa jag vill ha en italienare" ("Daddy I want an Italian")¹³, to ridiculing outright racists, as many Swedish stand-up comedians did in routines about neo-Nazis in the 1990s¹⁴. In many ways, this is a story of continuity rather than of ruptures. However, the picture becomes different if humour is seen as a way to carry out *aggression*. This has been central in many theories of humour since Hobbes (1991 [1651]), especially in superiority theory, but also in central incongruity-oriented works like Bergson's *Laughter* (1914), the version of relief theory developed by Freud (1976) and of course also in Bakhtin's (1968) original theory of the carnivalesque.

In public sphere theory, however, aggression has a bad reputation. It is incompatible with the most common understanding of a central virtue of the public sphere, civility, "a discourse that does not silence or derogate alternative views but instead evinces respect" (Jamieson, Weitz, Kenski, & Volinsky, 2018, p. 2). Habermas is often associated with civility, although he rarely writes directly about it. His discourse theory, which is the theoretical foundation for his version of the public sphere, is however based on interpersonal communication and individual speech action, which it can be argued that aggression obstructs (Mitchell, 2018). Agonistic

¹³ From the revue *Stinsen Brinner*, Lorensbergsteatern 1987

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G52VOXv-pzg> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

¹⁴ E.g. Lasse Lindroth AKA Ali Hussein, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMkb7GJj1u8> (Last checked February 11th, 2021)

theories of democracy often frame themselves as more positive towards passions and emotion in the public sphere, but it should be noted that Mouffe emphasises the difference between agonism and antagonism, where the first entails a clash of positions, the second a clash of people as they view each other as enemies (Mitchell, 2018). Verbal aggression is thus not unproblematic from an agonistic perspective either.

Worries about incivility, aggression, and affect in general, are prominent in meta-discussions of the public sphere, especially connected to social media (see Dahlgren, 2018 for an example). Satire, on the other hand, seems to generally escape critical attention regarding its aggressiveness, which is interesting as it historically has been considered a very aggressive genre characterised by personal attacks (Østberg, 2018). Furthermore, I would argue that the two shows that will be discussed in this chapter, Norwegian *O.J. – En utstrakt hånd* (*O.J. – a hand reaching out*) (1999) and the Swedish *Grotesco 2*, more precisely their first episode, “Svindemokraterna” (The pig democrats) (2010), were especially aggressive, targeting respectively individual politicians and a social group. The aim of this chapter is to understand how humour and irony was instrumental to put forward a form of aggression that otherwise would have been deemed as illegitimate in the public sphere. As such, satire is a way to work around the boundaries of legitimate and illegitimate speech. At the same time, I will argue that these satirical shows took part in a different boundary struggle where right-wing populist parties and their political views are the ones that are deemed illegitimate¹⁵. Here, the satire shows follow the general tendencies in the serious public sphere, but nevertheless add new aspects to the condemnation of right-wing populists both by adding an affective texture of joy through aggression and by critically examining the right-wing populists’ own narratives. Before analysing the two shows, I will argue that they should be historicised on the background of a cultural and

¹⁵ This kind of condemnation has also been a tendency in the Danish public sphere (Mjelde, 2020), as have comedy with xenophobia as its butt, but I have not found any shows comparable to the two discussed in this chapter in my Danish material. This is probably due to coincidences and personal preferences among satire-makers, and does not reflect anything about Denmark.

aesthetical development that was instrumental for an increasingly aggressive satire: the hardening of humour through irony.

3.1 A new humour? The ironic age and the hardening of humour in the 1990s

Aggressive or *hard* humour can be understood as a cultural *humour style* (Friedman, Kuipers, Savage, & Silva, 2013; Kuipers, 2009, 2015) and will thus of course be related to both cultural politeness norms and changing moral boundaries. Therefore, it is not strange that the debate of humour being too transgressive, inappropriate or aggressive will repeat itself with regular intervals, as L. O. Larsen (2001) has pointed out for the Norwegian context. However, something special seemed to have happened in the Western world in the 1990s and early 2000s: boundary transgression, especially the aggressive kind, became valued *in itself* (Kuipers, 2015, p. 149). This is thoroughly discussed in a Dutch study regarding both popular jokes and comedy (ibid, p. 147-49) and documented in a Norwegian study on jokes (Johnsen, 1997, pp. 157-158). This does of course not mean that dirty jokes¹⁶, sick jokes¹⁷, or hate jokes¹⁸ did not exist

¹⁶ Jokes referring to sexual activity, but of such character that some kind of taboo is crossed. This is of course highly contextual, both regarding place and time – in a public setting in the 50s it would be a mere allusion to sex, in contemporary times it would refer to improper sexual behaviour, which again is relative to social position, local culture and occasion (Kuipers, 2015, pp. 131-135). “If a woman sleeps with 10 men she’s a slut, but if a man does it... He’s gay, definitely gay.” (from <https://worstjokeever.com/sex>)

¹⁷ Jokes making fun of suffering and/or tragic situations, also often called dark humour, e.g. holocaust jokes or dead baby jokes. “What’s the similarity between a Jew and a pizza? They both go in the oven” (told to the author at a party in the Netherlands in 2015). “What’s red and sits in a corner? A baby chewing razor blades” (Dundes, 1979).

¹⁸ Jokes that clearly express direct aggression towards a group that is held in contempt by the joke teller, Kuipers (2015) calls them *attitude jokes*. “How many niggers does it take to roof a building? 10 if you slice them tin enough” (Billig, 2005a, p. 39). “What’s the difference between a pregnant Turkish woman and a trampoline? If you jump on a trampoline, you take your shoes off first” (Kuipers 2005: 26, quoted in Kuipers 2015: 143).

before the 1990s (see Legman (1975) for an (indignated) account of this). The historical change is visible in how these kinds of jokes started to be performed in the open, in social contexts where they earlier would be unheard of, as well as in the mass media (Johnsen, 1997; Kuipers, 2015). Kuipers explains this development in the Netherlands with a trickle-down effect from alternative comedy to the mainstream from the 1970s on, as well as with a general tendency in Western expressive culture to value shock effects and transgression in itself, combined with generational dynamics where each new generation needs to be ‘worse’ than the previous one.

It is especially interesting to note that many of the alternative comedians Kuipers discusses worked within public broadcasting. The resources public service had to both experiment and disseminate the results of these experiments seem pivotal for the development of this new, often aggressive form of comedy and its central position in the public sphere. Ytreberg (2001) discusses how this happened as a reaction to the new market situation when Norwegian NRK’s television monopoly ended. Comedians from alternative radio got relatively free reins to make a comedy show, *The Show* (1992), which was central for NRK’s strategy of reaching different segments of the population at the start of the fragmentation of the TV market, more specifically young, urban people with high education (ibid: 236). One of these comedians, Otto Jespersen (alias O.J.), was asked to create a show with a broader appeal and clearer satirical character, centred around his own persona (ibid: 253-257). This show, *O.J. – ute på prøve* (1994), became the first of three (followed by and *O.J. – på nye eventyr* (1995) and *O.J. – En utstrakt hånd*) on NRK in the 1990s¹⁹, where the O.J. persona combined classical TV host charisma with rhetorically crafted insults

¹⁹ This is just one example of what was often called “the new humour” (Ytreberg, 2000), but there were so many new comedians and programmes that shared some aesthetic and institutional characteristics that I think it is safe to say that we witnessed a historical shift in Norwegian comedy at this time (see Løvland (2002), Wester (2005); Ytreberg (2000); and Kjus (2005) for discussions of other shows and comedians in the period). The O.J. persona, and the original programmes he appeared in, are nevertheless the ones best discussed in the scholarly literature and therefore well suited to understand the dynamics that were instrumental in this historical shift.

as well as an ironic distance to both himself, the act of insulting and the subject matter of the insults (ibid).

Irony is a, if not the, central word for understanding the cultural zeitgeist of the 1990s. There seems to be no general agreement about how irony should be defined, but I will in this chapter use Linda Hutcheon's double definition. The main merits of this definition are that it is fundamentally pragmatic, as well as that it takes both ironist and audience into account: irony is something that is done with texts, and it is a way to do things with texts – a perspective that makes it possible to understand through textual analysis how comedy shows work in the wider public sphere:

From the point of view of the interpreter, irony is an interpretive and intentional move: it is the making or inferring of meaning in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an attitude toward both the said and the unsaid. (...) from the point of view of (...) the ironist, irony is the intentional transmission of both information and evaluative attitude other than what is explicitly presented. (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 11)

Irony is of course at least as old as the Gilgamesh epic, but Generation X, the generation born between 1960 and 1980, was often called “the ironic generation” (ironigenerasjonen) in Norway, a term originally coined by the mass media, but eventually also used by academics²⁰. While Norway is my case in point from this period, studies on Generation X and TV humour in respectively Sweden (Johansson & Landén, 2014) and Denmark (Bruun, 2011; Schiermer, 2008) indicate that similar changes happened all over Scandinavia²¹. The affinity for irony was also not specific

²⁰ Originally used in a causerie by journalist Tom Stalsberg in Dagbladet September 4th, 1996. In the academic world, it is most prominently sociologist Gunnar C. Aakvaag, self-proclaimed member of the ironic generation, who has used the term in public debate (https://morgenbladet.no/ideer/2015/i_skyggen_av_10ironigenerasjonen) (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

²¹ In addition to Otto Jespersen, who, although too old to be a part of generation X, definitely was a proponent of its cultural sensibility, the comedians Harald Eia and Bård Tufte Johansen were central in Norway. In Sweden, Henrik Schyffert and Killingegänget made shows very similar to those made

for Scandinavian members of Generation X. On the contrary, it has been discussed as a Western generational phenomenon, closely related to lifestyle and expressive culture (Heiman, 2001; Johansson & Landén, 2014; Ortner, 1998; Schiermer, 2008). In relation to film, Sconce (2002, pp. 351-352) understands it as a *sensibility*, meaning an intersection of a sociocultural formation and an aesthetic, with directors like Lynch, Tarantino and Anderson as important proponents. The common denominator for these directors, and for the Scandinavian “new humour” (see Ytreberg 2000, 2001; Kjus 2006, Eia 2006, Bruun 2011), was a form of ‘total irony’, or *ironia vitae* (Sloane, 2001), where everything in life is seen through an ironic lens, which manifested itself as a consequent detachment from both generic conventions as well as social expectations – Sconce (2002) calls it *blank style*. This was the background for the many accusations about nihilism and moral cynicism towards the cultural products of Generation X (Sconce, 2002; Wester, 2005; Ytreberg, 2000), and also the background for a unique, harder, form of comic aggression. Although irony is often seen as a ‘cold’ and detached way of communicating and relating to the world, its potential for anger and transgression is well known – think of one of irony’s subtypes, sarcasm, a rhetorical device known to be hurtful, and a word whose Greek roots mean “tear flesh”. Irony’s play with the tension between both emotional and illocutionary detachment and commitment is what gives it potential to carry out aggression, as I will show in this chapter.

Thus, although comic aggression is old news, it nevertheless seems to have changed in the 1990s, when Scandinavian TV humour was integrated in a larger Western change of sensibility, which also as discussed above was connected with a more ‘material’ historical change in the media landscape (Ytreberg, 2001) as well as surrounded by public controversy (Wester, 2005; Ytreberg, 2000, pp. 142-145). Hence, it makes sense to understand this period as a historical change, a rupture, in the

by Eia and Tufte Johansen, while Casper Christensen and Frank Hvam with *Casper og Mandrilaftalen*, although being latecomers, can be seen as Danish representatives. In this chapter, the Norwegian scene is used both because of Otto Jespersen’s satirical practice relating to the immigration issue, and because it has gained more scholarly attention than the neighbouring scenes.

field of comedy, which had consequences for how aggressive satire could be. A lot of the new humour could however not be called satirical. Many of its comedians enjoyed portraying themselves as anti-satire and proponents of total irony (Bruun 2011, Eia 2006, Johansson and Landén 2014, Schiermer 2008). *O.J. – En utstrakt hånd* and *Grotesco 2*, on the other hand, consistently have a standpoint behind their irony: the comical aggression points towards a referent in the world outside the text, as well as to a social norm that this referent is represented as breaking (Schwind, 1988, pp. 23-72). Furthermore, satire criticises this norm transgression through aesthetic means used to ridicule the referent (ibid). Satire directed towards people that are anti-immigration has been a staple in Scandinavian immigration comedy, and has taken the form of both social satire, with stylised social types and mentalities as its butt (Bruun, 2011, p. 58) and political satire, with society's powerful institutions and their representatives as its butt (ibid: 50). *O.J. – En utstrakt hånd* and *Grotesco 2* are nevertheless special not only as examples of a new, more aggressive form of humour, but also because of their satirical targets: right-wing populist parties at a time where either the political or the discursive position of these parties changed, respectively *Fremskrittspartiet* (The Progress Party, Frp) in Norway in the late 90s and *Sverigedemokraterna* (Sweden Democrats, SD) in Sweden around 2010. The shows should therefore not only be studied as examples of a historical rupture in comedy itself, but also as a reaction to, and hence a part of, a historical change in the larger field of immigration discourse, where it can be argued that a hardening of the immigration debate was – perhaps coincidentally – met by the hardening of satire.

3.2. Laughing at the indecent Progress Party: *O.J. – En utstrakt hånd*

O.J. – En utstrakt hånd (*O.J. – a hand reaching out*), hereafter *En utstrakt hånd*, was broadcast in two seasons on NRK1 in 1999. While the earlier *O.J.* shows lacked an explicit theme, this was declared to be about multicultural Norway. Presenting itself as “Etnisk moro fra Oslo 3” (“Ethnic fun from Oslo 3”), a reference to the urban well-off areas of Oslo where also NRK had their studios, the show would open with a vignette showing a well-fed white hand first reaching out to, and then grabbing and crushing, a

skinny, black hand – a clear reference to the title. The set decor can be described as ethno-camp: Persian carpets, mahogany and zebra patterned furniture, shishas, wooden elephants and one odd (and possibly offensive) detail: a bag of dog food. In addition to Jespersen himself, the show’s cast consisted of a weekly guest, as well as a house band of people with immigrant background all playing tunes and instruments coded as “exotic”, among them djembes and a swarmadal; and finally a vox populi-like panel of three men of colour, with the stereotypical names Jesus, Ali and Sambo.



Figure 1 Otto Jespersen with his vox populi of immigrants. From O.J – En Utstrakt Hånd, NRK, 1999.

All these visual and musical means added up to the show’s character as not only a talk show parody, but also a parody of the different discourses that circulated about multicultural Norway, and thus a form of social satire. This was also the topic of many of the sketches, interviews and monologues in the show, but not exclusively, as the topic of the day also depended on the guests and current affairs. However, the show’s first episodes coincided with the Kosovo war and the following flux of refugees, which was an important issue in Norwegian public debate at the time. Thus, Jespersen had a chance to combine pre-planned social satire with fresh, relevant political satire.

Similar to his earlier shows, this was done through his persona as an almighty and sarcastic show host – O.J.

This persona was originally characterised by an aggressive interview technique, which had roots in the late night radio show *Revolvmagasinet* (1988) and *The Show*, but it was in the three programmes named after himself that the O.J. persona became the star of the show, and was refined into a sometimes friendly, sometimes aggressive talk show host, carefully juggling elements of rhetorical virtuosity, classical TV host charisma and a distanced parody of the show host role (Ytreberg 2001). This style was used in interviews with studio guests, where Jespersen to various degrees would interchangeably insult and ignore his conversation partner, but its highlight was perhaps when O.J. delivered monologues of “fresh talk” (Ytreberg 2001:259-261), which Wester (2005) has characterised as personal attacks. These monologues consisted both of addressing the viewers directly as well as of autobiographical stories and talk about current affairs and people currently in the limelight of the public sphere. He would also sometimes address public persons, especially politicians, directly. Stylistically, he would deliver his monologues as well as the interviews with a deadpan expression, sometimes interrupted by an overtly controlled smile resembling a grin. His direct way of looking into a camera, and active gesticulation, was a contrast to this facial mimicry, and his monologues also often escalated from contained seriousness to aggressive outbursts, where he would scream towards the camera, point directly towards the TV audience and deliver angry and sarcastic statements about people and current affairs. As one can see, and as Wester (2005) observes, Jespersen’s persona has several antisocial features, which I will show are instrumental for how he uses them to carry out satire about xenophobia in this particular show.

In the second episode of *En utstrakt hånd*, Jespersen used his monologue to comment upon the Norwegian treatment of refugees from the Kosovo war, with a special emphasis of the rhetoric of the right-wing populist Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet, hereafter Frp). Although Frp had an anti-immigration stance from the very beginning, and made it into a central issue for the party in the local election of 1987 (Gripsrud, 2018; Hagelund, 2003), the late 90s was nevertheless a time of change

in the party as their relatively moderate rhetoric – both when it comes to characterisations of immigrants as well as policy suggestions – was replaced with a more fierce and controversial rhetoric (ibid). Frp had since the 80s been accused of “fishing in muddy waters”, meaning profiting from and even encouraging prejudice towards immigrants (Bjøntegård, 2017; Brox, 1991; Hagelund, 2003), but it is relatively clear that it was not until the 90s that both Frp’s rhetoric and its institutional anchoring changed in such a way that the allegation started to carry weight. In the late 80s and early 90s, party leader Carl I. Hagen argued against immigration on mainly economic grounds, and neither made use of prejudiced rhetoric nor questioned the legitimacy of refugees’ need for help (Bjøntegaard 2017)²². This changed in the late 90s, where especially party members Øystein Hedstrøm, Vidar Kleppe and Jan Simonsen were known for harsh rhetoric on immigration – which included statements like “where Christians, Muslims, Jews, Arabs and people from different cultures live together, life is characterised by murder, drugs and other forms of crime»²³, and the proposition that asylum seekers from selected countries should be followed everywhere to avoid crime²⁴. Hedstrøm also reportedly had contact with right-wing extremists and used their input to create parts of Frp’s immigration and integration policy (Gripsrud 2018: 222). Finally, the local elections in 1995 and 1999 can both be characterised as “immigration elections”, largely due to how Frp promoted immigration as a key issue (Hagelund 2003: 116). This is important background information in order to understand Jespersen’s monologue beyond being merely political satire of one concrete incident, and rather as a response to a change in the immigration discourse.

The incident in question was that Frp-leader Carl I. Hagen, about two weeks after the NATO bombing of Serbia had started, appeared in the newspaper *Aftenposten*

²² This point was also central for Ottar Brox (1991), who criticised the immigration debate in the 80s, calling it a moral championship where it was necessary for the participants to distance themselves from racism, albeit there – according to Brox – were no instances of racism in the mainstream political debate.

²³ Hedstrøm in Dagsavisen, June 27th, 1999.

²⁴ Simonsen on NRK Radio, September 2nd, 1999.

as a firm opponent both of the NATO bombing and of bringing refugees from Kosovo to Norway and other Western countries. Hagen argued that a better option would be to help the Albanians in Kosovo and the neighbouring countries, including supplying them with weapons so they could fight the Serbian army (*Aftenposten*, September 6th, 1999). Jespersen's monologue was then delivered Friday, September 4th, just three days after Hagen's statement in the press – which also shows how close to broadcasting the show was produced.

Spring has of course arrived further south. In Kosovo, for example, it is apparently green already, and the bumblebees have started to buzz around the poppies on the fields down there. But it is no joking matter being a bumblebee down there right now, given that around one million Kosovo Albanians rumble over the fields fleeing from Serbian soldiers. It is terrible what goes on down there right now, but what's even worse is that 90 Albanians have arrived here in Norway. And there are more to come. Bondevik [the prime minister, Christian Democrats] says that we have to open our homes for them. It's not really a good time right now. I am building an extra living room in the basement, I am going to have a bar, pool table, jacuzzi over in the corner, and it is not totally cool to have the basement full of hungry Albanians who move around among the building materials and make a mess out of it. Is this what Bondevik means, that it is going to be like this?

Carl I. Hagen is currently the only one who sees this threat towards Norwegian basement living rooms, unfortunately. We should help them where they are, he said to *Aftenposten* on Tuesday, in Kosovo, we need to give them food, and weapons, he said, and chase them back towards the Serbians!

And while the others just talk and talk, Carl and co.²⁵ does something. He and some other Frp boys are actually planning to travel down to Kosovo now. The trip will be financed by a series of new embezzlements by local Frp politicians. They are going down to turn the refugee flux into a formidable attack against the Serbians! They have been training for an entire week now, in Frognerparken. First, they went up to Armo shop in Trondheimsveien and bought some really heavy camo clothing. Everybody

²⁵ This is a reference to the sitcom "*Karl & Co*" (TV 2 1998-2001), known for relatively simple character-driven situation comedy, here probably connoting poor taste.

except Vidar Kleppe, who insisted on keeping his bright yellow V jumper, because he thought that would cause fear and uncertainty amongst the Serbians and I think he is fucking right about that!

What the boys have practiced the most, is to roll sideways with their weapons ready as we see in movies. And most of them managed quite well, except for Øystein Hedstrøm. He did indeed roll the fastest of them all, but he was so unfortunate that a stick was hooked in a part of his hair, and thus he tangled one and a half meters of combover into the thorns and got stuck! Jan Simonsen thought that they needed to cut over his hair all down to the bacon rind to free him, but Hedstrøm refused straight away, he has after all spent ten years saving the little hair he has, and so Carl I. Hagen promptly pulled up the entire bush with its roots, and Hedstrøm of course barely managed to stand on his feet with this fucking big thorn bush on his head, it has roots several meters long, that drag along the ground behind him, he cried and he did not want to come to Kosovo anymore, if this was what it was going to be like! But Carl I. Hagen declared: on the contrary! With this headpiece, he was so well camouflaged, that he could get the honour of going in front in the campaign against the Serbians when they arrived in Kosovo! The Progress Party is a delightful party, you guys!

Because they are right! We do not solve the conflict by letting refugees into Norway. *It is better to bomb them where they are!*

This monologue is exemplary political satire: topical, very dependent on shared contextual knowledge earned from the news, attacking politicians for their bigotry (Bruun 2011). Following Schwind's satire model, Frp is the real world-referent that is criticised for violating social norms. The core of the satirical criticism towards the party lays in an incongruence between the ideals propounded by Carl I. Hagen and the reality: the scenario of Frp going to war is cued as ironic because it is obviously fiction, and thus it is implied that the party in reality does the opposite of what they do in this story: stay safely at home while encouraging others to go to war. The evaluative message of the irony is hence that Frp has broken a social norm that can be formulated as "one should help victims of war, even if it means putting oneself at risk". This reconstruction is also backed up by the sentence "And while the others just talk and talk, Carl and co. does something", which should be read as ironic, since contextual knowledge tells the audience that Frp was the only Norwegian party that neither

wanted refugees nor active Norwegian military participation in the conflict. The Frp politicians are thus portrayed as someone who neither are interested in helping the victims of wars, nor show any form of bravery. This is accentuated and taken further in Jespersen's final statement, "it is better to bomb them where they are", which he shouted in a festive, enthusiastic voice, smiling and raising his hands. Being a paraphrase of a real Frp slogan, "It is better to help them where they are", this creates a semantic clash between the pragmatism clothed in humanist ideals of the latter, and the alleged harsh realities in Kosovo – there is no help there, only bombs. This way, Jespersen uses irony to challenge Frp's own narrative about themselves and their policy, by indirectly that Frp's suggested policy is not humane at all, as it ignores and maybe even contributes to human suffering – it is *indecent*.



Figure 2 Otto Jespersen at the end of his monologue. From O.J. – En ustrakt hånd, NRK, 1999.

Sociologist Anniken Hagelund argues that the Norwegian discourse on immigration has been dominated by an ideal of decency. She summarises this as follows:

A rhetoric is applied where it is made clear that while free immigration is impossible, immigration politics is a matter of helping people in deep distress, and a rich nation, which prides itself of its humanitarian traditions, has a responsibility for doing so (2003: 13).

Hagelund argues that taking up this decency position has allowed Norwegian politicians to restrict immigration while at the same time making clear that they follow humanitarian ideals and seek to help those who truly need it (ibid). Most interesting for my purpose is her discussions of how decency only “becomes meaningful in contrast to that which is not decent” (ibid: 14), which in political discourse historically has been Frp. Furthermore, Hagelund uses Laclau’s term *constitutive outside*, “the ‘outside’ that blocks the identity of the ‘inside’ (and is nonetheless, the prerequisite for its constitution at the same time)” (Laclau, 1990, p. 17) to explain the relationship between the decency discourse and racism. The Norwegian self-image as fundamentally decent is understood in opposition to racism. As I read Hagelund, this is also instrumental for making Frp into the embodiment of indecency, because although no politician would say that Frp *is* racist, the ‘fishing in muddy waters’ hypothesis implies a relation between Frp and racist sentiments in the population (2003: 218-19).

Jespersen’s monologue fits well with the then current formulation of the decency discourse and the problematisation of Frp as its constitutive outside. In 1999, this dominated the immigration debate. Hagelund (2003: 130-32) discusses how the other political parties largely competed in being the most immigrant-friendly and emphasising their distance from Frp, perhaps as a reaction to public rallies conducted by Hedstrøm and Kleppe that often were referred to as “immigration shows” (ibid: 126-129). Even though Jespersen’s monologue was held a few months before the election campaign, Frp’s rhetoric on immigration had been an issue in the media since 1995 and became more prominent during the Kosovo crisis. The monologue can thus be read as a part of an old but revitalised tendency to exclude Frp from the realm of

decency. Seen this way, Jespersen's humour was conservative, as it complied with dominant patterns of serious discourse, which in the terms of boundary struggles deemed not only certain types of xenophobic discourse as illegitimate, but also excluded those holding an anti-immigration position by labelling them as uncivil outsiders of the moral community (Thorbjørnsrud, 2017, pp. 262-264). If that was all that there was to it, then the contribution of TV comedy in the public sphere was to reproduce the same tendencies that dominated the ordinary debate.

However, this conclusion ignores how *En utstrakt hånd* worked within the decency-discourse by means of *humour*, hence following different rules than its serious counterpart, which made the show able to do things that could not be done in the ordinary debate. It is noteworthy that the counterattacks on Frp's harsh rhetoric in the political realm would be made by means of either relatively straight forward condemnation, through distancing by positioning oneself as immigrant friendly; or by some version of the 'fishing in muddy waters'-claim (Hagelund 1999: 37-42, 2003: 126-34). It appears to have been impossible to claim that Frp was racist, or even to elaborate on what exactly it was that was problematic and indecent with their rhetoric and policy. This could be done in Jespersen's satire due to its use of ironic humour, with its inherent balance between detachment and commitment, between non-seriousness and aggressive evaluations. Controversial implications can always be negated when using irony. Jespersen's monologue gave the ideal of decency flesh on the bone when he drew up a moral principle of helping people even if it puts yourself at risk and claimed that this was broken by Frp. This was even connected to a social form of satire: after describing his persona's rather extravagant plans for a living room in the basement, and how this would be compromised by letting refugees stay, Jespersen stated that "Carl I. Hagen is currently the only one who sees this threat towards Norwegian basement living rooms". Sequences like this show how the O.J. character is rather antisocial, which spills over to the satirical evaluation of Frp. The implication is that Frp's restrictiveness in the immigration field is not due to economic prudence but in sentiments like stinginess and gluttony. Furthermore, Jespersen constructed a discrepancy between Frp's own claims to be decent, but pragmatic ("we want to help them where they are") – and a reality described as so dangerous that this

policy would be impossible, a discrepancy that is created and emphasised by the surprising reworking of Frp's well known talking point, where the well-known became twisted and appeared in a new light. This served as a critical inspection and rebuttal of Frp's own counternarrative where they sought to portray themselves as decent, and did together with the rest of the monologue frame Frp as cynical and hypocritical to the degree of being antisocial. This way, Jespersen's humour contributed to boundary struggles in the public sphere by drawing up moral boundaries and to emphasise why Frp should be placed outside these boundaries. His satire, albeit being conservative in the sense that it goes along with the hegemonic discourse, did thus also have a creative quality, as it not only *re-produced* the moral boundaries but also *produced* them anew by filling them with more concrete sense and meaning than what the serious debate could do. TV comedy's work in the public sphere was thus not only to draw moral boundaries, but also to make them clearer. Hence, a different boundary, the one often drawn between conserving and creative humour, becomes less clear, and one sees how the particularities of the humorous mode first and foremost lies in its productive tensions.

In addition to being clarified, the moral boundaries were also elaborated with an affective texture and saturation brought about by the comical aggression in Jespersen's satire. A large part of the monologue is straightforward ridicule of the Frp politicians. Jespersen uses familiar humour techniques like comic degradation (Bakhtin, 1968), when he paints a picture of 'high' politicians being reduced to 'low' bodies, rolling around in the bushes and getting their hair stuck. In addition, the politicians' appearance is caricatured when Jespersen refers Hedstrøm's lack of hair and Kleppe's sweater. The grotesqueness of the imagery Jespersen paints does of course have a long tradition in comedy, also in political satire about real people. Nevertheless, something special is happening here. There is a sense of serious personal attacks. Jespersen does play a character, but his monologue has a more complicated relationship with the divide between fiction and reality than what a sketch would have. He combines burlesque scenarios with verbatim quotes from politicians, as well as an unsettling twist of Frp's catchphrase "It is better to help them where they are". Moreover, although it is a parody, he still partly operates within the generic contracts

of a talk show, where some committed relationship to the social reality actually exists – as opposed to comedy programmes (Kjus, 2005; Langer, 1981). This relationship with social reality is even stronger when Jespersen interviews people, but I will argue that it is an important part of his monologues as well.

As quoted above, Jespersen ridicules a yellow sweater Kleppe allegedly used to wear. During this sequence, Jespersen first increases the pace, then slows down, starts with theatrical gestures and puts emphasis on certain words, before he speeds up again, increases the volume, makes a short thumbs up and finally looks at the audience with a strict face, taking a longer pause for applause: “Kleppe ... who insisted on keeping his bright yellow V-jumper, because he thought that would cause *fear* and *uncertainty* amongst the Serbians and I think he is *fucking* right about that!”. Kleppe is insulted in a sarcastic tone, with hefty gestures and angry mimicry (which he also uses when referring to Hedstrøm’s scalp as a ‘bacon rind’). Although staged and exaggerated, it bears very strong resemblance to how insults and bullying happen in ordinary communication – both when it comes to the delivery and how the degradation of the politicians is based on their real appearance. “Jespersen’s satire is wrapped in a bully’s behaviour”, as Wester (2005: 63) points out. This becomes clearer when we, following Wester (ibid) and Ytreberg (2001), conceptualise Jespersen’s persona as a way of conducting mediatised face-work in Goffman’s (1971) sense. By ironically distancing himself from a traditional host role and the face-work involved in this, Jespersen creates an opportunity to manoeuvre the face-work of *other* people (Ytreberg 2000). This is something more than symbolic aggression, as it can be seen as a face-threatening act and thus a direct attack on people’s public reputation (ibid) – and when it takes the form of satire, it becomes a way of intervening into the political debate with a level of aggression rarely seen in other form of genres.

This kind of face-threatening acts are incongruous with the central generic feature of talk shows, namely their mediated intimacy. I would add that they also are incongruous with the classical kind of TV host authority based on a formal, institutionalised voice that is imagined to guarantee neutrality and factuality (Scannell & Cardiff, 1991) This is the core of Jespersen’s irony, where he in some respects appears to be a talk show host, but in other respects clearly is not. The evaluative

stance taken in this respect is one of distance and detachment from both classical TV conventions *and* his bully behaviour, and thus he does to some degree cancel the commitments that normally come with both the formal conventions of talk shows and the content of his talk, a trait which is quite paradigmatic for the new humour (Ytreberg 2000, 2001; Bruun 2011). This is how his personal attacks can be interpreted as humour, not as a grave transgression of norms, since they do happen within a parody of a talk show and thus can appear as nothing more than vehicles for an irony that seeks to ridicule TV in general and this genre in particular.

However, it can be argued that the personal attacks actually *happened*. It is worth noting that while there are many cues of irony (see Hutcheon 1994 for a discussion of how irony is signalled) that suggest an ironic intention both towards television conventions per se and towards the talking points of the monologue, Jespersen's description of Kleppe's sweater as repulsive or his comparison of Hedstrøm as a pig are quite direct and can hence also be interpreted as real, insulting speech acts²⁶. Thus, there are some aggressive impulses here that have a certain *authentic quality*. This creates a complex social space where the meaning of the monologue not necessarily becomes fuzzy, but at least is up to the beholder to decide. Is it real, meaning serious, aggression, or not?

This tension is also visible in the virtuosity that Jespersen employs in his parody of a talk show host. As Ytreberg (2001: 262-65) argues, this does not only create distance to the formal conventions, but also individualises O.J. and creates a new kind of contract between him as a person and his audience. It is expected that he will break the rules for social behaviour, herein lies his virtuosity and a central part of the show's potential to create pleasure. This can concretely be seen by how the management of applause is an integral part of his monologues: by means of changing

²⁶ I am aware that neither the word "repulsive" nor the comparison of Hedstrøm with a pig is explicitly expressed in Jespersen's monologue, which could mean that inferring these semantic blocks entails that irony is detected, as it is something more than what is explicitly said (and even evaluative!). However, Hutcheon's definition is based on a speech act perspective on meaning (if not, it would be a useless definition covering all kinds of implicitness in symbol use), and as far as I can see, there is no implicit speech act going on here – the face-threatening insults are quite explicit.

pace, volume and emphasis; gestures and cinematography, Jespersen seeks to make the studio audience applaud and laugh when he fires out an insult or an antisocial remark. The studio audience's response should furthermore be seen as a model response for the TV audience (Ytreberg 2001). In other words, the intended audience response is approval. It would call for empirical audience research to determine *exactly* what it is that the audience approves of, but based on how Jespersen and the director used different aesthetic means to manage the audience, I think it is safe to say that it at least includes some sort of appreciation of his insults and transgression – and that the pleasure connected to their authentic quality is a central dimension of this. After all, these bully-like breaks of decorum are what make Jespersen funny.

This does of course not mean that the audiences need to appreciate the insults based on their *content*. It might as well be that they enjoy them for the transgression in itself – in an ironic fashion. So far, this fits with the idea of irony as total detachment from the commitments of the real world. However, besides being epistemologically untenable (Tjønneland, 1999, 2004), this view of irony ignores how the trope also works with affects and evaluations. Hutcheon (1994, pp. 37-43) argues that irony always conveys an attitude or a feeling, although appearing to be distant – this is part of what she calls the *edge of irony*. This implies that Jespersen's audiences do at least infer, but not necessarily share, the evaluative attitude behind this aggression (ibid, p. 42). The cues to infer this evaluative attitude partly lays in the satirical message discussed above.

Thus, in addition to being traditional satire about Frp's questionable moral fibre, the monologue is also a text where party members are comically degraded and even directly bullied for their appearance. Their social face and public image are torn down in all thinkable aspects. To depict morally bad people as ugly and comical is an old trope, but it is still something that normally only comedians can get away with within a mainstream public sphere²⁷. This important difference from serious debate suggests that the aesthetic and emotional aspects of satire play an important role for how its moral evaluations are carried out, and they are indeed an important part of

²⁷ At least it was until the election of Donald Trump.

Schwind's (1988) satire model: the criticism towards the moral transgressor needs to be made by aesthetical means used to *ridicule* if it is to be satire. The question is if this matters for how satire *works* in the public sphere. In order to discuss the importance of this, it is necessary to move from the pure discursive level up to the level of social psychology.

According to Michael Billig, laughter is essentially a disciplinary mechanism of ridicule. Billig views laughter as inherently rhetoric, "for it is typically used to communicate meaning to others" (2005b, p. 189), but he also views it as being connected not mainly with joy, but first and foremost with the pain of being ridiculed, which he claims is how we learn what laughter is during childhood (ibid: 194-99). Furthermore, he argues that ridicule is a social universal closely related to embarrassment, and that these two social phenomena work similarly in reproducing norms and thus maintaining the social order. Billig's main concern is how it feels to be *ridiculed*, and the social consequences of these feelings. While his point is original and solidly argued, I do not necessarily agree with his rather strong conclusion of humour as inherently conservative – as I have indicated above and will return to later in this dissertation. More important at this moment, however, is how Billig pays less attention to the feelings of the *ridiculer*. This is probably because the point is well treated in classical superiority theory, already by Hobbes:

Sudden Glory, is the passion which maketh those Grimaces called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves (Hobbes 1991: 43).

The combination of Hobbes' insight and Billig's theory makes it possible to see how laughing *at* someone also reproduces social order from the perspective of the joke teller and his audience. It contributes to draw and maintain moral boundaries and is thus central in the formation of in-groups (Fine, 1983; Frye, 1990, p. 61). This is an important issue in modern humour research (Kuipers 2008), but little attention has been paid to how this interacts with other ways of keeping an in-group together,

especially on the level of mediated communication. My claim is thus that satire like Jespersen's monologue works with the inherent tensions of the humorous mode regarding negative and positive emotions by providing an opportunity to feel *joy through aggression* when drawing up moral boundaries, and that this is an important supplement to how these boundaries are drawn in serious discourse. The core point is that if moral boundaries are to be perceived as legitimate, it is necessary to *feel good about sticking to them*. One of the ways in which this can be done, is by feeling superior to people who transgress the moral boundaries. This is also a powerful way to create communion around these boundaries: shared laughter and joy. I would also add that this affective texture is a way to make a claim about why these moral boundaries *matter*, in other words, to make them politically relevant in this particular context. As stressed in the classical rhetorical tradition and demonstrated in modern psychology, emotional assessments of the world are also cognitive (Dalglish & Power, 1999; Fafner, 1997) and make issues clearer as they serve as value judgements (Nussbaum, 2004). This is perhaps the point where the functional interdependence of the satirical and the face-threatening parts of Jespersen's monologue becomes clearest: combining them is a way to direct value judgements towards both Frp's politics and the party's politicians. *En utstrakt hånd* thus enforced moral boundaries both by spelling them out, added an affective component that made it clear why they were important, and provided for the creation of an emotionally based communion around them – all the time by placing a specific political party and its politicians outside these boundaries.

With this in mind, the significance of the increased aggression in the humour of the 1990s becomes clearer. Harder humour can be understood as a stronger moral condemnation. Jespersen's face-threatening humour combined with more ordinary satirical moves is in one way a total condemnation of Frp's moral character, and with the ironic talk show parody as its basis it can be argued that he challenges the party's social face and public reputation in a very real way, while still maintaining the comedy show's right to transgress based on ironic distance. As Bruun (2011: 53-57) argues in a discussion about similar shows in Denmark, this tension is probably important for the entertainment value of the programme, which is as important a part of satire as its critical function (Vigsø, 2019). New forms of taste demanded new forms of satire, if

the genre was going to work. In addition, it is worth noting that the increased aggression, or harshness, in *En utstrakt hånd* was directed towards an increasingly harsh immigration debate. Hedstrøm, Kleppe and Simonsen talked about immigrants in a way that was unheard of before in the main fora of Norwegian public debate, and through this rhetoric they managed to set, or even become, the main agenda of the immigration debate in 1999. This is also the connection between the monologue I have analysed here and *En utstrakt hånd* as a whole: the kind of prejudice towards immigrants that the Frp-trio expressed publicly was also the butt of the joke in the show's social satire, which was ubiquitous through its two seasons. The aggression of his satire can thus be seen as a reaction to an increased aggression towards immigrants in public debate, where prejudice that used to be socially sanctioned now would be central in the rhetoric of politicians.

It is tempting to describe this dynamic as polarisation. The affective dimension of polarisation has indeed been an object of interest in the field of political communication in the last years (Iyengar et.al. 2018). There are also some indications in the representative data collected for SCANPUB that the immigration issue has become more polarised in Scandinavia over the years, indirectly measured by the steady increase of newspaper debate as well as a politicisation of the issue as national politicians to a larger degree participated in these debates (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019). However, the notion of polarisation as it is used in political science and psychologically oriented communication studies is based on a way of measuring public opinion that lays far from the scholarly tradition in which this dissertation is written, and it would not be sound to claim that Jespersen's satire contributed to affective polarisation. What *can* be claimed, perhaps keeping in mind some of the assumptions behind the notion of polarisation, is that this satire contributed to an on-going negotiation of an affective and moral divide in the Norwegian public sphere, where the treatment of immigrants was central. Although this negotiation in the 1990s also went on in serious discourse, manifested in the calls for decency amongst political actors, satire here had a special function, because the discursive rules governing it allowed it to be a space of aggression, and through this aggression elaborate and enforce moral principles and boundaries.

3.3. Grotesco's "The Pig Democrats": ridiculing the Swedish Democrats as socially and morally backwards

The group *Grotesco* originated as a group of teenagers doing theatre classes in the Culture School – public extracurricular cultural education common in Scandinavia – at Lidingö, a wealthy suburb of Stockholm. They entered the national comedy scene through winning the *Humorlabbet* competition in 2005, where different comedy groups mailed in pilots that were broadcast on SVT. The winner, based on both jury and popular vote, would get their own show produced and broadcast on the same channel. The first season of the show, named after the group, was a critic's favourite but not an audience success, but the show was nevertheless renewed as *Grotesco 2* in 2010. The first episode was titled "Svindemokraterna" and consisted – as most Grotesco-episodes do – of connected narrative segments fragmented by different sketches, sometimes obviously related to the main episode narrative, other times less so. The main narrative in this episode was how a political party rooted in Sweden's southernmost region Skåne (Scania), Svindemokraterna – the Pig Democrats – are elected into Parliament for the first time. Their new MP, the pig farmer Jöns, travels to Stockholm together with his favourite pig, and due to his old-fashioned appearance and attitude, he feels alienated in the modern city and is also mocked quite a bit by his fellow MPs from other political parties.

Svindemokraterna is quite evidently a caricature of the populist party Sverigedemokraterna, the Sweden Democrats (hereafter SD), which originally was based in Skåne and first entered Riksdagen, the Swedish parliament, in 2010, less than two months before this episode aired. The party, founded in 1988, has a historical connection to the extreme right, but had gone through a sort of cleansing process up to the election of party leader Jimmie Åkesson in 2005, who claimed that "the party is a

different one now than 10-15 years ago”²⁸. Nevertheless, it remains a controversial party, and it was made clear by the established political parties that no one wanted to collaborate with them in any way after they entered Parliament. It has even been claimed that SD was stigmatised as being *the beast*, the extreme other, by the Swedish parties (Hellström & Hervik, 2014), and that the party’s entry into parliament was treated as an *iconic event* (Leavy, 2007) by the Swedish press (Loman, 2010). As I will show in the following, *Grotesco*’s sketch – like the O.J. monologue discussed above – can be considered as partaking in this dominant discourse about SD, while still doing something unique by virtue of being satire and humour. Before I embark on this analysis, I will describe the general style of *Grotesco* and locate it in a comedy context that also makes it clear how its satirical aggression should be understood in relation to the rupture in the comedy scene of the 1990s.

I would argue that *Grotesco*’s style can be characterised by three features: its absurdity, its emphasis on the visually grotesque and its special use of identity humour, characterised by irony. The absurd lays in exaggerations built into story lines as well as musical numbers. For example, the very first episode of their first season is based on the premise that a magical portal has opened to Gothenburg of the 1970s, and extremely friendly working class people (a stereotype drawn from film and TV of the 70s) are pouring into modern Sweden, threatening its efficiency and bringing it to the brink of collapse. Another example is one of *Grotesco*’s most popular musical numbers, “Bögernas fel” (The gays’ fault)²⁹, where a pastor participating in a TV debate breaks out in song, singing how all thinkable problems in the world are caused by gay people. In many ways, this kind of absurdity emphasises *Grotesco*’s character as fiction, and is reminiscent of *Monty Python*.

At the same time, *Grotesco*’s humour is often based on the visually grotesque, especially ugly facial expressions, but also lavish mise-en-scènes with many visual allusions as well as strange details, brought to its fullest potential in the Eurovision

²⁸ Original press release from SD,

<http://www.mynewsdesk.com/se/sverigedemokraterna/pressreleases/sverigedemokraterna-byter-partisymbol-105142> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

²⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1lvMJ-10_A (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

Song Contest parody “Tingeling”³⁰. This again is pivotal in Grotesco’s special version of identity comedy. Arthur Asa Berger defines identity comedy as being “about people with all kinds of identity problems” (2010: 176), which I interpret as meaning that the comical conflicts are created by features closely related to social identity, and that the butt of the joke lays here as well. What is special with Grotesco is that their absurdities very often are based on existing, stratified social identities that can be located in space and time – like the working-class people from Gothenburg mentioned above, or the pig farmers from Scania that will be discussed in the analysis below. *Grotesco*’s closest relative is thus perhaps *Little Britain*, based on exaggerated characters with clear social identities and with a vast use of the visually grotesque. However, the humour in *Little Britain* lays in the repeating of the same conflicts and themes in different scenarios and variations (Berger 2010) – it is the comedy equivalent of jazz. *Grotesco* is based on variance – its grotesqueness hits in all directions, but common for all is how it makes fun of widely shared cultural stereotypes and narratives connected to social identities.

This highly intertextual form of comedy is a descendant of the new humour of the 1990s, as it was based on poking fun at media conventions (see also Bruun 2011). Absurdity was also an important element here. The difference between these shows and *Grotesco* lays in how the logic of the comedy was not so much based on mocking media conventions, but rather the narratives of social roles and identities circulating in the mass media. Ironic distance was thus still important: in order to get away with grotesque portrayals of various social identities, it was necessary to be able to claim an ironic position (see also Finding 2010). This was done through the absurd, which emphasised the fictional character of the show. Nevertheless, this operated in a tension with the realism laying in the very precise pinpointing of different social identities, which created the opportunity for carrying out – or at least interpreting – a certain kind of comic aggression by means of the grotesque. Irony was, like in the new humour discussed above, again a *carte blanche* to be aggressive, but this time towards groups

³⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yN9lOwZjXDU> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

rather than individuals, which I in the end of this chapter will show has potential consequences for how the show worked in the public sphere.

The episode “Svindemokraterna”³¹ starts with a landscape shot of twilight sky, with the onscreen text “Skåne” (Scania) in the lower centre, accompanied by accordion music. The camera tilts down to a farm. A change in musical motif is followed by a cut to an interior scene, where we first see a man sitting next to a table, sleeping, and dressed in old-fashioned clothes. A song starts off screen, and a cut shows a rowdy party of people dressed in the same way, one of them singing a patriotic call and response song about Scania, where he sings the verse and the other party guests join in for the chorus – “In Scania”. The partying characters exhibit appreciation of the song and the party with exaggerated facial expressions. After some seconds, it cuts to a boy who eats porridge alone next to a radio – obviously in the same house, but in a different room, as the party’s song can be heard in the background. He breaks the fourth wall by hushing towards camera when the radio announcer states that the results from the general election are ready. There is a short report about other results, before it is announced, almost inaudible, that the Scanian Svindemokraterna has broken the election threshold and will be represented in Parliament. It then cuts back to the party, where after the chorus “In Scania” we hear the verse “To immigration we clearly say no/Too much change makes the Scanian scared³²” – which also breaks the call and response-pattern as the party responds with a clear “No!!” after the first part of the verse. The boy seen before then interrupts the party by asking where his dad is, and is directed outside. Cut to the pigsty, where we for the first time see the main character, Jöns, who in a loving manner tends to one of his pigs. His son rushes in and says that Jöns has been elected to Parliament.

³¹ The narrative parts of the episode can be watched (in poor quality) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=waZwZusgi3I> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

³² «Till invandring säger vi tydligt vårt nej/För mycket förändring gör Skåningen skraj». The last word, “skraj”, is Scania dialect for “scared, fearful” (“rädd” in standard Swedish), which adds to the joke for native Swedish speakers.



Figure 3 The Scanian party guests, singing a xenophobic song. From Grottesco 2, SVT/Grottesco, 2010.

The next part of the story follows Jöns' travel to Stockholm – as he leaves in a horse carriage, his son waves him goodbye, asking him to say hi to the King – and his troubles fitting in in the modern city as well as in Parliament. He walks with his favourite pig on a leash, and among other problems, he becomes shocked when he sees a man on a TV screen and thinks he is captured in a glass box. During this segment, it becomes clear that Jöns views Stockholm as a cold and hard place, not the least because of how he is treated by his peers in Parliament. Dressed in red and blue, they clearly represent the leading parties of each political wing, respectively the Social Democrats and the Moderates. They do not laugh at his jokes, they ignore him, they pretend not to understand his dialect, and they talk about a pig smell when he sits behind them. The sequence ends with Jöns writing a letter to his son, stating that he has decided that he was not fit for Stockholm or the Parliament and is ready to go home.

The final part of the story starts in Parliament, where the chairman announces that Jöns is next speaker. When Jöns does not appear, the chairman asks if anyone knows where he is, and a conservative MP suggests looking in the pigsty, which elicits laughter from the chairman and the entire Parliament. Suddenly, Jöns appears, and holds an emotional speech about how he felt alienated in Stockholm and Parliament.

Accompanied by violas, he tells that he was about to give up his political career but changed his mind as he has a dream about a Sweden where a simple farmer like him can feel that Stockholm is his capital and that Sweden is his country. Then, he continues:

“We are all human. We are fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers, but first and foremost, we are Swedes. And that is why it is time that we all spit in our hands and give a proper whirl at throwing out all these Negroes, the Jews, and first and foremost the Muslims!”

The episode is then rounded off with a musical number, “Blanda Upp” (“Mix/Mash Up”)³³, a hip hop parody where different conflicting groups, among them people of colour and neo-Nazis, were urged to have sex with, and implicitly get children with, each other, in order to fix the country’s problems with integration and xenophobia – the song includes a sex-scene between a black man and a blond white woman singing the Swedish national anthem.

This description should make it quite clear that “Svindemokraterna” was political satire, where the butt of the joke was SD’s racist and Nazi past, and the episode’s relatively clear implicature was how this heritage still was a part of SD, behind the party’s rhetoric and self-image of being representatives for “ordinary Sweden” and perhaps even the only properly democratic alternative in the Swedish party flora (Hellström, 2010). Following Schwind’s satire model, the social norm SD is criticised for breaking could be reconstructed as “Sweden should be a pluralistic and multicultural society”. In the episode, SD’s alter ego Svindemokraterna represents the opposite: a chauvinistic and traditionalist milieu as shown in the beginning of the programme, as well as a clear exclusionary stance build into their vision of Sweden in the end. The inclusive Sweden that is presented here is only inclusive for those who are Swedes in the “correct” way – it is an ethnonationalist vision. This fits quite well with SD’s actual rhetoric and politics, where important topoi are how Swedishness

³³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCDMGu-xi30&list=FL8iOBz_YVYeteMshsKce5A&index=458 (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

understood not as racial but as cultural unity; nostalgia about the “Folkhem”, the People’s Home, a sort of social democratic paradise allegedly lost; and the claim to represent the true concerns of the Swedish people alienated by the political and cultural elites (Hellström 2010: 93-136).

The political establishment, and partly the media, reacted to SD’s rhetoric by framing SD as stupid or evil, starting in 2006 when the party started to become a real political force (ibid). The idea of the Swedish nation as multicultural and pluralistic rather than ethnonationalist was one of the strategies used to counter SD, as well as a critical discussion of the Folkhem nostalgia, partly as an attempt to reclaim it from SD (ibid.). Taken together, it is clear that SD was a constitutive other in the same way that Frp was in Norway. However, there were important differences. Firstly, SD was not only accused for fishing in muddy waters, but explicitly and forcefully accused of being inhumane and racist. The discursive battle regarding SD thus was about goodness (ibid) rather than decency, perhaps making the debate’s temperature even higher in Sweden than in Norway ten years before. Hellström and Hervik (2013: 451) have even argued that SD should be understood as a discursively constructed *Beast*, which in addition to being a constitutive outside comes about by crass language and unanimous condemnation. A Beast is an object of both repulsion and fear – it is an archetype of evil. Thus, the emotional temperature that I argued satire allowed for in Norway seems to have already been present in the Swedish debate – as well as the discursive room for explicitly spelling out what the moral boundaries that SD crossed were.

However, looking at the second difference between Sweden and Norway, a different story emerges. Hellström (2010) and Hellström and Hervik (2013) argue that from 2009 on, SD, while still being *politically* isolated and in many ways still treated as a Beast, become less *discursively* isolated. Champions of freedom of speech would stress the importance of dialogue and open argumentation with the party (Hellström and Hervik 2013: 460, Hellström 2010: 129), it was stressed that SD’s electorate was not evil or stupid, but carried valid concerns (Hellström 2010: 129) and the Moderate party even argued that the integration of immigrants into Swedish society was failing, thus adapting some of SD’s talking points (Hellström and Hervik 2013: 460).

Hellström (2010: 70) argues that this is in line with a general European dynamic where radical right populist parties manage to set the premises for the immigration debate. Following the logic of the figure of the Beast, such a strategy could compare to “transforming the *beast* into a pet” (Hellström and Hervik 2013: 460).

There were perhaps signs in Norway in 1999 that Frp was becoming more acceptable, as questions of integration and problems connected to multiculturalism moved higher on the agenda in the late 1990s (Hagelund 2003, Hovden and Mjelde 2019). I would still argue that this tendency had little impact on how Frp was treated by other political actors or how other political actors discussed immigration and integration policy, as discussed above. SD did however partly become acceptable around 2009/2010 – and entered Parliament. This paved the way for a shame-laden crisis in the national identity constructed by the Swedish news media, as the party that had been assigned the role of evil now was a part of Parliament, thus a part of Sweden to a stronger degree (Loman 2010). This was a shock that needed to be worked through. Loman finds that this was done a few months after the election through different means, where one of them was Grottesco’s episode. She claims that the press coverage of “Svindemokraterna” indicates that it was seen as a way to lessen the blow of SD’s entrance into Parliament by turning it into an object of mockery and ridicule (ibid: 40). This therapeutic function of satire, in line with the relief theory of humour (Freud 1976), is probably important. As discussed above, the superiority felt by laughing at someone can help keeping in-groups together around shared moral boundaries, which become extra pertinent in traumatic times.

But Grottesco’s “Svindemokraterna” episode did more than this. Its satirical intention was not realised by ridicule alone, but also by a narrative containing emotional appeals of sympathy towards the Jöns character. The first part of the episode ridicules both Jöns and his fellow Scanians – implicitly his electorate; while the second part appeals to sympathy towards Jöns, partly because he has been subject to ridicule. There is thus room for an interpretation that the episode contains an appeal to the audience’s bad conscience, as we probably have been laughing about Jöns earlier. This makes the last part, his speech, initially appear as an understandable and even sensible political vision, given that we previously have seen how “ordinary”

people like Jöns are not taken seriously – and we have perhaps even participated in this ourselves through laughing. Hence, it opens up for emotional judgements about how SD's claims of representing a misunderstood people might carry some validity. However, this impression is shattered when Jöns ends his speech with a racist rant, which creates an incongruence that might be an appeal to shock, or to laughter – perhaps to both. Whatever the final affective response, the incongruence makes any earlier felt emotions of sympathy become problematic, and thus works as a warning of the potential allure of considering any part of SD's ethnonationalist rhetoric as legitimate appeals. Thus, it makes sense to read the episode not only as a way to handle the trauma of SD's entrance into parliament, but also as a moralistic tale of caution that shows what can happen when we fall for ethnonationalist and nostalgic rhetoric. The comedy show thus participates in the boundary struggles of the Swedish public spheres by warning against any attempt to treat SD as representing legitimate concerns – to treat the Beast as a kitty.

In the same way as *En utstrakt hand* eleven years before, “Svindemokraterna” added something to the debate on right-wing populist parties: by making use of aesthetic devices to create affective texture, the moral boundaries could be explored in a different way and even made clearer. However, it should be noted that all empirical audience research on satire and political comedy shows that satire works best to preach to the converted: humour has little to no persuasive capacity (Young, 2018). It is thus worth noting that any possible political, or perlocutionary, effect indicated above probably would happen among those who already were critical towards SD in one way or another. The show should be seen as political rhetoric that strengthens existing views and vaccinates against counterarguments, not as rhetoric that moves voters.

This calls for a discussion of how the programme could have been read from a different position: the one held by SD voters or sympathisers. The central point here is how the episode's political satire was connected with a special kind of social satire, where the butt of the joke were people very precisely located in space, time and social standing. What is mainly made fun of during the episode is namely not right-wing attitudes, but the social backwardness of the MP Jöns and his social environment, thus in other words, the Swedish Democrat's electorate in Scania.

This also points to an important difference between Norway and Sweden: the O.J. character, with his smugness and antisocial egoism, was also the butt of the joke for social satire, but it was more directed towards a mentality or a type rather than towards a socially stratified group. If the character could be given any geographical or class identity, it would be some sort of new rich petty bourgeoisie living in the high-end neighbourhoods of western Oslo, but this identity is not too prevalent in his monologues. In “Svindemokraterna”, the pleasures of ridicule are closely connected to the absurd backwardness and even physical ugliness of Jöns and his fellow pig farmers – as well as to their patriotism, which becomes closely connected with their rural lifestyle.

There is a tendency in Swedish comedy to assign a specific local and rural identity to xenophobes, cued by the characters’ dialect, geographical references and stereotypical cultural customs. The most common homeland of xenophobe comedy characters is Norrland – the northernmost part of Sweden³⁴, but Scania is often used as well. Following Christie Davies (1990), undesirable traits are made physically and culturally liminal by assigning them to neighbouring or provincial people who are turned into joke material, and according to him, this is the universal mechanism behind all kinds of ethnic humour. Furthermore, Davies, who builds his theory on verbal jokes, claims that this kind of humour actually says nothing about attitudes towards the groups joked about, but rather works as a barometer telling us something about the society where the jokes are told and what it posits as major undesirable traits. Both Norrland and Scania can be seen as geographical and cultural borderlands of Sweden and are thus fitting for this kind of joke-target-dynamic. Following this, “Svindemokraterna” becomes a form of ethnic humour where it is made clear that anti-immigrant sentiments are un-Swedish. However, Davies seems to ignore how humour also can work as ridicule. This becomes pertinent as “Svindemokraterna” is not a verbal joke told within an in-group, but mass communication heavily based on visual

³⁴ For example a famous revue-monologue from as early as 1968, “Bunta ihop dom” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3HYrE32taAA>), or the routines of Ronny Eriksson, one of Swedens first stand-up comedians (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGPWEIGIOIA>) (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

humour. In addition, it is broadcast and produced in Stockholm (by comedians from a neighbourhood with a very high socioeconomic status), but has a rural (and perhaps lower class) population as its butt. The shows character as ethnic humour, where xenophobia is located in the periphery and thus marked as un-Swedish, is namely deeply intertwined with existing stereotypes and narratives about Scania. The province is the dominant agricultural area in Sweden, and the only district where pig farming is common. In addition, the local dialect is a distinct one, often caricatured and generally enjoying low status (Bolfek Radovani, 2000). Furthermore, Scania is the Swedish province where the largest percentage of the electorate votes for SD, and the province where both the Nazi legacy and hate crimes against ethnic minorities are most prevalent. Thus, the episode clearly addresses demeaning conceptions about Scanians as rural and racist, and hence non-modern, and there is a power dimension worth noting.

Grottesco themselves would probably say that the sequences from Scania, or Jöns being a rural fool in the city, are meant to ridicule SD's nostalgia, or make fun of the existing cultural stereotypes of Scania as rural and backwards. This might very well be the case, but there is regardless of intention, there is a level of comic aggression in the portrayal of the Scania farmers that paves the way for a deep feeling of being ridiculed. We can thus see how humour uses its (alleged) unseriousness for serious means: The comedy show's ambiguousness creates both the opportunity for an interpretation where SD's electorate is ridiculed, and for refuting the validity of this interpretation. Again, the emotional tension is also at play, as the sketch allows its audience to feel joy through aggression by placing SD's electorate outside the moral boundaries. The core here is the sketch's strong emphasis on cultural backwardness and its character as ethnic humour according to Davies' model, which support the interpretation that the electorate is the butt of the joke. Furthermore, some scholars argue that an important part of Swedish mentality is a self-image as the world's most modern country, which includes progressiveness in sociocultural questions, and that the view of the nation as modern was created in opposition to a more traditionalistic cultural-national view (Angell 2002, pp. 95, 112, Berggren & Trädgårdh 2006). There

is thus a strong implicature that the people portrayed in “Svindemokraterna” *not really* are Swedish.

This way, the episode feeds into the alienation theme that it makes fun of itself, which has been a staple in SD’s rhetoric where they portray themselves as victims of the establishment (Hellström 2010). Parts of the episode’s reception show that this was the case: complaints were filed to the Swedish media authority, *Granskningsnämnden*, of how SD was portrayed, and there are numerous angry blogs and posts in online discussion fora accusing the episode of not being funny, of being rude, or of being a part of the media establishment’s usual treatment of SD. The social function of ridicule, according to Billig (2005b), is to create embarrassment and social cohesion by making people stick to moral and social boundaries. However, empirical research of groups being laughed at indicate that ridicule can do the opposite if the group has consolidated itself in the right way: it can bolster moral and strengthen the wish to stay deviant (Kuipers 2008). Since “Svindemokraterna” was broadcast after SD’s greatest victory to date, its entrance into parliament, this is a more likely scenario. If so, it worked as divisive satire that used the mode’s special affective features to make moral boundaries, as well as who belongs to each side of them, clearer.

3.4. Conclusion: Hard humour against the xenophobes: Allowing aggression into the boundary work

Both *O.J. – En utstrakt hand* and “Svindemokraterna” were reactions towards the increased importance, discursive or political, of the right-wing populist parties of Norway and Sweden. The two shows were to a significant degree part of a larger tendency, where the populist parties were placed outside the realm of moral decency, as the constitutive other or the Beast. The two shows also used the satirical modality’s typical inspection of cultural ideals versus reality to examine and substantiate *why* the two parties should be placed outside the good moral company, in other words made the moral boundaries clearer and more justified. In Norway, this was rarely done in the serious part of the discourse, so this was actually one of the rare instances where

comedy carried out serious business with more vigour than what the serious debate did.

A perhaps even more important part of the role these shows played in the public sphere was how they provided aesthetic and thus emotional texture to the moral boundaries. Following theories of emotion and affect, this is a necessary part of the construction and legitimation of moral judgements. Thus, the shows played an important role in the boundary struggles of the two countries' public spheres, where the position of anti-immigration tended to be labelled as a threat to the countries' self-understandings as good, modern and decent, and thus needed to be marked as moral outsiders. This was done in an especially forceful way by the two humour shows since they used ironic humour to carry out a form of aggression that would not be acceptable in other parts of the public sphere, an aggression which through its linkage with humour not only became acceptable, but also intrinsically connected to the *good* feeling of superiority. Thus, we see how the tensions in the humorous mode between seriousness and unseriousness, between detachment and commitment, and between negative and positive emotions are used to carry out political work.

Whether anger and aggression is a constructive political force or not is as already mentioned a matter of scholarly debate within many different fields (Nussbaum, 2016). This is not the place to enter this theoretical debate, but it should be asked how effective these particular uses of anger and aggressiveness were. The main difference between the humour of Grottesco and the humour of O.J. was, as already mentioned, how the butt of the joke in Grottesco's case clearly resembled the social group associated with the Swedish Democrats' electorate, while O.J.'s egocentric persona had a less clear-cut connection to any socioeconomic group. Since it could be, and was, read as a way of ridiculing SD's voters, the aggressiveness of "Svindemokraterna" had the potential of contributing to polarisation and a *stronger* SD instead of strengthening the moral hegemony. The show thus risked of being an offense more than a joke. *En utstrakt hand*, on the other hand, was perhaps too much of a joke. Although Otto Jespersen often stated his satirical intention, and many audiences viewed him as obviously satirical, other audiences viewed him as being "only" an ironist, a moral nihilist only caring for transgression in itself. Yet other

audiences read his play with xenophobic slur and stereotypes as “fresh talk” where he told the politically incorrect truth about immigrants. There is always a risk that humour ridiculing prejudice will be interpreted as endorsing it, especially if it is based on the quotation of stereotypes and slur. This was indeed the case in *En utstrakt hånd*, which in this way – ironically – contributed to the increased publicness of xenophobic discourse. Irony proved to be a risky business for O.J.’s satirical project.

These pitfalls point toward a more general trend of the role satire plays in the public sphere: it works best as a way of preaching to the converted. This does not mean that it is futile, as historical studies of satirical cartoons have demonstrated (Townsend, 1997; Østberg, 2018), but that satire probably is best suited to maintain a space of disagreement by indicating and elaborate on existing moral rifts. However, the price of this when it comes to especially aggressive satire might be that not only moral boundaries are strengthened, but also those who we place outside of them.

This chapter has treated the far most common tendency in Scandinavian immigration comedy: Shows ridiculing xenophobic people, policies and attitudes. To various degrees, xenophobic positions have been deemed as illegitimate in the serious public spheres of Scandinavia. Comedy shows thus contribute to the boundary struggles in the public sphere by feeding into existing dynamics of establishing moral boundaries, but still does its particular part of the job by adding an affective component: they make the boundaries seem more self-evident by making it feel good to place deviants outside of them. This became especially clear and pertinent after the hardening of humour in the 1990s, when the satirical shows discussed here were mobilised to attack the changed discursive and political role of the right-wing populist parties.

It seems that this kind of boundary work is typical for how the anti-xenophobic immigration comedy in Scandinavia used the aesthetic particularities of humour to do political work, although the two cases discussed here were especially aggressive. Together with how these shows march along with tendencies in the mainstreams, this is perhaps the explanation for why they also were met with little controversy in the mainstream public spheres. This was not the case for comedians with an immigrant background, although they often were celebrated in the public

sphere. In the next chapter, the advent of immigrant comedians into the Scandinavian public spheres will show how the cultural understandings of humour can be as significant for its political role as its aesthetic features.

Chapter 4. When comedy earns you a voice: Stand-up as a gate of access for immigrants to the public sphere.

What I will talk about here tonight is how it is to be me.

The opening lines of Shabana Rehman's first performance at Smuget in Oslo.

Danes become integrated with the immigrants. When we see posh bankers walking around saying “sick gangsta”, integration has progressed significantly.

Omar Marzouk, commenting on Yallahrup Færgeby, Jyllands-Posten December 14th, 2007.

Access is a central concept in public sphere theory, especially in regard to subaltern groups' participation. The revisionist historians and feminist critiques of Habermas pointed towards different exclusionary mechanisms of the bourgeois public sphere, which limited access for women, ethnic minorities and working class subjects, counter to the normative ideal of the public sphere's openness to everyone (Fraser, 1992, pp. 118-121). It should be noted that the notion of access in these accounts to some degree overlap with the concept *voice*, which can be defined as “the chance for populations to have a say in decisions that affect them” (Couldry, 2008, p. 16), including how social groups are *represented* in the media (ibid). The difference between voice and access, as I understand it, seems to be that while both concepts pertain to how social groups get their interests and interpretations represented, access also encompasses the subjects' opportunities for participation. Voice, on the other hand, seems to be more concerned about the *legitimate* representation of social groups.

In contemporary research, scholars have claimed that immigrants have limited access to the public sphere due to exclusionary mechanisms like the use of an us and them-framing in the media, which reinforces the image where immigrants are seen as different from the majority population and perhaps not even as proper citizens. Immigrants are also used less often than the majority population as media sources (See Eberl et al., 2018, p. for a comprehensive European literature review; and Eide & Nikunen, 2011; and Horsti, 2008 for Nordic examples). However, comparative content analyses from the SCANPUB project show that immigrants have been quoted

relatively often in all three Scandinavian countries (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019, p. 148). Furthermore, other genres than hard news have provided alternative, and more inclusive, coverage of the immigration issue (Riegert, forthcoming; Riegert & Hovden, 2019). Finally, based on interviews with active immigrant participants, Midtbøen (2018) has questioned if ethnic boundaries really function as an exclusionary mechanism in the Norwegian public sphere.

As Midtbøen also points out, while the exclusionary mechanisms limiting immigrants' access to the public sphere have been extensively researched, less attention has been paid to the potential resources available in the public sphere that can be used by immigrant subjects to participate. Matters of access are entangled with larger questions of power in the public sphere (Couldry, 2008; Fraser, 1992, 2005), but it should be remembered that power can be productive as well as oppressive. In this respect, an interesting phenomenon happened more or less in parallel in all three Scandinavian countries: three stand-up comedians with an immigrant background, Shabana Rehman in Norway, Omar Marzouk in Denmark and Özz Nûjen in Sweden, gained access to the serious, political part of the public sphere and got a status similar to artist-intellectuals, frequently used as sources on matters of immigration, integration and racism. They thus did not only get access, but also relatively strong positions as immigrant *voices*. This is particularly interesting not only because they entered public life through the unserious field of stand-up comedy, but also because they have a loose connection to the organised immigrant community or social movements. Their entrance into the public sphere thus has to be explained in a different way than through the civil society-oriented models that are prevalent in public sphere theory, which for example Fraser (1989, 1992) seems to draw on in her influential discussions of subaltern groups' access to the public sphere and the formation of counterpublics. It also challenges the relationship between access and voice, as their legitimacy as immigrant representatives can be if not questioned, at least discussed.

In this chapter, I will argue that Rehman, Marzouk and Nûjen gained access to the political public sphere *by virtue of* being comedians. I will furthermore argue that this happened as a two-step process. The young genre stand-up comedy was especially well suited as a way to access the cultural public sphere for Scandinavians with an

immigrant background, not only to the comedy stage, but also to the larger cultural public sphere through television. Then, certain interpretive repertoires about comedy's cultural value were used by the media as well as by the three comedians themselves to understand them as political. These interpretive repertoires, recurrent patterns of speech used to construct interpretations of the world (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 149), worked as power mechanisms, but also as resources, which shaped how the comedians could access the political public sphere from the cultural one and eventually get moulded into a stable enunciative position. In the following, I identify such repertoires by demonstrating how the press coverage of the comedians made use of recurrent commonplaces and figures, and argue that there is a certain logic behind the use of these recurrent forms based on certain cultural ideas.

4.1 Stand-up – the short road from open mic to national success.

Stand-up comedy came relatively late to Scandinavia. Club concepts devoted to the genre, initiated by a few devotees in each country, appeared in Denmark in 1987 (Hjorth & Palle, 2009, pp. 22-23), Sweden in 1988³⁵, and Norway in 1993 (Løvland, 2002, p. 13). The genre's Scandinavian pioneers were young men heavily inspired by contemporary American comedy, but also by Scandinavian popular revue, stemming from amateur theatre and market vaudeville (Hjorth & Palle, 2009, pp. 9, 22-23, 56-58; Løvland, 2002, pp. 13-25). This was a sociological as well as an aesthetical influence, as many stand-up comedians had a background from some form of amateur revue (Hjorth & Palle, 2009, p. 45; Løvland, 2002, pp. 23-25).

That being said, there was a clear social distinction between stand-up and other forms of stage culture, and expressive culture in general. The concrete expression of this was how the genre was not performed in arenas exclusively devoted to the arts, but in bars, clubs and restaurants. This distinction, not first and foremost from the fine arts, but rather from the existing entertainment theatre in form of professional revue, was significant, and also an important part of the early stand-up

³⁵ <https://www.cafe.se/svensk-humors-historia-reportage/> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

comedians' self-understanding (Hjorth & Palle, 2009, pp. 15-16; Løvland, 2002, pp. 14-17, 40-41)³⁶. It should however be noted that the “new” genre was not the voice of the marginalised, as it lacked the connection American or British stand-up had to ethnic minorities and political countercultures (Løvland, 2002, pp. 78-80). It was nevertheless a clear contrast to more capital-demanding art forms in terms of the economic and cultural capital necessary to participate. This was probably important for the recruitment and the cultivation of the three comedians Marzouk, Rehman and Nûjen, with their immigrant and working-class background. It was cheap to learn stand-up by watching it: unlike expensive show or theatre tickets, one could see many comedians performing one night for the price of a drink in the bar. One did not need years of training to perform on the stand-up stage: open mic-formats, stand-up competitions and the club night format where a less experienced comedian warms up for a veteran all allowed newcomers to perform for the ordinary stand-up audience together with seasoned comedians. Even though the genre of course had (and has) multiple generic conventions beyond the aim of making the audience laugh, just this aim seems have been the pervading element of the contract between audience and performer, and the main criterion for success and evaluation of what makes a good stand-up routine (Løvland, 2002, pp. 47, 58-61). Løvland also claims that the early milieus were characterised by conviviality and joviality, and that new talents therefore were easily spotted and helped forward by more seasoned comedians (pp. 31-37).

The latter should probably be taken with a grain of salt, as it is based on first-hand sources reminiscing about themselves and their friends. Nevertheless, it should

³⁶ It is interesting to observe the similarity between the two sources I draw on here, although they belong to different genres. Palle and Hjorth are journalists, and their book is largely based on *interviews* with stand-up comedians, who in the referred pages explicitly state that it was important for them to distance themselves from the revue genre. Løvland, on the other hand, is a theatre scholar and the first academic to write about Norwegian stand-up, but she was also personally involved in the early stages of the genre in Norway, and it is clear that she invests a lot of scholarly energy in establishing both a historical and an aesthetical distinction between stand-up and the revue monologue. This is of course not necessarily a problem, but it should nevertheless be noted that the historical works on Scandinavian stand-up is largely based on oral first-hand sources and often written by people who were close to the community. It is thus largely a “We” history.

not be uncontroversial to assess that the Scandinavian stand-up milieu of the 1990s were closely knit social groups with at least a *possibility* to rise fast and high if you were talented according to the group's standards and thus managed to gain their jovial help.

Once a comedian had gained foothold within the stand-up milieu, the road to prime-time television was short. The connection between stage comedy and the production milieu for TV humour was close in all three countries (Bruun, 2011, pp. 134, 163-166; Kaare & Kjus, 2006, pp. 29-31; Løvland, 2006, pp. 108-109; Sjögren, 1997, pp. 156-238). Comedians in public service TV were also still relatively powerful in editorial and production processes, having quite a bit of room for experimenting with new formats and genres, and comedy was also a central part of the strategic initiatives to cater to young audiences after the end of the Scandinavian broadcasting monopolies (Bruun, 2011, pp. 139-149, 155-163; Ytreberg, 2001, pp. 236-243). This might be why many stand-up comedians, viewed as something new and exciting, found themselves working within the entertainment divisions of public service relatively soon after their stage debut, thus having access to the dominant forum of the Scandinavian public spheres of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

So, how does this *general* story about the easy access into stand-up fit with the comedians in question, Marzouk, Rehman, and Nūjen? Marzouk, the son of an Egyptian born engineer turned grocery store owner, and himself a computer repairman before his comedy career, is the oldest of the three and the one who first entered stand-up, through an EU anti-racism initiative in 1996 (Hjorth & Palle, 2009, pp. 99-101). This debut has turned into lore: Marzouk himself sometimes emphasises how terribly bad it was³⁷; while other sources focus on how significant this was as the start of his career, both as a kick start that caught public attention³⁸ and as the moment where the thematic seed of his stand-up routine was sown:

³⁷ <https://politiken.dk/kultur/scene/art5493426/Omar-Marzouk-%C2%BBMin-f%C3%B8rste-optr%C3%A6den-var-d%C3%A5rlig%C2%AB> (Last checked February 11th, 2021)

³⁸ <https://danskefilm.dk/skuespiller.php?id=13995> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

In the mid-1990s he learned that the European Union was sponsoring a competition to combat racism. He decided to enter with a stand-up comedy routine. “Until then, understanding between Danes and Muslims meant, ‘Come on, eat some hummus and see some belly dancing,’ ” he said. “I thought stand-up was a great way to talk about these things.” “At first I just wanted to get laughs,” he said. “Later, I started thinking about what I wanted to do or say.” (*New York Times*, August 18., 2008).

In this excerpt, Marzouk’s enunciative position in the public sphere is made explicit, as a bridge-builder who mediates between Danes and Muslims. It should also be noted that this role is a self-description that becomes adapted by the media: as we shall see, this is shared by all three, which points towards a certain level of agency and power for the comedians.

There was, however, a long road to this position. In the late 90s, Marzouk started to work with Jan Gintberg, one of the pioneers in Danish stand-up, as writer and actor in numerous shows on different public service channels, most notably DR, as well as touring together with the show *Op på fars jihad* (*On my father’s Jihad*). In 2001, he was one of the actor-creators of *OPM – Oplysninger om perkerne til samfundet* (*IPS – Information about the Pakis to Society*), commissioned by DR and marketed as their first multicultural satire. Since 2003, he has been a successful stage comedian touring Denmark with multiple shows, as well as participating in the production of multiple television programmes of different genres on public service channels, often with multiculturalism and integration as topics.

Unlike the two others, Özz Nûjen³⁹ actually had formal theatre education from the start – albeit a vocational one, not the higher status academy education. He also first gained media coverage not as a stand-up comedian, but as actor and co-writer of various comical theatre projects involving immigrant youth. Nûjen, who is Kurdish, fled together with his family from Turkey to Sweden when he was 8 years old and settled in the Stockholm suburb Rinkeby, well known for its large immigrant

³⁹ Nûjen’s biographical information is drawn from a market-pitch of him as a speaker, <https://talarformedlingen.se/talare/Özz-Nûjen/> (Last checked February 11th, 2021), as well as from a personal interview with him conducted September 28th, 2018.

population. Nûjen enjoyed being the class clown in school and began his stand-up career in 1999, when he worked as a waiter at Restaurang Engelen in Stockholm, first participating on open mic and eventually as responsible for the restaurant's stand-up shows. In 2000, he co-founded Stockholm Comedy Klubb (STOCK), according to himself as an alternative to the established club scene at Norra Brunn that already had grown stale and conservative⁴⁰. The collective eventually became a force in Swedish stand-up, producing multiple festivals around the country as well as the annual stand-up gala until 2013. STOCK's mainstream success started when the collective produced the television stand-up show *Stockholm Live* in 2004, where Nûjen was one of the hosts together with among others co-founder Shan Atci, who also has Kurdish background. The duo opened the first episode with these lines: "It is nice for guys like us to be allowed to be on TV. In other programmes than the news. From Iraq. Or Guantanamo". This was in line with Nûjen's role in the public sphere: the truth-teller narrating the experience of marginalised immigrants. In addition to his stand-up career, he has worked as an actor and producer, as well as hosting multiple shows on public service radio and television. Together with Shan Atci, he is by some considered as the proper starting point of professional Swedish humour made by immigrants poking fun at immigrants⁴¹, so-called *blattehumor*.

Shabana Rehman's trajectory from the stand-up scene to the public sphere was quite different from her two colleagues'. Born in Pakistan and growing up in the immigrant-dense Oslo suburb Nordstrand as the daughter of a chef and a stay-at-home mom, Rehman has often emphasised the importance of a schoolteacher of Norwegian in her childhood, both on a personal level and as a teacher of Norwegian language and fondness of literature⁴². It was actually not Rehman, but her classmate Zahid Ali, who originally participated in the young stand-up milieu in Oslo, to which he introduced Rehman after a class reunion. Ali later read her writing and suggested that she should

⁴⁰ Nûjen, personal communication, September 28th, 2018.

⁴¹ <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/qnkmM1/invandrare-ha-ha-ha> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

⁴² <https://shabana.no/aldri-mer-fremmed-del-ii/> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

perform at open mic night at Lille Smuget in 1999⁴³. Unlike Marzouk and Nûjen, Rehman was not a seasoned stand-up comedian before she entered the larger public sphere. On an open mic night, she was discovered by journalist Tonje Steinsland, who at the time was making programmes covering social control of young women with Muslim and Pakistani background for investigative magazine programme *Rikets Tilstand (State of the Kingdom)* on TV 2. Rehman was thus filmed and interviewed already on her second open mic appearance (Løvland, 2002, p. 39n20), an interview which gained huge media attention and started a period where Rehman was a frequently used source in the media on matters of women and integration, as well as a columnist alone or together with Steinsland's colleague Hege Storhaug. She became framed as a rebel against social control in the Pakistani milieu already from her first television interview, which paved the way for her role in the public sphere: the taboo-breaking fool fighting oppressive patriarchy from within.

Although these are the histories of three individuals, drawing on a limited source situation, it is nevertheless possible to induce a pattern from the three comedians' trajectories into the stand-up scene. The stand-up genre was easy both to access and to have success within for immigrants who had grown up in Scandinavia, or descendants of immigrants, around the turn of the millennium. This was due to the sociological positioning of the stand-up genre as distinct from commercial culture and fine arts, thus having different mechanisms of distinction that allowed (working class) immigrants to avoid the exclusionary mechanisms common in the rest of the cultural public sphere. Furthermore, success in the stand-up milieu provided access to the entertainment divisions of public service television, possible because of the close relation between Scandinavian stage comedy and television comedy.

Ideally, one would conduct production studies of both the stand-up scene and public service comedy as well as more closely discuss the social topology of the two fields to investigate this pattern more closely. I nevertheless view it as qualified: it

⁴³ <https://www.klikk.no/produkt/hjemmesider/hjemmet/tora-reddet-meg-ut-av-volden-3196109> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

repeats itself relatively clear-cut across the national contexts, and although I only discuss one comedian in each country, similar trajectories can be applied to more people, like the above-mentioned Zahid Ali and Shan Atci. One should also remember that becoming a professional comedian never can be a mass phenomenon, and that individual stories thus can tell us a great deal about the sociological mechanisms at work.

According to Fraser (1992), exclusionary mechanisms in the bourgeois public sphere were partly based on distinction in Bourdieu's sense. It seems clear that the comedians discussed in this chapter managed to get around these mechanisms of distinction through stand-up and gain a place, and even power, in the public sphere. I do not claim that stand-up stood out positively compared to other genres and art forms – to establish this would call for comparative research. What I do claim is that the stand-up genre gave access to the dominant fora of the Scandinavian public sphere for individuals who typically, according to public sphere theory as well as contemporary research on media and immigration, are portrayed as lacking access.

This should also be seen as something more than three individual histories. Rather, the three biographies are symptoms of larger historical ruptures in the public sphere. Stand-up comedy was a part of 'the new humour' discussed in the last chapter, and the advent of stand-up comedians on television was thus a part of the larger aesthetical and sociological rupture that took place in Scandinavian TV comedy in the 90s and early 2000s. In addition, the three comedians were part of the first generation of young immigrants and descendants that had grown up in Scandinavia and started to participate in public life. Their entrance into the public sphere was thus a result of independent but intersecting historical changes. Their individual trajectories into the public sphere are thus interesting on a level beyond personal biography, as they demonstrate how historical changes could be used to strategically overcome ethnic boundaries and gain access to the public sphere (See also Midtbøen, 2018, pp. 357-359). What is particularly interesting in this regard is how the three comedians soon moved from the cultural public sphere to the political one, framed as important immigrant voices, and that it seems that this was due to them *being comedians*.

4.2. Comedy's cultural value as a resource for access and a mould for positions.

As I have demonstrated, it was 'easy' to become a stand-up comedian, and the road was short from the stage to the screen. However, this does not explain how the comedians gained the status as important immigrant voices in the serious part of the public sphere. Why would a comedian be considered a serious voice?

I suggest that this was due to the cultural value given to comedy in general, and immigrant comedians in particular, and that this value became manifest in the media through interpretive repertoires. Elsewhere (Dahl, 2019), I have argued that these repertoires were partly shaped by well-established cultural understandings of humour, art and Islam; partly by the rhetorical doxa, the wider set of already accepted premises and shared commonplaces (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1973) governing the immigration debate in the different Scandinavian countries; but also partly by how the comedians interpreted themselves, as I have indicated in the excerpts from shows and interviews above. What we can see from the early media coverage of the three comedians is that these repertoires constructed their humour and comedy as *important* in different ways, and that this moulded a certain enunciative position for each of the three in the public sphere where they were considered immigrant voices.

Shabana Rehman's role became the taboo-breaking fool (Dahl, 2019), confronting social control, prejudice and taboos:

A woman without a face, but not without opinions. Suddenly she stands on a Norwegian stand-up stage. Draped in black to protect herself against unclean glances.

But the veil is demonstratively thrown away. Behold: a Norwegian-Pakistani girl who bravely confronts requirements of honour and other requirements that constrains women both in East and West. (*VG*, November 28th, 1999).



Figure 4 Shabana Rehman on her second appearance on open mic, just after "dropping the veil" - in reality pulling of a burka-like garment. From Rikets Tilstand, TV 2, 1999.

Although this excerpt states “women both in East and West”, it is clear that the constraining requirements Rehman confronts are understood as stemming from Muslim and Pakistani milieus. The excerpt is also drawn from a longer article discussing the veil. Rehman is thus not portrayed as someone who breaks taboos generally, but as a rebel from within opposing patriarchal taboos among immigrants. This fits with a general tendency where immigrant women are portrayed as victim-heroes in Scandinavian immigration coverage (Brune, 1998; Simonsen, 2004; Tigervall, 2005), as well as the then current emphasis on honour culture in immigrant milieus, especially the Pakistani one (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019; Simonsen, 2004). Hence, I argue that two interpretive repertoires are at work here: *Humour as a special form of truth-telling* and *Islam as a killjoy*.

An important part of the humour as a special form of truth-telling repertoire is its connection with transgression. It is regularly stressed that through breaking taboos, Rehman speaks a special sort of truth:

I want to show the woman behind the veil. Her sexuality – and vulnerability. When I enter, Norwegians think: she is oppressed, poor thing. Pakistanis think: wow, she is on stage, but has preserved her decency. Then I surprise both when the veil falls.
(*Dagbladet*, January 15th, 2000)

(...)

- We need brave people like Shabana Rehman who breaks taboos, immigrants say after the stand-up show where she ironises over sex taboos. (*Aftenposten*, November 27th, 1999).

The repertoire is put to work when it is reported how Rehman appears on stage veiled, confirming the audiences' prejudices, but then surprises everyone by showing her true self: dressed in a tight, red dress and without covering her hair. This surprise is indeed a humorous device, but it is also represented as what confronts the audience with the falsity of their prejudice. In the second excerpt, we see how her show is represented as something brave and important. The idea that humour is a valuable form of transgression because it gives us a special kind of insight, has a long history where the comedian is seen as a sage fool who dares to speak truth to power (Bevis, 2013, p. 66; Erasmus, 1979 [1509]; Gilbert, 2004, pp. 2-3; Palmer, 1994, pp. 40-53). Humour is here given a special status and value, and a young female comedian with immigrant background, whose comedy is interpreted as breaking the patriarchal taboos of immigrant communities, thus becomes newsworthy in herself.

What perhaps becomes a bit underplayed in the average interpretive repertoire based on cultural ideals of the sage fool is that her taboo-breaking also adds a certain levity to serious matters (Palmer, 1994, p. 51), similar to Bakhtin's (1968, p. 47) account of the carnival as a state without fear. This is nevertheless visible in many of the articles covering Rehman's stand-up debut:

Khalid Mahmood, secretary general in Pakistan Workers Welfare Union, says that Rehman's humorous form is comfortably relaxed, which makes it easier to talk about hymens and other taboo-laden topics than if she had presented an academic dissertation or participated in a television debate.

- She gives taboo topics within her own culture a face. (*Aftenposten*, November 27th, 1999).

Again, we see how the tensions between negative and positive emotions is put to work, but this time in the form of a cultural understanding of what makes humour important and desirable. Comedy's levity becomes a central element of its cultural value, as it manages to attach positive affects like joy and mirth to topics that normally are associated with negative emotions, like social control of girls' sexuality. Joy as a central element of Rehman's work confronting taboos is also emphasised by herself in her very first newspaper interview, with *Aftenposten* on November 26th, 1999: "I show the woman behind the veil – my passion and my zest for life". Here, Rehman's comedy, but also her closely intertwined sexuality, become objects that promise joy and ultimately happiness. According to Sara Ahmed (2010), this has become a duty in the Western world, and constructing objects of happiness while others are constructed as destructive *killjoys* becomes a mean for establishing norms and deviations. In Rehman's case, the contrast to comedy's levity and promise of happiness is the killjoy of Islamic patriarchy:

The demand that the woman should be veiled, has become a demonstration of power between humans to demonstrate the man's "property" and make visible women's chastity (...) With clear mimicry and body language, Shabana shows the contrast between the veiled and the frivolous female figure (...) With humour and self-irony, she disarms and includes and embarks on an important pioneer work (...) She speaks up against old conservative immigrant men with long beards and Norwegians with stale opinions. (*VG*, November 28th, 1999).

It is quite explicit that Rehman's taboo-breaking is imagined on the basis of an interpretive repertoire that is used to understand fundamentalist Islam as a suppressor of women and even a suppressor of the life forces sexuality and love. In addition, this interplay becomes strengthened by another commonplace important in the repertoire of Islam as a killjoy: The belief that Muslims have no sense of humour. As discussed in chapter 2, this is prevalent in Western discourse (Karlsson Minganti, 2014; Kuipers, 2011), and gains its strength both from the association of humourlessness with religious fundamentalism and from the emphasis of a sense of humour as an integral part of modern personhood. The humourless Muslim thus becomes someone outside

modernity (Kuipers, 2011, pp. 75-76). Although this belief is largely implicit in the excerpt quoted above, and in the coverage of Rehman as a whole, I would argue that its existence, and background for the interpretive repertoire of Islam as a killjoy makes it clearer why Rehman's role as a taboo-breaking fool became especially interesting for the press. Not only did it fit with the then current news agenda where cultural practices associated with Muslim immigrants were problematised, it also fits with a larger discursive tendency where Islam was portrayed as fundamentally alien to Western modernity and thus also to the modern Norwegian nation (Gullestad, 2002a, pp. 16-18, 94-103; Yılmaz, 2016). This can be considered a *latent* interpretive repertoire which strengthened the manifest repertoire of the taboo-breaking fool and allowed it to reify into a position in the public sphere: the immigrant comedian is allowed into the nation's public sphere because she humorously breaks taboos related to Islam.

This might come across as speculative, as there are no explicit references in the coverage of Rehman to Muslims lacking humour. I would still argue that the set of contrasts in the quote above clearly is indicative of the construction of an opposition between Rehman's life-affirming comedy and Islam. The constant emphasis on her humour and self-irony is used as an antithesis to the conservativeness of Muslim men, implicitly stating that an important part of their conservativeness and suppressive power is their lack of humour. The centrality of Islam as representing the opposite of Rehman is also clear through image of Muslim men as bearded, a trope of Islamic conservatism gaining popularity in Western discourse after the Iranian revolution and Khomeini's striking visual appearance, but has older roots (Culcasi & Gokmen, 2011). Even more important is the frequent mentioning of the veil, functioning as a metonymy for Islamic patriarchy (Kılıç, Saharso, & Sauer, 2008; Salte, 2018). It should also be remembered that this was in the beginning of the culturalisation of the immigration debate (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019; Yılmaz, 2016), and even though Islam had not yet turned into the clearest symbol of difference between immigrants and the majority population, the religion was already then often constructed as a orientalist constitutive outside (Gullestad, 2002a, pp. 16-18, 94-103; Simonsen, 2004).

Taken together, the manifest and latent use of interpretive repertoires in the press coverage of Rehman can explain why she gained the kind of media attention that she did. This points towards a certain cultural value of comedy, which paradoxically gives the unserious mode a serious place. There are namely few alternative explanations of Rehman's entrance into the serious public sphere: she was not associated with any civil society organisation or political party, and although she had experienced social control first hand, she was not one of multiple girls whose detailed, dramatic life story was brought to the forefront in the media. The perhaps strongest argument was that Rehman worked in the media *before* her stand-up debut, as a summer substitute and even columnist in *VG*, where she raised many of the same points in a similar style as she would do as a stand-up comedian – but without creating any debate or getting press coverage. Another point to support this is how Rehman, in the excerpt at the start of this section, was used as a source on the veil – a garment she had never used. It thus seems clear that it was her combined status as a female comedian with a Muslim background that gave her media attention and eventually made her an immigrant voice in the public sphere.

At the same time, she also became moulded into a certain enunciative position. The use of interpretive repertoires seems to entail a sort of path-dependency, so when Rehman started to become a taboo-breaking fool and internal critic, it became harder for her to be heard from a different position. She has namely often used alternative repertoires in the media, where she addresses the marginalisation immigrant youth experiences from the majority population and official Norway, but these have never resonated in the same way (Dahl, 2019). It also seems like she lacks some credibility in this regard, as her role in the Stovner revue-affair mentioned in the introduction of this thesis suggests. The interpretive repertoires connected to comedy's cultural value can thus be used strategically, but it seems like successful use of them also means that they tend to get fixated and that the enunciative position they afford tends to be reified.

That being said, I do not mean that the interpretive repertoires *determined* Rehman's trajectory into the serious public sphere, that they lived a life of their own, and magically brought the first Norwegian-Pakistani female comedian into the

limelight. On the contrary, Shabana Rehman's story is one of strong, individual agents: Olga Stokke, seasoned journalist of *Aftenposten* with immigration and integration as her speciality, the staff of *Rikets Tilstand* Tonje Steinsland, Gerhard Helskog and Hege Storhaug⁴⁴, and last but not least Rehman herself. It is clear that Rehman had her own agenda and provided the media with at least parts of the interpretive repertoires, through quotes in interviews as well as the content of her stand-up performances, and that these resonated in the public sphere and stuck to Rehman, as they were later used by other journalists, ordinary citizens writing letters to the editor, and civil society actors.

This way, Rehman managed to get a certain enunciative position in the serious part of the public sphere as an internal critic of the immigrant milieu. Since her debut, she has not been very productive as a comedian, with only two solo shows (premiering in 2002 and 2009), but on the other hand very visible as an activist, with multiple columns in major newspapers⁴⁵, performance-like stunts clearly aimed at taboo-breaking that sparked debate⁴⁶, as the founder of NGOs battling social control and racism⁴⁷, and as a member of the governmental Freedom of Expression Commission

⁴⁴ These three soon become problematic friends: Rehman has later criticised the editorial office of *Rikets Tilstand* for how they treated her, and also for how they treated other young girls with an immigrant background, in order to comply with their pre-given agenda rather than providing them with a voice of their own (e.g. in *Dagbladet*, February 9th, 2001). She also repeatedly seeks to distance herself from Hege Storhaug who has left TV 2 and became editor of the online magazine *HRS*, known for its harsh criticism of Islam and Norwegian immigration policy. Rehman herself soon argued for a "third way" in the immigration debate, arguing for clear confrontational debate about gender in immigrant milieu, but also challenged the negative stereotypical images of immigrant put forward by the media and Frp (e.g. in *ibid*, and *Dagbladet*, June 22nd, 2001).

⁴⁵ Regular in *Dagbladet* from 2000 until 2007, *Aftenposten*, *Henne*, *Dagbladet Information* and *VG* with irregular intervals after 2007.

⁴⁶ This includes bodypainting herself in full nude with the Norwegian flag and appearing on the front of *Dagbladet's* weekend magazine in 2000; physically lifting Mulla Krekar, a Iraqi-Kurdish mujahedin guerilla leader accused for terrorism residing in Norway, in 2004; and showing her bare buttocks at the Haugesund film festival in 2005, which I discuss briefly below.

⁴⁷ Founder and leader of *Sekular Feministisk Front (Secular Feminist Front)* in 2017, and founder and leader of *Født Fri* since 2018.

since 2020. She thus has a somewhat different profile from her two male colleagues, as she is more closely associated with hard news and official politics. This points towards how interpretive repertoires not should be seen as determining forces, but as rhetorical resources agents can use to gain voice and access in the public sphere. For Rehman, the constellation of repertoires was a success, at it gave her a *platform* in the public sphere, but also as it provided her with a particular rhetorical *ethos* that gave her opinions and analyses meaning and value, by virtue of being performed by the sage immigrant fool who speaks truth to power.

However, her role as a taboo-breaker and critic from within was also a precarious position, as she became an object of fierce criticism and even violence. This was clear already early in her public career, when social anthropologist Marianne Gullestad wrote an op-ed in *Aftenposten* (August 1th, 2000), arguing that Rehman overshadowed other immigrant voices. One of her points of criticism was that Rehman reinforced negative stereotypes about immigrants and that she contributed to an us and them-narrative. This criticism sparked debate, and seems to have become stuck with Rehman: It was repeated during the Stovner controversy, often in a much more uncivil form than Gullestad's academic tone – Rehman and colleague Zahid Ali were for example called “Paki's” (“Pakkiser”) on social media⁴⁸.

Gullestad also argued that Rehman's role in the public sphere was shaped by her use of female sexuality. Even though I agree with this point, as I have discussed in the analysis in this chapter, there is a thought-provoking overlap between how it was used in public debate and the exact issue Rehman was battling: social control over women's sexuality. Rehman's use of sexuality, inextricably linked to her humour and her role as the taboo-breaking fool, was important to give her access to and a position in the public sphere, but was also what made this position precarious. In addition to fierce criticism from intellectuals, Muslim leaders and anti-racist activists, Rehman received threats, according to herself mainly from fundamentalist Muslims⁴⁹. This culminated after she showed her bare buttocks at the Haugesund film festival. The

⁴⁸ https://twitter.com/humaf_/status/1110171275509538816 (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

⁴⁹ <https://www.seher.no/kjendis/voktet-av-politi-etter-drapstrusler/64277192> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

occasion was the premiere of the movie *Import-eksport*, a romantic comedy with a Norwegian-Pakistani girl and her majority Norwegian boyfriend as the main characters, which touched upon questions of social control. Rehman did the flash-performance as a part of her speech when she emphasised how she controlled her own body – she also kissed the female Minister of Culture, Valgerd Svarstad Haugland, on the lips⁵⁰. In addition to triggering yet another round of debate and harsh criticism of Rehman, it was probably the reason for a violent attack on her sister's restaurant, when someone an early morning fired 15 gunshots towards it⁵¹. As a consequence of this, Rehman left Norway and lived in New York for some years⁵².

This is yet another example of the tension between humour as conservative and radical. Shabana Rehman's unserious fool role was seen as subversive, which was what gave her a position in the serious public sphere. Thus, it can nevertheless be considered a conservative, or at least hegemonic, position in some aspects, as it complied with strong and widely used interpretive repertoires about humour's social value, but also, and more important, with repertoire's about Islam and Islamic patriarchy as a killjoy and suppressor of women. On the other hand, although this position was popular in the mainstream and fitting with then central issues of the immigration debate regarding social control (Dahl, 2019), it was controversial and even precarious in different subcultures as diverse as the academy, the anti-racist movement and Islamic milieus. It seems clear that this controversiality was connected to Shabana Rehman as the taboo-breaking fool: it was her use of her own body and sexuality in her comedy routines that became too problematic. Perhaps did she not really shake up any taboos of the mainstream public sphere, but she certainly used her position in the mainstream to address taboos that were powerful elsewhere.

Özz Nûjen was also seen as a fool and a truth-teller, but not as a critic from within. Rather, he was portrayed as an *outsider* who reveals the immigrants' experience of

⁵⁰ <https://shabana.no/rumpestuntet/> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

⁵¹ <https://www.nettavisen.no/nyheter/innenriks/rehmans-restaurant-beskutt/443431.html> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

⁵² <https://shabana.no/rumpestuntet/>

marginalisation in Sweden. This is clearly visible in an article about his first solo show in 2002, the stand-up/theatre hybrid *Den tjocka kurdiska kvinnan säger vad hon vill* (*The fat Kurdish woman says what she wants*):

A heavy-set Kurdish woman serves tea and cookies. But she uses her own language, talking about a cup of *cay*, which she threateningly serves while she hoists her broad breast and wiggles her butt. She is Fatima, the woman who says what she wants.

(...)

She has been living in Sweden for 25 years, but lots of things are still impossible to understand. Like that she remains an immigrant. Even her children who are born in Sweden are called immigrants. She thinks it sounds like a profession, like baker or carpenter. Should they not be immigrated soon? She is tired of immigrating and immigrating day in and day out, she wants to arrive now!⁵³ (*Svenska Dagbladet*, May 12., 2002)

In press coverage of monologues like this, Nûjen is interpreted as someone who stages and performs his own – and his family’s – marginality (Gilbert, 2004, pp. 1-8, 17-25). Marginality should here be understood as a term to describe the status of groups who differ from dominant society and also are denied, in different ways, access to power by the dominant group (Dennis & Dennis, 2017). The term also has a history in social psychology, where the so-called Park–Stonequist model of marginality describes a personality type that as a result of modern migration find himself between two cultures (ibid), similar to contemporary notions of hybridity, which gives a unique perspective where he can combine “the knowledge and insight of the insider with the critical attitude of an outsider” (Stonequist 1937, quoted in Gilbert, 2004, p. 4). In contemporary Swedish debate, this idea is central in an interpretive repertoire that can be termed *The marginalised immigrant* (Dahl, 2019). Marginalisation of immigrants was widely understood as a result of structural racism in Sweden at the time. Hovden

⁵³ The Swedish original, “komma fram” is ambiguous and can be read as both “arrive” and “appear”.

and Mjelde (2019) demonstrate that racism as a topic and the racism-subtype of the victim frame were common in the Swedish press around year 2000, and my qualitative readings of the same press material support that an understanding of racism as a structural problem in Swedish society was prevalent. This understanding is used in all kinds of genres, by all kind of actors, and about a wide variety of issues, from understanding xenophobia in the population as a whole as the cause for racist violence, via interpreting government policy as discriminating, to an understanding of “everyday racism” as common in acts and attitudes of the majority population.

A central repertoire in the Swedish immigration discourse could thus intersect nicely with a certain way of using the *Humour as a special form of truth-telling* repertoire, where ideas similar to the concept of marginalisation are central elements. The comic archetype of the fool is in addition to being foolish often also an underdog, from the slaves in Roman comedy via court fools, commedia dell’arte’s *zanni* and Shakespeare’s clown characters to Chaplin and Dario Fo (Bevis, 2013, pp. 63-76). Both Rehman and Nûjen became moulded into fool roles, but whereas the fool as a taboo-breaker was used to understand Rehman, the fool as an outsider was used to understand Nûjen. Common for both these aspects of the fool is of course that they are connected to a special truth. It should be noted that the idea of the comedian (or fool) as marginalised is extremely strong when the interpretive repertoire about humour as offering a special form of truth is used about stand-up comedians in academic literature. It is central in Lawrence Mintz’ seminal article “Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation” (1985), stand-up comedians are claimed to be modern day fools in Oxford professor Matthew Bevis’ popular textbook *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction* (2013), an entire monograph discusses stand-up comedy as particularly suited for the performance of marginality (Gilbert, 2004), and it has also been used to understand Nûjen’s comedy in the context of intercultural relations in Sweden (Karlsson Minganti, 2014, p. 49). It is thus no wonder that it also was used in the media coverage of Nûjen.

There are, however, few intersections of folly and marginalisation in the press coverage of him. As such, the underdog-fool is closer to an implicit or latent role, while the marginalisation-repertoire is what becomes manifest in the analysis of the

shows. However, since this repertoire is used to understand Nûjen as a performer and a comedian, as someone who *performs* his marginality, I would nevertheless argue that the fool figure, and thus the humour as a special form of truth-repertoire, is at play. In most articles about him, the serious aspects of marginality are allowed to the forefront:

[Interviewer]: You think that you have been discriminated?

[Nûjen] -Yes, terribly. In everyday life. When I applied for work and when I tried to get into clubs. One has stopped me even if I had the right age and the right money. So, one deprives certain people the freedom to have as much fun as others. (...) He [Nûjen] knows where ignorance lives and where prejudice flourishes – far into what he calls “proper city hall racism”. (*Svenska Dagbladet*, May 12th, 2002)

(...)

I have met young boys like Zozo [the main character of his show] many times. They are around us all the time. You should not be sorry for him, but for society. The way the new young boys live is proof that society does not work.

Özz Nûjen (born 1975) could have been a Zozo as well, he says. He is originally Kurd from Turkey, who arrived to Sweden as a refugee together with his family on the new year 1983-84. (*Svenska Dagbladet*, October 10th, 2001)

These excerpts illustrate how Nûjen’s performances are understood as connected to his biography: the marginality he performs has roots in marginality he as an immigrant experiences in the world outside the stage, a marginality well known through the serious Swedish press discourse. It is also mentioned that Nûjen is Kurdish, which is frequently done in Nûjen’s performances and in the press coverage. Although Kurds often have been represented through orientalist stereotypes, there is also a more recent tendency to represent them as a heroic, marginalised people (Kardaş & Yeşiltaş, 2018;

Sheyholislami, 2001) – “the world’s largest nation without a state”⁵⁴. It seems clear that Nûjen’s identity as Kurdish intersects with the underdog-fool repertoires. This can perhaps also be understood as a rebranding of Kurds in Sweden, as the ethnic group around 2000 was the centre of debates of honorary killings and patriarchal culture (Bredström, 2003; Simonsen, 2004, pp. 238-245).

There is a clear line from the underdog-fool repertoire used to describe Nûjen’s performances and the enunciative position he got in the serious public sphere. After his first solo performances, he became a contributor to *Mangas*, a magazine about multicultural Sweden within *Studio Ett*, a major news-oriented talk show on SR 1. In 2002, he was one of the “summer hosts” in SR 1’s popular summer programming. The experience of marginalisation was a central topic in these programmes as well as in the presentation of them:

Özz Nûjen’s summer programme will be about resistance. The resistance I had to grow up with, the resistance I met, the resistance I have seen, the resistance that gives hope and despair. (*Nummer*, June 26., 2002)

(...)

Why do immigrants need to learn Swedish before they get a job, if it is at the workplace that they have an opportunity to learn the language? Is it time to accept Rinkeby Swedish as a natural development of the Swedish language? Conversation about the tolerance towards people who speak with an accent and how much accent one can speak with in order to be understood. (*Mangas* metadata, June 30., 2001)

How this role became stable is visible in an interview with tabloid *Expressen* for the occasion of his third solo show in 2013⁵⁵, *Statsminister Özz Nûjen (Prime Minister Özz Nûjen)*, where he is quoted on racist threats, his personal refugee history, how he

⁵⁴ <http://www2.harpercollege.edu/mhealy/g101ilec/intro/clt/cltdiv/cltdivtx.htm> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

⁵⁵ <https://www.expressen.se/noje/ozz-nujen-jag-ar-en-av-de-fem-basta/> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

was type-casted to immigrant roles when he worked at the national theatre *Dramaten*, and perhaps most notably on his participation in Swedish-Norwegian talkshow *Skavlan*, where his characterisation of Frp as a racist party was edited out by NRK for the Norwegian version of the show. His personal experience of marginality, as a Kurd in Turkey or immigrant in Sweden, is still central, more than ten years after it accompanied his entrance into the public sphere.

The passage from the cultural to the political parts of the public sphere is less clear-cut in the case of Nûjen than in the case of Rehman, since the coverage of him mainly took place in the cultural section of newspapers and more talk-oriented radio and TV. He also lacks the explicit political connection that Rehman has as the leader of NGOs and contributor to government policy making. However, Riegert, Roosvall, and Widholm (2015) and Riegert and Roosvall (2017) claim that cultural journalism in Sweden should be seen as encompassing not only journalism about the arts, but also genres like feature and commentary and debate on societal issues holding a more reflective level, understood as an alternative perspective to the news. In addition, Nûjen's importance was understood through a repertoire dominating the Swedish political public sphere on matters of immigration at the time, where immigrants were understood as marginalised and victims of structural racism. Here, it was perhaps the political public sphere that spilled over into the cultural public sphere, and made one of the country's first immigrant comedians into a sort of artist-intellectual specialised on multicultural society, with access to and a voice in the parts of the political public sphere oriented towards debates about ideas and cultural issues in a broad sense.

Omar Marzouk differs from his two colleagues, as he not first and foremost is interpreted as someone who tells uncomfortable truths, but as someone who facilitates dialogue. Somewhat paradoxically, he is also controversial, and comes across as the rawest and the most satirically oriented of the three comedians. This does not go unnoticed, for example in Hjort and Palle's history of Danish stand-up comedy, where Marzouk is portrayed as one of the few political comedians in Denmark (2009, pp. 104-105), or when he in 2006 appeared on the front page of the magazine *Ud & Se* cloaked in a keffiyeh and wearing a football scarf in the Danish national colours, along

with the text “Tal om de farlige ting” – “Talk about the dangerous things”. However, almost every time when his potentially provocative comedy is brought up, it is also stressed that he does not seek provocation – but dialogue.

– For some, the keffiyeh is a symbol of terrorism. Does not this text and photo signalise that Muslims are dangerous terrorists? [...] “The important point is that this photo is humoristic and an expression of equality between two cultures – that is why the two scarfs appear together. We do not seek to provoke, but to create dialogue through humour” (*Journalisten*, January 3rd, 2003).

(...)

A Muslim serve full of humour, abundance and nuance in the stagnated Danish debate. A proof of the world being bigger, quirrier and more rewarding than the authorised soup-steak-and-ice-cream-Danish mother in law-joke. Stand-up lived in this dark eyed figure – not as anger, not as worn out platitudes, not as self-digging manners, but as unpretentious communication human to human, a cool show that with the smile as a battering ram destroyed the fortress of prejudice. (*Berlingske Tidende*, January 2nd, 2002)

(...)

“It’s not about being blasphemous, though; it’s about things that make both sides have a laugh. That’s more difficult than being provocative.” (*New York Times*, August 18th, 2008).

The enunciative position Marzouk is assigned in excerpts like this *the comedian as a bridge-builder*. Marzouk is represented as someone whose comedy targets both sides, meaning both majority Danes and the Muslim minority. The aim of this, however, is not mainly scornful ridicule, but to appeal to some kind of self-irony and through this facilitate dialogue and perhaps even community. This is another variety of a positive humour-view, where humour is connected to sociability, an idea that got philosophically elaborated already by Xenophon, Aristotle and Cicero who distinguish between ill-natured and good-natured laughter (Amir, 2014, pp. 78-79). In the classical

works, good-natured humour, *eutrapelia*, which can be translated as *cheerfulness* or *wit*, is a personal virtue connected to good taste, where precisely hurtful intention as well as inappropriate content is what one should avoid. This view of humour does not only have a life among philosophers: Kuipers (2015, pp. 170-193) has in her study of joke culture in the Netherlands shown that joke-telling first and foremost is a part of sociability, and closely connected with an ability to understand what is appropriate and not hurtful in different contexts.

One sub-variety of this idea is that humour not only is an expression of appropriateness and sociability, but that it *fosters* sociability, and even a cultured sociability of truth. This was a central point in the thought of Spinoza, and especially Shaftesbury, who viewed good humour as a social expression of true, intellectual judgement in line with God's benevolent order of the creation (Amir, 2014, pp. 77-81). Although there is no trace of any religious, and definitely not anagogical, ideas in the writings about Marzouk, it is still clear that his exercise in bridge-building through humour also is connected with a higher form of truth, as it challenges, and even destroys, prejudice, a central aspect of wit and humour in Shaftesbury's philosophy. Thus, also this can be a variety of the *Humour as a special form of truth-telling* repertoire. The specific application of the old idea about humour as truth through sociability in Marzouk's case is thus through a use of this interpretive repertoire where he is understood as a bridge-builder who by humour overcomes prejudice among Danes and immigrants alike, and thus facilitates a more true picture of immigrants and increased understanding between the groups. The importance of dialogue being facilitated through humour is visible in the excerpts where it is suggested that the audiences laughs or smiles.

Often, Marzouk's role as a bridge-builder is emphasised by examples of how he contributes to integration, but also by how he provides an alternative Danish identity. Of the three Scandinavian countries, it is safe to say that Denmark has the strongest pronounced ethnonationalism, which also is officially sanctioned. The idea of a particular *leitkultur* is very present in Danish public debate, in strong or weak forms (Mouritsen, 2006, pp. 76-78). An important manifestation of this is how Denmark early on adapted the naturalisation process of immigrants so that it also

served as an integration process, including mandatory knowledge tests and oath-taking. There is also a strong emphasis in the debate, as well as in legislation, on the importance of immigrants adhering to *Danish* values, when Sweden, in contrast, emphasises *democratic* and *universal* values in similar instances (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012, pp. 254-260). Ten official values have even been explicitly and officially formulated in a government process that started in 2016, *Denmark's Canon*⁵⁶. Furthermore, Islam tends to be formulated as an antithesis to these Danish values (Hellström & Hervik, 2014; Mouritsen, 2006; Mouritsen & Hovmark Jensen, 2014). Extreme consequences of this view would be that Muslims are inherently anti-democratic, or even that they cannot be real Danes. It is this kind of position Marzouk is understood as an opposition to, and explicitly opposes himself:

The well-known comedian was invited to Århus by the city council, who after some years with sad racist attacks made the initiative for the campaign 'Respect, Dialogue, Tolerance'. [...] The three topics were then treated by Omar Marzouk in his own politically incorrect manner. Among references to "Pakis" [perkere], "Pale faces" and hated football fans [forhatte Brøndbysupportere], he succeeded at blending in proper messages. For example, when covering 'respect', he said: "The meaning of life is to learn to live together with people one does not fit with" (*Politiken*, January 1th, 2007).

(...)

Omar Marzouk is preoccupied with how Danes are very full of themselves and do not understand how someone can be Muslim.

"I get asked about the strangest things, for example if it isn't sad to be Muslim, if my children are going to be circumcised, and what Denmark would look like if Taliban seized power. But I don't want them to take over either! It is like one as a Muslim isn't allowed to live like a completely normal Dane just like everybody else", he says. (*Jyllands-Posten*, October 12th, 2002).

⁵⁶ <https://www.danmarkskanon.dk/> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

It should be noted how Marzouk in these excerpts does not reject the importance of certain values as a part of the Danish civic identity, or suggests that Muslim values are as good as Danish values. On the contrary, he claims that he wants to be “a completely normal Dane”, and the quote “The meaning of life is to learn to live together with people one does not fit with” should be interpreted with the Danish concept (and later canonical value) *frisind* in mind. Frisind, which best can be translated as liberal-mindedness (Edelberg, 1945), refers to a relaxed and accepting attitude to how other people want to live their life, in modern Denmark especially when it comes to sex and sexuality (Thing, 2002). It also refers to a clear standpoint where the promotion and cultivation of this liberal attitude is expected from everybody. What Marzouk does, then, is to promote *frisind* from the position of being an immigrant and a Muslim. He thus uses a dominant repertoire in the Danish immigration debate, which can be formulated as *Adhering to Danish values is necessary in order to be a part of Danish society*, but does so in a way that avoids, and actively counters, the construction of an unbridgeable difference between Danishness and Islam. Instead, he suggests that it is possible to be both Dane *and* Muslim, in other words an alternative to a thick, ethno-nationalist identity. This more civic form of nationalism is one of Marzouk’s clearest contributions in the serious public sphere, when he is used as an interview object or public speaker, and it is clearly in line with the bridge-builder repertoire that is used to understand his comedy. Thus, he was able to take a middle-ground position in the political public sphere.

Marzouk was of course not the only actor critical to a thick ethno-nationalist civic identity or the creation of an opposition between Islam and Danishness. This was common, to various degrees, for politicians from all parties except the Danish People’s Party (Mouritsen, 2006, pp. 82-83). This is probably the reason for why he could get the position of the bridge-builder in the media: It fitted well with an existing problematisation of Danish nationalism. However, Marzouk had a much clearer and more consistent rejection of ethnonationalism than the political parties, who in practice often conducted a conceptual sliding where their promotion of civic values to various degrees became connected to Danish heritage (ibid). In addition, he was special as he

spoke from a clearly religious Muslim point of view, while still being a comedian. This became especially visible after the Danish Mohammad cartoon crisis, where Marzouk's religious identity was brought to the forefront. He took an active position where he, as a faithful Muslim, claimed the cartoons to be hurtful and unnecessary, but also unconditionally defended the freedom of speech of the papers that published the cartoons.

(...) when Muslim mobs began torching embassies last month, protesting a Danish newspaper's cartoons about Islam's prophet Muhammad, Marzouk, 32, stopped laughing. He decided, he said, it was "time to stand up." [...] Everyone's saying 'You're either with us or you're against us.' The middle ground has just got lost - it doesn't exist any more." Undeterred, Marzouk, said he will use his comedic talents to push back against extremism. "I think that my next show will be about freedom of speech and cartoons. "Sometimes I think that comedy is the only way. In any culture you're given extra space to say things if you do it with humor," he said. (*SFGate*, August 3rd, 2006).

(...)

He reminded the audience that there currently is a boycott in many Arab countries against Danish products. He therefore asked the crowd if imam Abu Laban from The Islamic Society was present, and encouraged him to appear in commercials in the Middle East for Danish dairy produce⁵⁷ in order to stop the boycott. "Please finish off the Friday prayer with a glass of milk", was the call from Omar Marzouk to both Abu Laban and the Muslim audience. (*Jyllands-Posten*, June 18th, 2006).

(...)

"I think that a tendency has developed in this country where one cannot say anything. There are a lot of people who think that one cannot say anything about Islam or the

⁵⁷ Abu Laban was an outspoken, controversial conservative Muslim leader in Denmark at the time, and "laban" is a milk product popular in the Arab world – the pun on his name can be translated as "Father Yoghurt".

imams without getting death threats. I think that is crap”, Omar Marzouk says.[...]“Both due the Mohammad crisis and due to the general turn to the right, I think it is important to do it [criticise religion], and that the criticism of for example Islam not always is on the premises of the right-wing. The political right means that one only can make fun of religion if it is strongly scornful. I actually think one can do it without pissing on anyone”, he says. (*Berlingske Tidende*, March 19th, 2008).

Again, we see how Marzouk seeks to actively use his middle-ground and bridge-builder position. This position is in opposition to the extremes in both ends – the political right-wing and fundamentalist Islamic clerics. What is clear in these excerpts is thus that the bridge-builder also is somebody who counters polarisation and harsh debate. That Denmark has an especially harsh debate, especially when it comes to the immigration issue, is a popular belief in Scandinavia, which there also is empirical evidence for. It is used a sharper language from politicians criticising immigrants compared to for example Sweden, including a tendency to frame Islam as a threat (Hellström & Hervik, 2014). The immigration coverage in the Danish press has also been more politicised and dominated by threat-frames than what has been the case in Norway and Sweden (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019), indicating that the issue is politically polarised. Finally, there are Muslim clerics in Denmark who at the best have been ambiguous when asked if Danish law stands over Sharia (Mouritsen, 2006), and in some cases clearly have opposed the dominant articulation of ‘Danish values’. The best known was the above mentioned Abu Laban, a Palestine imam with connections to the Egyptian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood (Khader, 2008) and then leader of the largest Muslim congregation in Denmark, *Islamisk Trossamfund*. He was a skilled media strategist, and took a central role in the caricature controversy as a promoter of an unreserved criticism of the caricatures in the Danish public sphere including encouraging protests and taking initiative to legal action in the EU court system (Jensen, 2007). He was also one of the imams instrumental in bringing the attention of the Arab world to the caricatures (Khader, 2008). Finally, it seems to exist a position of a certain kind of freedom-of-speech-fundamentalism in Danish political debate,

where the right to criticise something or someone in a confrontational mode is seen as non-negotiable (Mouritsen, 2006, p. 70), a position that was much used after the caricature affair. To put it short, the polarisation of Danish immigration debate worked along many dimensions. What is as important for the discussion in this chapter is that this also was an interpretive repertoire used by actors in the Danish debate to conduct meta-debates, and also attack political opponents by accusing them for being the cause of this kind of polarisation (Hervik & Boisen, 2013). The repertoire can be termed *The tone of the debate*, which also is a phrase recurrently used in this meta-debate by the participants themselves (“tonen i debatten”).

Omar Marzouk’s ability to get assigned a middle-ground position in a polarised debate was thus probably also because of this existing interpretive repertoire that posed the tone of the debate as a problem. Marzouk could hence again be seen as part of the solution of an already formulated problem. This also intersected with his Muslim identity, even more so after the cartoon crisis. The controversy was an important humour scandal where a moral and political rift between the Western and the Muslim world was dramatized (Kuipers, 2011), which suggests that like in the case of Shabana Rehman, the interpretive repertoire of Islam as a killjoy and the commonplace of Muslims lacking a sense of humour were important as latent means used to understand Marzouk and mould him a position in the public sphere. However, unlike Rehman who refuses to address her faith or lack thereof in public, and was represented as a contrast to humourless Muslims, Marzouk was portrayed as a Muslim *with* humour. His participation in the cartoon crisis was thus the clearest illustration of how a position was given to, and taken by, him in the public sphere: as the bridge-builder who uses humour that goes in both directions to create community in the middle ground, removes the difference between being Danish and being Muslim, and thus provides an alternative to the polarised Danish debate.

Like the case was with Rehman, Marzouk’s enunciative position in the public sphere was both sought after and precarious. He also received death threats, both from Islamists and nationalists, but did unlike Rehman not receive criticism from the anti-racist movement, but rather from the right wing. Especially fierce was his debate with the artist Firoozeh Bazrafkan, active participant in Danish debate, when she accused

him of being too soft against Islamist terrorists and ended the debate by giving him the finger⁵⁸. It thus seems that the bridge-builder role became increasingly difficult for Marzouk, according to himself due to the increased polarisation of Danish immigration debate. After having been a proponent of combining Muslim and Danish identities, he declared in 2016 that he “did not feel Danish anymore” and wished to move to another country⁵⁹. It is also telling that his comeback to the stand-up scene after a five year hiatus, in the winter 2020, was a solo show with the title “Afdanskningsbal” (“De-Danification Ball”). Like Rehman, it seems that also Marzouk had a position which was both compliant with hegemonic positions and something radical, both safe and controversial.

4.3 Conclusion: Balancing on the boundaries.

Since their first appearances in the public sphere, relatively consistent interpretive repertoires have been used about Nūjen, Rehman and Marzouk. Although there are significant differences between how the three comedians were understood, a shared trait is that their humour was understood as something important because it was connected to a special kind of truth. This points towards the cultural value comedy and humour has in the Scandinavian public spheres, and even that *being comedians and immigrants* was enough to not only get access to the public sphere, but also get an enunciative position where they would be considered immigrant *voices*, in line with how their shows and first media appearances were interpreted. The unserious mode of humour thus gained a value as a serious contributor to the debate. At the same time, it is clear that the repertoires to a high degree stemmed from themselves, which points to how the cultural value of humour could be used as a rhetorical resource by the three comedians, as individuals, to get access to the political part of the public sphere.

⁵⁸ <https://www.bt.dk/danmark/paa-live-tv-her-giver-kvindelig-debattoer-kendt-komiker-fingeren> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

⁵⁹ <https://www.bt.dk/danmark/standup-komiker-overvejer-at-flytte-til-et-andet-land-jeg-foeler-mig-ikke-dansk-me> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

It is also significant that the three were doing stand-up comedy. The genre was new in Scandinavia and provided an easy road into the world of stage and TV entertainment. It probably also had some news value in itself, especially as the comedians were immigrants. Although it is not directly visible in the coverage of the three comedians, it can be argued that stand-up comedians with an immigrant background were good symbols for the new, cosmopolitan urban lifestyle of Scandinavia (Løvland, 2002, p. 28), and thus interesting in themselves for the mass media. What is explicit in the cases of Rehman and Marzouk is that the two often would be understood as political comedians – and the ‘rest’ of their colleagues were often criticised for being apolitical, as Scandinavian stand-up typically was inspired by their contemporary Jerry Seinfeld, with his observational lifestyle comedy, rather than the political rebel and underdog Lenny Bruce (ibid, pp. 76-84). There are some instances where the media clearly interprets the two as stand-up comedians one ‘finally’ can take seriously. This also demonstrates the usefulness of investigating opinion formation in the public sphere as historical processes of ruptures and intersections between different historical series: The new genre of stand-up comedy intersected with the development of a young generation of immigrants and descendants who were seeking for ways to gain access and voice in the public sphere.

Both the comedian’s access into the world of stand-up comedy and their own and the media’s use of interpretive repertoires to understand them as politically relevant can usefully be understood as boundary struggles, in the third sense conceptualised by Midtbøen et al. (2017), where such struggles are seen as processes of inclusion and exclusion of and by individual actors. In a different study, Midtbøen (2018) has argued that immigrants participating in the Norwegian public sphere has to manage their background as immigrants in order to gain access and create a role for themselves, in a careful interplay with existing power mechanisms. This seems to be the case with the three comedians in this chapter as well, but they have also used their background as comedians as a strategic tool in this regard. This was done by mobilising different versions of a well-established interpretive repertoire, *Humour as a special form of truth-telling*, which each of them strategically adapted so that it would fit both with their own background and with broader tendencies in the immigration

debate in each of the three countries. Rehman entered as a participant in a larger debate about social control over women in immigrant milieus, Nûjen's focus on marginalisation resonated well with the Swedish immigration debate, and Marzouk took a middle-ground position, preaching civic nationalism, dialogue and respect in a debate climate that often has been characterised as ethnonationalist and polarised.

This points towards another way the tension between humour's conservative and radical aspects is put at work. The comedians were all, in different way, understood as someone who did something new and daring with their comedy, but this appreciation was again build on well-established understandings of humour's cultural and political value, as well as well-established themes and points of view in the broader immigration discourse. I have previously argued (Dahl, 2019) that Nûjen and Rehman's trajectory into the public sphere demonstrate how comedy has a limited power to bring something *new* to the serious debate: the comedians who manage to say something in the serious public sphere are the kind of comedians the press already look for. I still think this is somehow correct, but it has to be qualified. Although Rehman and Marzouk were moulded into roles that were sought after by the media, they were also very controversial to the point of being precarious in different subcultures. They also gained relatively unique positions as immigrant comedians who were respectively a critic from within and a bridge-builder. Even Nûjen, who appears as less controversial and more celebrated than his two colleagues, was unique in the sense that he managed to build up an immigrant led comedy club, and through being a comedian being a recurring participant in cultural debates. It thus seems that although comedy could not really challenge status quo in the radical way humour optimists seem to imagine, it could at least be used as a strategic resource for immigrants to enter the public sphere and create new kinds of enunciative positions.

Albeit the three comedians sometimes have been controversial, the general tendency in the reception of them has been celebration and endorsement. This mirrors more general tendencies in the reception of Scandinavian immigration comedy, but the reception of these three stands out due to the level of detail: we actually see the arguments and repertoires *behind* the celebration of comedy. The only other cases with this level of detail are humour controversies, when the celebratory tendency is

challenged, and public service comedy becomes accused of racism. These cases point toward how not only humour optimism, but also humour alarmism can contribute to opinion formation in the public sphere, and will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: When is a joke racist, anyway? Public service comedy controversies on racism

Ali: What else can one say?

Morten: Well, you can say what you want, when it is freedom of speech...down in the Middle East...

Ali: Call me a Paki then!

Morten: ...

Ali: Come on, call me Paki! Or I don't want to be integrated.

Morten: You're...Paki

Ali: Sick! What else?

Morten: You're stupid...Wrong-coloured!

Hassan: What??

Ali: Heeey, respect!!

Yallahrup Færgeby, episode 3: 100 % Dane.

Humour does, almost by definition, balance on a fine line between transgressing and respecting moral, aesthetic and political boundaries. When it stays safe, it is seldom very funny; when overtly transgressive, many will find it vulgar and offensive. This play with discursive borders makes comedy a good lens where cultural and social tensions in society are made visible (Kuipers, 2011; 2015, p. 124). This is especially true when someone finds comedy offensive and this becomes a topic in the mass media. Through such a humour controversy, which may evolve into a fully-fledged humour scandal (Koivukoski & Kuipers, 2019; Kuipers, 2011), public debate on the boundaries of the public sphere can occur. Following public sphere theory (Fraser, 1992; Habermas, 1996), these kinds of debates are necessary in order to include new topics and actors into the fold of the public sphere.

In this chapter, I will look at three different humour controversies in the Scandinavian countries and analyse them both as *boundary struggles* (Midtbøen et al., 2017) in the public sphere, referring to the contestation about what types of speech acts that are deemed as legitimate or illegitimate as well as to the public sphere's dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (25-27); and as attempts of *politicisation* (Fraser,

1989), referring to how concerns that get political attention are not simply given, but subject to interpretive conflicts where issues formerly seen as belonging to the private sphere – and thus as the concerns of each single individual – enter the social and the public sphere, and may become political and thus common concerns. The two concepts – boundary struggles and politicisation - are used in tandem as my material shows that boundary struggles about racist humour – what should be accepted in the public sphere – also is an interpretive conflict about what (discursive) racism ultimately *is*. Using a combination of simple actor analysis and an analysis of the interpretive repertoires used by the different stakeholders, I suggest that the development of such controversies partly depend on how strategically placed actors use the humour controversies rhetorically, partly on the potential the show that sparked the controversy had for different kinds of interpretation. The cases in question are the sketch “All skit försvinner” (“All shit disappears”)⁶⁰ from the Swedish programme *Lorry* (SVT) in 1989, the Danish Christmas calendar puppet show *Yallahrup Færgeby* (DR2) from 2007, and the Norwegian sitcom *Ali Reza and the Rezas* (TV2) from 2009⁶¹. Unlike the other chapters in this thesis, I will not treat each case in a separate section, but rather structure the chapter after the development of the three controversies, in order to highlight their differences as well as their similarities.

5.1. Spark of the scandals: the programmes and their earliest reception

October 26th, 1989, the sketch “All skit försvinner” was broadcast on SVT as a part of the second episode of a new comedy show, *Lorry*, named after the comedy group behind it, formed by a group of friends from the national theatre academy⁶². The show, marketed as humour for “divorced and mature youth”, gained positive critical

⁶⁰ The sketch can be viewed on <https://twitter.com/micke69/status/919199015413133312> (Last checked February 11th, 2021)

⁶¹ Most episodes of *Yallahrup Færgeby* and *Ali Reza and the Rezas* can be viewed as bootleg on YouTube, posted by different users.

⁶² <https://www.gp.se/livsstil/tv%C3%A5-dagar/det-finns-inget-lorry-g%C3%A4ng-1.9546388> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

reception and was generally understood as novel, shaking up a stale Swedish comedy scene. However, it would also be known for transgressive and offensive humour, of which “All skit försvinner” was an example. The sketch shows two scenes where a woman, dressed as a housewife from the 50s, uses a can marked with the Swedish flag to spray different messy areas in the house, while she in a jolly voice proclaims, “All shit disappears”. In the third scene of the sketch, she walks past a dark-skinned man sweeping the street and sprays him. He vanishes, and she repeats the same, “All shit disappears”, but in an even jollier tone and with an emphasis on the word “shit”. One week later, the first media report appeared in *Dagens Nyheter* about an immigrant initiative that had reported the sketch to *Radionämnden*, the Swedish broadcasting tribunal, as well as arranged a demonstration in front of the TV house. November 12th, *Lorry* was the main topic of the TV programme *Tycka om TV (Thoughts about TV)*, a magazine/debate programme where TV staff discussed with a “Vox Populi” consisting of both letters and videotapes sent in by viewers as well as a fixed studio panel of laypeople.

Almost 20 years later, *Yallahrup Færgeby*, a loose parody of the classic *Jullerup Færgeby*, was broadcast in Denmark on December 1th, 2007. The show was a Christmas calendar, originally a popular Nordic children’s serial format where one episode is broadcast each day of advent with a grand finale on Christmas eve. Since the 1990s, adult parodies of the format have been popular in Denmark and Norway, of which *Yallahrup Færgeby*, written by Nanna Westh and Alex Haridi, is an example. The plot revolves around 12-year-old Ali, alleged descendant of gangsta rapper Tupac Shakur, who in the first episode, after bragging about his “big bollocks (“store nosser”), gets publicly humiliated when he during a visit to the school doctor learns that his testicles actually have not fallen down to the scrotum, a message that by mistake gets broadcast over the school’s intercom. The rest of the show circles around how Ali and his friend, the poet Hassan, desperately tries to assert their manhood and gangsta image in various ways, for example by starting a hash smokers’ lounge in the school. In addition to Ali, voiced by Danish-Turkish Özlem Saglanmak, and Hassan, there are several important side characters: the school inspector Hanne, who gets sexually aroused by integration, the school librarian Morten, who suffers a stress-

related depression and frequently is taken advantage of (in all senses) by Hanne and Ali, the girl gang Crazy Girls, whom Ali and Hassan try to impress, the pusher Dennis and finally the imam Abu Babu, who tries to recruit the boys as suicide bombers. Although the characters are cute, fluffy puppets, there are many elements that do not belong in your average puppet show: the gloomy background of a concrete jungle, the use of slang and swearwords, and especially the explicit sexual imagery of genitals and masturbating puppets. *Yallahrup Færgeby* received some attention before it was broadcast and was already then labelled as ‘controversial’, probably due to successful PR⁶³. The show received positive reception after its first episode, but the critical reactions came after the third one, when three teachers from the immigrant dense Copenhagen suburb Hvidovre wrote a critical op-ed. Simultaneously, the show sparked multiple letters to the editor as well as reactions on different online fora. All these reactions became the basis for a syndicated news story about how controversial the show was, which was printed in numerous newspapers⁶⁴.



Figure 5 Hanne, the school inspector, starring in her homemade educational video about integration. From Yallahrup Færgeby, DR 2/ DR Ung/ Nordicom, 2007.

⁶³ See for example <https://www.berlingske.dk/kultur/ornli-syge-gangstere-i-jullerup-faergeby> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

⁶⁴ <https://www.information.dk/kultur/2007/12/yallahrup-faergeby-modvind> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

The Norwegian case, *Ali Reza and the Rezas*, broadcast in 2009, was a sitcom about Ali Reza, a young Norwegian-Iranian who wants to become a celebrity. The plot circles around Ali's attempts to become famous through his music, as well as his flirting with the neighbour Anja. This leads him into multiple conflicts with society around him, but also with the traditional family that he lives with. For example, one episode is about a forced marriage between Ali and his cousin from Iran, while the plot of another episode is structured around cultural conflicts between the Reza family and their neighbours during the celebration of Nowruz, the Iranian new year. Ali Reza was played – in drag – by Lisa Tønne, adopted from Iran to Norway as an infant. Tønne was also the scriptwriter together with Irasj Asanti, Bahareh Badavi, Yngve Skomsvoll and Per Olav Sørensen, of whom the first two had an Iranian background. Already after the first episode, the show was accused of being racist on different online discussion fora, on Facebook, and in letters to the station TV 2. The newspaper *VG* picked up on this and wrote an online story⁶⁵ on it on December 2nd.

The three controversies were very different from the outset, especially in scope. However, they shared two elements: direct accusations of racism or discrimination from people with an immigrant background, paired with an aesthetic debate of the shows. *Dagens Nyheter* (November 2nd, 1989) reported about Abdolreza Soltani, an immigrant from Iran, who had reported *Lorry to Radionämnden* as well as reached out to multiple immigrant organisations to organise protests against the “increasing racism in Sweden”. Soltani emphasised how strong the reactions were in the immigrant communities, that immigrants were angry and ready to act to combat racism. There was also a clear disrespect-theme connected to the sketch's script: “Us immigrants were literally treated like shit”. A more aesthetically oriented criticism was voiced in an anonymous letter to SVT undersigned “working immigrant woman in Stockholm”, read aloud in *Tycka om TV*'s episode on *Lorry* ten days later. She expressed how surprised she was that SVT could broadcast something so “tasteless

⁶⁵ <https://www.vg.no/rampelys/tv/i/3v1XL/tv-seere-anklager-ali-reza-for-rasisme> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

and foul” and criticised how the station had so “poor imagination” that they went after “already weak groups like immigrants and children”. It should be noted that the letter writer also criticised another sketch from the *Lorry* show, which rather graphically showed incest.

Her criticism became the leitmotif in the debate that night. It was clear that most members of the studio panel agreed with the letter writer: the show was tasteless and crude. However, most of them were reluctant to attribute racist intention to SVT or the Lorry gang. Many acknowledged the comedians and station’s points of defence, that the sketch was made as a criticism of the ignorance (“aningslöshet”) that allowed racism in Swedish society, but they nevertheless claimed that it was so crude that it could be misunderstood by immigrants who already were mocked and marginalised. Some of the panel members explicitly self-identified as immigrants and drew upon their own experiences, but it should be noted that they had Finnish or Hungarian background and thus were racialised in a different way than the dark-skinned actor of the sketch. Crude humour as disrespectful and opaque, concealing any satirical intent and thus only being hurtful and even harmful against those who already are in precarious positions, were typical talking points used to criticise the show in the following debate, and can be summed up as an interpretive repertoire, *Offensive humour causes real harm*.

Crudeness was also a central objection against *Yallahrup Færgeby*, albeit on a slightly different note: the three teachers Kamilla Elleby, Kashif Ahmad – who also was a MP candidate for the party New Alliance – and Asif Ahmad wrote that:

Yallahrup Færgeby largely uses as its starting point our prejudice about a classical ghetto with classical immigrant youth in the dominant role, with accompanying offensive language, drugs, gambling, sex, violence and scenes that can be experienced as discriminating and frightening (*Politiken*, December 4th, 2007).

The teachers furthermore claimed that the show was counterproductive for their own attempts to teach their students to avoid bad language as well as prejudice against immigrants. As we can see, the teachers’ op-ed follows a quite classical formula for

media panics, worrying about media content's destructive effects on vulnerable youth due to how much violence, sex and bad words there is in the show (Drotner, 2006). The media panic dynamic can partly explain how the controversy developed but will not be inspected in detail here: media panics happen recurrently (ibid), while both the controversy as a whole and the teachers' op-ed stands out as a debate about racism and the boundaries of the public sphere. Despite following the 'recipe' of adults worrying over how the media corrupts the youth, their objections and analyses of why the show was discriminatory were actually much more detailed and multifaceted than the attacks on *Lorry* almost 20 years earlier, as they argued that the show was damaging both by perpetuating stereotypes about immigrants to the majority and by encouraging a sort of undesirable gangsta-identity. Through their role in civil society as teachers and politicians, they also had ready-made points of access to the public sphere, something Abdolreza Soltani and the anonymous letter writer probably lacked in 1989.

The *Yallahrup Færgelby*-controversy was in general more detailed and diverse than the *Lorry*-case already from the onset, which can be seen by how it engaged actors from the opposite sides of the polarised Danish immigration debate: independently of the teachers' op-ed, the show had sparked hefty online debates on the blog of Helen Latifi⁶⁶, a well-known blogger with an immigrant background, and *Uriasposten*⁶⁷, a right-wing alternative news blog with a very active commentary field. On Latifi's blog, the discussion started with critical posts along similar lines as the op-ed, emphasising how the show was based on generalisations and stereotypes about immigrants – but also with the added aspect that humour targeted towards Muslims always would be acceptable in Denmark, while Muslims could not joke freely about the majority. There was thus also traces of an analysis concerning humour regimes, social norms about who are allowed to joke about what (Kuipers, 2011, p. 69), and the power mechanisms associated with these regimes. On *Uriasposten*, one point similar to the teachers' criticism was reformulated, and one new point of criticism appeared. Some commenters agreed with how the gangsta image of the characters was

⁶⁶ web.archive.org/web/20071203100823/helenlatifi.wordpress.com/2007/11/22/dr2-jul-i-yallahrup-f%C3%A6rgeby/ (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

⁶⁷ <http://www.uriasposten.net/archives/5262> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

problematic, as they claimed this was a glorification of social losers that made them idols for immigrant youth. The commenters on the blog did however go one step further and claimed that this was a particular form of racism from DR's side, as "ghetto-behaviour" was portrayed as the only thing immigrant youth could do, and even actively encouraged. It is thus clear that similar kinds of criticism towards the show could be used by actors with diverging interests and widely different framings of social problems. The commenters' particular take on this criticism was also connected with the second prevalent point, which was introduced on *Uriasposten*: The show being multicultural propaganda, and especially inappropriate as a Christmas calendar. These two topics also appeared some days later in a couple of letters to the editor in *Jyllands-Posten*.

This sums up the two dominant repertoires in the criticism of *Yallahrup Færgeby*. One of them was again *Offensive humour causes real harm*, but in this case, what was central was the perpetuation of harmful *stereotypes* rather than how the show was a crude, opaque and disrespectful representation of anti-immigrant attitudes. This repertoire was used arguing two different standpoints: that the show maintained prejudice; and that it glorified social misfits. However, the further conclusion of these two standpoints was shared: The show maintained an existing and problematic ethnic divide. The second repertoire was more closely connected to the immigration discourse at large than to humour per se and can be termed *The media advocate a multicultural agenda*. This was used to understand the show as an attack on Danish culture in general, and Christmas in particular. The stereotype-variety of the *Offensive humour causes real harm*-repertoire builds on the classical media panic-repertoires that draw on the Hypodermic needle theory of media influence, where the media is seen as duping passive consumers (Drotner, 2006), but also on the humour negative view I have sketched in the theory chapter, exemplified in scholarly literature by authors like Pérez (2013, 2016), where comedy based on stereotypes is viewed as a strategy to get away with the promotion of racist and dangerous stereotypes. The second repertoire is not connected to cultural understandings of humour but draws more on the Eurabia conspiracy, where the political and cultural elite is seen as

complicit in fighting an imagined European culture and make the continent culturally and racially Muslim (Carr, 2006).

Diversity and detail were not characteristics of the debate about *Ali Reza and the Rezas*. In *VG* on December 2nd, 2009, the only interviewees were the show's director and TV 2's press liaison, who defended the show and simultaneously explained the reactions by how the main character Ali "encounters many problems we rarely dare to joke about", while none of the many minority cast and crew of the show were interviewed. The complainants were referred to as "multiple TV viewers", only represented by one anonymous quote: "The programme is too brutal and shows too strong signs of racism". On online discussion fora, discussants were mostly positive, but a couple of self-identified Iranians were critical:

What a bullshit serial. Embarrassing, directly embarrassing for us Iranians to be represented this way. I would have laughed if it was something I, as an Iranian, could have related to, because I have the self-irony it takes, but this was directly embarrassing ("samey999" at the *VG Debatt* thread "Ali Reza and the Rezas - terningkast 6!", November 25th, 2009).

Further contributions by this and other participants claimed that the show did not get the stereotypes right, that Ali Reza seemed more like a Pakistani than an Iranian, or even more like a general immigrant cliché coloured by the Norwegian majority's prejudice rather than 'actual' mannerisms in the various immigrant communities. The main repertoire was thus again a version of *Offensive humour causes real harm* with an emphasis on how stereotypes are harmful, but it was not put forward as a criticism of stereotypes per se, but of *wrong* stereotypes, still claiming that they created prejudice. Notably, this criticism was not referred to at all in the *VG* story – although praise of the show from the same forum was. In fact, the news story did not substantiate the claims about the show's racism at all, and there were no other news stories during the controversy – the rest of it played out on social media.

The three controversies thus all started by public statements from immigrants about the experience of racism. Following Fraser (1989, 1992), this can be seen as the start of the politicisation of racist media representations. Speaking publicly about an

issue, thus moving it from the realm of private experience to the realm of social discourse, is the first step towards the politicisation of it, necessary to create an oppositional public around the issue as well as eventually putting it on the policy agenda proper (1989, pp. 301-304). I do not claim that my cases represent the *first* contestations of racist comedy representations in the Scandinavian countries. As Fraser argues, such contestations are likely to be unsuccessful from the point of view of the oppositional public seeking to politicise an issue, as it battles with hegemonic forces on different levels. Later in this chapter, however, I will argue that these cases were especially interesting, and that the Danish and the Swedish case should be seen as ruptures in the need interpretation contests about racism.

I also view it as fruitful to understand the onset of these scandals as public display of the experience of being *disrespected*. According to Axel Honneth (2007), the experience of disrespect, grounded in denial of social recognition, is what fuels the moral demands that are voiced in the public sphere and is thus also a motor for social change (pp. 69-72). For my purpose, this notion is useful with its phenomenological focus on experience, and thus on emotion and affect, creates an entry point to a richer understanding of why it mattered that it was comedy shows, as well as just these particular comedy shows, which sparked the controversies. As we have seen, the criticism of racism goes hand in hand with an aesthetical, i.e. an experiential, critique of the shows, and understanding this as articulations of disrespect connects it to social theory and makes it possible to better understand the controversies as attempts of politicisation.

5.2. A step back to the shows: the sources of disrespect

As mentioned above, *Lorry* was critically acclaimed, but also controversial. Although they may not be entirely representative, newspaper enquêtes with titles like “What did you laugh of this year?” (*Aftonbladet*, December 26th, 1989) or “What do you do on your spare time” (*Aftonbladet*, April 27th, 1990) indicate that especially youth and cultural workers enjoyed the show, while many older viewers voiced their criticism, for example in the episode of *Tycka om TV*. This indicates a generational gap – which

again reminds us of the so-called ‘new humour’ of the 1990s, which I discussed in chapter 3. I would claim that *Lorry* was a forerunner, or perhaps even a premature instance of the new, ironic humour of the 90s, especially by virtue of its detached irony used to handle touchy subjects. This was visible from the “All skit försvinner” sketch, where racial slurs and hateful attitudes were represented in an ironic coupling with the idyllic and cheerful aesthetics of a commercial, and also in the incest sketch from the same episode, where a family engages in graphic incestual behaviour before the eyes of a shocked guest as if it was socially acceptable – and the characters’ groping and kissing would be inappropriate even if they were not related, at least at your average dinner party. Finally, Stefan Sauk’s “Tilfälligt avbrott” (“Random interruptions”) were fresh talk monologues similar to Otto Jespersen’s a decade later, where irony would be used as a *carte blanche* for aggression and insults.

This kind of detached irony is normally not associated with strong emotion. However, Hutcheon (1994, p. 43) discusses the emotional element connected to how any instance of irony must be imagined as possible to misunderstand: an utterance that was intended as ironic can be interpreted as literal, and real offense can thus be taken. There is also emotion at play on the edge between those who do and those who do not get the irony, as the latter can feel excluded, the former intellectually superior – and possibly superior again if the misunderstanding sparks emotional reactions in the other group. This mechanism was probably at play in the case of “All skit försvinner”, as the use of racist metaphors and a dark-skinned person disappearing seem to have been taken literally. Furthermore, users of detached irony have often been accused of nihilism and moral cynicism (Sconce, 2002; Ytreberg, 2000), accusations that often have been delivered with a certain amount of emotional indignation. This might be yet another explanation of the provocative potential of the show – especially taking into consideration how it’s ironic aesthetics might have been ahead of its time. The tensions between humour as serious and unserious and as emotional investment and emotional detachment were thus at play in this controversy.

Yallahrup Færgeby was built on exaggerated stereotypes about immigrants – and the people working with them, rather than an ironic treatment of hate-speech and prejudice. An important part of the scriptwriting process was interviews with youth

from immigrant dense suburbs⁶⁸ – a technique that became famous with the Norwegian youth TV success *Skam* almost ten years later (Sundet, 2020). The slang and the stereotypes were thus founded not only in the colloquial debate on immigration and integration, but also in the lifeworld of those who were represented in the show – even though this representation was satirical, unserious and exaggerated. For example, “Crazy Girls” was a real name of an infamous girl gang in the Copenhagen area, and the ideals from hip hop culture were emphasised as important by the show’s informants, as well as by groups of immigrant youth interviewed in the wake of the show⁶⁹. That being said, *Yallahrup* was a smorgasbord of stereotypes – repeated and varied in each and every episode. I would argue that this saturation of stereotypical representations probably was the reason for why the show triggered so many and various reactions. The humour of this kind of aesthetic lies precisely in the tension between serious and unserious, and thus between conservative and subversive: by some, a serial only consisting of stereotypes can be seen as mocking and derisive towards immigrants – if they are interpreted as *serious*, meaning read as intended to be a truthful representation of how immigrant youth ‘really is’. By others, the sheer number of stereotypes cancels such a reading since it clearly signals that this is not to be taken as a serious representation: it is obvious that the ‘real world’ in no way is like that. There is an ironic dimension also in humour of this kind. Therefore, the latter audience position also thrives on the tension between serious and unserious, conservative and subversive since the stereotypes somehow need to be viewed as *credible* for the show to be funny. Irony is based on quotation of something that can be recognised as serious, so if it is to work, the ironic quotation has to resemble an un-ironic quotation to a certain degree (Tjønneland, 1999, 2004). How this works with ethnic stereotypes will become clearer when I discuss *Ali Reza and the Rezas*. To sum up, immigrant stereotypes are both reproduced *and* rejected in *Yallahrup Færgeby*.

This ironic mechanism also happens through another important humour technique of the show: incongruence through juxtaposition. Cute puppets were

⁶⁸ <https://www.berlingske.dk/kultur/yallahrups-halalhippe-mor> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

⁶⁹ See note 64, as well as <https://jyllands-posten.dk/kultur/ECE3458817/Fuck-Yallahrup-F%C3%A6rgeby/> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

swearing, fighting and masturbating; educational staff behaved completely inappropriate and irresponsible; the character Hassan participates in Ali's gangsta project, but is also a polite and sensitive poet; and the jihadist imam, who also is gay, sings the song "A hug for Osama" ("En krammer for Osama"), about how you can be vain even though you are a terrorist. This way, the stereotypes of the show – but also our everyday scripts, like how teachers should be responsible – are played with, in a way that foreruns the shows that will be discussed in the next chapter, and thus signalled to be unserious. This is also a way to make stereotypes such as violent youth or religious fundamentalists humorous instead of threatening, demonstrating how humour works with both negative and positive emotions. Again, this can be interpreted as subversive, as a way to address stereotypes without claiming them to be true – but it can also be interpreted as yet another way to repeat and reproduce a stereotypical understanding of immigrants.

Stereotypes were also central in *Ali Reza and the Reza* and were also here marketed as a way to poke fun at "immigration policy relevant questions" (*Utrop*, August 3rd, 2008). However, we remember that the first critical reactions that we know of questioned the *credibility* of those stereotypes. Ali Reza does not talk with a Persian accent, but with an undeterminable immigrant one. The language humour does not consist of slang or so-called "kebab Norwegian", a mix of Norwegian and various immigrant languages, but of how Ali consequently uses the wrong prepositions and fails at pronouncing long words. He has decorated his room with the post-revolutionary flag of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a controversial symbol in the Iranian diaspora (Khayambashi, 2019). This diaspora is generally very secular, including the Norwegian wing (Alghasi, 2010a), so Ali's female relatives wearing the veil can be seen as a representation with little credibility. The same is the case for the episode about an arranged marriage, a very rare custom amongst urban Persians (Afary, 2017), the ethnic group we know that the Reza's belong to due to their name as well as scenes when they speak Farsi.

It is both tricky and controversial to argue that some stereotypes are more or less fitting, apt or even true than others. However, it can be argued that for ironic communication to be successful, the interpreters have to recognise the codes the ironist

draws on. The ironist and the audience therefore need to belong to the same discursive community, sharing various culture specific markers and signals (Hutcheon, 1994, pp. 98-99), which include cultural ideas of what the world ‘really’ is like. For example, the ironic asocial behaviour of the O.J. character needed to resemble *real* asocial behaviour in order to be recognisable as an ironic representation, and elicit the evaluations associated with irony. This was done through various culturally sanctioned signs of asocial behaviour like shouting or insulting his conversation partner. Along the same line, the ironic representation of ethnic stereotypes needs to comply with shared cultural understandings of what, and who, these stereotypes represent. The textual elements I discussed above, taken together with the early reception of the show on discussion fora, indicate that this failed in the case of *Ali Reza and the Rezas*, as the stereotypes there were seen by some as not credible or relatable – at least as stereotypes about Iranians. I would argue that this is an important explanation for why the show was read as racist and disrespectful: it came across not only as a parade of stereotypes, but as an ignorant and belittling such from the point of view of the majority. The divide between the the serial’s makers belonged to, and the discursive community of the Norwegian-Iranian audience, was probably not so deep that the latter did not understand that there was an ironic intention. However, it was deep enough that the emotional elements inherent in the irony’s evaluative dimension failed to come across – since it was not credible, it also failed to be funny and was thus only offensive. It probably added to the insult that although Lisa Tønne was born in Iran, she seems to be read as part of the Norwegian majority by Iranians discussing the show, and it is notable that her character Ali *never* speaks Farsi during the show even though his family often does – he only nods. Hence, it became another factor contributing to a reading of the show as the majority ridiculing the minority, based on wrongful and demeaning stereotypes.

That being said, *Ali Reza and the Rezas* was not univocally criticised by immigrants. There are many comments from users with names indicating an immigrant – sometimes even Iranian – background on Facebook and YouTube who clearly appreciate the show. I do not claim that the way *Ali Reza* used stereotypes *has to* be read as offensive – rather, it can serve as an explanation for a particular reading

where it is seen as disrespectful and racist for some particular reasons. However, although stereotypes with little credibility can be seen as offensive when coming from the majority, I will also argue that they give little fodder for discussion and debate – which will become clear in the next section, where I look at how the controversies developed further.

5.3. From offense to debate: the controversies develop

Although immigrant voices were prominent in the criticism of *Lorry's* “All skit försvinner”, they were virtually absent during the rest of the controversy. The *Tycka om TV* episode caused a couple of columns, deeply critical of the reactions against the sketch – and the show as a whole. Margareta Schwartz, long time journalist in *Expressen* and later political advisor for Social Democrat PM Mona Sahlin, wrote an especially elaborate column on December 13th:

(...) “Lorry” is the first show in ages that pokes fun at something else than priests saying bad words and owning bedchambers.

In “20:00”, a Bulgarian explained that he chose to fly to Sweden for the sake of freedom. If he had been able to watch “Tycka om TV” before he left, God knows if he would have stayed at home.

”Lorry” is not a pretty in the middle of the road-show. Your blood freezes when you watch it. The hair on your head stands up. You laugh to get them down and sometimes you don’t do that either. (...)

I do not know what would happen if Picasso painted “Guernica” in Sweden.

He probably would have a lot to answer for, I think, for slander about the dead. Someone would have pointed out how difficult it would be for the next of kin to see their loved ones portrayed so grotesquely.

This excerpt illustrates the two major interpretive repertoires in the debate. The first is yet again *Humour as a special form of truth-telling* and serves as a defence of *Lorry*. Here, truth is connected with transgression: We see how the shock effect one gets by watching *Lorry* is described in vivid detail, and implicitly, this is presented as important and valuable – as something new and out of the ordinary, and even compared to the canonical artwork *Guernica*. Other columnists express this explicitly, for example Thorleif Hellbom in *Dagens Nyheter* on December 15th: “sketches that are sharp and pressing (...) funny and just on the spot”. This enthusiastic valuation of *Lorry* was already visible in the columns before the *Tycka om TV* episode, where many journalists praised both the originality and the transgressions of the show.

The second repertoire can be termed *The Swedish Nanny Society*. This is rather an attack on Swedish mentality and debate climate than a defence of the *Lorry* sketch per se. Here, the Swedish public sphere is characterised as overtly prude, politically correct, and even with totalitarian tendencies. This is performed in rather harsh tones, with implicit claims of how *Guernica* could never be accepted in Sweden, or that communist Bulgaria is preferable over Sweden when it comes to freedom. This critique often went hand in hand with statements claiming that people offended by the sketch had “misunderstood” and that their criticism was embarrassingly off the mark. Sometimes, their immigrant status was explicitly mentioned.

None of the columnists dug deeper into the accusations of racism. I would therefore argue that we saw a two-sided boundary struggle in this phase of the controversy: on the one hand, attempts to start a politicisation of racism was effectively blocked by the newspaper commentariat. It is worth noting that this was the work of the cultural elite, which statistically – and, as I showed above, individually for at least one of the columnists – belong to the left wing. These columnists *supported* the fight against racism and were sure that it existed in Swedish society – they namely interpreted the sketch as a poignant critique of this. Ironically, by doing so they used rhetorical moves that served as exclusionary mechanisms towards immigrants and their concerns about racism, labelling the critical reactions as totalitarian. This happened before the term “political correctness” became prevalent in the US and the Western world at large (Wilson, 1995), but I see clear conceptual and ideological

links. However, unlike the typical popular belief of how the PC-term is used now, it was the left wing commentariat who voiced these concerns, and they did not refer to how the difficult matters regarding immigration were silenced in the debate, which we will see in the two other cases in this chapter.

On the other hand, this was a boundary struggle about how coarse satire should be allowed to be. Its value – not clearly formulated but at least forcefully stated – was contrasted with the description of a more general tendency where the Swedish debate climate was seen as overtly prudent and sensitive. There are few *arguments* put forward in this debate, other than that offensive satire seems to have a value in itself by virtue of the emotions it causes, and possibly hence can function as a way to renew a stale public life. Many columnists did also acknowledge that *Lorry* often could be plump and fail in their transgressive satire, so it does not seem like their stand is based on very principled views about freedom of speech – offensive satire needs to be *good* if it is to be endorsed. The problem is thus when people find the *wrong* shows too coarse and fail to ask the right questions about them in public (i.e., the ‘correct’ analysis of Swedish racism) or even move towards censorship by reporting them to *Radionämnden*. Thus, this debate is more of an aesthetical debate based on taste, in a very Bourdieuan sense, than a debate on the fundamental principles of freedom of speech. A certain type of satire is good and even important. Those who do not get the irony are ridiculed, and even portrayed as flirting with totalitarianism.

This became even more visible after the verdict of *Radionämnden* on April 5th, 1990, where *Lorry* and SVT were convicted of violation of the Democracy Clause in the Radio Law, concerning broadcasters’ responsibility for human dignity and the rejection of racism and discrimination. “All skit försvinner” was considered so opaque and unclear that it came across as prejudiced and offensive towards immigrants. The verdict was unanimous (*Radionämnden*, TV 341-89). I have unfortunately not been able to access the written complaints to *Radionämnden* nor the minutes of their meetings, but it is clear from the verdict that they seem to have accepted the premises voiced by Abdolreza Soltani the autumn prior. This was not noticed by newspaper journalists or columnists. The decision was univocally condemned, and in addition to columnists, ordinary people reacted in letters to the editor:

Radionämndens decision adds fuel to the lukewarm prudishness that characterises public debate and makes self-censorship spread in even wider circles (Jörgen Eriksson, letter to the editor in *Dagens Nyheter*, April 8th, 1990).

Columns, letters to the editor and interviews using the nanny society repertoire became more frequent after this verdict, and also even sharper in tone. Fritiof Haaglund in *Svenska Dagbladet* (April 9th, 1990) compared the nanny state and *Radionämnden* with Queen Victoria, well known for her prudishness and alleged influence over social morals, and Margareta Schwartz went even further than before and claimed that *Radionämnden* had committed a “violation” (April 22nd). The verdict also led to a couple of interviews with the writer of the sketch, Rolf Börjlind, who elaborated on the Humour as a special form of truth-telling repertoire. Firstly, he claimed that he was only telling the “truth” by working from existing social types. Secondly, he claimed that transgressions like the comedy he and the rest of the *Lorry-gang* did was the only way “for other people to leave behind prejudice, bigotry and estrangement” (*Expressen*, April 29th, 1990). More arguments for the value of offensive satire were thus given: It is a way to reveal the truth, and to make sure that this revelation gets consequences – due to the shock effect of transgressive satire.

Satirical transgression and the value of strong emotion was less important in the debate about *Yallahrup Færgeby*, but satire’s ability to convey controversial truths was prominent here as well. In addition to the initial positive critical reception, the early criticism was answered through interviews with the creators, letters to the editor, and even an editorial in *Jyllands-Posten* on December 17th, 2007, with the title “Ornli’ syg satire” (“Real sick satire”):

The shortest way between an immigrant and a Dane is, among other things, through a good laugh. It is therefore great that humour finally is used in the interest of integration and the common good. Besides delighting us, humour can serve as an eye-opener and also be disarming.

Humour with satire, irony and self-deprecation creates community and shared identity. Satire should provoke both by virtue of form and content and provoke debate.

Danish humour is not always that funny, but used with wit and a sting and without fear of taboos like in “Yallahrup Færgeby”, it serves integration much more than the first thousand acceptable and politically correct integration projects.

Although this quote has references to satire’s form and provocative force, note that it is not substantiated how *Yallahrup Færgeby* provokes, nor is there given any vivid descriptions of its emotional force, which was the case in the *Lorry*-controversy. Instead, emphasis is on how the serial breaks taboos of the immigration debate. Note the explicit link to political correctness in this excerpt. Satire is thus again given a special truth-value: not only does it manage to treat taboos, but it does it in a way that can be both revelatory and disarming. In other words, taboos and difficult topics becomes less dangerous and more accessible through satirical treatment. This is by far the dominant way to use the humour as truth-telling repertoire in the defence of *Yallahrup Færgeby*. It does, however, come in two sub-varieties. By columnists and the creators of the show, it is clear that the show is seen as addressing taboos in order to bring difficult matters related to integration into the public sphere, thus countering an imagined political correctness dominating the immigration debate, but also to combat prejudice surrounding these matters, like the show’s writer Nanna Westh argued in an interview with *Berlingske Tidende* on December 8th:

“It looks like they [the 3 teachers] just react on default. And actually, I understand them. On the surface, Ali and Hassan are stereotypes, but we have conveyed them with sympathy and depth. Ali does for example want to be a gangster, but he has tiny balls. Hassan is a poet and quite nerdy and also does not fit inside the boxes of the stereotypes

(...)

You cannot make a Christmas calendar about young Muslims and not address extremism. It is something people are afraid will happen and something that happens. So, it would just be too weak if we did not dare address it. On the other hand, it was

extremely important for me that the message in that episode is very clear. Ali and Hassan are not extremists.

Westh argues that by building the characters around stereotypes, but also adding depth to them and even contradicting some elements of the stereotypes, the show avoids being discriminatory and does not create distance between Danes and immigrants. Even though she implicitly addresses political correctness, her argument is aesthetically warranted – like in the *Lorry* case, she does not really advance a principled defence of satire, but argues why the satire *she* has created is good and even socially beneficial. The boundary struggle on offensive satire is thus framed in the ethos of public service: how it can do good. The answer is that satire by handling difficult taboos in the public sphere make them less powerful. At the same time, Westh actually addresses her adversaries' concerns in a more direct and responsive way than anybody did during the *Lorry* controversy. The politicisation of racism initiated by the three teachers is thus not rejected and put to a stop, as I argue the case was in the debate about *Lorry*. Instead, *Yallahrup Færgeby* is defended as an anti-racist use of stereotypes, and the politicisation of racism, which necessarily includes an interpretive contestation about what discursive racism actually *is*, can continue.

As mentioned above, the idea that satire breaks taboos was used in two different ways, and the other way was by contributors in the comments sections and right-wing blogs like *Uriasposten*. Here, *Yallahrup Færgeby* was interpreted as a highly authentic mirror showing the real social problems in Danish suburbs:

I agree that the serial is deeply “racist” or at least prejudiced, but that being said, it just shows the multicultural reality on Nørrebro or Ishøj. (“Casper” on *Uriasposten*’s “Samfundskritik eller folke-opdragelse – DR2’s voksen-julekalender”, December 3rd, 2007).

I still do claim that the writers through the obvious comparison with the idyll of Jullerup Færgeby wish to make visible the brutalisation and the increased division of Danish society. I can of course not explicitly prove that. (“Anonymous” on *Information*’s “‘Yallahrup Færgeby’ i modvind”, December 20th, 2007).

On the one hand, these comments engage in the politicisation of racism, serving as rebuttals of the claims that *Yallahrup Færgeby* was racist or discriminatory by claiming that the stereotypes are if not directly true, at least mirrors of real cultural and social problems and thus cannot be racist. On the other hand, comments like these seek to turn the debate away from matters of racism to matters of integration and the social problems caused by mass immigration. They can thus be understood as a way to derail the debate about racist representations, but also as participating in their own, specific boundary struggle where any critical voices about immigration and integration are represented as being silenced. It is interesting to note that both *Yallahrup Færgeby* and the criticism of it is seen as ‘multicultural propaganda’, which according to some of the contributors on these blogs seems to cloak the truth about all the problems associated with the immigrant population and integration policy. Although interesting, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to analyse this part of the controversy, as it does not directly concern the accusations of racism and also mostly was reproduced on right-wing blogs, and thus seems confined to a specific counterpublic.

It is, however, worth noting that neither the idea of how problems concerning immigration are hushed away nor the reference to how ‘things really are’ were unique for the right-wing undergrowth as a defensive tactic. It was also used by the show’s creators, like Nanna Westh, and in editorials, albeit on a more implicit and less aggressive note, through statements like the above-cited reference to the existence of Muslim terrorists or how the show can serve as an “eye-opener”. It is clear that the imagined adversary in this case is political correctness, and we can hence see how the manifestation of the interpretive repertoire defending humour as truth is intimately connected with ideas and repertoire that are central in the immigration discourse at large, concerning its alleged political correctness. Furthermore, even though it is clear that these interlocutors defend *Yallahrup Færgeby* on the basis of how it can break prejudice, these references to ‘real-life problems’ still position them in the dominant problem-oriented immigration discourse, where the differences between Danes and immigrants are emphasised and problematised (Hervik, 2004, 2011) and where threat-frames and a politicised discussion of integration is prevalent

in the press coverage (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019). The defence of the show is based on an acceptance of the premise that immigration brings about tensions between immigrants and the majority, which, as I will discuss in the next chapter, does not *have* to be the case even though a comedy show is based on joking with ethnic stereotypes and differences.

Unlike *Lorry*, the *Yallahrup Færgeby*-controversy can be understood as at least the initiation of an effective politicisation of discursive racism. A related difference between the two cases is how the debate did not come to a stop after one round with criticism and another round of defence. Instead, it spread out and took different directions. I have already mentioned how it got a life of its own in the fora of a right-wing counterpublic, but more interesting for the purpose of my chapter is how it was discussed by actors with an immigrant background. A likely reason for the longevity of the controversy was probably that Manu Sareen, at the time member of the municipal council of Copenhagen and deputy member in Parliament for Radikale Venstre (Social Liberal Party), arranged a meeting with different cultural workers with an immigrant background with the purpose of discussing the show, and also to write a joint statement about how the media represented immigrants⁷⁰. This can be seen as the clearest merging of the politicisation and the boundary struggle over racist representations. Sareen also advanced a version of the “Harmful stereotypes”-repertoire that was connected to a disrespect-logic rather than to a media panic-logic, namely how the serial normalised “perker-Slang”:

«I think that what the problem with «Yallahrup Færgeby» is for many minorities (...) is that everybody starts to talk that way. So many Danes say: «Cool, man, we talk like you, and now, that’s humour». They do it in good faith, but being made into a part of the satire at work or other places annoys many minorities. And it is quite hard to correct if you don’t want to be hit below the belt and accused of being against freedom of speech» (*Berlingske Tidende*, December 4th, 2007).

⁷⁰ https://www.avisen.dk/indvandrerere-vrede-over-yallahrup-faergeby_4000.aspx (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

Here, Sareen addresses the experience of people with a minority background, rather than departing from how the majority allegedly gets their attitudes formed by stereotypes. It is also worth noting that he thematises the “problem of the killjoy”: how criticising humour can be difficult, and how this also can make it hard to take a position where one speaks about one’s own experience of offence and even racism (Ahmed, 2010; Graefer & Das, 2020).

This kind of disrespect-criticism was also voiced by a group of immigrant youth interviewed by *Jyllands-Posten* on December 8th, under the title “Fuck Yallahrup Færgeby!”. The boys, living in the Århus suburb Bispehaven, expressed strong emotions about the show, and argued that the show was “too flat”, “we do not talk like this all the time” and that “it is like they want to make us into scapegoats” – similar objections like those voiced against *Ali Reza and the Rezas*. The perhaps most interesting dimension of this rather long feature article was how the boys articulated the background for the attractiveness the hiphop and gangsta culture had for them, and thus substantiated their emotional reactions on *Yallahrup Færgeby* as they viewed it as poking fun of something that for them resonated deeply with their own lifeworld, and also was a mode of survival. This might also point towards a more fundamental difference in discursive communities and humour regimes, where some spheres of life are seen as inappropriate targets of humour and irony as it is opposed to the respect one for example gains in certain milieus through the gangsta lifestyle.

Some days later in the same paper (December 14th), an almost opposite point was made by Mehmet Umit Nedef, lecturer in Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Southern Denmark. He argued that being satirised was a way of being included in society as equal citizens, and that the show thus promoted integration. This again emphasises how the value of satire lays in crushing taboos, albeit again from the immigrant perspective, since it focuses on the experience of inclusion and recognition rather than any attitude change in the majority population. I would argue that the difference between Nedef’s defence and the criticism voiced by respectively Sareen and the boys in Bispehaven is based on two fundamentally different views of what humour *is*. If humour is ridicule, the latter’s views are obvious and valid, if it is a way to be sociable and inclusive, Nedef’s view is more on point. As they are based on

fundamental assumptions, these views are unlikely to change. What is interesting, however, is that they all figured in the controversy. Especially the feature article with the boys from Bispehaven stands out as a rather rare occurrence in the Danish immigration debate, where not only immigrants, but ‘problematic’ immigrants, are given voice and space to elaborate on their own lifeworld, values, and their experiences of media representations of this (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019; Riegert & Hovden, 2019). Furthermore, unlike in the *Lorry*-controversy, the references to political correctness in the *Yallahrup Færgeby*-debate do not seem to have blocked the discussion and delegitimised the concerns of immigrant voices. Hence, the controversy was rich and served as an opportunity to introduce new voices and perspectives, analysed both as a boundary struggle on immigration comedy and as politicisation of racism in the media.

The same cannot be said for *Ali Reza and the Rezas*. As mentioned above, there was only one single story about the controversy in the media, but the debate went on for a while in online discussion fora⁷¹. This was a rather polarised debate, where two stands soon formed. One, already mentioned, sided with the original critique that the show was disrespectful as it promoted *bad* stereotypes, which again did nothing but fuel prejudice against immigrants. The other was a relatively principled defence of humour, claiming that a humoristic use of stereotypes cannot be racist. In addition, the critical voices were accused of being politically correct and for lacking a sense of humour and especially self-irony. This repertoire, which can be termed *It is just a joke*, was effectively used to rebut, and perhaps even delegitimise, the attempts to start a need interpretation contest about racism in the media. If a joke is *always* just a joke, i.e. unserious, it can also not be racist or discriminatory. This is a well-known move in the literature on ethnic humour, but what is interesting here, is how the forum participants that originally criticised the show seem to have been caught in this logic as well, maintaining their original point about how the show was built on ill-fitting

⁷¹ This analysis is based on comments on <https://vgd.no/musikk-tv-og-film/tv-program/tema/1527488/tittel/ali-reza-and-the-rezas-terningkast-6/side/1> and <https://freak.no/forum/showthread.php?t=144928>. (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

stereotypes, but specifying that this was not about racism, as well as that they themselves were not sensitive, offended, nor lacked self-irony.

Criticising the show thus seems to have been a precarious position, where participants modified their standpoints during the debate to avoid coming across as offended, and also avoided to call the show ‘racist’ in public. This is in line with existing research both on offensive television (Graefer & Das, 2020) and on the Norwegian public debate on racism (Hagelund, 2003). The difficulty to point out racism in the Norwegian public sphere can be one explanation for why the controversy around *Ali Reza and the Rezas* never developed like it did in the case of *Yallahrup Færgeby*, just two years prior. However, the lack of people with an immigrant background who took an interest in the case, placed strategically in the public sphere, is probably a better explanation. No teachers or politicians raised their voices against *Ali Reza and the Rezas*, and the accusations of racism was thus not given legitimacy or substance in the mainstream venues of the public sphere. Although there might be many reasons for this lack of engagement, one possible contributing factor could be the show themselves. As I argued above, *Yallahrup Færgeby* and *Ali Reza and the Rezas* handled stereotypes in two different ways. I would argue that the script of *Yallahrup Færgeby* was aesthetically better than the script of *Ali Reza and the Rezas*, in terms of how stereotypes were represented, but also in terms of how the former has more complex characters as well as employs different humour techniques. *Ali Reza and the Rezas* is largely a traditional farce, exemplified in details like how his bride to be is revealed to be very ugly, and Ali mixing the CD with the Mosque’s call for prayer with his own hiphop sample. *Yallahrup Færgeby* uses exaggeration and surprising twists of talking points in the immigration discourse, like when Hanne, the well-meaning school inspector who dresses in bright colour and enjoys belly dancing, gets an orgasm from thinking about integration, or when the extremist imam turns out to be gay. There is thus both more to like and more to be offended by in *Yallahrup Færgeby* – which gives fodder for debate.

5.4. Conclusion: The scandals fade away...or do they?

As per usual with media events, the humour controversies in this chapter did not last very long. The debate about *Ali Reza and the Rezas* fizzled out rather quickly, and it is most interesting as an example of how a controversy was *not* allowed to develop, and how concerns about racism were ignored. The *Yallahrup Færgeby* case lasted from the start of December into January the following year and gained some media attention again when the show was nominated to a European TV prize for integration, although this did not rekindle any debate. Being the only one of the cases that can be characterised as a fully-fledged humour scandal according to the quantitative criteria of Koivukoski and Kuipers (2019), where it should be mentioned in 14 or more journalistic stories, it is especially interesting to ask if the controversy had anything that can be called an ‘outcome’, for example if the beneficial inclusion of minority voices and perspectives continued in the public debate at large. This is a hard question to answer empirically, and perhaps also a question which is unrealistically optimistic on behalf of satire. A possible way to research any historical significance of the controversy, however, can be to look at similar controversies before and after. Just seven years earlier, DR was accused of racism in their online game “Perkerspillet” (“The Paki game”), and was even asked by the Committee for Ethnic Equality to take the game down – to which the station refused, rather changing the name to “The Mujaffa-game”⁷². Although this controversy was as heated – or even more so – than the *Yallahrup Færgeby* scandal, it is notable that besides Omar Marzouk, the debate was led by members of the Danish majority population. There were also few arguments presented in the defence of the satirical game beyond mere supportive expressions of the value of offensive satire⁷³.

Six years later, however, the picture was different again when the sketch show *Det Slører Stadig* created debate. Rosenfeldt and Hjarvard (2017) argue that the debate

⁷² <https://www.dr.dk/historie/webfeature/mujaffa>. (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

⁷³ See <https://jyllands-posten.dk/premium/indland/ECE3570300/DR-afviser-protest-mod-Perkerspillet/> and <https://jyllands-posten.dk/indland/kbh/ECE3301099/Virkeligheden-som-Mujaffa-spil/> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

about the show demonstrates how the cultural public sphere can serve as a corrective to the political one, as more frames and voices than normal were included in this debate. It is daring to say that this change in the debate over immigration comedy happened due to *Yallahrup Færgeby*. One should also take into account that immigrant voices probably had gained a stronger position in the public sphere by time, and that online media facilitated access in new ways. That being said, the *Yallahrup Færgeby* controversy did present a richness in voices and perspectives on both racist media content and satire as a genre. Following public sphere theorists like Nancy Fraser (1992) and Bernhard Peters (2008), this has a democratic value in itself, but is also a part of a long, complex process of societal learning not only about the issues in the public sphere, but also about who we are as a public. Hence, the *Yallahrup Færgeby* controversy was a rupture in the public sphere that advanced a shared understanding of satire and of racism, which happened through the intersection of expressive culture and politics. There is a clear ‘before’ and ‘after’ *Yallahrup Færgeby* in the discussions of symbolic racism in Denmark.

A more definite outcome was apparent in the *Lorry* case, as the sketch was found violating the Democracy Clause in *Radionämndens* verdict. The consequences of such verdicts are that the programme in question cannot be shown in reruns, but also that the TV station has to take the points from the verdict into consideration for further productions. It has, unfortunately, fallen outside the scope of my work with this dissertation to interview editors and programme makers in the public service channels, so I cannot know for sure how this was done in practice after the *Lorry* case. What I can establish, however, is a relatively clear change in Swedish immigration humour on the public service channels after this verdict. Before 1990, I could see little difference between the three countries in how stereotypes and harsh prejudice was represented in comedy – if anything, Swedish humour was harder than its neighbours, of course always with the intention to ridicule xenophobia as discussed in chapter 3. After 1990, however, representations of for example hate speech becomes extremely rare in Swedish immigration humour, and it also comes across as very cautious in its use of stereotypes – that is, until the advent of *Lilla al-Fadji* and *Syster Khadidje*, which I will discuss in the next chapter, and which notably were not shown on the main TV

channels. It is of course not certain that this caution occurred because of the verdict against *Lorry*, but it is at least an interesting path for further research, which also could shed light on how the small differences in media systems between the three countries influence immigration comedy, satire and the public sphere at large.

Regardless of tangible consequences like this, the shows discussed in this chapter contributed to the boundary struggles of the public sphere, both by being discussions about the limits of humour, how offensive satire should be allowed to be; and by discussing what symbolic racism actually is and why it is harmful. The controversies were all sparked by emotional reactions where immigrants claimed to be disrespected, and developed into controversies where the parties used different interpretive repertoires about the social and political functions of humour. These repertoires stemmed from fundamentally different, and mutually exclusive, ideas about humour and stereotypes, which again stem from the tensions in the humorous mode between its conservative and subversive aspects, tensions that were also traceable in the shows: is humour using stereotypes necessarily bad and oppressive, or can it give new insights and be socially radical – and can a humorous representation of serious, emotionally laden issues be turned into something unserious we can watch with emotional detachment? The most central repertoire criticising the shows was *Offensive humour causes real harm*, which sometimes was used to criticise the representations of immigrants as disrespectful, sometimes to criticise them for perpetuating harmful stereotypes. What they share was how they were used to argue how the offensive humour shows were racist representations in one way or another. The most central repertoires defending the shows was *Humour as a special form of truth-telling*, where humour is seen as valuable because it reveals the truth through transgression, both by means of different desirable effects of humorous treatment of an issue, but also by being the opposite of political correctness, thus addressing things the serious debate cannot address. We can thus see that the defenders of the shows participated in a boundary struggle that was framed differently than the boundary struggles initiated by the critical immigrants: It was about freedom of speech rather than racism. Although the positions in these debates appear as irreconcilable with each other, the controversies nevertheless dramatised the difference of opinion in the public sphere,

and thus contributed to increased plurality. This was especially the case for *Yallahrup Færgeby*, which was exceptional when it comes the inclusion of actors and perspectives, but also regarding how participants who disagreed with each other to some degree actually entered in dialogue, however rudimentary. There was thus a potential not only for the dramatisation of differences of opinion, but even for reflection around the boundaries of the public sphere.

As we have seen in this chapter and presented already in the theoretical discussions in chapter 2, ethnic stereotypes are heavily contested when it comes to immigration comedy. This makes it pertinent to investigate through textual analysis how they actually are used, especially by comedians who are immigrants themselves and thus seem to have more leeway in this regard. This will be the topic of the following chapter.

Chapter 6: Diaspora humour and playful recognition in the Scandinavian nation states.

The world is such serious business

for all who forgot how to play

Where nations and tribes are so many

The continent sinks, so they say

Erik Bye, Norwegian TV personality, singing his own song “We are the climbers of tomorrow’s mountains” in what was probably the first Norwegian talk show episode dedicated to immigration and immigrant guests, December 1973.

In the early 2000s, Scandinavians with immigrant background started to make television comedy. The earliest artists came from the stand-up milieu, with Omar Marzouk as writer and comedian in a number of Danish shows from 2001 on, including the self-declared multicultural satire *Oplysninger om perkerne til samfundet (OPS)* (“Information for the society about the Pakis”), and Özz Nûjen and Shan Atci as writers, co-producers and comedians on stage in *Stockholm Live* from 2004 to 2007. The latter was the breakthrough of the so-called *blattheumor* (from “blatte”, originally pejorative name for dark-skinned person) in the Swedish public sphere: humour where immigrant mannerisms, prejudice and the relationship between immigrants and the majority population are the butts of the joke – and where the joke-tellers themselves are of immigrant background.

Blattheumor and its Danish and Norwegian equivalents, *perkerhumor* (from “perser”, Persian, and “tyrker”, Turk) and *utlendinghumor* (“foreigner humor”)⁷⁴, are the closest one gets to American and British forms of ethnic comedy in Scandinavia. However, there is one major difference: while the Anglo-American – especially the American – tradition tends to categorise ethnic humour following traditional ethnic divides (Gillespie, 1995, p. 91; 2003; Gillota, 2013; Musser, 1991) – African American humour, Asian American humour, Jewish humour, Polish humour – it

⁷⁴ These two terms have not caught on in everyday language in the same way as “blattheumor” did in Sweden.

makes little sense to do the same in Scandinavia. Norwegian, Swedish and Danish humour of this kind seems to have as its starting point in a shared immigrant experience: what it is like to be a part of the new, ethnic minorities in general rather than what it is like to be Pakistani, Kurd or Arab in Scandinavia. As such, perhaps it should rather be called *diaspora humour* than ethnic humour, referring to the diaspora as both a physical and a cultural ‘contact zone’ between different cultures as a result of global migration (Hall, 2017). This does not mean that there are no traces of national or ethnic cultures in this humour: Muslim cultural traits are almost always central, Nûjên and Atci often underline that they are Kurds, and more fine-grained stereotypes and play with different languages are important as well. However, the experience of being a minority through having been relocated in a new country, and the mixed culture which as a result of this has developed in the modern Scandinavian cities, seem to be the most important both in the dimension of representation and in the subjectivity dimension. Traditional ethnicities are often not foregrounded in the comic material, and although there are exceptions, comedians rather refer to themselves as “dark” or “foreigner” rather than “Kurd”, “Iranian” or “Somali”.

Diaspora studies tend to see migration as a process of displacement and estrangement (Alghasi, 2010b; Gillespie, 1995). This implies an emphasis on difference from the host society, and often an attachment to a historical homeland. However, while the emphasis on difference is clear in my material, the attachment to a historical homeland is less so. In many of the sketches and episodes I have watched, there are no signs or mentions of any historical homeland or primordial culture. The characters are clearly immigrants, formed by living in a diaspora where they are strangers rather than Swedes, Danes or Norwegians, but any connection to anything ancestral that made them strangers is opaque – Islam being an important exception.

This points towards a different conception of diaspora, where notions like *hybridity*, *in-betweenness* and *third space* are important, referring to a space rather than a place, which is neither the homeland nor the new country where the immigrant settles (Bhabha, 2004). Here, the diaspora becomes a space where cultural differences become visible, but also where cultural translation becomes possible (Hall, 2017). The third space has often been seen as a space where old forms of authority collapse,

dichotomies are challenged and the opportunity to talk back to power arises (Alghasi, 2010b; Bakøy, 2010; Bhabha, 2004; Hall, 2017), which is similar to how many studies that are positive to ethnic comedy view it as a way to negotiate and even question the very concept of ethnicity (Gillespie, 2003; Gillota, 2013; Musser, 1991). However, this view might be too celebratory (Alghasi, 2010b; Anthias, 1998; Eide, 2004), and diaspora studies taking this stance has often lacked an analysis of the actual context of the third space, be it social or textual (Alghasi, 2010b; Bakøy, 2010).

The benefit of viewing the modern Scandinavian ethnic humour as diaspora humour, as a form of third space, lies in how these concepts emphasise how cultural difference becomes a *pressing* issue as well as how culture never is something ‘clean’, but a continuous project of change and cultural translation (Bhabha, 2004; Hall, 2017). These features are clearly visible in the comedy texts in my material. I will argue that the core of this comedy is to treat *differences* between the diaspora communities and the majority populations that traditionally have been equated with nation states of Norway, Sweden and Denmark, thus being constructed as *ethnonationalist* states. That being said, I do agree with the above-mentioned criticism of diaspora studies, as I find it more important to see *what* the implications of this third space are rather than to just identify that it exists. In this chapter, I will propose that the implications in my case way can be conceptualised as *playful recognition*. This is an extension of the concept of recognition as developed by Hegel (1991), Taylor (1994) and especially Honneth (1995), where the struggle for recognition is seen as the main driver in social conflicts and social change. The tension between “struggle” and “playful” should be noted: it points towards an apparent paradox, but I would argue that it rather is a fertile way of understanding the special potential that humour and comedy can have in the public sphere. Through this playful recognition, diaspora namely contributes to public opinion formation by being a part of the boundary struggles seeking to define who legitimately belongs to the nation state.

I will move from analysing how difference and cultural translation is handled in four case studies – the show *Lilla al-Fadji & Co.* (2008) and the YouTube character Syster Khadidje (2010) from Sweden, *Det Slører Stadig* (2013) from Denmark and *Svart Humor* (2017) from Norway – before I use the insights from these to discuss

playful recognition in the public sphere. First of all, however, I will discuss how the new Scandinavian diaspora comedy not only was a change in the field of humour, but also a part of technological and cultural changes in public broadcasting that had great implications for how audiences and publics are understood – a central issue in order to understand this new comedy’s location and character as a rupture in the modern public sphere.

6.1. Diaspora comedy in the multi-channel society

Like most other European countries, Norway, Denmark and Sweden started out with only one television channel – public service and state-owned, broadcast through analogue signals from terrestrial transmitters. As technology progressed, especially with the advent of cable and satellite TV in the 1980s, more and more viewers gained access to multiple channels – foreign and indigenous. However, the end of the legal monopoly of the public broadcasters, and subsequent broadcasting of nationwide commercial channels, happened quite late – 1988 in Denmark, 1991 in Sweden and 1992 in Norway. There were relatively few commercial channels until the digitalisation of the terrestrial transmitter system, which happened around 2005 in all three countries, after which the number of channels skyrocketed.

This is not the place to go into details about the development of the Scandinavian TV landscape from the 1980s, but the short summary above provides the background to understand how technological changes allowed changes in how TV audiences were understood by the TV stations. As Syvertsen (1992), Søndergaard (1994, 2003), Edin (2000) Ytreberg (2001), Moe (2009) and Gripsrud (1995, 2010) have argued, the development from monopoly to competition in Scandinavia and the subsequent digitalization made public broadcasters understand their viewers as consumers who should be catered to – but still also as publics to whom a certain kind of quality content should be delivered. In other words, the logic of the market started to intersect with the logic of public service. This trend had an impact on in-house programme production (Ytreberg, 2001) as well as the acquisition of foreign productions (Gripsrud, 1995), often leading to formal invention, as I also discussed in

chapter 3 (Ytreberg, 2001). After the digitalisation of television, the market logic seems to have intensified, and turned more and more into a system of narrowcasting rather than broadcasting in all three Scandinavian countries (Mjø̄s, 2010). The advent of online TV fuelled this tendency further, but the public service ethos seems to be not only surviving but even adapting to the new technological and commercial circumstances (Bruun, 2016, 2018; Ihlebæk, Syvertsen, & Ytreberg, 2014).

Parallel to this, one audience group grew rapidly in the Scandinavian countries: the immigrant population. One thing they (typically) shared was a tendency to watch Scandinavian TV in a different way than the majority population, and to be more oriented towards foreign TV channels, often from their country of origin, broadcast via satellite (Christiansen, 2001, 2004). This was a challenge for the Scandinavian public service stations, obliged as they were to cater to the whole population. At the same time, the development of narrowcasting afforded them with both the technological and the ideological opportunity to develop a variety of programming specifically directed towards the immigrant population. This is also visible in the new Scandinavian diaspora humour. The production of these shows accelerated from 2005 on, and they were often broadcast on the new niche channels, clearly addressing immigrant audiences not only by joking with their (presumed) experiences, but also by basing the humour on premises only (parts of) the immigrant population would understand – or at least people with extensive knowledge of and experience with immigrant life and culture. Thus, the diaspora comedy can be understood as a top-down construction of minority audiences, where technological, economic and cultural forces of the media created objective relations that formed a background for the construction of a “we” (Alghasi, 2010b). This “we”, ethnic minority audiences with an immigrant background, was also related to the *nation* as a whole since the stations producing these shows did this as a part of their public service mission of contributing to democracy and national culture, which with the advent of narrowcasting was interpreted as being a matter of catering to the different needs and tastes of the diverse population.

It is, however, important to note that history was not so simple as I perhaps give the impression of here. Firstly, the new ethnic comedy arrived in bulks – probably

because of the commercial success of a single show, a daring producer, or the combination of both – rather than being a staple in the Scandinavian TV landscape. Secondly, I do not claim any cause-effect relation between TV segmentation and the development of ethnic comedy. Some of these shows were broadcast on the main channel of the public service broadcaster, indicating that there was room for them in the ‘old’ TV format. It is, however, worth noting that the idea of producing content addressing a specific part of the population while still maintaining the public service mission, hereunder some sort of national unity, seems to be at play, an idea that developed in the specific historical context of narrowcasting that was sketched above. Thirdly, this story is made even more complicated both by commercial channels and by the internet. Two of the cases discussed in this chapter, *Syster Khadidje* and *Svart Humor*, started out as private productions on social media, and much of the new diaspora humour seems to first and foremost be an online phenomenon – primarily watched on YouTube or Facebook, and often not even broadcasted on linear TV although it is produced by a public service channel. *Lilla al-Fadji & Co.*, on the other hand, was broadcasted on one of the commercial, non-public service channels that had benefited from the digitalisation of TV, Kanal 5.

These nuances are however not reservations to my point, which is to show how the development of a new comedy style should be located as a part of a larger historical development in the Scandinavian public spheres, both material and ideological. It was a part of a media logic based on narrowcasting, which nevertheless intersected with the logic of public service directed towards a national public – a logic that also sometimes influenced the purely commercial channels as well as homemade internet content. The result was the development of an idea of *the immigrant audience* in Scandinavian television.

An adjective often used to characterise the development towards narrowcasting is *fragmented*, but one could also use *diversified* – two words that give quite different connotations and often are connected to a negative versus a positive evaluation of this development: prophecies of the erosion of a common ground and the development of echo chambers and ideological trench wars are contrasted with visions of an increased possibility for specialised publics and subaltern counterpublics to gain

access to the public sphere (Gripsrud, 2010). I would say that looking at the comedy programmes discussed in this chapter, the latter is a better characterisation. The immigrant audience these shows cater to are namely addressed as immigrants (or descendants), but they are also addressed as Norwegians, Danes, or Swedes – as is the majority population, who is another imagined audience of these shows. Together, they are addressed as a national public dealing with the differences modern immigration has caused in the Scandinavian nation states.

6.2. *Lilla al-Fadji & Co.*: The stereotypical antiheroes' wonderful adventures through Sweden

Lilla Al-Fadji & Co. was broadcast on Kanal 5 in 2008 and was the first show dedicated to the character Lilla al-Fadji, played by Felipa Leiva Wenger, who made his first appearance in the *Humorlabbet* episode “Sen kväll med Pierre” on SVT in 2006. The plot in *Lilla Al-Fadji & Co* centres around Lilla’s quest for his dad, whom he never has known, but believes to be incredibly rich. Lilla, who lives a financially scarce life with his mom in the Stockholm suburb Husby, asks his friend, the businessman Abu Hassan (Fredrik Eddari, who also is the show’s main writer) to come with him to the northernmost Swedish landscape Norrland, where the last sign of his father came from. They travel by multiple detours, starting by going the opposite way to the southernmost landscape Skåne (Scania), also stopping by the island of Gotland and downtown Stockholm before they finally arrive in the north. The journey can be read as a very loose parody of the famous Swedish children’s novel *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*, where the protagonist, similarly to Lilla, is an antihero who travels across Sweden from Skåne to Norrland.

However, Nils develops and becomes a better human being after his journey, which is not the case for Lilla Al-Fadji. The comedy of the show is based on the opposite: how Lilla and Abu Hassan remain the same in all the different situations they encounter on their way. Thus, it is less similar to epic quests or a bildungroman

than to comedic quests like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or *Don Quixote*⁷⁵, where the comedy is achieved through the protagonist's rigid personal qualities, described by Bergson as "something mechanical encrusted on the living" (1914, p. 49). The core humour technique is thus caricature, but of social types rather than specific persons: Lilla Al-Fadji and Abu Hassan embody two different stereotypes of the immigrant man from 'förorten', the troubled multicultural suburb, an important trope in the Swedish immigration debate from 2000 on (Riegert, forthcoming)⁷⁶. Lilla is a boastful macho, obsessed with sex, fame and money as well as his own appearances. He has an impressive mullet of black curls, which he is very proud of, and constantly talks about "Hälliwüüd" and his career there – sometimes referring to future dreams, but often lying to impress people, especially girls. His nemesis is Hermes Saliba, whom he fights through rap battling and throwing shade. Lilla is also a (very) petty criminal and has disgusting habits – he cheats on the welfare system, throws trash in the walker basket of elderly women, pees in the swimming pool and constantly scratches himself on his penis.

Abu Hassan is a hustler kind of character, who always sees an opportunity to make money. He portrays himself as an "international businessman", but operates out of a café table and his old Mercedes. At the same time, he is conservative and paranoid: he owns a yellow budgerigar named Mujahedin, often talks about that things are not allowed ("tillåtet"), referring to the Islamic concept haram, is very preoccupied with homosexuality (which he calls "boy who like other boy") and is convinced that windmills are bugging devices for Israel and USA. Thus, Abu Hassan becomes the

⁷⁵ There are more parallels between these two novels and *Lilla Al-Fadji* than just shared (super)genre, for example the windmill motif discussed below and similarities between Lilla and Huck Finn and Abu Hassan and Tom Sawyer.

⁷⁶ The suburb, 'förorten', public project satellite towns, seems to be important not only in the Swedish immigration discourse, but in the social imaginary of modern Sweden at large. There are numerous books and movies about the social democratic dream of suburban paradise and the problematic reality, and this has been a central political issue over many years. See Wirtén (2012) for an interesting account of the dreams and debates on the Swedish suburb.

criminal variant of a yuppie, but also a caricature of the stereotypical social and political views of an Arab man.

These personal characteristics frequently bring the two into conflict and hampers their quest. In the fourth episode, the two companions arrive in central Stockholm, where they apparently have never been, despite living in one of the city's suburbs. While in a parking lot, Abu Hassan panics when he spots the large, dome-formed sporting arena Globen, as he is convinced it is an Israeli laser weapon. Lilla Al-Fadji is not scared, leaves Abu Hassan by the car and goes alone into the city, where Stockholm Pride is going on. Lilla befriends a woman, and eventually charms her with his bragging about "Hälliwüüd". After a while, he calls Abu Hassan and manages to convince him to travel downtown to take advantage of all the business opportunities of the packed pride festival. After walking around the festival area and observing various obviously queer people, Abu Hassan puts up a stand where he sells the North African chili paste harissa as a cure for homosexuality, "an opportunity to cure the boys who like boys and the girls who like girls and at the same time earn a penny", as the narrator describes it. However, two men dressed in leather enthusiastically approaches and want to buy the harissa as it is "Persian Viagra". When Abu Hassan understands their planned use of his goods, he panics, grabs all the harissa jars and runs away. He then calls Lilla Al-Fadji to convince him that his new flirt probably is a man dressed as a woman, which makes Lilla abruptly leave her in anger.

For Lilla Al-Fadji, his machismo, or perhaps rather his worry that he is not macho enough, ironically impedes him from getting to have sex when he refuses to talk or listen to his flirt as he is convinced that she is a man just because the possibility was brought up; while for Abu Hassan, his conservative and conspiratory views interrupt his business plans. In his book *Laughter*, Henri Bergson argues that the comical character is not ridiculed because of his lack of moral, but his lack of sociability. This is done through making an inner quality appear through automatic gestures. Bergson's examples are drawn from Molière's comedies, where the stinginess of Harpagon and the hypocrisy of Tartuffe is explained as traits that totally control the characters, while at the same time being external to them: the traits are not

integrated in them as persons, but take control over them automatically in the least opportune situations. As we see, this mechanism is also at play in *Lilla Al-Fadji & Co*. Lilla and Abu Hassan's traits make them into social misfits who cannot manage to fulfil their own projects. Read this way, the laughter the show elicits is a corrective kind of laughter, as the stereotypical immigrant men are ridiculed through being portrayed as restrained by their cultural traits.

In this respect, it should also be noted that the people and situations they encounter can be read as representing a contrasting normality. Different sides of the white majority population's Sweden, from rich boat owners in Skåne to rural people in Norrland to the participants on a medieval fair on Gotland, represent the ordinary life that the two immigrants from the suburb struggle to fit in with. Even the drag queens and leather gays of the pride festival are portrayed as more normal than Abu Hassan and Lilla, as they are more flexible and function better socially.

An important dimension of *Lilla Al-Fadji & Co* is thus to ridicule a stereotype of immigrants. A possible reading could perhaps even be that the show suggests that immigrants of this kind do not fit in modern Sweden. This was indeed an empirical reading when the show premiered, as clips from it were appropriated on YouTube to support racist views⁷⁷, and there was a lively online debate about whether the show was racist or not⁷⁸. In light of this, it can be argued that the show was conservative, as it endorsed and perpetuated stereotypes. However, this is only one possible reading of the show. It is also a reading that ignores how many of Lilla and Abu Hassan's traits are less connected to mainstream and xenophobic stereotypes, but first and foremost recognisable for people who themselves are of immigrant background, for example Abu Hassan's love of sandals and "biskvit till qahva" ("biscuit for the coffee"). These are stereotypical traits, but they are also more closely connected to first-hand experience, and they are of such a kind that they add texture to the two characters and make them rounder and even lovable. This is also done through the many humorous elements of the show that play with the stereotypes.

⁷⁷ <https://www.expressen.se/noje/tv/lilla-al-fadji--co-utnyttjas-av-rasister-pa-internet/> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

⁷⁸ <https://www.svd.se/humorsucce-i-kanal-5-orsakar-debatt> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

Although Lilla Al-Fadji and Abu Hassan embody stereotypes, they also subvert them both by exaggerating and by breaking them. This is a running joke in the case of Abu Hassan, especially when it comes to his appearance. He wears a blazer over the traditional Arab robe and sandals, poking fun at his combined identity as conservative Arab and international businessman, but he also has a high pitched, even squeaky voice that contrasts with his serious image. His world views and their consequences are also exaggerated to the absurd: he makes more and more elaborate stories about how USA and Israel surveil everybody, and he profits from social control over young women by locking them up in a small cellar, “Svensk Dotterförråd AB” (“Swedish Daughter Storage Ltd”), where fathers pay Abu Hassan to keep their daughters until they are ready to get married, and where he also keeps the goat he is looking after for a friend who is on holiday. On the other hand, the threatening parts of his world-views, like the implied sympathy for militant Islam, collapses as he gives the name Mujahedin to a tiny yellow bird, who also follows the two anti-heroes through Sweden and is shown great affection from Abu Hassan. His hustler qualities are also a source of playfulness, as there is a not insignificant amount of creative joy invested in how he always finds a new way to make money, consistently emphasising how he actually has a positive and optimistic outlook, for example when he agrees to look after the breast implants of an old friend – who happens to be former Big Brother contestant and glamour model Carolina Gynning – and possibly sell them if he finds a good buyer, something he is convinced will happen, as “Little boy, he buys little dog. Big boy, he buys donkey. Huge man buys horse. And I know he who buys the horse. I will sell to him.” This is a scene with no motivation or consequence in neither the main nor the episodic plot – except Gynning being from Skåne, where our heroes currently are – and can hence be seen as nothing more than an opportunity for play and humour around the Abu Hassan character.

Similarly, playing with Lilla Al-Fadji’s macho image is the central comic premise in many of the show’s scenes, and established already in the very beginning. Lilla has a large Scarface Dollar Bill poster in his room, he constantly swears, and runs through the streets accompanied by music from martial arts movies, but he is clearly subordinated his mom (played by Ettari in drag), he eats her homecooked meals with a

bib on, and he never questions anything she says or does. The potentially threatening sides of his macho, or gangsta, image are also challenged. In the start of the first episode, we see Lilla looking all over his room for money, and as he does not find any, we see him covering his face with a balaclava outside a supermarket, before he runs in and grabs for something in his bag. However, our expectations of a robbery are subverted when we see that he does not reach for a gun, but for a bag of empty bottles to collect the deposit. The stereotype of the criminal immigrant thus collapses, both cognitively by creating an incongruity between the audiences' expectations based on the stereotype and the actual plot, thus pointing out how our mental scripts are based on stereotypes; and affectively by making the situation of a young, masked immigrant male into something unthreatening, calling for a giggle and perhaps even some sympathy rather than a scare – the same mechanism that is at play when a budgie is named Mujahedin.

This way, *Lilla Al-Fadji & Co* addresses the stereotypes as representations, and thus parodies them. Hutcheon defines parody as “repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity” (2000, p. 6). Furthermore, the target of a parody is “another work of art or, more generally, another form of coded discourse”. It is not problem-free to argue that a stereotype is coded discourse, but I will ignore this for the time being and return to it below. Hutcheon’s definition is useful as it manages to separate parody from satire, where the latter necessarily has an extra-mural butt and a moral and social agenda. In order to understand *Lilla Al-Fadji & Co.*’s social force, it is – ironically – necessary to understand how the show is formed more by an aesthetic than a social agenda. This is where the critical, or ironic, distance in Hutcheon’s parody definition becomes useful. The central element of a parody is in fact not similarity to the parodied text, but how it departs from it, how it uses irony to signal that it means something different than the original. Hutcheon also stresses that parody is fundamentally pragmatic and hermeneutic: it is made with an intention to parody another text, and to be decoded so that it is possible “to find and interpret the backgrounded text in relation to the parody” (ibid).

In the case of *Lilla Al-Fadji & Co*, this means that to be able to appreciate the humour of the exaggerations and silly deconstructions, it is necessary to know what

they are based on, which means that it is necessary to recognise the base stereotypes *as being stereotypes*. To laugh triumphantly of the failures of a macho or conservative immigrant man, one needs knowledge about the content of the stereotype, but to laugh about the subversions of the stereotype in *Lilla Al-Fadji & Co*, one needs to reflexively understand that this is a stereotype, a representation, and to understand what it is about this stereotype that makes some particular subversions of it funny. To get the joke about a conservative Muslim naming his budgie Mujahedin, one needs some knowledge about political Islam, but also about how the image of jihad is connected with images of masculinity, aggressiveness, and danger – everything a budgie is not⁷⁹. This is not to say that exposing the stereotype as stereotype means that we necessarily laugh at the stereotype and not its target. That would be a simplification of both stereotypes and parody, which ignores how it is not random why joking with some stereotypes is funnier than joking with others, a question which ultimately must be answered by social explanations. It is, for example, perfectly possible to laugh at Abu Hassan and Lilla Al-Fadji not because one enjoys per se that the stereotypes they represent are subverted, but because one enjoys that through the subversion of their stereotypes, the two are portrayed as Arab men who become emasculated. In this case, the joke becomes more enjoyable because it provides us with a way to direct aggression towards a target that we harbour difficult feelings towards (Freud, 1976; Gripsrud, 1990), something which explains the attractiveness the show had for racist appropriation. However, this parodic subversion is nevertheless what makes another reading possible, where the show is something more than merely ridicule.

This becomes clearer when one sees that the show's parody extends to more than just some stereotypes of immigrant men. Most notable is perhaps the visual parody of immigrant interiors in episode 1. Both Lilla Al-Fadji's home and Abu Hassan's car are filled with crochet mandala tabletops on expected and unexpected places and baroque interior elements. Abu Hassan owns a golden object that is both a

⁷⁹ This is a less intellectually charged operation than it probably seems when described in academic discourse: as we all are competent language users and familiar with our everyday culture, we quite intuitively understand when and how a stereotype is subverted, probably without making the mental note "aha, this is a stereotype".

lamp, a clock, a telephone and a music box. Lilla's relationship to American pop culture is also a part of this parodic sensibility, as he wants to appear like a "gangsta", hinted at through his way of speaking, the posters in his room and the musical score, such as the martial arts movie style music mentioned above. These are of course elements in the caricature of Lilla as a machismo stereotype, but they also constitute a parody of American culture in its own right. Seen this way, the show fits better with Hutcheon's emphasis on how a parody always has another coded discourse as its target. Although she writes about parodies of art - individual artworks as well as styles, techniques and motifs - I see no problem in extending her definition to encompass expressive cultural practices outside of the art institution, be it interior design or gangsta rap, which often are connected to aesthetically marked lifestyles. This way, *Lilla Al-Fadji & Co.* becomes a parody of immigrant lifestyles in the suburb, which also makes it possible to view stereotypes as a coded discourse, as they are embedded in the performance of a lifestyle.⁸⁰

An important part of this parody is the peculiar mixing of completely different styles of music in Lilla Al Fadji's two battling scenes. In the first episode, Lilla goes to the public bath, where he encounters his nemesis, Hermes Saliba, in the sauna. Hermes sings the popular Swedish children song "Lilla Katt" ("Little Cat"), but he appropriates it and sings it in the style of the crooners of Arab pop music. Lilla moves to the showers, and when Hermes follows, they embark on a rap battle, but not exactly in hip hop style: the songs they use are appropriated from dance pop and Swedish nursery rhymes, but mostly consisting of obscenities rather than the original lyrics. The second battling scene takes place in the penultimate episode, where Lilla and Abu

⁸⁰ It is beyond the scope of this thesis to expand further on this point, but I will nevertheless add some examples for clarity: The macho immigrant is a stereotype that can be caricatured, but his gangsta and/or thug lifestyle, which is aesthetically marked, can be parodied. The whimsy professor is a stereotype, his middle-class lifestyle with many markers of cultural capital can be parodied. Drag queens are caricatures of women, but specific subcategories of drag queens like pageant queens parody certain aesthetically marked ways of performing femininity. In these examples, we do not only focus on the aesthetic, but also move from stereotypes as mere sets of reified beliefs to something broader: larger systems of belief and order. This is how I read Bakhtin's account of parody, where the carnival is a parodic inversion of the official world represented by the church.

Hassan encounter some local people sitting outside a gas station in Norrland. Lilla spots a black man playing the accordion and dressed in a Swedish folk costume. Lilla starts to beatbox, which sparks a battle session that is a clear parody of the banjo-guitar duel in the horror movie *Deliverance*, complete with Lilla's opponent refusing to reciprocate his greeting gesture at the end.

These two scenes make Swedish folk culture clash with forms of cultural expressions that would appear less homebound for a Swedish audience, but probably not less familiar. Both American pop culture in general and its appropriation by the diaspora communities in Sweden are staples of the Swedish cultural public sphere. These two parodies make the normally separate genres and styles interact in a playful way. It is hard to find any sort of comic aggression towards neither foreign pop culture nor Swedish folk culture in this parodic mixing. There is certainly an ironic distance to the parodied works and styles, but I would argue that this used to create a playful, even joyful, ethos, rather than a satirical and scornful one (Hutcheon, 60). This is due to how the parodic contrasting is used as a source of creativity. For example, the musical phrasing of the song "Lilla Katt" is surprisingly fitting to the crooner style of Arab pop, and the combination of accordion and beatboxing creates some quite interesting rhythmic play. Thus, the mixing of Swedish and foreign becomes creative, productive, and filled with joy – a joy that depends on knowing the parodied references. It is also a diasporic ethos, as culture is showed as something that is created through encounters and translation – and it is not without significance that this happens in the suburb. I would also argue that a playful ethos characterises the visual parodies of the interiors, although of a different kind: it exhibits the baroque, or camp, joy of sheer exaggeration. This is also instrumental for making the two characters objects of both sympathy and ridicule.

However, the parody is to some degree used for satirical means. Although it is hard to read any negative evaluation of Swedish nursery rhymes, dance pop, *Deliverance* or hip hop battling *per se* in the parodies of *Lilla Al-Fadji & Co.*, the use of the latter genre as a way to perform and assert Lilla's (and Hermes') masculinity is ridiculed. Through the contrasting of the traditionally masculine genre of battling with non-masculine dance pop and nursery rhymes, in addition to the exaggerated amount

of obscenities, the attempts to assert masculinity become silly and forced. The bodily gestures also play an important role here. During the beat box-accordion battle, Lilla Al-Fadji scratches his own penis even more often than usual, and in the first episode, Hermes wiggles his butt towards Lilla when the latter sings “I’ll fuck you so hard”, the very opposite of the normal machismo strive to avoid any association with receptive homosexuality. The camera work of this scene is also notable, with super close shots of the two battlers from the point of view of the opponent, making them appear uncomfortably close to the viewer, and a frog perspective that emphasises Hermes’ crotch as he plays with his trunk and sings “Eat my cheese”.



Figure 6 Lilla al-Fadji battling with his nemesis, Hermes Saliba. From Lilla al-Fadji & Co., Kanal 5, 2008.

The body and its functions are important in *Lilla Al-Fadji & Co.* The show is very preoccupied with sexual and scatologic elements, as well as a joy of ugly bodies. Lilla’s grotesque hair is of course central, but so is the red bulge of Hermes Saliba, a fat naked man who appears in the sauna with whom Lilla bickers, and the translucent breast implants Abu Hassan looks after. In addition to scratching himself down below, Lilla constantly farts in the car, which upsets Abu Hassan. He, on the other hand, often sees his businesses being reduced to shit or sex. I have already mentioned how what he believes is medicine against homosexuality actually is used as a gay aphrodisiac. In another episode, Abu Hassan enters the bathroom in a bar and starts collecting money

from the users, listening at the door of a bathroom stall so he can catch people who defecate when they only payed for urinating. Lilla and Abu Hassan's great ambitions of earning fame and money are also degraded when Lilla exits the car where he and Abu Hassan has made their deal. As they were both very excited, they jump up and down and make the car shake, which a gang of pre-teen boys spot. Upon Lilla Al-Fadji's exit, they ask him "Did you fuck in there?" and get chased away by Lilla. This little encounter is not only emasculating for Lilla, as it is suggested that he is gay, but it is also a mockery and degradation of his main project: to become rich and famous. I would argue that this is the main function of the sexual and scatological jokes in *Lilla Al-Fadji & Co.*: it is not a case of high, elevated status becoming bodily degraded, as in Bakhtin's original account of the carnival, but high, elevated social projects, like becoming a successful businessman or a Hollywood star.

These projects are again connected to the stereotypes that Lilla al-Fadji and Abu Hassan embody. The show is thus playing with stereotypes in three different ways: by subverting them through exaggeration and collapse, by using them as springboards to play with the mixture of the Swedish and the foreign, and by degrading their social projects. Through this play with stereotypes, the show also deals with cultural difference, which becomes a laughing matter. This is the core theme of *Lilla Al-Fadji & Co.* Both the hustler and the macho man – stereotypes connected to the social imaginary of "förorten", the Swedish immigrant dense suburbs – are turned into projects that we laugh about. This also includes the dangerous, fearful sides of them, like excessive machismo or social control. To some degree, the butt of the joke is thus immigrant stereotypes, and there is potential for a reading where immigrants in the suburb are ridiculed, and "the Swedish way of life" is portrayed as superior. This is the kind of reading that was done in the racist appropriations of the show. However, the playful way of subverting the stereotypes, and especially the way cultural mixture is used to create playful and productive parodies, point in a different direction where the show is about something more than ridiculing stereotypes. There is a joyous atmosphere connected to this kind of comedy, which points towards the shared humanity that the emotion of joy can construct, as opposed to the in-groups and out-groups of ridicule (Willett, 2008; Willett & Willett, 2014). In the recent affective turn

in cultural and social sciences, with their critical ethos, there have been few studies of *positive* emotions or affects like joy – and the clinically oriented science of psychology has also paid little attention to the emotion. A literature review does however suggest that joy is characterised by things like gracious disposition toward humankind, a way to train our affections through imagination and a way to feel more deeply connected to others (Johnson, 2020) – all traits that point towards universality, or at least communality, rather than tribalism. The universal aspects of the show can also be found in its more teasing elements where Lilla and Abu Hassan fail or are bodily degraded: ambition and masculinity are recognisable human traits in any modern cultural context, as is their potential stupidity. As the Swedish columnist Abraham Staifo wrote about Lilla: “There are many persons like that, but this one is Arab with a mullet and slippers”⁸¹. In *Lilla al-Fadji & Co*, common human aspirations are given the unmistakable flavour of contemporary Swedish immigrant communities – but, *contra* Nussbaum, instead of providing compassion, we join in laughing about them as we could do with all the other instances of human shortcomings that are visible through our existential and social projects (Lippitt, 1996). *Lilla al-Fadji & Co*. is thus an alternative to the problem-oriented accounts of the suburb, a comedy show that handles the differences between the diaspora Swedes – Lilla and Abu Hassan – and the majority population – everyone they meet on their way – by basing the comedy on these differences and thus emphasising them, but also by through playfulness constructing them as laughable, sympathetic and human rather than fearful and fundamentally different, so that despite an emphasis on ‘us vs. them’, boundaries become more porous (Willett & Willett, 2014) and the “förrort” can become a part of Sweden.

⁸¹ <https://www.expressen.se/gt/abraham-staifo-sverige-behov-mer-av-al-fadji/> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

6.3. Syster Khadidje: Laughing of and together with the veiled fundamentalist

Syster Khadidje is one of Gina Dirawi's characters, who first appeared on her vlog *Ana Gina*, meaning "I am Gina" in Arabic, in 2009. Dirawi, who was only 17 when she started her blog, was born in Sweden of Palestine-Lebanese parents, and her grandfather was imam at the mosque in the small northern Swedish town Sundsvall, where Dirawi also grew up as a pious Muslim⁸². Her vlog, originally a mix of autobiography and comedy sketches but eventually mostly comedy, became immensely popular – she had 177 000 followers in 2014⁸³, and the most popular video about Khadidje currently has 1.2 million views. After working as a journalist in local media, she was hired by SVT to vlog about the Swedish election in 2010, and eventually got her own online TV show on SVT Play, *The Ana Gina Show*, where Khadidje and other characters appeared. She really became famous in the Swedish public sphere in 2012, when she was one of the hosts for the Swedish national final of Eurovision Song Contest, Melodifestivalen.

Dirawi also fits in the dynamic described in chapter 4, as comedy was a way for her as a person with immigrant background to access the public sphere. This will however not be the focus in this section, although it is worth noting how the specific comedy Dirawi made paved the way for here into the serious part of the public sphere⁸⁴, indicating that it was an attractive, albeit difficult, form of comedy for the Swedish media. The social relevance of Dirawi's comedy cannot be fully understood without paying attention to the reception material, including Dirawi's own blog⁸⁵. In

⁸² Dirawi has for example stated that she observes the fast during Ramadan, does not drink alcohol, and will not have sex before she is married – but she does not wear the hijab.

⁸³ <https://www.resume.se/insikt/helgintervjuer/19-aringen-som-erovrar-natet/> (Last checked February 11th, 2021)

⁸⁴ It should be mentioned that it did not pave a way of roses. Dirawi has received a lot of intimidating and hateful reactions of both Islamist and racist motivation, including death threats.

⁸⁵ Which unfortunately no longer exists, but can be accessed on the Internet archive waybackmachine: https://web.archive.org/web/20100801000000*/anaginas.com (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

addition to indicating Dirawi's intentions as well as what made her comedy attractive in the public sphere, it points towards an interesting tension between the her comedy material and how that material was talked and written about: a very persistent theme in the reception of Dirawi's characters, especially Syster Khadidje, was namely that they were understood as extreme caricatures meant to draw the attention towards and ridicule prejudice, especially about Muslim women. Although Syster Khadidje is said to ridicule prejudice, there are few, if any, textual cues in the sketches to support such a reading. I would therefore argue that a critical reading of the Khadidje-sketches rather supports seeing them as statements that handle difference by asserting that Gina herself, but also the immigrant youth in her audience, are fully Swedish despite their immigrant background.

Khadidje, who shares her name with the Prophet's first wife, is a woman dressed in black, including a tightly worn hijab, with a moustache and converged eyebrows. She talks broken Swedish with a very thick Arabic accent, always starting her videos with the greeting "Salaam aleikum", often turning to Arabic when she gets agitated. She lives with her husband, her teenage daughter, Soraya, and her teenage sons, Suleyman and Hassan, and is very preoccupied with things that are not allowed, "tillåtet", especially concerning her children but also when interacting with her ethnically Swedish neighbours, Svennmorskan ("The Swedish Mommy") and her daughter Fjortisen ("The Teenybopper").

Khadidje is an aggressive, uncompromising defender of the faith; a hyperbolic caricature of a pious Muslim woman. This is already established in the first video of her⁸⁶, where she discusses the concept 'ikhlaak', meaning the disposition for virtue and good manners⁸⁷, and makes a case for how important it is for women to cover themselves up. The main comic conflict in her sketches is between Khadidje's strict enforcement of rules like this (implicitly what is halal by Islamic standards, though rarely referred to as such) and the unruly people around her, which goes hand in hand with the sub-conflict between Khadidje's fierce temper and those who become

⁸⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6C2sH-pfVU> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

⁸⁷ أخلاق , normally transcribed *Akhlaq*.

exposed to it. This is often related to gender and sexuality. The underlying value conflict thus lies between a modern-romantic and a family-oriented view of gender, love and family – where Khadidje represents the traditional family-oriented view, while the people around her, but also Gina Dirawi herself, represents the modern-romantic view.

This is most obvious in one of the sketches that was part of *Ana Gina Show*⁸⁸, where Khadidje has a sex ed lesson aimed at converting Amir Akrouti, who at the time was one of Sweden’s most famous bloggers with “Gaybloggen”, to heterosexuality. In the sketch, he wears makeup and has some stereotypical gay mannerisms, including painting his nails during class, which makes Khadidje very angry. Her first pedagogic point is to argue that it is more beautiful with a leaf and a flower in a bouquet than two leaves, whereas Amir argues “But I can think two leaves are *nice*”. In her second attempt, she points out that if there are two men in a couple, there will not be any children: “All baby die”. Amir points out that love has nothing to do with children, which Khadidje answers with “Love comes later”. Increasingly aggressive, Khadidje forces Amir to pick a picture of a woman over a muscled man when she asks him to choose a partner, although she does not realise that the woman actually is a man – Christer Lindarw, one of Sweden’s most famous drag queens.

Even though Amir himself has a stereotypical persona with some comical potential, Khadidje and her futile attempts to convert him clearly are the main butts of the joke. Amir even represents some sort of normality and rationality, whereas Khadidje is obsessed with rules that seem out of touch with reality: rigid, stupid and old-fashioned. This is connected to the value conflict that drives the sketch. Khadidje propounds a traditional view of love as intrinsically connected to family and procreation: couples are formed with the purpose of getting children, to extend and maintain kinship relations (Coontz, 2005). Love is valued, but it should be a lucky side effect of family life, not the reason for entering into a relationship (ibid, p. 18). Amir, on the other hand, understands love as a goal in itself – couples should be formed on the background of mutual attraction and for no purpose other than *the pure*

⁸⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_rI4hE9YV9A (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

relationship, where the loving relation exists for its own sake (Giddens, 1993). The pure relationship is a development of romantic love, an essentially modern invention (Coontz, 2005; Giddens, 1993) where love and couple formation is understood as a means of self-realisation. Thus, love becomes an expression of authenticity and individuality (Giddens, 1993). This connection between love and the authentic individual is emphasised at multiple points in the sketch: Amir underlines that he is born gay, that it is an intrinsic part of him, but he also makes it a question of personal *preference* when he argues with Khadidje that a bouquet composed only of leaves can be beautiful. Hence, he is authentic in two logically, but not colloquially, incompatible ways: following both his personal taste and his biological destiny. His mannerisms, although stereotypical and thus to some degree inauthentic, can also be seen as an expression of “I am who I am”, especially since Khadidje, obsessed with *explicitly* extra-personal rules of proper conduct drawn from sharia, is infuriated by them.

In other sketches, the consequences these rules have for individual freedom is explored further. The sketch “Khadidje and the Teenybopper”⁸⁹ introduces the teenybopper for the first time, a young girl with her face covered in fake tan and with exaggerated teenage mannerisms, also played by Dirawi. Khadidje is very puzzled by the Teenybopper’s appearance and asks why she is allowed to be outside at 6 PM. Most of the sketch is devoted to Khadidje criticizing the young girl for her makeup, which she thinks looks like faeces: “You should not wear this things, girl. You look like caca [poop], which boy wants caca, you think if they can marry flower, they choose caca instead (...) it does not look good, you do not look allowed”. In another sketch⁹⁰, she argues with her son, Hassan, who does not want to come along to a wedding. According to Khadidje, it is because he wants to spend time with a girl, Felicia, whom she does not approve of (“she is disgusting, she is not allowed”), but Hassan himself seems more preoccupied with his bad looking hair and nose. Khadidje threatens to throw a shoe at him, as she is very stressed since the wedding is an opportunity to find Hassan a future spouse for a good price. She is actually so upset

⁸⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A94vij4ZDpo> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

⁹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4d9YIMTRkE&t=14s> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

that she collapses on the bathroom floor with symptoms reminiscent of a heart-attack. In a third sketch⁹¹, Khadidje presents her daughter, who is completely covered (she even wears sunglasses) in white since “she is innocent” and acts like a servant for Khadidje, who after having been served tea and an orange in the garden sends her daughter back in, shouting in Arabic: “Yallah go away, go home, don’t go out, watch out” and at a later point throws the orange at her, as it has gone bad, screaming “This is not fresh, motherfucker [literally ‘son of shit’]!” in Arabic.

Both Hassan and the Teenybopper are very exaggerated and laughable characters, and Khadidje’s daughter appears as an ironic exaggeration of the stereotype of the suppressed Muslim woman. Despite this, Khadidje is the star of the show, and the protagonist of the comic conflicts through her insistence of the rules of proper conduct, always somehow related to traditional marriage. Her daughter has no say on her own since she belongs to her family; the Teenybopper’s makeup is judged from the perspective of how attractive it makes her for potential husbands; and Hassan’s reluctance to go to a wedding is worrying both because it challenges Khadidje’s parental authority and because it hampers his marriage prospects. The comical stems from how hyperbolically invested she is in these rules, to the point of the mechanic quality discussed by Bergson, and thus she and the rules become ridiculous. The corrective element of this humour relates to how Khadidje’s stiff, mechanical obsession with the rules is contrasted with the living, organic individuality of her environment. Hassan and the Teenybopper are perhaps not very individualist or authentic, as they are pure teenager caricatures. They are, however, representatives for a different view of love and the self than Khadidje, a view which opens up for self-development and freedom rather than obedience and tradition – and a view which maybe enjoys a particularly hegemonic position in Sweden. According to Berggren and Trägårdh (2006)⁹², a modern, individualistic view of love is especially evolved in Sweden compared to the rest of the Western world, and has multiple connections to other parts of Swedish mentality.

⁹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d3xbO-kQmsM> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

⁹² Who curiously never refers to Giddens, but discusses modern love and family life in almost exactly the same terms.

As such, it is perhaps not so strange that the tension between a traditional and a modern conception of love was central in the Swedish immigration discourse of the 1990s and 2000s. It was especially central in a number of popular and critically acclaimed fiction movies made by immigrant directors and screenwriters around the turn of the millennium, such as Josef Fares' *Jalla! Jalla* and Reza Bagher's *Vingar av glas (Wings of Glass)* from 2000, and Susan Taslimi's *Hus i Helvete (All Hell Let Loose)* from 2002. Here, conflicts between the traditional immigrant family and their young, individualistic second generation children are central, conflicts related to couple formation and proper gendered conduct (Tigervall, 2005; Wright, 2005). The dramatic and comic potential in the tension between a romantic couple love and a sceptical family is of course extremely well-known and much used in Western culture (Frye, 1981; L. O. Larsen, 1998; Simonsen, 2004), so it is not strange that it has been used by a new generation of filmmakers, growing up being exposed to the Swedish theory of love (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2006) but with parents from predominantly Muslim countries where the ideals of romantic love are less hegemonic (Fortier, Kreil, & Maffi, 2018; Friedland, Afary, Gardinali, & Naslund, 2016). A more current, and sadder background for the centrality of this tension in the serious part of the immigration discourse was however a number of honour killings, most notably the killing of Swedish Kurd Fadime Şahindal by her father in 2002. Fadime was already a public figure, after having fled from her family in 1997, reported her father to the police and made a number of media appearances due to a violent conflict over her being engaged not to a Kurd, but to a Swedish-Iranian (Simonsen, 2004). This sparked massive media coverage, with an emphasis on how Kurds in Sweden came from a patriarchal culture and were unsuccessfully integrated into modern Sweden (ibid). It is interesting to read excerpts from the newspaper debate at the time, where there are multiple references to the tension between a collective, family-oriented Kurdish culture and the Swedish strive for individual freedom, often also with strong pathos: Fadime's father refused her the right to be "true to herself" (Dagens Nyheter, 23.01.2002), i.e. to be an authentic being.

Syster Khadidje is a comical parallel to the tragic social control of the serious immigration discourse. At the same time, she represents a manner in which to

symbolically present immigrants as well integrated, since the Khadidje-videos are made by an immigrant who ridicules the norms of her parents' culture and favours the Swedish way of life. Syster Khadidje thus goes along with dominant tendencies in the serious discourse, and Gina Dirawi herself fits with what Ylva Brune (1998) identifies as the victim-hero type in the Swedish press coverage of immigration: (young) women seeks to break with their traditional background, represented by oppressive fathers and brothers, and become Swedish – a type Brune connects to the major colonial trope Gayatri Spivak (1988, p. 92) called “White men are saving brown women from brown men”. This should however be qualified in the case of Gina Dirawi, as she clearly saves herself – but it could be argued that she saves herself on the terms of white men.

Although Khadidje in light of this can be interpreted as going along with the dominant Swedish discourse, perhaps even with colonial roots, there are many elements of the sketches and its reception that make the matter more complex. The most striking is that there are no oppressive men neither in Khadidje's nor in Gina's lives. If anyone practices any oppression in the house of Khadidje, it is herself. She is angry, strict, and (comically) violent, and exerts social control not only over her daughter but also over her sons – and over neighbours and Swedish celebrities when she gets the change. Thus, she is an inversion of a stereotype: in her world, it is the women, not the men, who are conservative and powerful. She also breaks with the stereotype of the miserable Muslim woman, as she has her sensual sides: she enjoys arak, giggles loudly, hugs people to the point of crushing them when she gets enthusiastic, and she likes to dance. Although she is far from a round character, she is more than just a stereotype, which probably is one element that makes the Khadidje videos funny as well as their ridicule acceptable, as its aggressiveness somehow becomes mitigated through playful inversion. Gina Dirawi's biography probably also plays a mitigating role. As mentioned above, she is a pious Muslim, and her grandfather, the imam, is portrayed in multiple interviews with her as a spiritual guide as well as a great supporter of Gina's comedy.

This leads me to the second element of Syster Khadidje that breaks with mainstream Swedish immigration discourse: the emphasis on Islam. While patriarchal oppression of women has been central, it has almost never been constructed as a

question of Islam – whereas the opposite has been the case across the border, in Norway, where the coverage of the Fadime murder largely was explained as the unavoidable result of a problematic view of women inherent in the Muslim faith (Simonsen, 2004). The Swedish press has also covered immigration and religion consistently less than its Norwegian and Danish colleagues (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019).

On the other hand, in the Khadidje-videos and in interviews with Gina Dirawi like the one quoted above, the link between Islam and the traditional, oppressive and anti-individualistic view of gender and family is explicit. Those who subscribe to the view of the Sweden as an exaggeratedly politically correct place with strict rules for what can be said or not, “åsiktskorridoren” (“the opinion corridor”), would probably argue that comedy on YouTube was the only way to criticise Islam in the Swedish public sphere. There is probably something to the mitigating function of comedy in handling controversial issues, as I have discussed above. However, Khadidje appeared just after a media controversy around Islam, regarding SVT’s magazine programme *Halal-tv* in 2008. Here, SVT was criticised both for propounding an extremist version of Islam and for stereotyping Muslims, and the controversy has been interpreted as an indication of a public understanding of Swedish values as opposed to religious values (Lövheim & Axner, 2011). Critique of Islam was thus not completely absent in the Swedish public sphere at the time. I would argue that the Khadidje videos rather should be seen as a way of demonstrating that Islam can be something other than oppression, and thus comply with Swedish values and the Swedish way of life. This reading is supported by the reception material, including paratexts by Gina Dirawi herself. Although she consequently emphasised that she ridiculed prejudice, not Muslims, she often attacked fundamentalist interpretations of sharia, most commonly as a reaction to the reception her sketches got from Muslim milieus. Her vlog was also framed by SVT1 as provocative, as she starred in an episode of the documentary serial “Provokatörarna” (“The Provokers”) in December 2012. Here, her pious Muslim faith was a topic, along with the strong reactions she had received both from Islamic and xenophobic milieus – where one side accused her of insulting Islam, and the other side for propagating it. She reacted to these accusations by claiming to be Swedish, and that she through her videos wanted to show that “it is possible to be a Muslim and also

be yourself (...) People believe that us Muslims are a homogenous group. They think we all are pro burka and want women to sit at home. But we are all different, just like any human. Me and my friends are ordinary girls who like to laugh”. (Svenska Dagbladet, October 10th 2010).

What Gina Dirawi does through statements like this, together with the Khadidje videos, is to handle the construction of difference between immigrants and Swedes along the axis of gender and sexuality by ridiculing how a traditional view of gender and family suppresses the authentic individual and by adhering to the modern one. The contrast between herself and Khadidje is central here: Gina is pious, but obviously not like her character – she is more similar to the imagined average Swede, a similarity that becomes even more profound since she can ridicule conservative Muslims. In this respect, it should also be noted how, in the interview quoted above, she says that she and her girlfriends “like to laugh”. As discussed in chapter 4, Muslims’ lack of humour is a well-established notion in modern Western countries. Through obviously having a sense of humour, Dirawi demonstrates in yet another way how well integrated she is – something she also does on behalf of her audience with an immigrant background, as they, at least to some degree, need to appreciate the ridicule of Khadidje in order to enjoy the sketches. This way, they, too, can prove their Swedishness.

That being said, Khadidje offers more to her immigrant audiences than symbolic subordination under Swedish values. The tension between traditional family values and romantic love has been experienced as a central and difficult part of life for young Muslims, both in the Middle East (Fortier et al., 2018; Friedland et al., 2016) and in Sweden (Karlsson Minganti, 2008). The Khadidje sketches are a way to process this for young Swedish Muslims, as well as non-Muslim second generation children experiencing similar tensions. There are also many elements of the sketches that are accessible only to people who are familiar with Islam and/or speak Arabic, for example the concept *ikhlaak*. This kind of insider humour is perhaps the strongest argument *against* Dirawi’s own interpretation of her humour as a way to ridicule prejudice about immigrants. After all, the average prejudiced Swede probably has little knowledge about the terminology for Islamic virtue. Elements like these make

Khadidje extra funny for people who experience these kinds of pious religious actions and attitudes as a part of their everyday life. In this respect, Khadidje is ethnic humour in the sense of Werner Sollors (1986), where communities of laughter develop a wellness (pp. 132). For young people living in a public sphere where a difference is constructed between Swedish values and religious values, and in a family life where one is urged to adhere to tradition, Khadidje and Gina provides a comic relief from the demands from both sides, as the central premise is that the “we” is Muslim *and* Swedish.

Khadidje and *Lilla al-Fadji* share this form of address, where their audiences, or publics, are addressed as both immigrants and Swedes and where the difference between the groups is negotiated in a way that makes it appear less important and problematic. The difference between the two shows lays in how it places itself on the scale between play and satire, which also can be connected to the serious-unserious-tension. While both shows play with stereotypes on one hand, and ridicule their main characters on the other hand, Khadidje is clearly ridiculed from the viewpoint of a moral standard based on Swedish and Western views of self and love, and she is explicitly and recurrently marked as a fundamentalist Muslim. In *Lilla al-Fadji*, on the other hand, the ridicule of ethnic stereotypes is indeed present, but it is at the best less clear how it is connected to a Swedish or Western moral position, since the show’s structure as a comedic quest make the characters rounder, more sympathetic, and emphasises unserious and aesthetically oriented play and parody over serious and morally oriented satire. This points towards two different strategies of addressing immigrant’ publics and negotiating the ethnic boundaries of the public sphere, which I will discuss in the conclusion of this chapter.

6.4. *Det Slører Stadig*: From fearful to playful

Det Slører Stadig (“Still veiled”, hereafter DSS) was broadcast in one season on Danish DR 2 in 2013, starring the four young women Sara Al Naser, Ellie Jokar, Naghme Ashabi og Ajla Prohic, with Parminder Singh as director and co-writer. The four girls were relatively unknown, while Singh was an established director. DSS is

traditional sketch comedy, with some candid camera pranks. Many of DSS' sketches use classical comic inversion pieces, where the roles and scripts of a well-known situation are turned around (Bergson, 1914), a staple in ethnic comedy where it is used to twist the logic behind stereotypes and ethnic relations (Gillespie, 2003). For example, in the sketch "For HELLIG til Love" ("Too HOLY for love"), the character Güla, a pious Muslim girl, goes on a movie date with Kasper Abdul, an ethnic Dane converted to Islam. Most of the sketch is a parade of stereotypes of how the pious Muslim should behave, and the fun comes from how it all is framed as a dating show. However, the sketch ends with Kasper Abdul abruptly ending the date since Güla buys jelly candy for the movie, which is not halal as it contains gelatine from pigs. Güla, quite disappointed, states: "Should a convert teach me about my own religion? No, I was here first!". The satirical intent of this sketch is quite clear: to point out the ridiculousness of fixed beliefs about how Muslims *necessarily* behave this or that way due to a fundamentalist interpretation of religion.

This kind of explicit thematisation of prejudice is a staple in DSS. Other examples are when a white Danish pharmacist refuses to sell condoms to a dark skinned woman because she is unmarried "and sex outside of wedlock is not allowed in your religion", or when a TV crew desperately searches the suburb⁹³ hoping to find people with poor Danish skills, as well as violence, ethnic tensions and social control, only to find peaceful co-existence and educated professional women. It turns out that the only person they find who speaks broken Danish is an ethnic Dane, who clearly has some problems with substance abuse – but the crew still insists that they discovered terrible social problems and tensions between Danes and immigrants. These sketches are relatively straightforward social satire where Danish prejudice about differences between immigrants and the majority is the butt of the joke, and are clearly influenced by the British modern classic *Goodness Gracious Me*, which in similar ways to these DSS sketches use comic inversion to expose prejudice and even racist tendencies in the everyday ethnic relations (Gillespie, 2003).

⁹³ Which in Denmark is called "ghetto" (sic!) by the media and in official political discourse.

Other times, DSS works with comic inversion in more subtle ways. Among the more interesting recurring sketches are the ones about Sara El Sheikh, reporter from the fictitious programme Dubai News, who is obsessed with money, status and looks, and quite puzzled about how Denmark and Danes fail to live up to all her standards in this respect. In stunt interviews with people in Copenhagen, she asks questions about “Danish stuff” like freedom of speech and “hygge”⁹⁴, interviews that develop into sessions where she lectures and bashes them – for example consequently calling people ugly in the sketch about freedom a speech.

Sara el Sheik is a Middle Eastern stereotype, but probably not the kind of stereotype that is immediately recognisable to the average Dane. Being a caricature of the excessively rich jet set of the Gulf Countries, she is actually the opposite of the stereotype of a Middle Eastern immigrant in Denmark, who is conservative, traditional and poor (Albertsen, 2013). This is a comical inversion in itself, but also adds something extra for audiences with a Middle Eastern background who will recognise the stereotype. In addition, el Sheik is a woman with power, and a foreigner who arrives to Denmark to question, judge and belittle the Danish way of life. This is an inversion of the dominant societal norms, where immigrants are lectured about how to behave. It can be argued that this inversion loses some of its power since Sheik herself and her opulent, arrogant behaviour often is the butt of the joke, so that Denmark represents the normality. Still, the sketches largely manage to make the Danish customs seem strange, for example when Sara el Sheik visits a Danish family to experience hygge, and sits under a blanket with a cup of coffee waiting for it to happen. Another example is from a sketch about “frisind”, where she first asks multiple people if it is acceptable to be naked on beaches, and then asks if the burka is acceptable, whereas everybody answers yes to the first and no to the latter. Danish normality is the contrast that makes el Sheik funny, but she is also the contrast that makes Danish normality funny. Her outrageousness can thus be seen as a mitigating

⁹⁴ *Cosiness*, a concept that carries many cultural connotations and is highly valued in all three Scandinavian countries. The Danish word for it has been especially well known internationally due to intense commercialisation in the latter years.

factor which makes it possible to question and ridicule Danish culture, “so that the citizens can criticise themselves and yet still have their city”(Hariman, 2008, p. 252) .

In the Sara el Sheik sketches as well as the typical ethnic comedy sketches, comical inversion is used to handle the construction of difference between immigrant and the majority, through satire over the belief that cultural difference is essential and necessary and that Danish culture is normal and commonsensical, thus diminishing the hegemonic construction of difference, a quite common strategy in ethnic humour (Gillespie, 2003; Gillota, 2013; Musser, 1991). Other sketches are more ambiguous in this respect, and circle around relationships between a Muslim (or, as it is called in the sketches, “ethnic”) girl and a Danish man. One of them, “An exotic girl”, is about a man who fetishises the girl he is dating because she is “exotic”, and is in the build-up thus quite similar to the sketches discussed above. The twist lies in how he goes from well-worn clichés, like how she is filled with passion, to quite elaborate, clearly sexually charged, fantasies about how her brothers and cousins will arrive to destroy the cafe and kill him to protect her honour. Two normally separate orientalist stereotypes are here brought together, and thus become ridiculous, which also turns something that normally is perceived as fearful into something funny.

Two more complex sketches not only mention, but also show, brothers and cousins executing social control. In one of them, the girl and the boy walks around in the park, and the boy is clearly nervous – which becomes understandable when we see how the couple are followed by a gang of buff men, whom the girl introduces as “just my brothers”. In another sketch, a candid camera is used to film a girl asking different men to pose as her boyfriend so she can avoid forced marriage. Most men are quite sceptical, especially when her male relatives turn up. The girl, however, insists that the pranked man is her boyfriend, which leads to increased tension, not because her relatives become aggressive but because the pranked men become increasingly uncomfortable and even visibly afraid.

These scenes are only funny with the knowledge about the stereotype of the controlling, patriarchal Muslim man, and although the sketches do not necessarily endorse it, they do not subvert it either. However, they do turn it into an *image that can be laughed about*, and thus turns negative emotions into positive ones. The same

mechanism is at play in a set of recurring sketches about the burka. In one of these sketches, a candid camera first films clearly puzzled people in the main shopping street of Copenhagen, and we soon see the reason for their puzzlement: a woman dressed in a bright pink burka, with golden and lace details, holding a designer bag and a chihuahua dressed in the same pink fabric. In another sketch, “Babushka Burka”, a tall woman dressed in a black burka elicits sceptical looks from the crowd, until a smaller woman, then yet another and yet another, jumps out from behind her, until there is a row of four veiled women resembling a set of matryoshka dolls. In the last sketch, a woman in a bright blue burka is running through the streets, and after a while, we see that she is chased by Pac-Man. They enter into a building, and soon come back out again – but this time, the woman is dressed in a bright red burka and chases Pac-Man.



Figure 7 The pink burka



Figure 8 Pac-Man burka

This is very visual comedy (but also musical – the soundtrack of the sketches is important) that nevertheless relies heavily on cultural references. What makes them interesting is how they are related to the veil debate in Denmark, which has been especially harsh. Face-covering clothing has been forbidden since 2018, often termed “the burka ban”. It can be argued that the veil, especially the burka, was a metonymy for immigrants being treated different from Danes, as well as for Islamic fundamentalism, in the Danish public sphere (Andreassen, 2011; Yılmaz, 2016, pp. 160-161). Andreassen (ibid) has even argued that the Danish veil debates not always are about a concern about immigrant men’s social control over immigrant women, but rather are a way to construct Denmark as a white society with gender equality as a core characteristic. Thus, the veil, and especially the burka and the niqab, become threats in themselves to the Danish society. It is thus notable that DSS makes the burka *in itself* into something laughable.

This is not satire in the traditional sense, as it is hard to pinpoint any reference to a moral norm system. What DSS’ burka sketches do can best be understood affectively: they created a space where the burka can be laughed about instead of feared. This is a central part of carnival theories of laughter. Bakhtin (1968) writes already in the introduction of *Rabelais and His World* that in the spirit of carnival, “All that was frightening in ordinary life is turned into amusing or ludicrous

monstrosities. Fear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter” (pp. 47). Heavily influenced by Bakhtin, Hariman (2008) argues that this fearlessness becomes possible only by “prior conversion of some part of the world into an image” (pp. 255), as the fearful thing itself is hard to laugh of. In the virtual world of carnival and parody, however, it is possible to be liberated from the serious aspects of an image and instead handle it in a playful and fearless way.

DSS’ play with fear is central in how it deals with the constructed difference between Danes and immigrants. It can be argued that xenophobia – in the very affective sense – has an especially strong position in the Danish public sphere, and that it is deeply connected to the portrayal of Islam as fundamentally different from Danish values and as a threat to social cohesion. This is in line with Yılmaz (2016), who argues that the Danish hegemonic view of immigrants as culturally different partly came about as a set of historical moral panics around Islam, and Hellström and Hervik (2014), who argue that Islam has been given the role of the Beast in Danish immigration debate, representing a highly stigmatised extreme Other that is impossible to negotiate with. Finally, quantitative findings by Hovden and Mjelde (2019) support such a reading, as they find that the Danish press covers both social customs and religion relatively more than its Scandinavian neighbours, combined with a relatively higher frequency of a frame where immigrants are portrayed as a threat to social cohesion.

The immigration debate is thus loaded with fear in Denmark, especially when it comes to the intersection of immigration and gender. The sketches about social control and the burka in *Det Slører Stadig* thus create a moment of freedom from the deadly serious manners in which immigration is treated in the public sphere. One can of course argue that matters like social control and patriarchal religious practices *should be* considered deadly serious. Following Bakhtin and Hariman, a counterargument to this is that strict seriousness is limiting as it imposes necessity and closes down new potentialities. A less theoretical, and more serious-friendly, counterargument will remind us that in Denmark, these questions of social control are not only parts of a discourse about solving political problems. They are also parts of a

discourse where Danes with an immigrant, especially a Muslim, background are constructed as essentially non-Danish and even dangerous to social cohesion. Seen as such, *DSS* intervenes in and works against this construction of difference, not only by explicitly contradicting it as it does in the comic inversion-sketches, but also by breaking it from the bond of the serious and turning it into something that can be played with.

6.5. *Svart Humor*: The carnival of difference

Svart Humor (*Black Humour*) was originally released on Facebook and YouTube as a private initiative in 2015, but was soon picked up by NRK, as the station saw that the clips were popular among young people with an immigrant background. Initially, NRK released clips on different online channels, and the show appeared in 30-minute episodes on their web player and linear TV in 2017. Made and lead by Yousef Hadaoui, the show mixes candid camera pranks with stunt interviews and sketches. The stunt interviews are the most prominent, and the joke here is often based on a gameshow parody, “Do you want to be a thousandionair”, where immigrants through multiple choice questions with tricky alternatives are lured into giving wrong or strange answers on questions about Norwegian language, history and society⁹⁵; or on asking immigrants questions based on figurative idioms, whereas they often answer literally. Although the premise of the show seems demeaning towards the immigrant population, it gained success among young Norwegians with immigrant background, visible from the activity on the show’s Facebook page.

Even more than the other shows discussed in this chapter, *Svart Humor* is based on the explicit addressing of differences between immigrants and the majority population. This is visible already in the opening of the first episode, where Hadaoui asks a black man: “Brother, I try to find out about Norwegian values. How much are they worth?”, and gets a complicated calculation in reply, with the conclusion “it will

⁹⁵ See for example <https://tv.nrk.no/serie/svart-humor/2017/MUHH45000317/avspiller#t=14m24s> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

be a trillion values every hour every second”. This question refers to the big debate in 2016 and 2017, about “Norwegian values” (“Norske verdier”), which escalated during the 2017 summer’s election campaign. This debate does however have a long history in Norway: Marianne Gullestad (2002a, pp. 94-108) argues that the mobilisation of “Norwegian values” in the immigration discourse is a central means for constructing an interpretive frame that creates a division between immigrants and Norwegians, and at the same time places unspecified demands about integration on the immigrant population.

This lack of specificity is made visible in the next sequence of the episode, where Hadaoui asks a number of white Norwegians if it is important to maintain Norwegian values. Everyone emphatically answers yes, only to get in trouble when he challenges them to define these values. This scene is typical for how the *Svart Humor* show plays with the explicit and implicit interpretive frames about Norwegians and immigrants – even though this is one of the most explicitly satirical scenes. Talking points from the immigration debate, prejudice and stereotypes, and immigrant mannerisms, in other words *premises* of the immigration discourse, are addressed *directly* through relating them to an abstract, unspecified idea of “the Norwegian” as well as everyday life on the more multicultural streets of Oslo. They are never debated, but made to seem strange, and thus also visible, through novel juxtapositions, exaggerations, and pranks. In many ways, Hadaoui embodies the in-betweenness of the diaspora, and his enunciative position is that of a mediator between the Norwegian and the immigrants. This position is implicit in all the shows discussed so far, but clearest in this case where Hadaoui plays himself. He thus appears as a kind variety of the *trickster*, somebody who conducts mischief and breaks the rules but also is a boundary-crosser and thus often a mediator of new knowledge and cultural development (Hyde, 1998).

A lot of this is realised through an inventory of rhetorical devices. For example, as the name alludes to, the juxtaposition of black/brown and white people is important in the show. In the stunt Hadaoui asks one kind of questions to people who are dark-skinned, for example the tricky quiz questions mentioned above, and different kinds of questions to people who are white, typically questions who would challenge

the taken for granted-Norwegian normality, as the interview about Norwegian values. However, Hadaoui's interviewees are often different in other ways than race and ethnicity: people in eccentric clothing and substance abusers. This enhances the impression of the show as a way to play with normality – and deviations from it.

The most important rhetorical device in *Svart Humor* is probably Hadaoui's interview *style*. He comes across as extremely friendly, charismatic and jovial, while also a figure of authority. He always smiles, small talks and comes across as an immigrant himself through slang and a slight accent, but he is also firm and in control in the interview situations, sometimes clearly controlling the course of the conversation as well as clearly knowing the answers to his trick questions – and the tricking itself, and the knowledge it is based on, is also of course a form of authority. This form of authority is perhaps best compared to that of a cool youth worker. A friendly and joking authority is of course no lesser of an authority than more serious and authoritarian styles, but can in fact be quite effective in maintaining social order, as classical studies of humour in the workplace have shown (Bradney, 1957; Coser, 1960). This can thus be a background for a reading of the show where immigrants are ridiculed and kept in check by demonstrating their lack of knowledge and thus legitimating the Norwegian normality and superiority, mitigated by humour and friendliness (Zijderveld, 1983, p. 55).

However, a different reading is possible as Hadaoui never *sanctions* the wrong answers – another element that adds to his trickster-persona, breaking the rules. Instead, he will give the interviewee a hug, a consolation prize (for example a date – either the fruit or the social event), and often start a conversation. The prize for winning is also nothing to write home about: NOK 50, if Hadaoui has remembered to bring money. This way, the entire competition aspect is made less important. Instead, the emphasis is on the friendly and playful atmosphere surrounding it, which is helped by the fact that a large part of the sketches consists of Hadaoui walking around greeting people, doing small dances, or just filming the diversity on the streets, accompanied by music from the Berber music band Inouraz. There is also a playfulness in the quiz game's reference to popular culture, the game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, as it is played with the seriousness of the show's big prize as well

as many of its well-known formal elements like the visual design or the lifelines and safety nets participants can use in the competition. This kind of play with formal elements of popular culture is commonplace in the show, for example when the thug life-meme is placed on the head of an angry man who has just ended a rant about Norway with the phrase “Kiss my arse”⁹⁶. Finally, there is quite a lot of playfulness in the quiz’ multiple-choice alternatives, where language puns as well as obviously wrong but entertaining alternatives are common.

These sketches, along with many others in *Svart Humor*, are quite idiosyncratic and untraditional⁹⁷, which is perhaps why I find it hard to discuss single sketches in this analysis. The style and format of the show seems both more pertinent and easier to retell in writing. There are namely no narrative build-ups or punchlines like in *Det Slører Stadig*, no satirical character comedy or comic conflicts like in *Lilla al-Fadji & Co.* or the Khadidje videos. The humour of *Svart Humor* appears more like a *state of being* rather than a narrative text leading from A to B with a reference (butt) to the world. Thus, it is reminiscent of the carnival and the carnivalesque as described by Bakhtin (1968). One should of course not stretch this parallel too far. As Bakhtin himself stressed (pp. 120-121), the carnival was a pre-modern cultural form closely intertwined with medieval and renaissance European folk Christianity and cannot be used directly to analyse modern cultural phenomena. There are for example no traces of the often violent aggression of the carnival in *Svart Humor*, nor any visible links to the idea of Earth’s power to devour what exists in order to give birth to something new (p. 91). However, there are many points of similarity. The amicable and playful atmosphere is the most central one. The carnivalesque laughter is namely:

...not a subjective, individual and biological consciousness (...). It is the social consciousness of all the people. Man experiences this flow of time in the festive marketplace, in the carnival crowd, as he comes into contact with other bodies of varying age and social caste. He is aware of being a member of a continually growing

⁹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ur4i9eotsiY> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

⁹⁷ It should be noted that the most common complaint made about the show to NRK was not that it was offensive, but that it was incomprehensible.

and renewed people. This is why festive folk laughter presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper class, of all that oppresses and restricts (Bakhtin, 1968, p. 92).

Even though the carnival played with existential matters like life and death, this was permuted by a light, joyful⁹⁸ atmosphere, grounded in how the carnival was not about individuals but about the people as a collective, universal body, which thus removed the fearful aspect of death and hence also of authority. Thus, the carnival functioned as a temporal suspension of the official world, its interpretive frames and its seriousness (pp. 88-89). In the same way, the amicability and playfulness of *Svart Humor* is a temporal suspension of the seriousness of one *particular* system that oppresses and restricts: the immigration discourse.

The role such an alternative conception can play in the public sphere becomes clearer if it is compared to what Gullestad (2002a, pp. 82-85) argues is an ethnonationalist and hegemonic interpretive frame in the immigration discourse where a culturalised and problem-oriented understanding of immigrants has become important. In Gullestad's words, "Those who are different, lack something essential" (p. 83). This means that even trivial cultural differences become important markers of how un-Norwegian immigrants are (Gullestad, 2002b), a perspective in line with Billig's (1995) theory of *banal nationalism* – although turned around, as it is not Norwegian-ness that is constantly flagged, but the immigrants' lack of it.

Svart Humor explicitly addresses trivial cultural difference. In *Svart Humor*, however, the individual's failure to integrate, by not answering questions about Norway correctly, becomes of secondary importance. This does not mean that integration as a concept or a value is rejected. The show is not (or at least rarely) a satire over news coverage or the hegemonic interpretive frames, but rather an alternative space, functioning by its very own logic characterised by a constant play with meaning as well as an amicable, solidary atmosphere. The latter is important as

⁹⁸ Bakhtin uses the word "веселая" (veselaya), in the English versions of his works commonly translated as "gay".

the demands of integration are put upon the immigrant as an individual – but in *Svart Humor*, the failures to integrate are laughed away *together*, as the show is a place where everybody laughs and is laughed about. Thus, an unconditional feeling of community prevails over division based on cultural diversity.

Community in diversity is a recurrent theme in *Svart Humor*. As already mentioned, diversity is visually cued as the show takes place on the streets of Oslo and has a clear preference for showing visually striking bodies. This is evident already in the title sequence, where we see multiple smiling and waving people with colourful clothing, impressive beards, or forming a row of hijabs and Canada Goose jackets together, but we also see dogs, birds, and mountains of fruit. On Hadaoui's interview rounds, the multiple ways of talking, working and playing that take place in the city are showcased. Taken together with the importance of references to popular culture as well as a fair share of sexual and scatological joking, this is reminiscent of another element of the carnivalesque, the language of the marketplace:

The marketplace of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was a world in itself, a world which was one, all “performances” in this area, from loud cursing to the organized show, had something in common and were imbued with the same atmosphere of freedom, frankness and familiarity. (...) The marketplace was the center of all that is unofficial; it enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality in a world of official order and official ideology, it always remained “with the people” (Bakhtin, 1968, pp. 153-154)

It should be noted that most of the show is filmed at Grønland, an immigrant-dense inner-city neighbourhood in Oslo. Like the suburbs in Sweden, Grønland has its place in the serious immigration debate, where the area is often framed as a problem area with high rates of criminality and social problems. In the alternative logic of *Svart Humor*, it rather becomes an arena for the playful, anarchic unfolding of life in many different forms – but always with a tie to different immigrant vernaculars. Thus, immigrant culture, or perhaps more precisely diaspora culture, is – similar to *Lilla al-Fadji* – used to creative and productive ends. This is for example done when Hadaoui makes a sketch where young dark-skinned boys and one white man, who probably has

a history of substance abuse, improvise the weather report⁹⁹. Being a country with quite temperamental weather compared to most of our European neighbours, the highly formalised TV weather report is not only a parody-friendly format but also has an important place in Norwegian public culture – and is of course also a daily ritual reminding us of Norwegian geography, thus constructing the imagined community of Norway (Anderson, 1983). Although the boys demonstrate a complete lack of knowledge about Norwegian geography, they also show a high level of energy and charisma and an impressive ability to (apparently) improvise lines relating the current agenda about refugees or stereotypes about immigrants and make them fit to the weather report. In another sketch¹⁰⁰, two dark-skinned boys, very much in the process of adolescent voice change, act as talk show hosts, where Hadaoui acts as a guest who sings Norwegian folk songs – whereas the boys laugh and “show him how it is done” by an improvised rap.

The most interesting example is perhaps in the last episode of the show’s first season, where “kebab Norwegian” (“kebabnorsk”), the sociolect mixing Norwegian with words from English and different immigrant languages, is the running theme. Hadaoui asks an elderly, white woman about Norwegian language, who without further ado starts complaining about its sad state as many people speak grammatically incorrect. Surprisingly, she also tells that she has bought a book about kebab Norwegian, and when challenged to speak it with Hadaoui, she demonstrates quite some proficiency in it. This develops into a musical medley of multiple lines said by different people in the show¹⁰¹. Common for all these sketches is again the atmosphere of play and familiarity – this is a place where difference is not threatening or a lack, but welcoming and a contribution.

None of these sketches seem particularly funny when retold in writing. Spontaneous response from real audiences has proven the opposite: many people find

⁹⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNyl6_90wCU (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

¹⁰⁰ <https://tv.nrk.no/serie/svart-humor/2017/MUHH45000417/avspiller#t=15m27s> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

¹⁰¹ <https://tv.nrk.no/serie/svart-humor/2017/MUHH45000617/avspiller#t=15m31s> (Last checked February 11th, 2021).

these sketches funny, even hysterical. This reminds us again that *Svart Humor*, like the carnival, is best understood as a state of being or as a mood – which again points towards the importance of the affects permutating the public sphere. Where the affective makeup of hegemonic discourse is fear of the unknown and an uncomfortable sense of not belonging, *Svart Humor* is not a rebuttal, but first and foremost an affective alternative through being a playful vision of another way of living with cultural difference.

A final point that has to be made is *Svart Humor*'s character of ethnic humour in Sollors' (1986) sense. In order to appreciate *Svart Humor*, it is necessary to understand at a minimum how it plays with the divide immigrant/Norwegian and the immigrants giving the wrong answer in the quiz sketches. However, the combination of quite complex play with Norwegian culture and equally complex play with diaspora culture privileges people who have grown up in, or at least had extended contact with, the mixed diasporas of Norway. Thus, the target group are people like Yousef Hadaoui himself – young people with an immigrant background who grew up in Norwegian immigrant dense neighbourhoods. By constructing an in-group in this particular way, the show represents these people as what the mainstream discourse does not: both Norwegian *and* different.

6.6. Conclusion: The playful recognition of difference.

Celebratory accounts of ethnic comedy claim that it is used to construct ethnicities as fluid and debatable (Gillota, 2013, p. 39), or even to take “a more ironic look at the larger question of ethnic identity itself” (Musser, 1991, p. 41). This argument is based on how different humour techniques are used to invert or conflate the fixation of ethnic difference (Sollors, 1986, p. 141). This is also central in the shows I have discussed in this chapter. However, it cannot be ignored that ethnic comedy and diaspora comedy also draws heavily on stereotypes and fixated markers of ethnic difference in order to poke fun at them, which potentially can lead to the perpetuation of ethnic boundaries rather than challenging them.

I suggest that in the Scandinavian context, a better way to think about this kind of comedy is to see it as a way to challenge not ethnic boundaries or ethnic difference, but to challenge their importance and significance. All the shows analysed above are based on pointing out the difference between the immigrant population in diaspora communities and the majority population in one way or another. Although this is done in a comical and often ironic way, it is nevertheless a way to stress how immigrants are unlike the majority that until now has made up the nation state. To some degree, this thus also foregrounds the nation state as an ethnonationalist state.

The idea that a nation should be comprised of people of the same kind is of course a central premise in the modern ideas of nationalism and the nation state (Gellner, 1983). However, cultural traits do not have to be the central element of nationhood (Eriksen, 1997), although they often are, which is an important element in the construction of immigrants as someone who needs to be *integrated* into society – but also as someone who is unable to do so (Wallerstein & Balibar, 1991). This conception of immigrants’ relationship with the nation is at work all over Europe (ibid). However, it can be argued that it enjoys an especially strong position in Scandinavia, where a relatively ethnoculturally homogenous past has contributed to different conceptions of ethnonationalism that pose the cultural difference of immigrants as a major problem (Eriksen, 1997; Gullestad, 2002a; Hervik, 2004; McIntosh, 2015). Some readers would perhaps object to the classification of Sweden as a country characterised by ethnonationalism, but this is due to its peculiar nature: Swedish nationalism does not *explicitly* draw on ancient tradition, historical glory or unique nature, but is based on seeing Sweden as the most modern country in the world – as the end of history, so to speak. This nevertheless entails a strong emphasis on cultural values, like feminism and social equality, and it has been argued that even this peculiar nationalism, like many other nationalisms, has its roots in the attempts in the 19th century to construct a peculiar national “geist” connected to shared land and history (Angell, 2002, pp. 97-99; Berggren & Trägårdh, 2006). In addition, the state – and hence the nation – has a special position in Scandinavia, especially in Sweden, as it is seen as a primary place of social belonging that guarantees individual freedom (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2006).

Thus, the difference the diaspora humour stresses is at first glance a problematic difference, which draws a strict boundary between the immigrants and the majority, and thus nationhood. What these shows do through their humoristic treatment of these differences is to *recognise* the difference between immigrants and the majority, but also *challenge* that this mean that immigrant cannot belong to the nation. This is not done by seriously refuting the interpretive frames of sameness and ethnonationalism. As Gullestad (2002a) argues, this can be problematic as it is both hard to avoid reproducing these frames when seeking to rationally modify them, and easy to be seen as an adversary if explicitly challenging them by for example advocating radical multiculturalism. The comedy shows in this chapter avoid these traps by using play over reason. Difference here is not negated nor explicitly rejected as being important or valid, but rather played with, a strategy humour and comedy is especially well equipped to do.

In the logic of play, it is possible to denote difference, and at the same time not denote what would be denoted by difference, which in this case is danger to social cohesion and nationhood – just like the playful nip denotes a bite, but not combat or pain (Bateson, 1972, pp. 179-180). According to Bateson, this seemingly logical fallacy should in fact be seen as a way to communicate about the rules of communication itself, which in this case would be to communicate about the frames and understandings through which we communicate and understand nationhood and cultural difference. These ‘rules’ govern who can be *recognised* as a part of the nation.

As mentioned in chapter 2, the theory of recognition, as it has been developed by Taylor (1994) and especially by Honneth (1995), is an attempt to describe the grammar of social conflict through different social groups’ demands of and struggles for recognition from society at large. As one can see from the title of Honneth’s seminal work, *The Struggle for Recognition*, recognition is to a significant degree understood in terms of conflict. To connect play, humour and recognition thus seems slightly paradoxical. Nevertheless, I would argue it is a useful exercise that says something fundamental about the role humour and comedy can play in the public sphere. In countries where the problematisation of difference, and indeed a struggle to be seen, or even to feel, belonging is the rule; the comedy shows that are discussed in

this chapter provides an alternative logic, the logic of playfulness. They thus take part in the boundary struggles of the public sphere connected to the exclusionary mechanisms ethnic minorities are subject to, but they do so in a way that has not been described by Midtbøen et al. (2017): Instead of countering the exclusionary mechanisms of ethnonationalist and problematising representation in the serious debate, the shows address them in an alternative sphere, the cultural and comical public sphere, where the problems can be played with instead of countered directly. This is nevertheless also a possible strategy in the struggle for recognition: By following the rules of comedy and play, but still addressing and negotiating what goes on in the serious public sphere, the diaspora comedy shows are more than just escapism: they are rooms of one's own where the rules of the serious debate are refuted and thus fought. The carnival becomes an alternative to the official public sphere (Habermas, 1992, p. 427), where diaspora comedy shows playing with difference in relation to immigrants and the nation state *perform* recognition of immigrant identities by showing how difference can be imagined as less significant, even as non-threatening. Thus, the shows become a strategic means in the struggle to maintain the dignity of immigrant's inner self (Taylor, 1994) by being a space for recognition of cultural difference instead of problematisation.

There is also another symbolic level at play through the shows location in the public sphere, which can be seen as a demonstration of recognition from the majority: being broadcast on national television following a narrowcasting logic where immigrants are treated as a part of the diverse makeup that constitutes the national public. This is the *playful recognition* of Scandinavian diaspora comedy, where difference can be emphasised but at the same time be treated with indifference.

The shows discussed in this chapter do this in very different ways, from how Khadidje ridicules the pious Muslim view of gender and family in order to be recognised as a part of the Swedish norm, to *Svart Humor*'s constant transformation of difference from being something to be debated and stressed over, to something that can be played with and used to bond. In line with Fraser (1997), one can perhaps understand Khadidje as an example of affirmative recognition, where unjustly devalued group identities are revalued (in this case young Swedish Muslims), and

Svart Humor as an example of transformative recognition, changing the underlying cultural-valuational structure so that *everyone's* sense of self would be changed, with *Det Slører Stadig* and *Lilla al-Fadji* on each side of the same scale, but not as pronounced as the two others. For lack of space, this is not the place to discuss this further, but it does point towards possibilities of further research on playful recognition. What can be said at this point, however, is that all the four diaspora comedies discussed in this chapter have shown how a variety of comedy techniques can be used to address ethnic difference, play with what the meaning and significance of this difference *is*, and thus play a role in the public sphere through participating in the ongoing negotiation of modern nationhood by being a rare place in the public sphere where immigrants are recognised as being different but still part of the nation.

This is also a reminder of how the shows are diaspora spaces, in the meaning that they negotiate immigrant culture as an in-between-space, not as something pure or essential that needs to be kept safe from integration or cultural appropriation. They do not envisage a multicultural vision in the sense of first and foremost encouraging minority rights and basing society on deep diversity (Taylor, 1991), where all different kinds of belonging both to different groups as well as the nation as a whole is seen as equal. Quite the opposite, these shows seek to address their publics in different ways than what is typical for both nationalism and multiculturalism, and seek to present a different solution to the classical problem of accommodating diversity by negotiating a different kind of civic identity (Kymlicka, 1995): that of hybridity. The comedians themselves are the clearest examples of this, as their enunciative position is that of the trickster who mediate between cultures and thus ultimately brings about something new: a proof that one can be both immigrant *and* Scandinavian. The playful recognition of Scandinavian immigration comedy is hence not a recognition of minorities per se, and especially not of ethnic boundaries, but of interaction, interplay, diversity and fusion – the melting pot rather than the salad bowl.

Again, we see how this is done through working with humour's inherent tension between the conservative and the creative: What is established as existing, important, and even problematic cultural differences are reproduced, but also played with and thus used to create something new. The reworking of negative emotions into

positive is also an important part of this: Fear and alienation is turned into joy and communitas. Finally, all this can be done because it is done through play, which is fundamentally unserious, but nevertheless has a reference to the serious world by addressing real talking points and themes from the immigration discourse. At the same time, by being playful, the diaspora comedy shows create their own space and signal that they are not to be taken seriously. This do somehow disconnect them from the serious world and its concerns, which begs the question of how efficient they really are and can be. This question of causality is of course the hardest question to answer when researching opinion formation processes in the public sphere, at least on stages like this, before the formal and semi-formal procedures of deliberation. It can probably only be answered tentatively and based on theory: By being an alternative space, breaking with the boundaries set by the serious discourse, comedy has the power to do things which cannot be done in the serious public sphere, and to address the immigration issue in a more free and fundamentally different way. If we accept the premise that the different parts of people's lifeworld all contribute to how they think and act about different social issues, there is thus at least an opportunity for comedy to matter.

Chapter 7: Concluding remarks

In this dissertation, I set out to answer *How can TV comedy thematising immigration contribute to public opinion formation on immigration in the larger public sphere?* I did this from the perspective of public sphere theory, through a text-focused, case based historical study of comedy shows, actors and events in the three Scandinavian countries – Norway, Sweden and Denmark.

Common for all my cases were that they can be considered as manifestations of *boundary struggles* in one way or another. Scandinavian immigration comedy, and the debates around it, have worked to preserve boundaries in this respect, as *moral guards* against anti-immigrant positions in the public sphere; but also worked to challenge boundaries by being means of *access* for immigrants. Furthermore, as attempts of *politicisation* of the issues of symbolic racism and the limits of humour, debates about immigration comedy have worked to both challenge and maintain boundaries. Finally, immigration comedy shows made by and for immigrants themselves, *diaspora humour*, have through their *playful recognition* of ethnic difference worked as *alternative spaces* to the more problem-oriented serious public sphere, thus challenging its boundaries in a different, and perhaps more radical, way than usually described in the literature on boundary struggles.

These different forms of boundary work were all done through the special characteristics of the comedy genre that stems from its dominating element: the humorous mode. I have conceptualised these characteristics as *unsolvable and productive tensions*: Between humour's *unseriousness* and its *use for serious means*, between humour as *conventional, conservative and suppressive* and *creative, radical and subversive*, and finally between humour as a facilitator of both *emotional investment* and *emotional detachment* – which also includes a tension between *positive* and *negative emotions*. These tensions are intertwined and tend to depend on each other in various ways. My most central argument has been that humour is not inherently conservative nor inherently radical, but works politically through balancing

these two aspects, often by using conservative, or conventional, impulses to do something new, or radical. Scandinavian diaspora humour does for example frequently use well established ethnic stereotypes, but instead of using them to problematise the existence of ethnic difference, the stereotypes are played with in such a way that ethnic difference appears less dramatic.

In this concluding chapter, I will first sum up how the analyses of my cases have answered my research questions, before I address some limitations of this study. Finally, I revisit the three main arguments I advanced in the introduction, in order to make clear the contribution of this dissertation.

7.1. The research questions revisited.

My overarching research question, how can TV comedy thematising immigration contribute to public opinion formation on immigration in the larger public sphere, was divided into three sub-questions, which again have been answered by analysing four sets of cases, of which two sets consisted of comedy shows and two sets consisted of comedy reception – and all sets were in different ways viewed as comedy events. My discussions in each chapter will here be synthesised under the heading of each research question.

- 1. How can comedy events be historicised as parts of changes in the public sphere and its treatment of the immigration issue in Denmark, Norway and Sweden?*

The rationale behind this sub-question was that public opinion formation ultimately has to be thought of as a historical process, a process of change – or lack thereof. With the multitude of comedy shows, actors, and events in mind, it was necessary to establish a strategy behind my selection of cases. Hence, this research question was important to qualify that the comedy events I selected indeed were historically and theoretically interesting, but it was also paramount for advancing my methodological argument, defending a textual-historical view of public opinion formation.

The core idea behind this, drawing on Foucault's discourse theory, is that any text at the same time depends on, stages, and alters the relevant discourse system. Immigration comedy is dependent on the existing rules and conventions governing both comedy and the broader immigration discourse, and different aspects of these discourses are brought to the forefront in each instance of immigration comedy. Since there always will be something new and unique with each single text, or enunciation, they will also slightly change the discourses they are a part of. Viewed from a more rhetorical perspective, inspired by Warner, Hauser, and Skinner, comedy texts, and the discourses about them, can thus be viewed as *interventions* in the processes of opinion formation regarding immigration in the public sphere, and their character as such are discussed by answering RQ 2 and RQ 3, which I will return to shortly.

That being said, it is unlikely that each and every one of all the comedy shows that can be termed immigration comedy were equally interesting as parts of processes of public opinion formation. I therefore looked for cases that could be seen as discursive *events* where comedy intervened in the public sphere's treatment of the immigration issue in a new way. Inspired by Foucault, I was interested in *ruptures* in immigration comedy, when different discourses, or different series of texts, started to interact in a new way. For my purpose, this meant identifying instances when the relationship between the public sphere and immigration comedy *changed* in one way or another – especially if changes in the public sphere *and* changes in comedy happened seemingly independently of each other but nevertheless intersected and created second-order changes.

I identified four such ruptures that also were useful to think with, in terms of theory development, about the relationship between comedy and politics. The first, discussed in chapter 3, was how the so-called hardening of humour, an aesthetical development in public service comedy connected to the development of a broader Western sensibility where transgressive aesthetics and a special use of irony were central features, intersected with new political and discursive roles of anti-immigration right wing populist parties. Satirical instances of the new, harder humour thus became a part of the moralistic mobilisation against these parties.

The second rupture, the topic of chapter 4, consisted of how another aesthetical development of comedy, the advent of stand-up comedy, intersected with the emergence of immigrant voices in the Scandinavian public spheres. This led to immigrant comedians gaining personal access to the public sphere, but also to their moulding into certain enunciative positions that made it possible to understand them as *legitimate* immigrant voices. Stand-up thus became a tool for access and voice into the serious public sphere.

The third rupture, which is treated in chapter 5, pertains to when immigration comedy itself became politicized when it was accused of being racist. As a humour controversy, such debates are clear instances of the intersection between the unserious realm of comedy and the serious realm of debate, since comedy itself becomes the issue of debate. However, such controversies happen regularly, and are thus harder to understand as ruptures. My solution was to analyse how they actually worked as politicisation and contrasting them with earlier and later humour controversies about racist representations. Following this, my Swedish and Danish case could thus clearly be seen as ruptures, since they had different character than earlier controversies of the same kind regarding the plurality of participants and the temperature of the debate. They also had traceable outcomes, especially the Swedish case, which had legal consequences that again can be traced in how Swedish immigration humour later was more cautious in the treatment of ethnic stereotypes and especially racial slur.

The fourth rupture, discussed in chapter 6, was the intersection of the gradual developments of narrowcasting and of immigrant audiences, and perhaps even publics, in the Scandinavian countries. Growing immigrant populations, together with the new public service logic – and commercial logic – behind narrowcasting, were new material and ideological traits of the Scandinavian public spheres that made possible what I call *diaspora comedy*: comedy made by immigrants, about immigrant characters, and clearly with an immigrant audience in mind.

All these ruptures were historical processes that per se are broader than public opinion formation, but they also altered the constraints and opportunities of opinion formation in the public sphere. Thus, it is interesting to see how these new opportunities and constraints were used by the means of public opinion formation:

texts and their interaction. To analyse the texts that were a part of these changes, is thus a fruitful strategy to understand how they could do special work, intervene, and contribute to the treatment of the immigration issue.

2. *How are questions of immigration addressed and negotiated in the comedy texts that are part of such events?*

In chapter 3 and 6, I analysed two types of comedy shows that have been important in Scandinavian immigration comedy: Satire ridiculing xenophobia in its various guises, and diaspora comedy, shows made by immigrants, about immigrants, and with an imagined immigrant audience in mind. The shows I discussed in these chapters addressed and negotiated two important issues in the immigration debate: The position of anti-immigration right-wing populist parties and the status of ethnic difference. Both types of shows can be seen as participating in boundary struggles, but of two very different characters: While the satirical shows reinforced existing moral boundaries in the immigration debate, the diaspora comedy worked around the ethnic boundaries in the public sphere by creating an alternative space where ethnic difference was represented as less significant.

Common for both types of shows was how they used the humorous mode to do things that rarely is done by serious genres, although with almost opposite logics: The satirical shows, *O.J. – En utstrakt hånd* and *Grotesco*, was a means to carry out not only aggression, but *joy through aggression*, towards right-wing populist parties. Thus, they were placed outside the moral boundaries of the public sphere, a common exercise in the immigration debate. The two shows nevertheless contributed something special since they added an affective texture to this by means of their joy through aggression, which can make the process of putting the right-wing parties outside the moral boundaries feel good, and thus make the boundary work appear more morally self-evident. It is also worth noting that the shows' aggression was directed not only towards the narratives and talking points of the two parties, i.e. their policy and ideology, but to a large degree towards the *persons* behind the parties –politicians and electorate. This adds to the level of aggression performed through these satirical

shows, and demonstrate how satire and humour can do things other genres and mode (typically) cannot: While harsh condemnation of policy is not only common but also accepted in the serious debate, personal attacks and ridicule of people is viewed as more problematic – it will at least not be actively facilitated in prime time by public service broadcasters, something harsh satire actually is.

The two shows worked with the tensions inherent in the humorous mode: Their transgressions were made possible by using irony to balance commitment with detachment, and they did their boundary work by joining in on common and dominant tendencies in the public sphere – the condemnation of right-wing populist parties – but nevertheless adding something new: affective texture through ridicule. This also points towards their play with emotions: Negative and positive emotions were combined, not only in the form of joy through aggression, but also by aiming at different affective responses in different audiences, as ridicule at least presupposes that the butt of the joke feels embarrassed, and those who laugh feel morally superior.

This play with emotions, and the other tensions of humour, was also central in the diaspora comedy. The central contribution of these comedy shows can be termed *playful recognition*, where ethnic differences that normally are framed as problematic were played with, and thus saturated with emotions of joy and communitas. One important strategy here was to address ethnic stereotypes that often are connected with fear in the serious debate, like the criminal immigrant or the veiled woman, and play with it in order to diminish this fear. Play is of course also a fundamentally unserious way of approaching the world: Instead of following conventional rules, acting goal-oriented and with logical outcomes in mind, one abolishes all these concerns and creates one's own logic. Nevertheless, this kind of play had a serious aspect because it addressed and negotiated something serious, the immigration debate, and in order to do so had to follow some of its conventions, with in this respect mainly was ethnic and cultural stereotypes and their relation to concerns in the immigration debate, like questions on Norwegian values, the tension between different view on love and family or the immigrant-dense suburb. This points towards how the diaspora shows worked with humour's tension between conservative and radical: To some degree, it

reproduced stereotypes by heavily relying on them to create funniness, but at the same time, the shows can be interpreted as subverting them by different means.

The outcome of this subversion can from a public sphere perspective be analysed as playful recognition, where ethnic difference is made less important and immigrant comedians thus put forward a statement, but also create a space, where immigrants are parts of the Scandinavian nations on equal terms as majority Danes, Norwegians, and Swedes – not because their ethnocultural difference is rejected, but because its significance as a boundary for belonging to the nation is downplayed. Thus, also these kind of shows participate in boundary struggles, but in a particular way: Through play, comedy can do something unique by creating an alternative space with different rules than the serious public sphere, but a space that nevertheless feeds into the mainstream since play always mirrors the serious world in one way or another.

3. *How are questions of immigration addressed and negotiated in the public comedy reception that are part of such events?*

In chapter 4 and 5, I analysed the reception of two different kind of comedy events: The advent of stand-up comedians with an immigrant background, and humour controversies over racism and humour. Both these sets of cases should be regarded as meta-discussions about immigration and the public sphere, where respectively matters of immigrants' access to the public sphere and the problem of racist representations were the questions addressed and negotiated. Common for both these sets of cases were that different interpretive repertoires regarding the political and cultural value of comedy were mobilised to do so. Both in press coverage of the stand-up comedians, and in the defence of comedy shows accused of racism, a repertoire I have termed *Humour as a special form of truth-telling* was frequent. The manifestation of this repertoire did of course depend on each specific situation, where they in different ways addressed and negotiated the serious immigration discourse by interacting with, and being coloured by, repertoires, issues and talking points that were prevalent in the current debate. Shared traits in the manifestations of the repertoire were how transgressive humour is valuable because it is a way to bypass taboos and prejudice in

different way and thus arrive at a more correct picture of immigrant life and multicultural Scandinavia. This repertoire was also clearly connected to freedom, both when it was used to understand stand-up comedians as underdogs, and when used to understand transgressive humour as liberatingly politically incorrect. It thus emphasised how the unseriousness of humour, here in the form of rule-breaking, has a serious value. In addition, it often worked in tandem with a different repertoire, *Islam as a killjoy*, of which the idea that Muslims do not have humour often is an important part. The prevalence of these repertoires, and their foundation in cultural ideas with a long history in the Western world, points towards an interesting manifestation of the tension between the conservative and the radical aspects of humour: It is mainstream to expect and endorse that humour should be transgressive, taboo-breaking and give new insights. This again could serve subversive ends, as the background for establishing new enunciative positions in the public sphere, when comedians like Shabana Rehman and Omar Marzouk gained access to the public sphere as well as legitimacy as immigrant voices. That being said, it could also serve conservative ends, when used as a power mechanism against minorities who attempt to politicise symbolic racism, as criticism of comedy tended to be refuted with accusations of political correctness.

This points towards how the two sets of cases were different forms of boundary struggles where immigrants manoeuvred themselves into the public sphere: The cultural value of comedy became a means for individual immigrant actors to access the serious public sphere and become legitimated as immigrant voices. However, they also eventually got their enunciative position moulded and to some degree reified – the way they manoeuvred to get access would also form constraints that at times have made their positions in the public sphere difficult to have. The criticism of comedy, on the other hand, worked as attempts to politicise symbolic racism, but often also turned into debates about the limit of humour and how transgressive comedy and satire should be allowed to be. Thus, both cases illustrate, in different ways, how the cultural understandings of comedy can be used to address and negotiate meta-questions of the relationship between immigration and the public

sphere and thus serve as strategical tools, but also how these cultural understandings create constraints for the actors making use of comedy – or opposing it.

Taken together, these three sub-questions can be summarised to answer my main research question, how can TV comedy thematising immigration contribute to public opinion formation on immigration in the larger public sphere. I mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation that the word “how” should be read as referring to both *what kind of* contribution comedy did, and *by which means* it did so. The kind of contribution all my cases did in the Scandinavian public sphere can be summarised as *boundary struggles*, and the comedy events were part of these boundary struggles by means of *the productive tensions* that are the most important particularities of humour. I will return to these two answers soon, when discussing them and this dissertation as a whole is a contribution to the fields of humour studies and public sphere studies, but before doing that, I will address some limitations of the thesis.

7.2. Limitations of the study

The main limitation of this study is that it cannot establish any *causal* relationship between what goes on in the cultural public sphere and the outcome of opinion formation, meaning of changed attitudes and, more importantly, substantive political decisions. However, this is a general limitation of research on public opinion and on the public sphere. The empirical reality of the public sphere is messy, and it is regardless of genre hard to establish how all the published opinions that are part of it contribute to the theoretical construct that is public opinion – and how this again has policy consequences. In my view, researching how specific published opinions – texts – can be understood and conceptualised as parts of the historical processes of opinion formation, is the theoretically soundest way to go.

That being said, to be able to do such conceptualisations require the support of other types of research, which looks at audiences, institutions, and production processes – perhaps even on media effects. In this regard, I do side with Young (2018) and Holbert and Young (2012) in their call for looking across discipline and method in

research in political humour. My contribution to this has been to combine social and democratic theory with textual analysis, cultural history, and more aesthetically oriented perspectives from the humanities. Moving further on from this, many of my theoretically motivated claims can be significantly substantiated, some of them perhaps even tested empirically, by studies using other perspectives and methods. The concept of *playful recognition* does for example call for interview studies investigating if minority audiences really experience this kind of recognition when watching diaspora comedy. I have also already mentioned that expert interviews and more sociologically oriented studies of institutions would be useful to better understand how the first immigrant stand-up comedians gained access to the public sphere. Finally, effect studies could yield interesting results regarding the moral boundary work conducted by satirical shows discussed in chapter 3, as it is possible to deduce multiple hypothesis from the discussion in this chapter. The problem is of course that the process of opinion formation moves swiftly, and these shows and the socio-political context they were part of are already long gone.

Another possible strategy could be to backtrack a specific piece of legislation and show how different mechanisms in the public sphere were instrumental in arriving at it. This approach could perhaps more clearly establish the empirical relationships between the workings of the public sphere and their outcome as policy, and thus point towards a possible limitation of this thesis. This different kind of historical method has been used by Engelken-Jorge (2018) in a study on abolition of military service in respectively Spain and Germany, from the perspective of deliberative systems theory. Engelken-Jorge focuses on how conscription was problematised in public discourse, meaning looking at when actors explicitly reject the necessity and desirability of conscription (2018, p. 146). The impact of workings in the public sphere are then established by backtracking from a specific political outcome, abolition of military service, by inspecting how this issue has been problematised through history. This way, the study seeks to establish that problematisation indeed played a role in not only public opinion formation, but also will formation, regarding military service in the two countries.

While this study is empirically rigorous and makes a convincing case for the validity of its claim, it only covers a tiny tab of everything that goes on in the processes of will and opinion formation. It also conflates public opinion formation with its desired outcome, will formation, and therefore falls short in understanding how opinion formation is a process on its own merits, with different outcomes and functions than mere policy making. Furthermore, despite the study's home in a systemic perspective, it pays little attention to how the mechanism of problematisation interacts with other parts of the deliberative system. This is probably how it needs to be in order to firmly indicate causal relations, but problematic when it comes to complex issues like the immigration issue, which cannot be reduced to the outcome of one single law-making process or one single topic subject to problematisation. Issues like immigration are central issues for late modern democracies, and knowledge about the opinion formation around them are relevant for both communication theory, social theory and social practise. For this kind of issues, departing from the empirical processes of opinion formation rather than backtracking from their outcome seems more promising.

7.3. The dissertation's main contributions

In the introduction, I presented the three main arguments of the thesis, which are my main contribution: *The methodological argument*, *the empirical argument* and *the theoretical argument*.

The methodological argument has been that the relationship between the cultural and the political public sphere best can be analysed through a *textual-historical view of public opinion formation*. This has been my core methodical approach and consists of viewing public opinion formation as a process of change (or lack thereof), of which texts, or the content of the public sphere, plays a pivotal role. To understand public opinion formation, and thus also how expressive can be understood as an input to politics, it is useful to analyse how texts are active parts of this changes. This is founded on two basic assumptions: That texts should be analysed as interventions into current debates in the public sphere, and that such interventions

will both stage and alter the relevant discourses they are part of. Thus, any text can potentially contribute to the process of opinion formation, and it should be paid attention to both the particularities of each text as well as its context to understand how it does so.

That being said, the difference between my textual-historical view of opinion formation and more traditional approaches within textual analysis, rhetorical criticism or discourse studies, lies in how I suggest identifying ruptures, moments of change in the public sphere where different discourses started to interact in novel ways, in order to establish interesting cases for researching public opinion formation. This is especially the case when interested in text who are not part of explicitly deliberative debates. Such changes should be established in a positive way, meaning starting from observing the empirical features of the texts themselves and their relations to the material world rather than departing from theoretical concepts or textual interpretations. This kind of changes would mean that the texts of the public sphere, including expressive culture and comedy, is given new constraints and opportunities to intervene in the public sphere's treatment of different issues. To depart from this kind of changes, and analyse how specific, empirical instances of text are parts of them by intervening in debates that go on in the public sphere, constitutes the *textual-historical view of public opinion formation*, and is a new approach for understanding how expressive culture can contribute to the serious public sphere, or to put it more boldly: how the arts can play a political role.

In this dissertation, I have advanced my *empirical argument* by showing that one way that comedy can play such a role is by contributing to *boundary struggles*, the various contestation and negotiations of the borders and boundaries of the public sphere. Such boundary struggles pertain to many different processes, from drawing up the boundaries of what kind of speech acts or positions that are legitimate in the public sphere to the borders governing the inclusion and exclusion of actors and social groups. I have shown that comedy has contributed to a variety of these processes in the Scandinavian public spheres: Satirical shows have worked around the boundaries regulating aggression in the public sphere, and by this contributed to the making of moral boundaries that mark right-wing populist parties as delegitimate. The cultural

value of comedy and the easy access to the stand-up scene have together been means of access for individual immigrants to the public sphere, and also for their legitimisation as immigrant voices. Humour controversies are occasions for the politicisation of symbolic racism as well as boundary struggles about the limits of offensive comedy. Finally, diaspora humour forms an alternative space of playful recognition to the problem-oriented framing of ethnocultural difference dominant in the serious public sphere.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate why comedy has been an *important* part of the treatment of the immigration issue in the Scandinavian public sphere. First, the particularities of the humorous mode of communication has been done to do things other modes and genres cannot do, or at least to provide alternative opportunities for contributing to the public sphere. Satirical comedy is a very particular way of communicating that seems to license aggression that otherwise would not have been acceptable, and play is a way of communicating and experiencing the world that is if not unique for, at least strongly associated with comedy and humour. Stand-up as a way of access and comedy controversies, on the other hand, are alternative but efficacious ways to strategically overcome borders in the public sphere. Hence, comedy has been used to do work in the public sphere and even to do so better than other means in some respects.

Second, the processes of boundary struggle I have discussed in this thesis touch upon central questions in public sphere theory as well as the immigration debate: Questions like racism, political correctness, the role of right-wing populist parties, incivility and aggression, access for marginalised group and civic identity in the multicultural era. This shows that the contributions comedy has made are highly relevant for how the question of immigration has been treated in the Scandinavian public spheres, as well as for their continuous self-thematisation.

I have been reluctant to identify specific functions that comedy has in the public sphere, both because humour and comedy are very complex forms of communication and because I think it is more useful to identify contingent functions in light of the specific contexts where comedy is put to work. Nevertheless, it seems like it is possible to analytically generalise and claim that boundary work is a central

function comedy plays in the public sphere. To some degree, this is a loose claim, as the concept boundary work is very wide and encompasses many different processes, as I have made clear by resorting to them in my analysis. Nevertheless, there is some theoretical backing to substantiate the claim, as well as making it more interesting: Since humour as a mode balances on many different boundaries in itself, or exists on the edge of transgression, so to speak, it might be especially well suited to conduct boundary work of many different kinds.

This leads me to my last argument, *the theoretical argument*, which I also view as the main contribution of this dissertation. This regards *how* humour is able to do the special contribution it does do, by looking at its particularities as a communicative mode. I suggest that we should approach these particularities as *unsolvable but productive tensions*, and have worked with three (and a half) such tensions in this thesis: The tension between humour as conventional, accepted, conservative and perhaps even suppressive; and as novel, complex, creative, transgressive, radical and perhaps even subversive; the tension between humour as an unserious mode and its use for serious means; and finally the tension(s) between humour as emotional investment and humour as emotional detachment, which also includes how it works with both negative and positive emotions.

These tensions should be understood as ways to describe what humour is and what it can do, but not as mutually exclusive forms of appearance or alternatives for action: The core of these tensions is that humour are all these things at the same time. As I have discussed in my theory chapter, research on the social and political aspects of humour and comedy tends to understand comedy as either a conventional/conservative or as a creative/radical force, and that can lead to begging the question in empirical analyses of the politics of humour. I have shown in this study that it is more fruitful to depart from the assumption that comedy is both these things at the same time, and that it often uses its conventional and conservative aspects to do creative and radical things, that again can feed into more conventional or hegemonic processes in the public sphere or to creative and subversive ones. This tension has been most central in my work, but I have also shown how this is intertwined with the tensions between serious-unserious and the tensions regarding emotion and affect.

Regarding the latter, this thesis also gives a contribution: Different versions of superiority theory, for example, tends to be most interested in *either* the feeling of “sudden glory” or the feeling of being ridiculed, but as I have argued in my chapter about hard satirical shows, their political function cannot be fully understood if we don’t assess how these two affective dimensions both are put to work in the public sphere and depend on each other.

To approach humour’s particularities as unsolvable and productive tensions is thus a contribution to humour studies in general and research on the political and social role of humour and comedy in particular. More indirectly, it is also a contribution to public sphere theory, as it demonstrates that texts, and other phenomena for that matter, that appear as messy, complex and ambiguous nevertheless can be interesting in the process of public opinion formation, which at least by some tends to be viewed as a goal-oriented, formulaic and rule-governed process.

In sum, this point towards at least three lines of future research. One would be to use the textual-historical view of opinion formation to investigate other contexts, issues, modes and genres, preferably taking of the challenge and investigating how other messy things in the public sphere work by being messy, like other forms of expressive culture but also complex social movement like the women’s movement, the gay movement, working class movements and the environmental movement. Another line of research would be to depart from my findings regarding how comedy has contributed to the boundary struggles of the Scandinavian public sphere, by using different kinds of perspectives and methods and thus contributing to a rich, interdisciplinary understanding of public opinion formation. Finally, how the productive tensions of the humorous mode work in other contexts would be an interesting line of research, which can significantly develop our understanding of why and how humour and comedy matter in our lives and societies.

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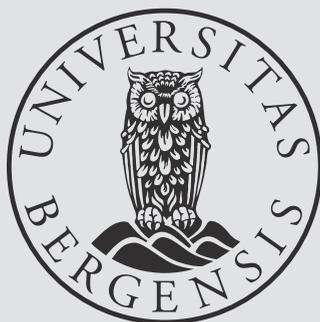
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