

## **Laughter and revelation: A *Sideways* look at humour in film**

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I live in constant endeavour to fence against the infirmities of ill health, and other evils of life, by mirth; being firmly persuaded that every time a man smiles, - but much more so, when he laughs, that it adds something to this Fragment of Life.

Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*

Cheerfulness cannot be excessive but is always good... laughter and joking are pure joy.

Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*

Humour in film, as in life delights in revealing the ludicrous and often contradictory aspects of the human drama. As a dramatic technique humour is used to characterise, create empathy, release tension, provide contrast and conflict, conceal exposition, and of course make us laugh. As one of the varieties of the comic it provides pleasure and distracts us from painful feelings. (Sigmund Freud 2002, p. 222). To see the humorous side is to rise above calamity, disaster or the merely quotidian disappointments of life that might otherwise overwhelm the childish self. As such, it exalts the adult ego, and a sense of humour can be seen as an essential element of true adulthood, making us feel good about ourselves even at the expense of others. As a response to terrible events and threats, a humorous indifference can reveal a greatness of spirit even as it defends against a painful reality. The early Greek medical philosophers encouraged humour as a defence against illness and depression, a defence that of course can also deflect. The use of humour can be a strategy of avoidance, a way of not dealing with real pain and anger, a resistance to some particular change by laughing at everything. The aim of humour is always to make (some) people smile but better still, laugh.

Laughter, it is claimed, is exclusive to human beings as it defines something essential about being human and points to the serious importance of play in our lives and the complex interlocking needs that are social, psychological and physiological. The need to mock authority or those whose behaviour we despise or find risible, the need for release. Laughter can flow from a sense of superiority or the comedic viewpoint can liberate, open up new possibilities, new ways of being and thinking and communality. Humour as technique has a place in most kinds of stories but where it is most centrally important is in comedy. Film has its own specific comedy genres: slapstick, screwball, romantic. But they all draw upon the comedic tradition with its origins in Greek drama. The seasonal cycle of ritual and fertility, the Dionysian celebration of life, where reason and authority are overthrown and in their place travesty, sexual licence and the inversion of ideal human qualities are played out in intoxication and phallic procession. These are the vital origins of the drama with its archetypal themes of sin and redemption, death and rebirth.

*Sideways* (2004) is a contemporary film that places itself firmly within this comedic tradition, playing on our experience of the classic comedy built around stock characters, a problem to be solved, a communal celebration and a happy ending. Two middle-aged men, Miles and Jack, take to the road to have a week's holiday from responsibility and convention sampling fine wines in a trip through California's central coast. Jack is a rich, dumb, good-looking actor, about to be married at the end of the week and determined to have a wild sexual time, while Miles is a poor, uptight, depressive wine connoisseur still suffering from a recent divorce and failed ambitions to be a writer, who must soon return to his boring teaching job. There are traces of comic archetypes here: the swaggering soldier, the impractical young man, the Fool and the Trickster. Both are moving *sideways* through life, unable to deal with problems directly. Jack faced with marriage and commitment wants to return to his time as a freedom loving rake and Miles caught in an endless re-run of his life's failures just wants to drink fine wines and eat good food: one seeks oblivion in sex the other in the intoxication of wine. But Miles is also tempted by the possibility of moving *forward* when Jack arranges a date with Maya, and Jack, while driven by his lustful self, is conflicted by the reminders from Miles that this might not be the best way to begin married life. The humour arises from the conflict between the two contrasting characters with their differing desires but also the internal conflict generated by the fact that what they want they also *don't* want at the same time. This double act (ego/id) both external and internal provides the trigger for laughter: the audience recognizes the dissembling and are reminded of their own conflicted selves (Stott, 2005, p.9).

The source of the comedy lies not only in the classic Dionysian setting of liberation and festivity but in this conflict

and contrast between reason and vulgarity, sobriety and joviality. Miles wants to sample the best wines and have interesting conversation while Jack just wants to party and get laid. In this situation we have the original comedic impulse to laugh at the rigid and inflexible, to mock the myopic intellectual who'd rather talk than act. Even when Miles finds a possible new love he is unable to respond instinctively or sensually. In another comedy the balance of empathy would be with Jack, the lover of life, impulsively falling in love and grabbing the moment against the miserable depressive who steals from his mother and lies to his best friend. In a narcissistic culture of consumption where hedonism is the norm, Jack is surely the more natural man and Miles the repressed party pooper. But this is a more nuanced drama, where humour and laughter conceal barely repressed anger and hurt as well as a lack of knowledge of each other and themselves. Jack is kind but superficial completely selfish and lacking in responsibility. As well as being stupid and reckless he lacks any empathy for how others may be affected by his actions. This is what draws the audience in and tempers the laughter and the incompleteness of both characters reminds us of our own lack, our impulsiveness, our lies, our fear of failure, our lack of self-awareness. It is both funny and touching to watch our subtle and ambiguous selves reduced to the one dimension of monstrous activity as they often are when overwhelmed, intoxicated, obsessed. Comic humans are incomplete but there is something almost sacred in the idea that in comedy and through humour there is always a more serious impulse at play, whether it is the revelation of psychological darkness or spiritual imperfection.

The humour in *Sideways* becomes harder to sustain as the suffering humans are placed under increasing pressure: the consequences of their own bad behaviour and the humiliation of rejection. Humour can no longer defend the characters or the audience from essential truths but it can help reveal who they might be and suggest where redemption or release might lie. For all their narcissism they help each other. Jack supports Miles in his ambitions to be a published writer and initiates the relationship with Maya who may ultimately reanimate Miles's life while Miles saves Jack's wedding by risking himself in recovering the ring and allowing Jack to crash his car as an excuse for Jack's broken nose. There is serious intent in the humorous unfolding of events, having fun is complicated and not always funny for everyone, irresponsible licentiousness comes at a cost to others and while the ending follows the festive closure of conventional comedy there is no real sense of celebration. As Jack slips on the ring to his beloved and Miles climbs the stairs to meet with Maya they are both hopeful, but have either of them really changed? Maya is the one character who has dealt with her difficulties and disappointments in a temperate and thoughtful way and her example may yet draw Miles into a more creative and less foolish future. Comedy can reveal our vices and foibles, and with good humour we can learn to live with them, maybe even change our obsessions or recalibrate our focus of attention. But we are who we are: confused, ambiguous creatures whose rational plans and projects are constantly confounded by unconscious desire and life's contingencies. Comedy is as much at the ontological centre of our lives as tragedy: opening up our understanding. Films that make us laugh at ourselves remind us that we need a sense of humour to survive and that used creatively in the tragic-comic mix of life and drama the ensuing laughter will not be at the expense of others, but in the revelation and celebration of our shared humanity.

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