

### Surprise/Subversion:

A cornerstone of contemporary American humor is the idea of the surprise, especially in the form of the subversion of the audience's expectation. For instance, what is funny about Thurber's memoirs (as well as Buster Keaton, Jack Benny, and Groucho Marx) is the ability to look at insanity and respond with "deadpan," turning what could be tragedy into comedy. This is a proof of the Horace Walpole quote, "life is a comedy to the man who thinks, and a tragedy to the man who feels." Another source of such subversion is the liberal use of the "surreal" -- think, for instance, of Harpo Marx's mania for cutting things off displayed in *Duck Soup*, or of flowers sprouting on top of Elmer Fudd's head in the mock heroic "Rabbit of Seville," or Ernie Kovacs's "Kitchen Symphony" or "Musical Office," or Lily Tomlin's "Lucille W., Rubber Freak," or Wanda Sykes's detachable body parts, or, indeed, the entire contents of Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*. Some of the surprises that we have seen perpetrated on the audience in the texts we have viewed and read recently include the following: The "happy ending" subverted (think about the ending of both *Blazing Saddles* and *Some Like It Hot*); the subversion of the traditional version of "The American Dream" (think about Dave Chappelle's version of the story of Rick James; or Eddie Murphy on what happens when he talks with his childhood heroes, Bill Cosby and Richard Pryor; or Bill Cosby's accounts of growing up in "Go Karts" and "The Chicken Heart"; or *The Producers*'s Max Bialistock becoming rich by sleeping with elderly women); the subversion of the idea of "freedom" ("We're Going to War" in *Duck Soup*; the *Blazing Saddles* accounting of the peopling of the West, etc.); and of the "Manly American Male" (*Some Like It Hot*; "Running Faggot Running Free" from *The Kids in the Hall*; Margaret Cho on her daddy; Ernie Kovacs as Percy Dovetonsils, etc.)

### Imitation/Appropriation:

A second major source is Imitation and Appropriation; this refers specifically to the power of dressing up and imitating those who have traditionally been identified as less-powerful, less-privileged, or as people who have had to fight for a place at the table in the "Land of the Free": slaves, former slaves, and Blacks; racial and ethnic minorities; women; gay people; the underclass; and other groups which have at different times been targeted or excluded from the American polity. Sometimes this humor takes the form of making fun of these groups; but sometimes -- and this is what we are focusing on here -- this takes the form of imitating (dressing up as) those groups, or even borrowing (stated in the negative as "appropriation") from them to posit a new position for oneself, even if you don't come from that community yourself. For instance, the use of Blackface by immigrant comedians -- most notably by the Jewish singer Al Jolson -- is an example of a person who was classified as nonwhite using an already-established

American tradition to gain a place for his own identity (hidden behind the Blackface) to be present as an *American* identity; it is an example of aligning with the powers that are (white and Anglo Saxon) even while noting that Black culture (Jazz and Blues traditions, especially) are among the most *American* of traditions -- truly grown out of the American experience of traditions brought from the old country and then shaped by conditions encountered in the history of the country (for Blacks, African musical traditions tempered by European religious music within the slavery tradition, and then made into a new, born-in-America musical form).

While Blackface (and specifically Minstrelsy) is the most prominent American example of imitation, there is also a strong tradition of Drag -- the obvious (in the same way that Blackface is "obvious") dressing up in the clothing and mask of a gender other than your own. Examples of this abound in American humor (think, for instance, of the character of the eccentric director in *The Producers* or numerous examples of Bugs Bunny in a dress). Sometimes drag is presented as funny because of its challenge/threat to heteronormative sexuality (jokes about "fairies" and "queens" -- as in *Blazing Saddles*, "He's hit Bunny! Get him girls!") and sometimes as funny because men in skirts and high heels are awkward (or surprising; see above). The film *Some Like It Hot* is a prime example: the sexual byplay of Jack Lemmon's character with the millionaire who pursues him while he's in drag (see the ending: "Nobody's perfect!"); Lemmon's awkwardness as a woman, all Adam's apple and kneecaps; and the shock of how conventionally attractive Tony Curtis is as a woman in makeup and a tight skirt (think here of Garth's question, in *Wayne's World*, if he's gay because he finds Bugs Bunny attractive in a dress) present an impressive array of ways drag "works" in American humor. An interesting twist on all of this is Jack Benny's persona -- while Benny was not gay, he did present himself as a kind of effeminate man for humorous effect; see also the Ernie Kovacs's "Percy Dovetonsils" character for this tradition.

#### Assimilation/Inclusion:

Rolled up in the issue of Imitation and Appropriation is the struggle of people who actually *are* members of the targeted/excluded group to have a voice of their own, to make their own experiences and views heard, and to refuse to allow imitations that make fun of their struggle stand as representations of them. American humor tends to address the struggle over assimilation by making jokes about how hard it is to fit into society, or how ridiculous it is when a person doesn't or can't. But there is also an argument put forward by members of these marginalized communities that the "normative" identity (that which is "unmarked" in American society and need not be identified by other terms such as "Black," "woman," "gay," "disabled," etc.) is not, in fact, that "normal" or "common." This resistance to the normative setting an agenda about what it means to be "American" is a powerful force in "ethnic" or "gender" humor"; you can see it reflected in standup routines from comedians of those identities discussing what it means to be that identity (for instance, Chris Rock on "Black People versus

Niggaz"; or George Lopez on "Trying to Be White"; or Wanda Sykes on detachable parts or "Why Women Snap"; or Margaret Cho on "Being Gay") -- one thing to note is who the intended audience for these comments is; the fact that they are intended to reach *that* audience, rather than some imagined white/male/heterosexual normative audience is itself subversive.

This is what is going on when Chris Rock, for instance, discusses the very small window of time and experience that allows white people to call a Black person by the "N-word," or when Larry Wilmore states when it is okay for people to appear in Blackface ("when your face is Black"), or when Richard Pryor responds to the N-word with its pair-word ("*dead* Honky"). When Eddie Murphy engages in a reverse Blackface to reveal what white people do when Black people aren't present, he is both lampooning the shallowness of those who look at minstrelsy as representing the reality of Black experience (his comment that whites walk with "their asses real tight" and his rehearsing whiteness by reading greeting cards out loud), and also pointing out that he won't allow white privilege to go uncommented upon ("I've got a lot of friends, and we've got a lot of makeup"). An example of a strong statement of the refusal of Black artists to allow Blackface to stand for Black experience is Spike Lee's powerful *Bamboozled*. Parallel to the struggle of Blacks against Blackface is that engaged in by Jewish Americans (for instance Mel Brooks); Latinos (for instance, George Lopez); gay Americans (such as The Kids in the Hall's Scott Thompson, who would have a stroke to hear me call him an American, but hey); or women (such as Lily Tomlin or Margaret Cho). These traditions start from the argument that if I can make you laugh, I can make you take me seriously, too. And it is worth noting that instances of imitation and appropriation surge at moments when the real people being imitated make important social gains (for instance, the sudden appearance of minstrelsy at the moment when the U.S. has elected its first Black President), which indicates that at least part of the imitation/appropriation story is about counteracting that empowerment and containing the perceived threat that poses to white/straight/male privilege.