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This issue is dedicated to the memory of Maresa Sanniti di Baja

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Giuseppe Balirano

Humourless Indians? A Multidisciplinary Approach to 'Diasporic' Humour in Ethnic Media Productions

We live in ideas. Through images we seek to comprehend our world. And through images we sometimes seek to subjugate and dominate others. But picture-making, imagining, can also be a process of celebration, even of liberation. New images can chase out the old.[*]

Some premises

The transnational migration of images and sounds, commodities and peoples, re-shapes national identities and moulds mutual belonging into new, hybrid, hyphenated products. That is why the discourse on the media should reflect on the multicultural symbiotic transformation that television, the cinema, the internet and the so-called 'new media' have operated on their mass audience, by converting the Objects/Others into Subjects/Selves who, in turn, are now investigating the formerly ruling Eurocentric narratives.

Technologies mediate between reality and reality representations relating to wider social transformations, and in particular the media – complicated polysemic architectures of technologies, texts, contexts, processes, ideas, information, and excesses – aim at helping us experience the world beyond the space we occupy. They do so by constructing multiple relationships between the audience and the real world; they mediate between us and reality creating

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[*] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta Books, 1992).

a version of the world for our consumption. Their operating in the space between the viewing, listening or reading audience and the wide world outside enacts several functions: cultural, social, economic, political, ideological and national. One of the most important functions of the dominant ideology of a country fostered by the media, and in particular by Television, is to establish and maintain a cohesive national identity, so that the representing/represented nation can be wholly engaged in the common perception of the same *Self*. This is a performative function since it advances a social and shared dialectics, giving people common reference points, and has the primary task of encouraging a sense of loyalty and/or patriotism. Indeed, issues of patriotism have often played a fundamental role in shaping and strengthening the connotation of a national identity in opposition to the emerging and disturbing spectrum of *otherness*.[1]

Yet, by reaching distant peoples, the media have inadvertently or intentionally provided the many 'voices' and the several colours from *elsewhere* with a possible 'home'. It is this newly de-colonised territory which has led the British national and 'traditional' media production centres – the BBC, for instance – to change direction in the encounter with the multicultural stories which now submerge and 'stain' the original centre, or rather the many centres of numerous contemporary western cities. It is this stain which, flowing into the mainstream culture, is widening its borders, occupying unexplored, un-homely and resistant territories which are inevitably bound to draw new lines, new geographies, new languages and transform national identities into multicultural hybridisations facilitating tolerance and mutual understanding.

This paper, on the grounds of this last assumption, investigates the possibility of identifying the hybrid concept of 'diasporic humour' through the analysis of the Brit-Asian TV series *Goodness Gracious Me!* (*GGM*) produced and aired by BBC2 in 1998, which was very favourably received – on a very large scale –by the British

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[1] See Herbert C. Kelman, "Nationalism, Patriotism, and National Identity: Social-psychological Dimensions", in Daniel Bar-Tal & Ervin Staub, eds., *Patriotism in theLlife of Individuals and Nations* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1997), 165-189.

public. In order to define Diasporic Humour,[2] I have focused on the multimodal linguistic analysis of a short visual humorous sequence from the sketch-show, attempting to locate some linguistic and, in particular, pragmatic strategies underlining the rationale behind the political and social importance that *GGM*'s kind of humour achieves in the creation of a post-national, hybrid identity.

Humour and power

The contemporary hybrid condition of Britain may be analysed in view of the binary perception of the term 'Britishness' operated by Iain Chambers who highlights the existence of "two perspectives and two versions of 'Britishness'. One is Anglo-centric, frequently conservative, backward-looking, and increasingly located in a frozen and largely stereotyped idea of the national, that is English, culture. The other is ex-centric, open ended and multi-ethnic".[3] The polysemic term 'Britishness' is used here in the direction of a radical evaluation of power relations, developing it into a general plea for a more mutual assimilation where each attempt at cultural interlocution between the 'Anglo-centric' and the 'ex-centric' perspectives gives rise to deep transformations in both interlocutors, and inevitably allows the creation of new models of representation. These 'other' forms of narration, by *chasing out the old*, undermine the very texture of the collective imagery of a whole nation, which in Britain worked "as an apparatus for narrating the nation as a stable entity with a strong sense of its own identity, and its past achievements, and for securing an image of the nation as a knowable, organic community".[4]

In this hybrid period, what the others/migrants/hybrids re-*produce* is not a copy of the original product designed by the former occupants/rulers/colonisers, but a qualitatively different text, where misunderstandings amplify the doubts and ambivalences of pre-existing and/or contemporary Anglo-centric texts, rejecting their

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[2] On diasporic humour see also Giuseppe Balirano, *The Perception of Diasporic Humour: Indian English on TV* (Loreto: Tecnostampa, 2007).

[3] Iain Chambers, *Border Dialogues: Journey in Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, Comedia Book, 1990), 27.

[4] Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 274.

authorizing existence. The new ex-centric products seem to operate a textual mutiny against the national Anglo-centric discourse of cultural authority, providing the term Nation with a new multicultural, polycentric connotation, which inevitably intensifies the condition of its own system of cultural implications.[5]

At this point, especially since we are referring to a multicultural or hybrid nation such as the United Kingdom, in order to have a wide-ranging insight of the country's multi-ethnic identities and their accomplishments we shall necessarily and unashamedly apply a postcolonial framework of reference to media discourse. The term *hybrid* in postcolonial theory calls attention to the multiple identities generated by the geographical displacements, and assumes a theoretical perspective affected by anti-essentialist post-structuralism, which refuses to control identity along traditionalist positions. Post-colonial theory "emphasizes how hybridity and the power it releases may well be seen to be the characteristic feature and contribution of the post-colonial, allowing a means of evading the replication of binary categories of the past and developing new anti-monolithic models of cultural exchange and growth".[6]

Thus, occupying contradictory social and discursive spaces, hybridity, which is dynamic, mobile, fluid, versatile, less an accomplished blend or pre-arranged formula than an unstable assemblage of discourses, can be easily seen as a relentless process which preceded colonialism and will continue after it, enacting what Salman Rushdie defined, in the opening quotation, "a process of celebration, even of liberation".

Yet, when the ex-centric minorities, within the borders of their new *homes*, in order to strengthen their *different* individualities, turn their gaze ideally to former Motherlands so as to learn, imitate and re-locate newly-spread models of representation, with the purpose

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[5] In the words of Shohat and Stam, a radical multiculturalism enacts a deep transformation in any society since it "calls for a profound restructuring and reconceptualization of the power relations between cultural communities,… challenging the hierarchy that makes some communities 'minor' and 'normative'", Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism, Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1995), 47 [henceforth Shohat *et al*].

[6] Bill Ashcroft, G. Griffith and T. Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies* (London: Routledge, 1998), 183.

of reinforcing their hybrid condition from 'elsewhere', media politics draw back to their Eurocentric, nostalgic, conservative ideologies. The media overpoweringly object to such a 'liberating and celebrating' need of *their own* hyphenated citizens, by opposing a very negative image of the East which, as a result, becomes an inaccessible source for the diasporic subject. Accordingly, the distressing and recurring images trans-*lating* India, and the whole of the East in most cases, on Eurocentric screens foster a representation of a miserable country peopled, for example, by terrorists, homeless criminals, cannibals, maimed and tortured bodies. This anchored imagery indulges in the national instability of non-Western countries weakened by hunger, illnesses and partition, representing them as a site where only sorrow, mourning and tears seem to be 'at home'. This atrocity exhibition – frequently interrupted by playful TV advertisements representing a reassuring opulent West – induces audiences to perceive the East as the gloomy and uncanny *Other*, a distant location inhabited by forlorn barbarians who can only be seen as miserable and *humourless* aliens. And if 'through pictures we try to comprehend the world', the figure of the body/alterity typified on the screen conveys to the new hyphenated migrants the same impression the ruins might have conveyed to an Eighteenth century traveller to Greece, that is a *sublime* encounter with their Motherlands, since the body/ruins provoke, at the same time, a ghastly experience and a mysterious pleasure.[7]

The idea of the sublime is consequently built up on the divergent but complementary and simultaneous, image-led, unfocused, and political representation that the euro-centric media design for the East. Such false interpretations inevitably act to 'subjugate and dominate' the Other. The colonial body, anchored by the negative representation the West has construed for it, is therefore transformed into a terror-driven mechanism which helps to shape the stereotyped image of *otherness* as a gloomy and unpleasant experience. One of the most brutal stereotypes of Eurocentric societies is to designate any kind of minority group as a *humourless* community.

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[7] For a more detailed understanding of this specific use of the term *sublime*, see Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquire into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1759), part II.

Humour is a cognitive quality every human being innately owns, and since it should be obviously equally distributed in society, everyone who is considered *humourless* is downgraded to a miserable social de-humanizing position, since the lack of humour diminishes the very idea of humanity itself. That is why in a widely shared western imagery, Jews, Irish, Muslims, women, and lesbians are, to cite just a few examples of peripheralised communities, from time to time stereotypically depicted as humourless, less-human types.[8]

When the East laughs, and it very rarely happens on western screens, it creates a new opening, an unusual place similar to what Homi Bhabha defines an *in-between* territory.[9] Humour and laughter on the face of Eastern people typically epitomised only as a suffering community trigger a *post-sublime* dimension which can become a powerful instrument in the hands of the migrants. This kind of humour, which I would like to identify as 'diasporic humour', has the strength to deterritorialise and subvert the practice of imagining communities, and whereas it may generate isolation by turning audiences into lonely, self-entertaining atoms, it can *otherise* communities and create new relationships which entail an inevitable sharing of power.

Goodness Gracious me!
[…] there's a generation now who have been brought up here, who feel they have the right to contribute to society in a particular way and take credit for it. They feel they have the right to be visible.
Sanjeev Bhaskar[10]

When the *BritAsian* sketch comedy,[11] *Goodness Gracious Me!*

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[8] The idea of humourless minorities as a dehumanised representation of alterity comes from a lecture by Don Kulick, *Humorless Lesbians*, at the Second European Workshop in Humour Studies: Humour, Language & Gender. May 20 – 22, 2004, University Residential Center of Bertinoro, University of Bologna at Forlì.

[9] Homi K.Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation", in *The Location of* Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), 139-170.

[10] "Mirth of a Nation", *The Guardian* (February 20, 1999) (henceforth *Mirth*).

[11] In the present article, the terms "BritAsians", and "Indo-Saxons" are used

(*GGM*), appeared for the first time on England's TV screens, the 1990s much praised Anglo-Indian films, ethnic music productions, and theatre renaissance[12] had not yet boosted hybrid productions on national television, since the only few attempts at hybridisation had remained in the margins of the highly announced process for a multi-ethnic development of Britain.[13] Subsequently, the producer Anil Gupta, formerly Satyajit Ray's production manager on *Ganashatru* (1989, India) and script editor for ITV's hilarious puppet-show *Spitting Image*, presented an innovative 'Asian' comedy to BBC television, in 1995. The BBC head of Comedy and Entertainment, Jon Plowman decided to try the show first as a radio programme, an inexpensive way of proving the potential of an untested ground-breaking comedy. In July 1996, *GGM* was aired on BBC Radio 4 and after immediate success, it led to a full radio series, which, unexpectedly soon, won a prestigious Sony Award.[14] The time was right for BBC2 to switch the radio show to mainstream television and *GGM* became the only terrestrial television show created and performed by Indians to obtain a regular position in the BBC's

interchangeably in order to denote the same hybrid group composed of British subjects of Indian origin. The normal term is "British-Asian", but "Brit-Asian" and "BritAsian" are gaining currency (witness the magazine *Brit-Asian*; see http://www.brit-asian. com/). *GGM*'s opening credits introduced the compound neologism "Indo-Saxons" to describe the hybrid nature of the show which the authors defined as an: "Indo-Saxon production", in an obvious opposition/allusion to "Anglo-Saxon". Although, both these terms are somewhat imprecise (fudging, as does the first, especially, between different ethnic Asian groups in the UK); they are used here as simplifications to guide the reader to the rapid identification of the ethnic group.

[12] Ayub Khan-Din's *East Is East* is but one example of the wide success of the Asian culture in diaspora achieved in Britain in the '90s.

[13] The *BritAsian* development was enacted by second- and third-generation British-born Asians who in the 90s decided to 'make it big' by breaking with conservative white Britain, with the purpose of giving visibility to their *migrant* culture through the media. Things have accelerated somewhat since, thanks to the impetus of such as *GGM*. The new 'cool' BritAsian style is promoted in Channel Four's Media magazine *Second Generation*, where information on comedy, music, fashion, and the new media, created mostly by youngsters such as Tahir Moshan and Nitin Shawhney, can easily be accessed.

[14] The radio show was on air for three series on BBC Radio 4, from 5 to 26 July 1996, then 11 July to 1 August 1997, and the third series, six editions, was broadcast from 21 May to 25 June 1998.

Britcom schedule, so as to win Best New British Television Comedy at the British Comedy Awards, several awards from the Commission for Racial Equality, and a nomination for Best Light Entertainment at the British Academy Awards.[15]

The sketch show immediately took its distance from other ethnic programmes broadcast in Britain, and especially from their *Passage to India*'s colonial rhetoric. While TV productions such as *No Problem!* and *Tandoori Nights* were primarily directed to a minority of consumers,[16] *GGM* mainly focusing on racial specificity, and more exclusively on diasporic subjects' personal experiences, attracted a colossal audience of 2.83 million, rising to 3.84 for the second series. Had only Asians watched the show,[17] it would have never been more popular than any other Asian comedy on the screen, but when white people tuned in, the comedy turned out to be a real mainstream success. Yet, it was a show created by and for the BritAsian community "speaking for oneself", as one of the co-writer/actors of the show, Kulvinder Ghir put it, talking about the enormous recognition obtained by *GGM*: "The Asian community feel they have something that belongs to them. Something they can identify with and call their own".[18]

The style of the show was similar to that of popular British TV shows, such as *Monty Python* and <u>*The Fast Show*</u>, where recurring characters granted continuity to the programme by highlighting the eerie connection between nation, politics and culture through explicit satirical sketches, typical of non-realistic television. And in particular *GGM*, working between the boundaries of a postcolonial,

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[15] In 1999, after only two TV series the show became so popular as to produce a hugely successful UK theatre tour.

[16] Farrukh Dhondy, Commissioning Editor of Multicultural Programmes at C4, produced a sitcom, *Tandoori Nights*, about two competing Indian restaurants in London, which was screened in July 1985. It is the story of Jimmy Sharma, the owner of the "Jewel In The Crown", a luxurious restaurant in Brick Lane in the East End, and of a restless Bengali waiter, Rashid, who opens a less exclusive little restaurant, "The Far Pavilions", right across the road. *Tandoori Nights* was the second Asian sitcom to appear on British TV following *No Problem!*, but apart from the migrant background of the characters it was not very different from any other mainstream series.

[17] A condition which proved untrue, since there were only 1.26 million South-Asians in the country, while the show reached 3.84 million viewers in 1998.

[18] *Mirth.*

post-national, hybrid identity, exploited those Anglo-centric satirical techniques with the purpose of openly criticizing national/realist television. The subjects for the sketch show were, in fact, all inspired by the actors/writers' diasporic experiences and cultural bewilderment, suggesting the difficult relocation of 'home'. They wanted to represent the diasporic struggle to outline and establish a personal new dimension within the nation, expressing at the same time the marked desire for a real Indian culture. The need for an authentic representation of India, which seemed to be very weak and Westernised within the imagery of second- and third-generation BritAsians, is carried out in all sketches[19].

The main characters as well as the co-writers of many of the sketches are four young 'cool' and emerging Asians: Meera Syal, Nina Wadia, Kulvinder Ghir and Sanjeev Bhaskar. Meera Syal is the author of a number of successful TV and film scripts, including *Bhaji on the Beach* and the multi-award-winning *My Sister Wife*, in which she also starred. She also wrote and appeared in BBC hit comedy series, *The Real McCoy*. Her first novel, *Anita and Me*, 1997, won a Betty Trask Award and was short-listed for the Guardian Fiction Prize. Her most recent work is the witty *Life isn't All ha ha hee hee*, 1999. Nina Wadia is a stand-up comedian and actress, already famous in radio and on stage; Kulvinder Ghir who started out doing impressions in Yorkshire working-men's clubs and has since become both a playwright and an actor;[20] and finally Sanjeev Bhaskar, a well-known BritAsian TV actor[21].

Although the ethnic humorous formula may have seemed

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[19] For insights into the status of British-Asian English and the language practices of young BritAsians, see, e.g. in Ben Rampton, *Crossing: Language and Ethnicity among Adolescents* (London: Longman 1995), and Mike Reynolds and Mahendra K. Verma, "Indic languages" in David Britain, ed., *Language in the British Isles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 293-307; and Ben Rampon, Roxy Harris and Constant Leung, "Education and Speakers of languages other than English" in David Britain, ed., *Language in the British Isles*, 411-435.

[20] Ghir was highly praised for his role in Trevor Griffith's *Thatcher's Children*, where he played a drug-dealing Sikh.

[21] Now even more popular, thanks to his *Kumars at Number 42* talk-show (debut on BBC 2, November 2001- seventh and last show series in 2006; still airing on Fox and many channels around the world; witness his recent BBC documentary TV series (*India with Sanjeev Bashkar*; aired August 2007) on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of Partition.

BritAsian-specific with clinging mothers, girls regarded as inferior citizens, the pretentiousness of assimilation within a very Anglo-centric idea of Britishness, the topics were mostly based on universal issues, and were presented in such a witty way as to become mainstream 'quotable quotes'. Owing to a very accessible kind of humour ranging from satire to slapstick, traditional English sketches, film and TV spoofs and hilarious farces, *GGM* has succeeded in meeting the tastes and the needs of a wide non-Asian audience as well.[22]

Diasporic humour on the BBC

> Humour alone assures me that the most prodigious reversals are legitimate. Humour alone alerts me to the other side of things.
> (Aimé Césaire)

Goodness Gracious Me along with the tendency of most TV shows and comedies does not veil ideology under a hidden realistic narration; besides, an explicit realistic aesthetics would be theoretically impossible in such a kind of entertaining representation. Nevertheless, this absence of reality does not imply that nothing 'real' happens, since viewers are always capable of distinguishing a sense of the real behind each sketch, either by borrowing it from their own experience, or simply on the basis of what they can accept as feasible, or identifiable as subverted representation. On the contrary, it is the absolute and overt lack of verisimilitude which gives rise to an ideological clash, highlighting contrasting aspects of reality by means of a fragmented narration and an unusual exploitation of humour. A general unrealistic aesthetics, especially when indulging in visibly simulated studio-sets, the incessant recurrence of the same – only four – leading actors in almost all scenes acting out different roles, and the unlikely fast succession of events are all expedients which *GGM* inevitably employs to enact both the rescue of classical British comedy conventions, and the postcolonial shaping of hybrid identities, mostly by means of reversed stereotypes.

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[22] Almost 80 percent of the audience was white.

Stereotyping the Other is a natural cognitive process,[23] but it is also the consequence of the Western desire to convert, adjust and shape alterity into a culturally identifiable, familiar product; otherwise any form of empathy and thus communication would be impracticable, as Edward Said maintains:

> …one ought to remember that all cultures impose corrections upon raw reality, changing it from free-floating objects into units of knowledge. The problem is not that conservation takes place. It is perfectly natural for the human mind to resist the assault on it of untreated strangeness; therefore cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving those other cultures not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be.[24]

And it was just 'for the benefit of the receiver' that the show's producer Anil Gupta wanted some of the jokes to be Anglocentric, white-friendly, or as he defined them, 'entry-level sketches'[25]; this would help everyone participate in the show without the feeling of being excluded by incomprehensible culturally and linguistically connoted skits which could, at this point, subtly and gradually, come along with entry-level sketches. As Gupta stated, "If you like that, then once you are in, we'll do these other ones".[26] This stratagem was without any doubt winning, since it helped the comedy to make it into the mainstream while keeping 'these other ones' alive and effective.[27]

The show's most successful skits are stereotyped reversals which hinge exclusively on turning inside out the multifaceted encounters between Indian and Western experiences. Reversals are not simple repetitions, they represent a fracture in what is known and accepted as humorous by the same community but located in

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[23] George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things. What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[24] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 54.

[25] *Mirth*.

[26] Ibid.

[27] "Entry-level sketches" include characters drawn from the Asian experience, but with universal appeal, such as the matriarch "who can make everything at home for nothing", or mothers boasting about their sons.

a different and upturned situation, where the subjects become the objects under scrutiny, where the *West* becomes – and accepts to be – the 'underdog' ridiculed by the East.

The subversion and constant replication of well-known sketches, typically belonging to the traditional and much praised British 'sense of humour', develops into a powerful humoristic apparatus, allowing a disseminating kind of subtle humour to seep into 'the other side of things'. As a consequence this hybridised new formula, which results from the repetition of Anglocentric pre-existing recipes, bestows originality and uniqueness on the BritAsian show, on the principle that every repetition is a necessary alteration; therefore, if meaning is generated through replication, any connotation can be forged, reversed, adapted. According to Jacques Derrida's principle of *iterability*, language works because it can be cited and, as a result, if something is not repeated it does not really mean.[28] Consequently, the linguistic sign, a universal symbol of all things and beings, must be quotable in order to mean, since nothing has a proper 'origin' but everything changes and becomes new, original, and, therefore, 'the most prodigious reversals are legitimate'.

From this point of view, the evident and determined reiteration in *GGM*'s exploitation of humorous 'subverted' sketches, cannot be merely interpreted as a plain evidence of digression and redundancy, but as the creation of a distinctive liberating power. *GGM* nullifies the notion of 'origin', going across the margins of a different dimension since through its hybridity and iterability, a non-original, non-identical existence is established. This heterogeneous paradigm of the "Indo-Saxon" TV show proves, thus, that the dualism between subjects and objects, or between the individual and the universal can be overcome by way of Diasporic Humour. When *GGM*'s powerful satire generates a hybrid, Indo-Saxon form of narration, humour is subverted into *diasporic humour*, in as much as it:

1. draws attention to power differences, and this marked differentiation disseminating from India to England creates a subverted balance of power;

[28] Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context", trans. Alan Bass, reprinted in J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 309-330.

2. tends to release anxiety in the construction of each other's Other/ reversed Self;

3. fashions a hybrid post-nation, where the concept of 'mainstream' is, at the same time, weakened and amplified.

When the former colonised Self, in her/his new hybrid ex-centric position, emerges from the past and tells her/his story to the coloniser by means of an *iterable* humorous narration, both eurocentric and ex-centric subjects acknowledge the re-presentation of the Other as a reversed Self, and by doing so they insinuate the possibility of a hybrid post-nation.

A multimodal analysis of GGM

The following sketch "Let's go for an English!"[29], from the first series of *GGM*, has been selected and examined with the purpose of detecting the way some rhetorical elements are used to uncover and formalise various features related to the concept of Diasporic Humour in *GGM*. Given the 'multimodal' nature of TV productions, that is, the presence of simultaneous modes of communication, the analysis of the rhetorical strategies implemented in the creation of reversed stereotypes in GGM will be carried out in a pragmatic perspective, which allows the study of visual humorous texts not only in a merely linguistic and semiotic perspective, but also from a cultural perspective. In addition, this kind of analysis will necessarily make use of a number of elements of concern to pragmatic linguistics, such as the extralinguistic factors adding to the illocutionary and perlocutionary force of texts and utterances: voice pitch, facial expressions, fillers or phatic elements, and others.[30]

The sketch, which is one of the most prodigious reversals in *GGM*, features a group of drunken Indians going 'for an English' to

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[29] The title is given by the present author for reference purposes.

[30] The multimodal analysis techniques adopted here exploit Paul Thibault's "multimodal transcription" with some necessary adjustments to match the features of the corpus under scrutiny. (See Paul J Thibault, "The Multimodal Transcription of a Television Advertisment: Theory and Practice", in Anthony Baldry, ed., *Multimodality and Multimediality in the Distance Learning Age* (Campobasso: Palladino, 2000).

the *Mountbatten* restaurant in Bombay. The party's rudeness harasses the white waiter in exactly the same way that might happen to Indian waiters in Europe. The show reaches its humorous climax when, having decided to opt for the worst food on the menu, one of costumers in the party arrogantly utters the famous question, "What's the blandest thing on the menu?". This lampoon re-iterates and reverses earlier jokes on the same topic by Rowan Atkinson (Mr Bean), and has a strong impact on the white viewers who, in need of the immediate pleasure of humour release, accept the racial slurs against the white waiter albeit they would be ashamed to voice the same ethical considerations in a serious non-reversed conversation. This kind of 'judgment suspension' reaction is the typical response to jokes or humorous texts where the Gricean principles of co-operation are inevitably broken for the ironical incongruity to be accepted and resolved.[31]

The skit begins as a mini-film parody of an Indian cinema advertisement which simultaneously shifts between the location of the 'real' audience watching TV at home – here/England – and the typical 'fictious' spectator in an Indian cinema – there/India, "just around the corner of this cinema" as the advertisement promotes. The juxtaposition of different images and tropes constitutes the script opposition underlying the humorous text, and in particular, the two overlapping macro-scripts England *vs*. India are then – without difficulty – declined into Englishman *vs*. Indian and to a lower level 'white man' *vs*. 'black man'.[32]

The choice of adopting old images from the 60s is to evoke the days when Indian restaurants were promoted in Western cinemas and when the whole lot about India was still felt as mysterious, sublime, and exotic. In the reversal, the restaurant is an English restaurant (frame 1) where everyone, from the chef (frame 2) to the waiter, is English and white, but the location is of course India, 222 Viceroy Place, Bombay (frame 3).[33] This indulging between new and old, near and far tropes,

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[31] Paul H. Grice, "Logic and Conversation", *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

[32] On Script Opposition Theory, see Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanism of Humor* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985).

[33] Lord Mountbatten was Viceroy of India in 1947 and Governor General of India in 1948 upon the eve of the independence. Therefore, both the name of the restaurant and its location take on a symbolic meaning.

and the post-modern, post-national allusion to Hindi cinema, introduces a twofold narration of nations – England/India – in what Bhabha (1994: 145) calls a "double-time" – now/then –, enacting a "double-writing or dissemi-*nation*", past-India/present-England.

1.   2.   3.

Diasporic Humour is to be found in the dichotomy of space and time which seeps into this thoroughly hybrid narration, an Indo-Saxon tale, since the sketch draws a clear connection between England and India, and their mutual fondness of cinema which has enhanced the awareness of the Other in both cultures/nations.

The language of the Indian party at the restaurant is very offensive and highly connoted, and their rudeness, especially towards the white waiter, sets the scene for an irritating, racist situation which, portrayed as it is by means of a reversal, becomes the diasporic humorous element. This type of humour has, nevertheless, the power to induce the audience to think about the unthinkable in a more or less serious situation or public sharing while laughing at the silly jokes, since the humorous texture here arises from the unexpected use of the socially unacceptable racial discrimination. Here is an exemplary short passage from the sketch which illustrates the linguistic power of the reversal:[34]

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[34] The transcription conventions are drawn from Jefferson's notation system, see Atkinson J. Maxwell and J. Heritage, *Structures of Social Action. Studies in Conversational Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984): ix-xvi; Ian Hutchby and Robin Wooffitt, *Conversational Analysis. Principles, Practices and Applications* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), vi-vii), except for the symbol (∓) chosen here as a convention to mark the occurrence of canned laughter:

    =   'latching' between utterances (no interval)
    ?   Rising intonation
    ¿   Weaker rising intonation

	Visual Frame	Action	Verbal Transcription
1		The first woman (W1) addresses the waiter physically, by touching him on his back-side. He jumps embarrassed.	**W1:** ! I say young manŦ, ↑you're my <u>mate</u> Ŧ aren't you, Jamid. ŦŦ
2		W1 looks at her friends (W2) to reiterate the previous statement.	**W1:** °Jamid's my <u>mate.</u> °
3		The waiter speaks with a low tone, quite embarrassed, but he dominates the scene with his physical attractiveness.	**Waiter:** ↓Actually it's James.
4		W1 touches again the waiter on his back side, and puts on an irritated tone. The man looks puzzled.	**W1:** <u>Jams</u>, yes that's what I said!
5		W2 to W1, ironically and in a gossiping mode.	**W2:** ↑Hasn't he got lovely pale *skinia?*Ŧ
6		W1 nods interested, showing female sympathy to her friend's provocative remark	**W2:** =¿it's really nice and pasty looking. ŦŦ
7		Both W2 and W1 turns inquisitively towards the waiter	**W1:** =? Yeah, but you know what that say about white men, ¿don't you?
8		W1 and W2 can't stop laughing, while the waiter turns right, looking rather upset.	((*Both women burst into a laugh*)) ŦŦ

!   Animated or emphatic tone
"   Marked rising intonational shift of the following utterance
"   Marked falling intonational shift of the following utterance
((*note*))   Transcriber's notes
°text°   Quieter utterance
<u>Under</u>   Speaker's emphasis
Ŧ   Canned laughter

The sequence above can be divided into three main phases (frames 1-4; 5-6; 7-8), each corresponding to different utterances of *Verbally Expressed Humour*[35] and to different markers of irony derived from the analysis of the images and the intonation/accent pitches, though all bound by the unique purpose of addressing and deconstructing a common humorous object: the waiter's white body. The three characters in the eight close-ups occupy a central on-screen position since the Indian ladies are sitting at a table while the waiter is standing in the middle of the scene. His body, in main close-up, works as the underdog in the sequence, continually jeopardised by the ladies' authority, and in particular by W1's repeated physical interaction with it (see frames 1 and 4), and with the women's final verbal harassment which works to create the reversed stereotype.

The first phase plays with the difficulty of properly pronouncing the waiter's common English name, James. Altering (Jamid) or mispronouncing (Jams) a name produces an inevitably humorous effect on the audience which, by means of a simple association with the typical difficulty English people (or the former colonisers) encounter in pronouncing Indian names, laughs at the mispronunciation while thinking how irritating the situation must be when experienced in real life. W1 alters the waiter's name by calling him by an Indian name, Jamid (pronounced [dja'meed]) in the first instance. Then, she reiterates her mistake in the second frame and finally, after the waiter's useless attempt at correcting it, the 'lady' turns James into a less credible Jams (pron.: [jams]), showing her irritation for being corrected, also increasing the tone of her voice and turning her gaze elsewhere, angrily. The first level of humour is thus established since the construction of the VEH is mainly a growing innuendo (as underlined also by the increasing effect of canned laughter). Moreover, the physical contact established by W1 in frame 1, and the derived embarrassment of the waiter lead to "metacommunicative" and "paracommunicative alerts" respectively which signal to the viewers the presence of an ironical sequence.[36]

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[35] On "verbally expressed humour" see Delia Chiaro, "Investigating the Perception of Translated Verbally Expressed Humour on Italian TV", *ESP Across Cultures* 1.1 (2004), 35-52.

[36] A *Metacommunicative alert* is found when a particular marker is produced by the

Diasporic Humour works on a deeper or second level here, since it is obviously linked to a cultural reflection on what happens in the scene by means of the reversal situation of Indian people seeing their names turned into English familiar names.

As a matter of course, since in our society names fulfil both a public and a private function, they epitomise the identity of every human being; thus changing or not accepting a name creates a dehumanising effect on the subject who is inevitably confined to a newly imposed identity. Re-shaping someone's name has a strong performative function since it allows the naming subject to assume a superior position over the re-named recipient, who has to renounce his previous pre-existing identity. To name someone is an act of power since it is connected to the public assignment of a new identity. Humour here plays with the typical enslaving supremacy of the coloniser, originally associated with the power of naming. Re-naming draws on the history of colonialism, as colonisers gave 'familiar-sounding' names to the places and peoples they met on their route as a mark of possession, as a form of creation. In consequence, colonialism deprived the colonised of their *unspeakable* names and gave them other, more Eurocentric, conventional nicknames in order to mark them as colonial possessions. Re-naming means writing on the body of the other, chaining it with the intention of enslaving the subject's identity.

The second phase presents the ladies' 'reversed' appreciation of the waiter's fair complexion ('pale skinia' and 'pasty looking') which plays with the reversed stereotype of the typical Western appreciation of the exotic brown skin, seen as a symbol of health and the reverberated glow of sunny colonial lands. The exchange here is humorous as it portrays the typical stereotype of brown/ white skin in a reversed mode working on both a semantic and

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speaker in order to inform the hearer that the previous or concomitant utterance is to be interpreted as humorous. In this sequence, W1 slapping the waiter's back while saying "you are my mate, aren't you, Jamid?". A *Paracommunicative alert* is a marker of irony which communicates something in opposition to the verbally expressed utterance, so that the hearer understands that the situation is meant to be ironical, in this case the waiter's *blank face*. See also S. Attardo, J. Eisterhold, J. Hay and I. Poggi , "Multimodal Markers of Irony and Sarcasm", *Humor: International Journal of Humor Studies* 16.2 (April-June 2003), 243-260.

phonetic level since the inflection of the Indian pronunciation by W2
(/skinia/ for *skin*) and the semantic reference to the white skin as a
mark of beauty creates a suggestive dichotomous effect. Moreover, the
typical Anglo-Indian accent mainly used in *GGM*, known as a *chee-
chee* accent, differs most visibly from RP particularly in its prosodic
characteristics and this creates an overpowering humorous effect. In
particular, stressed syllables are characterised by a low-rising pitch
with a rise on the following syllables, and the final consonant syllable
is generally lengthened, thus [skinia:] for *skin* in frame 5.[37]

The third phase of this sequence introduces another reversed
stereotype which is connected to a long series of Western jokes on
Indian men's hypothetical small *membrum virilis*. In the reversal the
white man is, in fact, scrutinised in his sexual anatomical parts by
both women who create the final punch line of the sequence with the
rhetorical question '*You know what they say about white men, don't
you?*' (frame 7). The easy substitution of the item 'white' for 'Indian'
which underlines the whole scene, performs the hilarious reversal
which at a first level of humour is largely accepted and appreciated by
the audience.

Diasporic Humour introduces the joke on Indian men's small penis
by drawing on a very powerful stereotype which has the strength to
relocate a whole population of Indian men on a lower cultural level.
As a matter of fact, according to Freud's analysis of the psychology
of gender,[38] the lack of the penis becomes the explanation for the
'inferiorised' and 'alternative' psychology of women under patriarchy.
The male organ represents the inheritance of 'cultural authority' and its
continuation through the male. Freud was especially concerned with
the mechanisms of the 'mastering plan' of patriarchal culture, and
the vital role that sexed subjectivity plays within it. Lacking the
penis means occupying an inferior position in society, therefore it
inevitably dehumanises the (male) subject who, via the so-called
castration process, is subjugated by the system thus losing his male,
dominating identity. The pseudo-small *membrum* attributed to

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[37] John C. Wells, *Accents of English* vol.3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 1982), 630-631.
[38] Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Standard Edition
(1905), 123-246.

Indian men by the colonisers has the function to disrupt the power of the authority, the dichotomy between 'masculine' and 'feminine' by destroying their gender identity and creating various conflicting possibilities in relation to the culturally acceptable strictures of power and identity.

Conclusions

The sketch analysed is linked, although completely self-contained, to other skits of the three series by a common contaminating reference to the language of cinema, including filmic studio-sets or post-production teams at work. *GGM* plays with different kinds of contamination in terms of textual/filmic genres, identity and nationalities. *GGM*'s recurring references to the cinema, the national leading mass medium of India, strengthen the implication of a post-national identity, which while encouraging the formation of a hybrid culture, does not call for a detachment from the original culture. On the contrary, as *GGM* demonstrates by stressing the importance of Bollywood as a mark of both national and post-national appropriations,[39] a hybrid culture can bring together groups as heterogeneous as diasporic subjects, and all the white viewers who accept to merge with multicultural and ex-centric cultural expressions. The subversive humorous power of many of the sketches arises from Bollywood's central position in BritAsian cultures, fostering a dominating representation of India with its creative power of the imagination.

The cinematographic skits in *GGM* evoke a satirical, postmodern, postnational image of India which emerges as a dominant 'imaginary homeland' overshadowing the BritAsian imagination of the subcontinent in its correspondence to Britain. As a matter of fact, images of the two countries are continually opposed and overlap creating a humorous incongruity which is resolved (or pseudo-resolved) into a hybrid anchored message.

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[39] Bollywood is the leading film industry in the world. It produces between 700 and 1,000 Hindi films a year. "Unfortunately, 'standard' film histories, and the media generally, not to mention local cineplexes and video stores, rarely call attention to this filmic cornucopia" (Shohat *et al.*, 29).

In conclusion, this analysis, which does not claim to be comprehensive, shows how *GGM's* insistence on the persistent exploitation of reversed stereotypes, by subverting the typical stereotyping of the Anglo-Indian community and the way the white man perceives it, relies not simply on the assumptions of the viewer, but also on the characteristics of the group being described. Diasporic Humour is introduced in the sketch show by means of both verbally expressed humour and anchored TV images of reversal stereotypes, which translate the Others (Indians) into Selves (British-Asians) in order to reduce anxiety in their relocation abroad. It has also the function of drawing attention to power differences by subverting the *status quo* and the very sense of Britishness itself, and by doing so this marked differentiation disseminating from India to England creates a subverted balance of power. This kind of humour tends to discharge viewers' anxiety in the construction of each other's Other/reversed Self. Thus, while on one hand, the Indo-Saxon community finds a place to express its own culture in diaspora, on the other, the white Anglosaxons avoid the shame of being racialists by enjoying the sallies which are humorous just because they are proposed as reversed stereotypes.

Therefore, Diasporic Humour – a subversive tool in the hands of a young group of BritAsians – creates a hybrid post-nation, where the concept of 'mainstream' (BBC) is, simultaneously, destabilised and extended to and by voices from 'elsewhere'.

The Indian community has in fact succeeded through the first impetus of this popular and successful sketch show – watched by over three million British subjects in the late 90s– which paved the way for even more popular comedy successes, such as *The Kumars at n. 42* (2001-2006)[40], to achieve a fierce and coherent hybrid representation of their ex-centric status, accessing, and exploiting – as humorous hybrids[41] – mainstream terrestrial television (BBC2, and BB1) for a more wide-spread appropriation of power.

[40] See Giuseppe Balirano "The Kumars at no. 42: Hybrid *vs* Ethnic Scripts in Diasporic Humour" (in prep.).

[41] For a discussion of the problematic meaning and misuse of the term and concept of hybridity, see Giuseppe Balirano and Jocelyne Vincent "Migrating English in postcolonial *trans*-lation: Brit-Asian /Desi as the source/ target of diasporic representations", talk delivered at the XXIII AIA Conference, *Forms of migration - Migration of forms*, Bari, 20 September 2007 (forthcoming).