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The Ethics of Slapstick Humor

One of the many genres of humor is slapstick comedy. Perhaps the most dominant characteristic of slapstick is its violent nature, which raises the question, is slapstick humor ethical? There are so many examples of humans engaging in activities we believed to be harmless, only to later discover the harmful effects they have been producing all along. The health concerns of smoking tobacco and the effects of pollution are two examples of this. Slapstick comedy is generally considered fun and innocent, and if it is that's great, but if it is actually causing harmful effects it is important to know that so we can avoid it or mitigate for the damage. A look at the history and evolution of slapstick, including some of the iconic examples of slapstick comedies, helps set the stage to understand the nature of this type of humor. Scrutinizing slapstick under the theories and ethics of humor from the perspective of philosophy helps explain why slapstick is funny and begin to answer if it is ethical. Finally, a look at the psychological desensitization to violence from exposure to it through media, and specifically comedic media, will show that slapstick comedy is unethical. I will then argue that the enjoyment of slapstick by the viewer is not unethical, but rather the viewer is molded unethically by slapstick comedy once the healthy negative associations to violence are outweighed by distorted and harmful positive associations.

History

A slapstick, the namesake of slapstick comedy, is a device composed of two flexible pieces of wood that are joined at one end. When you wield the slapstick as if to hit someone, the two pieces of wood separate during the swinging motion, then collide again to create a loud slapping noise. This device was used in entertainment to give the impression of an exaggerated beating with little to no actual pain or impact. Exaggerated and absurd violence is still a huge component of slapstick comedy, as is “farce,” or dramatic buffoonery and horseplay involving ridiculously improbable situations. Slapstick is considered low comedy, as opposed to high comedy which takes advantage of sophisticated dialogue through wit and satire. Overall, what slapstick comedy relies on and takes advantage of is exaggeration and complete absurdity.

Punch and Judy is one of the earlier and most iconic examples of slapstick comedy. Pulcinella was introduced as a marionette puppet in a theater in London by a visiting Italian showman in 1662. The character was adopted by the English, transposing the name to “Punch.” The character of Punch quickly evolved to fit a clown role for British performances of folk dramas. Punch remained popular throughout the eighteenth century, moving to the streets as a hand puppet towards the end of it (Speaight 1). The show has not only survived to the present day, but is still well known and performed. The average format for a Punch show looks something like this:

Punch calls for his wife, Judy; she gives him the Baby to nurse; the Baby cries, and in desperation Punch throws it out of the window; Judy returns, and when she learns what Punch has done she beats him with a stick; Punch beats Judy, and kills her; a succession of other characters will now call upon Punch, and may include a Doctor, a Foreigner or Black Man, a Dog (Toby) and its owner, a

Crocodile, and the Ghost of Judy; they are all knocked out by Punch's stick; in these games, or fights. Punch is partnered by a Clown, who often produces a string of sausages; finally Punch is arrested by a Policeman and condemned to be hanged; but by a trick Punch hangs the Hangman; finally the Devil comes to take Punch away, but Punch defeats even the Devil and is left victorious at the end (Speaight 2).

Outside of puppet-theater, slapstick was common in the performances of clowns and mimes. With cinema, slapstick comedy was able to move from small, live performances into silent films. Slapstick relies on the aesthetics of grand, unrealistic gestures and violence to act out absurd scenes far more than it relies on dialogue, so silent films were the perfect stage on which slapstick comedy could shine. Charlie Chaplin is iconic for his success in slapstick comedy based silent films. He became one of the most recognized individuals in the United States and Europe during his career which lasted from 1914-1967. Chaplin built his popularity through ten to twenty-five minute slapstick short films, though it is his full length films, "City Lights," "Modern Times," and "The Great Dictator," that keep his reputation thriving today (Caron 1).

When sound entered the film industry it was initially seen as bad news for slapstick comedy films. The low comedy of slapstick had been able to thrive in the film industry without competition from humor that required dialogue. High comedy now had a place in film, and many producers thought sound had no place in slapstick (King 2). Sound was soon incorporated into slapstick, but mainly for exaggerated sound effects such as bursting balloons, car horns, and, of course, the sound of a beating, like what was made from the slapsticks in the original, live

performances (7). The use of clever comments was eventually appreciated, and the fast action and physical gags that characterized slapstick were accompanied by subtle, clever dialogue (4).

Even after the age of silent films, slapstick comedy still remains one of the most popular forms of comic art used in entertainment. “The Three Stooges,” “Monty Python and the Holy Grail,” “The Pink Panther,” and “Home Alone” are just a few examples of popular slapstick films. Slapstick comedy has not only survived, but thrived throughout time. With its emphasis on absurdity and violence it is interesting that it remains popular and socially acceptable. When a crowd of young children are sitting around laughing at a puppet beating his wife to death, you have to wonder what makes that funny. After understanding why we see the violent scenes of slapstick comedy as funny, we have to ask if it is innocent, good clean fun, or if something darker is going on. Is slapstick comedy ethical?

Philosophy

Slapstick comedy can be explained by a few of the theories of humor. The superiority theory states that laughter is the expression of our delight in the shortcomings of others (Morreall 6). The theory focuses on humor in the negative light of laughing at people for being foolish, which makes ourselves feel good in comparison. Before other theories of humor surfaced this was the only standing explanation for why situations were funny. Superiority theory lead to humor being shunned in society because raising yourself up at another’s expense is unethical. In slapstick comedy a fool is very common. In the Punch and Judy puppet shows Punch doesn’t even speak with clear, articulated words. Instead, the puppets speech is distorted by kazoo like sounds that emphasize the vibrations of spoken language over any intelligible meaning (Katz & Gross). “The Three Stooges” and “Dumb and Dumber” preface the low intelligence of the main characters in the titles. Charlie Chaplin played the clown of society in his films (Caron 1).

Inspector Clouseau in “The Pink Panther” is a terrible klutz and comes across as stupid. In “Home Alone” the side kick criminal, Marv Merchants, is not at all bright. The list goes on; with any slapstick comedy comes at least one fool character. The recurring theme of fools, clowns, and idiots in slapstick makes the superiority theory a compatible explanation, but it is not the only theory that can be applied.

Freud’s input in the relief theory may explain the persistent theme of violence in slapstick comedy. The relief theory focuses on the physiology of laughter as a valve to release nervous tension (Morreall 15). Freud argued that “most prepared jokes and witty remarks are about sex or hostility, because those are the big urges which society forces us to repress” (18). Because society represses these urges we joke about them so we can release some of the pent up nervous tension through our laughter. In slapstick comedy there is a seemingly compulsive need for people to “solve” conflict by striking one another and fighting. The dark theme behind this is that it represents people as always being on the verge of completely losing control (Caron 5). Freud would have been quick to say that the violence in slapstick is enjoyable because the urge for violence is so strongly suppressed in each of us that we almost need to be able to joke about it to release the nervous tension of that suppression.

Disengagement in humor is a crucial aspect to slapstick comedy seeming innocently humorous as opposed to terribly unethical. When we are amused we are disengaged from reality and put into a play state. In this disengaged play state it doesn’t matter how unrealistic, impractical, or absurd the scenario is, we can still be amused by it. In fact, if you look at the incongruity theory, the more unexpected the events of a situation, the funnier we find it (Morreall 10). Amusement doesn’t have to be connected to anything realistic because humor puts us in a state of disengagement from reality where we can play with the impossible (30). That’s

why, when listening to a joke, we don't question why inanimate objects are talking, we accept the presented setting of the joke, no matter how absurd, and wait for the punch line. In slapstick comedy, the activities being performed by the performers are often extremely unethical. The Punch and Judy play described on page two is about several murders. There's no debate about whether or not murder is ethical, it's not, and yet the play exists to amuse children. Why are we more inclined to be amused by the violence in slapstick rather than deeply disturbed? The extreme exaggeration of simple movements and sounds makes slapstick immediately appear unrealistic. Then you have these exaggerated behaviors acting out ridiculously foolish situations. The exaggeration and absurdity of slapstick quickly disengages us from reality. Perhaps we are so disengaged that we aren't even considering the real life consequences of the unethical behavior being acted out because it is clear to us they don't exist. Perhaps we are so distracted by the absurdity of the comedy that grief, pain, hurt feelings, and being violated don't even cross our minds. We are not disturbed by the unethical behaviors in slapstick because in our state of disengaged play it doesn't occur to us to be. That being said, if you're not a fan of say, "The Three Stooges," then you probably won't be transported into disengagement by it, which frees up your mind to be disgusted that anyone thinks such terrible behavior is entertaining.

From the standpoint of the ethics of humor, blocking compassion is a harmful effect of disengagement (Morreall 103). If we spend a lot of time laughing at the beatings, murder, and insults of slapstick, we may find ourselves being disengaged by real life situations as well. We may think that it's okay to laugh when someone who isn't very bright is being made fun of, or we may think it is okay to make fun of them ourselves instead of considering their feelings. We may think it is okay to laugh when someone looks funny because they slipped on the ice instead of being concerned about the pain and humiliation they are feeling. If the violence and mocking

of fools in slapstick is blocking our compassion for the violence and mocking in real life, then not only are the behaviors acted out in slapstick unethical, but slapstick comedy itself is also unethical.

Psychology

A look into the psychology of desensitization will help determine how much actual potential there is for compassion blocking from slapstick comedy. “Desensitization has been defined as the diminished emotional responsiveness to a negative or an aversive stimulus after repeated exposure to it” (Fanti 1). Initially, violence viewed through media can provoke the same physiological responses that viewing live violence would provoke: fear, increased heart rate, perspiration, discomfort and disgust (1). Humans have an instinctual aversion to violence, but this instinct can be trained through exposure. Chronic exposure to media violence has been shown to have long term effects on viewer’s attitudes (2). Viewing violence increases fear of being a victim, desensitizes us to the suffering of others, and increases the likelihood of engaging in violent behavior (McIntosh 2). That means that the attitudes that are being formed about media violence carry over into our attitudes about live violence. Desensitization doesn’t have to be a long, drawn out process either. Traces of desensitization can be found after a single exposure to film violence (Fanti 2). If someone watches a violent film every once in while than desensitization will slowly occur over a long period of time, but if a lot of exposure takes place in a short time span than desensitization will take place in that short amount of time (Fanti 7). A weekend of binge watching a violent series could alter our sympathy and aggression for the long term.

Comedic violence is distinct from other media violence because it focuses more on the comedy than the violence. In crime fighting action scenes, violence is the point, so it will be

portrayed as realistically as possible with all the blood, injuries, and pain of real violence being carefully mimicked. In comedic humor, however, the negative consequences of violence are rarely portrayed (McIntosh 3). Some argue that research into the negative effects of comedic violence isn't necessary because the emphasis is on humor, but the research that has been done despite this claim has shown that this emphasis could actually be more harmful because it makes desensitization worse (2). Desensitization to real life violence can still occur from watching comedic violence, and it occurs faster because the initial aversive response to media violence doesn't happen with comedic violence (Fanti 7). This is because the positive associations to the comedy override the negative associations to the violence and, again, the violence doesn't depict real life consequences. In other words, since we are disengaged by the humor, desensitization happens faster, and desensitization not only blocks compassion but encourages aggression. Since it seems that the violence in slapstick comedy does indeed block compassion then it would seem that slapstick comedy is unethical.

My Argument

The philosophy of humor and the psychology of desensitization make a strong argument that slapstick comedy is unethical. It is unethical because of the long term effects the exposure of violence has on our attitudes towards the very real, and not funny, issue of violence. I would like to argue that while slapstick humor may be unethical, enjoying it is not unethical behavior on the part of the viewer. The viewer is disengaged. Chances are it doesn't even occur to the viewer how unethical the performed situation is, let alone the practical consequences of the unethical behavior. Slapstick comedy is such an exaggerated and absurd representation of our world that we are transported into a world that we accept as not having the same consequences and social norms as our own. On a conscious level, our enjoyment is innocent.

The threat of slapstick is not one of the morals of the viewer, but of the biology of the viewer. Beyond the viewer's awareness, neurons taking in the violence are forming associations with neurons that take in the mirth, amusement, enjoyment, and safety of the comedy. Because these associations have been made, the next time those violence neurons are stimulated it will also stimulate what violence has been previously associated with, which in the case of slapstick comedy is amusement and safety. Violence experienced live would be associated with fear, sympathy, hurt, etc. If there are more negative associations attached to violence then actual cases of it will be responded to appropriately. However, if there are more positive associations attached to violence, then come the consequences of desensitization: blocked compassion and increased aggression. Blocking compassion is what makes slapstick comedy unethical, and so it only succeeds in being unethical if it succeeds in blocking compassion.

Slapstick comedy certainly has the potential to block compassion, but it needs sufficient exposure to have the dominant associations attached to violence to succeed, and that depends on the life of the viewer. A viewer who is well practiced in sympathizing with victims can enjoy a little bit of slapstick with no harm done; the associations from the slapstick won't be strong enough to outweigh the associations of compassion in real life situations. A viewer who has very little experience with real life violence but a lot of time dedicated to watching slapstick comedy will have a very distorted idea about the actual harm and consequences of violence making them less sympathetic to victims and more likely to think it's okay to participate in aggression. Imagine positive and negative associations linked to violence being on opposite sides of a scale. My argument for the ethics of slapstick comedy is that it is harmless until the positive associations outweigh the appropriately negative ones. When desensitization tips the scale, slapstick comedy is no longer harmless to the viewer, and is therefore unethical. The

responsibility lies with the viewer to be aware of desensitization and ensure that their concern and disgust for the consequences of violence far outweigh the comedic violence they expose themselves to. Even while enjoying slapstick comedy, the viewer could make a conscious effort to think about the ethics and consequences of the performances so that compassionate associations are being intentionally formed to slow down the process desensitization.

From the Punch and Judy puppet show that started in the mid sixteen hundreds to the silent films of Charlie Chaplin to the classics of today, the basis for slapstick humor has been violence and mocking the fool. The delight we find in this genre of humor can be explained through the superiority theory, relief theory, and disengagement. The philosophy of ethics begins to show that slapstick humor is unethical by blocking compassion, and the psychology of disengagement confirms this. Although these three disciplines make a clear case for slapstick being unethical, I argue that it isn't unethical until it has succeeded in blocking compassion in the viewer. For this reason it is important that slapstick humor be viewed in moderation and with an intentional wariness to the unethical factors.

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