



Comedy and Language

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Overview

- This presentation looks at how comedy is enabled when two or more languages are in play, with a filmed scene from a feature film.
- The project leans into the following comic approaches
 - Fish out of water
 - theory of incongruity as well as
 - theory of superiority

What this is not

- About translating a language for film (and all that entails)
- Dubbing of films
- Making films set in one language only to make it in English (*Anthropoid*)
- Strictly about misunderstanding in translation

It is about

- Using translation for dramatic irony
- Using language to hide what the character really means and says
- Translating the sense of what is being said rather than the strict translation.

Some films that utilise 'translation' as a narrative tool

A Family Affair, 2024

The Farewell, 2019

The Interpreter, 2005

Life is Beautiful, 1999

Lost in Translation, 2003

Love Actually, 2003

Spanglish, 2005

With some texts using misunderstanding between cultures

Intercultural vs multicultural

Intercultural – fish out of water

trying to exist in another culture –

Minari, Ali's Wedding,

Multicultural – incongruity between cultures

multiple cultures exist together –

My Big Fat Greek Wedding, Modern Family, The Big Sick, Top End Wedding.

Here comedy emerges in the gap between different cultures

I extend the notion of the fish out of water and incongruity by exploring how two cultures (one from Europe and one Indigenous) try to coexist within an imposed culture –

It is the clash of inter and intra cultures. As in this scene from *Love Actually*



Love Actually 2003 wr. Richard Curtis



Lying in Translation

When translations say something else as in

Life is Beautiful, 1999, and

A Family Affair, 2024.

Life is Beautiful, wrs. Vincenzo Cerami, Roberto Benigni, 1999.



The project

- Explores the comic potential when two or more languages are in play
 - English, Czech and Aboriginal
- Aim is to situate **the audience as the receiver** of the comedy:
 - experiences where dialogue between two characters in one language and
 - the exposition of translation from one character to another



Czech in the Rear View Mirror

A black comedy which explores the effects of displacement.

Czech in the Rear View Mirror (*Čech ve Zpětném Zrcátku*)

Set in 1940/50s Czechoslovakia and 1950/60s Australia when two migrants, with a baby about to drop, decide to drive from Darwin to Brisbane in the wet season (over 2000 miles or approx. 3400 km) – and one of them can't drive or speak English, nor lie.

Based on actual events this dark comedy explores how displacement affects migrants and the Indigenous people of the land they want to call home. It's about lying to survive.

The main protagonist is Olga, her goal is to pursue her career as a doctor, but her flaw is that she cannot lie, which she needs to do to escape Czechoslovakia and practise as a doctor.

The investigation at the heart of the film and the project

the film is about **how two cultures try to exist and co-exist within another culture**

the project then explores **the comedy when two or more languages are in play while** the translations say something else

Picking up from last year and *The Bind*: the scene chosen is just after the MP and Olga is beginning to realise she is in a bind

Conversations Beyond the Script

- The chosen scene required Czech and Aboriginal characters and a
- Czech director – Karolina Smolova who then cast
- Two Czech actors and unfortunately unable to get Aboriginal actors
 - Solution: Two Swahili actors
- Rehearsal was reading on teams
- Shot in one day – limited time for much coverage (spot continuity errors) and performance – filmed like a theatrical recording
- Shot in VP studio – posing opportunities as well as challenges
- We didn't have a car, nor could we fit one in the studio so we

COMEDY AND LANGUAGE:
CZECH IN THE REAR VIEW MIRROR
research project

Playing with language and translating in CRVM

- The use of three languages between characters (not common)
- Gap in what is said and what is translated – making the comedy
- The Audience is in the position of superiority and the main characters are incongruous to the space and the secondary characters
- The project assisted with refining the feature script
- Translating language that carries the same meaning –
 - Czech translation done by the director in consultation with cast
 - Swahili done by ‘Ernie’s’ nephew in Tanzania

Conversation Beyond Script

- What if it was all spoken in English?
- What considerations would come into play, especially in comedy?



References

- *A Family Affair*, wrs. Carrie Solomon, Richard LaGravenese , 2024.
- *Life is Beautiful*, wrs. Vincenzo Cerami, Roberto Benigni, 1999.
- *Lost in Translation*, wr. Sofia Coppola, 2003.
- *Love Actually*, wr. Richard Curtis, 2003.

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- Mullins, Anthony. *Beyond the Hero's Journey. A screenwriting guide for when you've got a different story to tell*. Sydney: Newsouth, 2021.
- Silverman, Tanya. 'Automotive Associations in Post–New Wave Films by Czech Directors.' *journal of film and video* 75.3 / fall 2023.