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Writing Jokes in Film Form: The style of Zucker, Abrahams & Zucker as influenced by
wordplay

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wordplay**

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wordplay**

O presente trabalho em nível de Mestrado foi avaliado e aprovado, em 27 de novembro de 2025, pela banca examinadora composta pelos seguintes membros:

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*To all of those who would have rightfully hated this scholastic endeavor
towards such a thing as humor – Norm Macdonald, Rodney Dangerfield,
Campos de Carvalho, Miguel de Cervantes, Kurt Vonnegut, Buster Keaton,
Chris Farley, Andy Kaufman, Gene Wilder, Richard Pryor, Mel Brooks,
Biff Rose, Rose Biff, Roast Beef, Other Cuts of Meat, Douglas Adams,
Madeline Kahn, Steven Wright, Spike Milligan, Groucho Marx, Bob Saget,
Joseph Heller, David Berman, Sergio Aragonés, Peter Boyle, Alfred E.
Neuman, Machado de Assis, Al Jaffee, Mario Monicelli, Totò, Jerry Lewis,
John Candy, Moms Mabley, Aaron Freeman, Mickey Melchiondo,
Mark Volman, Howard Kaylan, Donald Fagen, Walter Becker,
Doug Kenny, Michael O'Donoghue, SpongeBob Square Pants,
those who made me fall in love with comedy, all the truly funny people
I've been lucky to have in my life and, of course,
David Zucker, Jim Abrahams and Jerry Zucker –, I'm sorry.*

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And now for the phony acknowledgements:

I am admittedly very lucky to love so many people, out of which only two are imaginary.

This condition, of course, makes the task of writing this page invariably difficult. If for some strange reason you find yourself reading this and expecting to find your name only to not find it at all, know that I do thank you – I did not forget you nor do I hate you. I actually quite like you. Really. Oh, c'mon, grow up.

Of all the people I have met in my life, I often find that I tend to stick to those with whom I share a sense of humor. If not that, a mutual admiration for each other's comical sensibilities. That being the case, I want to thank you all for laughing with me. This one is for you:

My oldest friends, the dumbest school mavericks still alive, in order of height (presumed – to this day, and to my own fault, I have never measured my friends) – Tio, Duba, Lukas, Cretus, Allan, André, Cagli, Frodo, Natasha, Diogo and, shorter but not least, Toko. Our stupidity is an invaluable thing. I could have never asked – nor could I have ever known *how* to ask – for a better lasting friendship. Here's to years to come.

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My *astorishingly amazing* girlfriend Duda, who may at one point of her life read this again and find that I edited out a stupid little joke in which I called her “my current girlfriend”. I hope you remain my current girlfriend despite this very poor attempt at humor. I love you. It is not by any exaggeration that I say that this thesis would not be completed if it wasn’t for you. Thank you very much for all your ideas and opinions; thank you for talking some sense into me when sense had escaped; thank you for making me feel like I could stand the academic environment; thank you forever and always for the love; and thank you for being you. Again, I love you; so, this whole “being you” thing actually works out for me. See you later, honey.

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Ok, I’m done. Thank you all; I owe you one (except for Cretus, to whom I owe nothing!).

*And the man that has anything bountifully
laughable about him, be sure there is more in
that man than you perhaps think for.*

Ishmael, *Moby Dick*, chapter 5

What – me, worry?

Alfred E. Neuman

RESUMO

O foco desta presente dissertação é o estilo cômico e cinematográfico de Zucker, Abrahams e Zucker (ZAZ), o trio de cineastas responsável por filmes como *Apertem os cintos, o piloto sumiu!* (1980), *Top Secret!* (1984), *Corra que a polícia vem aí!* (1988), e o programa de televisão *Police Squad!* (1982). O propósito é discutir o trabalho de ZAZ – seu estilo e humor – dentro da dedicação de uma pesquisa acadêmica que possa se valer de uma investigação do ofício cinematográfico. A abordagem consiste em identificar mecanismos de piadas e jogos de palavra (assim como trocadilhos) aplicados a noções de artesanato e forma cinematográfica. Para tanto, essa dissertação elabora e identifica – através de suas gags – como ZAZ foram capazes de compreensivelmente escrever piadas em forma cinematográfica. O objetivo não é validar ZAZ como artistas (de certo modo, eles próprios satirizam noções de autoimportância) mas simplesmente reconhecer sua autenticidade dentro da comédia cinematográfica e sua abordagem da forma como ferramenta de criação de humor. Esta dissertação é um estudo interdisciplinar e se encontra entre os campos acadêmicos do humor (principalmente a linguística do humor) e estudos cinematográficos. Além disso, considera reflexões de ofício por escritores e diretores cômicos. É elaborada aqui uma tentativa de identificar mecanismos e outros aspectos perceptíveis nas gags de ZAZ e então propor uma categorização que, por sua vez, é colocada em prática através de análises distribuídas pelas páginas e concentradas num último capítulo. A intenção não é alcançar uma categorização definitiva das gags de ZAZ, mas fornecer um modelo funcional e sistematizado que pode ser usado por futuras investigações. Finalmente, a pergunta que é colocada é: podem gags cinematográficas possuir mecanismos similares aos de piadas, porém efetivados através de artifícios especificamente cinematográficos? O que se encontra nas páginas dessa dissertação é um esforço para respondê-la.

Palavras-chave: comédia cinematográfica; mecanismos de piadas; ZAZ.

ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the comedic and cinematic style of Zucker, Abrahams and Zucker (ZAZ), the filmmaking trio responsible for films such as *Airplane!* (1980), *Top Secret!* (1984), *The Naked Gun* (1988), and the TV show *Police Squad!* (1982). The purpose of this thesis is to discuss the work of ZAZ – their style and their humor – within the dedication of an academic research that can lean on an investigation of their craft. The approach consists of identifying mechanisms of jokes and wordplay applied to notions of craft and film form. As a means to do it, this thesis elaborates and identifies how – through their cinematic gags – ZAZ may have comprehensively written jokes in film form. The goal is not to artistically validate ZAZ (who, in certain respects, satirize self-importance) but to recognize their authenticity within film comedy and their approach to film form employed for humorous effects. This thesis is an interdisciplinary study and finds itself somewhere between the academic fields of humor (especially humor linguistics) and film studies. It also looks on reflections on craft from comedy filmmakers and writers. There is an attempt to identify perceivable aspects and mechanisms within ZAZ gags and then propose a categorization that is put to effect through gag analyses that are distributed throughout the pages and given special attention in a final chapter. The point is not to achieve a definite categorization of ZAZ gags, but to provide a functional and systemized template that can be used for future investigations. Overall, the question that is posed is: do cinematic gags have similar mechanisms as jokes while employing specific artifices of cinema? What one will find within the pages of this thesis is an effort to answer it.

Keywords: comedy cinema; joke mechanisms; ZAZ.

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PREFACE

[Extracted from the future thoughts of the author as a future specialist on the eating habits of aquatic creatures]:

As I clock in at the aquarium for yet another dull day of feeding baby dolphins, I fondly remember the time I wrote a thesis on film and humor and, alas, I can't help but think about how different this life of mine turned out to be. O, what bright-eyed kid was I back when that rosy-cheeked juvenile version of my sorrowful self thought that words had the power to change the world! Ha! Who, I wonder, could have seen in those eyes – then so filled with optimism, justice, dreams of accolades and larger-than-life speeches about the monstrous truths of this big bold world! –, a mindless, withering future of artificial pools and fish-smelling work clothes? All this for what... all this for stealing that one joke from Norm Macdonald! Relegated to shame, I was. Perhaps it was due! But then again, so much crying and trouble has been sowed upon this damned earth; why in the heavens should I appear to suffer all consequences? Sure, I used to think it was a fine joke, one of the finest jokes around! But now – now *everything* looks like the worst of all jokes. Not even the joke I stole seems to be worthy of the trouble, anymore. O sad truth. But still, of all truths how can one tell which is sadder? This globe is well surrounded by woe, anyhow. Happy may be those who do a good job, who clean their hands with pride after another day of surviving a thankless task that most likely keeps this evil wheel of life and misfortune turning – forever and ever until the end of all times! Aye, 'tis but the human condition, I suppose. The more accustomed one is the more should this person be able to enjoy and rejoice in the simple things of life!

I shall wail no more, for how very unthankful of me to shout at the winds as if I were a gale more powerful than mother nature herself; and for such petty reasons! I shall turn myself in, no more of this! Yes, this old life of ours sure moves wickedly toward giving us – mere and mighty flesh – a perspective on things. Sure! Maybe I could have been big, a reference – nay, a pioneer! – around those of the academic realms of humor and film studies; who knows? I shall let it go because this here, this thing of mine right here, is as great as any dream! Who's to say I am less than my desires?! I am indeed as happy as one can realistically and earthly be! I do *not*, in fact, desire any of that high praise! I now only desire the present which is set upon us! I am very well liked here in the watery ways of this aquarium. Folks down at the baby dolphin department are kind and sharing people. Through these damp corridors my work, not my wild dreams, is revered and noticed by its precious and tempestive qualities! I understand now that I am even seen as some kind of captain, but not one whose powers blow out of their heads and into oblivion and solitude, infested by their own thirst for warped greatness, no; not I! Yes, I suppose I could have been that, but no more do I strive it! I could have been greatly admired by the thinking minds, but here along my darling baby dolphins my work resonates to the greater cause of the present! Yes, I may not be revolutionary, but at least I am serving a *youthful porpoise!!!* !

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Surely you can’t be serious.”

“I am serious; and don’t call me Shirley.”

Airplane! (1980)

Film comedy has a long history of farcical tendencies. From the silent era, through the screwball 1930s and 1940s, and to the raucous 1950s and 1960s, North American comedy has often been linked to words such as zany, wild, slapstick, spoof, absurdity, and – within this humorous context – insanity. Thompson and Bordwell have said that “[m]ocking Hollywood was itself a Hollywood tradition” (2003, p. 528). Indeed, comedies have been commenting on themselves ever since George Méliès started performing illusions with the use of cinematic techniques. As early as 1905, Edwin Porter had already shot *The Little Train Robbery*, a comical remake of his own *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) featuring a cast entirely composed of children. Buster Keaton, Charles Chaplin, Max Linder and Harold Lloyd were constantly breaking the laws of representational physics and logic by enforcing the laws of imagination. Screwball comedies were a product of Hollywood while wittily aware of its condition. Abbott and Costello movies’ role in Hollywood was precisely to intrude and savage the tendencies of the business. Jerry Lewis, Blake Edwards and Billy Wilder were all actively commenting on the filmmaking process and Hollywood’s vices.

Going into the late 1970s and 1980s, a new layer of antics was introduced to this already notable proximity to insanity. Central to this phenomenon, there was a filmmaking trio – David Zucker, Jim Abrahams and Jerry Zucker (henceforth, ZAZ) – with a very unique style of film comedy, one that lied heavily on filmic form. Their style and influences suited those times of popular culture and media being at the very center of attention. Their films were a spoof not specifically on Hollywood, but on all things familiar to the majority of American audiences. Funny and popular as they were, they left a mark on film comedy that, even though still present if searched for, is nowadays much less recognized and indiscreet than what it once was. As we will see, they left a mark on an entire generation. Their influence was recognized and unescapable. Despite that, it is only natural that this awareness would dissipate a little for generations to come even if the effects of their contribution lingers on.

The ZAZ trio has never been and likely never *longed* for being interpreted through the lenses of intellectual validation or bloated concepts of filmmaking artistry in its most condescending sense. Their humble beginnings into the craft (John Landis, director of ZAZ’s

first film project, *The Kentucky Fried Movie* (1977), mentions they did not even know how to format a screenplay and that, overall, “they really didn’t know anything about filmmaking” (Landis *apud* Zucker, 2023, p. 132)) probably never made them crave recognition from the *Cahiers du Cinéma* or European film festivals. As David Zucker himself says: “[...] I knew what I wanted to do. It was to make funny movies and make people laugh” (2023, p.21). While telling the story of showing one of his short films in film class, he says that “[t]he other films were all very esoteric studies of light and shadow, weird camera angles, deep meaning, shown through the prism of ... whatever ... and then it’s my turn, and Jerry [Zucker] comes onscreen, and he’s being chased by a guy with no pants on [...] They all laughed, maybe despite themselves” (*Ibidem*). We can see here that, ever since their college years, there was no desire to be taken too seriously as artists (in its most abstract and self-important sense) or intellectuals; which is not to say, however, there was no seriousness of craft, no actual work put into constructing something for a certain effect – that is, humor. As we will see further on, ZAZ were in tune with Luigi Pirandello’s (1920) understanding of humorists as *rebels of rhetoric*¹, whereas they worked with not only non-scholarly practices but also intuitively while deconstructing rather than constructing – disordering and disagreeing rather than obeying and replicating.

Recently, a book of oral history (Zucker, 2023) recounting the production and reception of ZAZ’s most famous film, *Airplane!* (1980), was released. It contains stories of their career and statements from people who have worked with them and those who were, in different ways, influenced and/or amazed by their work. There are too many of these statements to be reproduced here, but they range from comedy personalities from all levels of silliness and tastes such as ‘Weird Al’ Yankovic, Peter Farrelly, Bill Hader, and Mark Stone & Trey Parker (creators of *South Park*) to people with more “serious”, smart, sober, and witty personae such as David Letterman, Gore Vidal, and Willem Dafoe. To exemplify the range of these statements, Letterman says the following about *The Kentucky Fried Movie*, their first film: “[...] well, if that wasn’t the template for movies to come in the world of comedy, then *Airplane!* certainly was” (Letterman *apud* Zucker, 2023, p. 106). Gore Vidal called *Airplane!* “the single greatest work of art to my mind in the last thirty years” (Vidal *apud* Zucker, 2023, p. 36) and Peter Farrelly and actor Willem Dafoe both credit ZAZ for making them realize that “they were just like the guys I hung out with!”, that ““Hey, maybe I can do this!”” (Farrelly *apud* Zucker,

¹ In the original: “ribelli alla Retorica” (1920, p. 64). The English translation (Pirandello, 1960) phrases it differently: “[...] they are *in open revolt against Rhetoric*” (1960, p. 32, my italics).

2023, p. 3) and that “[y]ou don’t have to be a card-carrying industry person” (Dafoe *apud* Zucker, 2023, p. 50). Bill Hader says, “I often credit *Top Secret!* as being my all-time favorite film (partly because it needs the love, and partly because every single moment in it is hilarious) – but *Airplane!* is the movie that unequivocally changed the world of comedy” (Hader *apud* Zucker, 2023, p. 329). To put in perspective how popular *Airplane!* was, ‘Weird Al’ Yankovic has said that “[t]he only longer movie line I had ever waited in was the one for *Star Wars* a couple of years earlier. *Airplane!* was a bona fide comedy blockbuster – the buzz on this thing was huge” (Yankovic *apud* Zucker, 2023, p. 322). *Airplane!* being comparable to *Star Wars* – a notoriously popular film – in terms of popularity is no dismissible deed. As *Star Wars* was for science fiction and adventure fans, an entire generation of young people had their humorous sensibilities affected by what came to be a cultural event in the history of American comedy.

Therefore, it is intriguing that such popular and influential filmmakers with clear formal intelligence and distinguishing style are often only briefly mentioned in studies on film comedy and constantly underplayed as *auteurs* or simply – because a strictly authorial condition may not be the sole qualifier of filmmaking artistry – capable filmmakers with acquired knowledge of craft and the ability to play around with it; to disrupt it and twist it around in order to create something new.

For example, Robert Stam makes no mention of ZAZ while discussing subversive film (2015) or introducing film theory (2000); Robert Sklar’s “A World History of Film” (2002) covers the history of film but ignores them completely despite having a paragraph dedicated to blockbuster comedies; David Bordwell (1997) leaves them out of the history of film style; Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2003) briefly name ZAZ among many of the filmmakers who have long in the history of film been disrupting genre conventions – they mention *The Naked Gun* (1988) and *Hot Shots* (1991) in passing merely as examples of farcical uses of sound (2008a); Anthony Balducci’s “The Funny Parts – A History of Film Comedy Routines and Gags” (2012) ignores ZAZ and only briefly bring up *The Naked Gun* trilogy (1988, 1991, 1994) to quickly mention scenes featuring a baby carriage, disarming a bomb or a funny bed; and even Andrew Horton’s “Comedy/Cinema/Theory” (1991) curiously mentions *Ruthless People* (1986) and *The Naked Gun* only as examples of box office hits that were critically snubbed, maybe accidentally exemplifying its own point.

If we think of other household names of post-1960s American film comedy like Woody Allen and Mel Brooks, for instance, we see an obvious difference in treatment – each of these

books brought up in the previous paragraph mention them extensively; and obligatorily when it comes to discussing comedy. On ZAZ, Emilio Audissino says that

their classification within the parody/spoof genre is possibly one of the main reasons for the underconsideration of ZAZ as auteurs. [...] [They] did not “evolve” into “serious” authorship as Allen did in his post-Annie Hall Bergman/Fellini-influenced filmography. Neither did they have a career as lengthy and graced with accolades as Brooks, who is one of the rare EGOT (Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, Tony) winners, which makes it difficult to ignore his work. (2021, p 80.)

They have never proved themselves as intellectuals (Allen) or extremely talented showbiz personalities (Brooks); they have, however – and much to their credit –, proved to be passionate about films and comedy. Very little attention has been given – not only academically but also critically – to their cinematic/formal style. That being said, although this research does not attempt to crown nor understand ZAZ as bastions of film art, it does believe that their films offer very interesting reflections on film craft²: functions and mechanics that have never really been explored to a deeper extent and that grant them part of their very particular style. Therefore, this is where this research stands – a look on style, craft, form, process, and reflections on process. It is focused on the work itself and not so much on ZAZ as a historical or socio-political phenomenon. In many ways it is a very practical study, as much as a study on *language* can be practical. Film language³ is the way through which I will be looking at the ZAZ style – how much of it lies on cinematic wordplay (i.e. plays on cinematic words/language)? Studying ZAZ through structure, form, and craft is the main driving force behind this research.

The reception of ZAZ has always dodged every inclination towards seriousness, and perhaps with reason (the problem with “taking humor seriously”, which I will explore further in this thesis). The trio themselves seem to avoid it. Apparently – if we look at interviews and stories surrounding the films – ZAZ were trying to have fun while focusing on the results of their work (usually, the landing or not of a joke or gag and how to make it work) rather than suffering for their art whilst making and thinking their movies (Zucker, 2023). Their casual approach and even a kind of aloofness to their deeds and work comes as no special surprise to

² Even though *art* and *craft* can very well be argued to be the same thing, this discussion would diverge the focus of this study; so, let us assume that art, in this sentence, carries the weight of *importance*, an ideal notion of *greatness*, whereas craft is “merely” – careful not to underplay it – the *work* itself, the handling of tools and materials to achieve something.

³ Although a widely accepted term, “film language” is not unproblematic. Mackendrick (2004) calls it “film grammar” but admits that “it is somewhat misleading to call one of the classes I teach ‘Film Grammar’. The word ‘grammar’ suggests there is some kind of language of cinema, when it is probably more useful to consider the basic ideas in these notes as nothing more than a series of visual conventions based on the contract that exists between film-maker and audience” (2004, p. xxxvi). Let us also consider it, then, as visual-narrative film conventions.

anyone familiar with their work, and we should never lose sight of that. However, regardless of all this appearance of lightness and simplicity (one that could be quite misleading), their style deserves properly focused studies.

If they are so popular within the world of comedy, why is a look on their style and form (on their cinematic “speech”, essentially) left so neglected? If we think about it, it is not exactly a surprise that they are often mentioned in casual conversations with awe but almost never mentioned academically or critically with analytical will. Somehow, the lack of the latter perpetuates the profusion of the former. A study on their craft allows for the possibility of their work to be discussed for what it is and for how it *functions* (allowing it to be paralleled and compared to not only other comedies and filmmakers, but other genres of film studies and artistic works), and not only as a thing that once existed and is well remembered. *A focus on their style and mechanics is – I believe – key to place them within the reach of academia.*

As William Archer says: “One thing is certain, and must be emphasized from the outset: namely, that if any part of the dramatist’s art can be taught, it is only a comparatively mechanical and formal part – the art of structure” (1913, p. 7). In a subject as abstract and as prone to subjectivity as humor – and in jokes, specifically –, a humorous structure is always undeniably there even if no one finds the joke funny. We can, therefore, understand the *possibility* of humor (the existence of a way to it, a structure to allow it) as parallel to the *possibility* of effective and moving (emotional) drama. Alexander Mackendrick, famous film professor and talented filmmaker, says that the thing that “stories as varied as prehistoric myths, ancient epic tales of gods and heroes, classic works of the theatre, folk stories, fairy tales and even anecdotes” have in common is that “they all seem to share a similar anatomy. Though wildly different in their *content*, they are curiously alike in *structure*” (2004, p. xxviii). So, with that in mind, with structure being existent in wildly different forms of stories and narratives, we can imagine that there might be structural similarities between these different forms (namely, jokes and films), which better allows us to study them comparatively.

Therefore, the way in which this research places ZAZ in a central position is by looking, specifically, into the influence of jokes, puns and wordplay on the cinematic and comedic style of ZAZ. The hypothesis of this research is that their style can be successfully understood as ingrained in the structural and storytelling characteristics of jokes and wordplay, making it almost one of the most comprehensible cinematic ways of writing and performing jokes. It is the belief of this research that looking at these elements (film language and the mechanics of wordplay and jokes) separately and then placing them together will hopefully make for a clear

understanding of ZAZ's cinematic/comedic style and why it is so unique – the reason why their focus on film form is so essential to create humor in a way we can recognize authorship and singularity. It could also point to the possibility that the work put on crafting literature and narrative is not unlike the work put on crafting jokes and visual gags; and if that is the case, it is possible to understand ZAZ's filmmaking abilities as grounded on knowledge of craft and familiarity to cinema. As a means to navigate through that, I will employ studies on humor, the linguistics of humor, narrative and dramatic construction mostly in films, and studies on ZAZ – there are very few of these, but I will be looking at the available ones. A selection of scenes will then be analyzed while placing all these areas of study in parallel to each other.

As stated before, this research attempts to establish a connection between studies of jokes and wordplay (mostly regarding structure and linguistics) and narrative and dramatic construction to the very unique comedic/cinematic style of ZAZ, especially in their work with gags. By doing that, it is expected that some light can be shed over the trio and point them out as filmmakers who are worthy of dedicated studies and reflections on film form, something that greatly exceeds their body of work being commonly mentioned only as part of historical/index purposes or simply as a novelty act too odd and unparalleled to be talked of in more extent.

In short, there is a desire that this research can be a contribution to a way out of the intellectual obscurity surrounding ZAZ in academia and film criticism. There is a sense that a structural approach to their work is capable of revealing just how singular their style is in the world of film comedy. The common approach of cinematic humor as content and content alone is perhaps too limited – ZAZ's invisibility within critical and academical studies despite their huge popularity might prove it. The intention is that this research can be an interesting companion to the vast field of humor studies and its linguistic branch, an addition to film studies and its serious approach to a practical focus on comedy instead of the usual historical and/or strictly political/cultural, and a novel look into the greatly ignored work of ZAZ.

2. ZUCKER, ABRAHAMS & ZUCKER: NOT A LAW FIRM

Zucker, Abrahams and Zucker stands for brothers David and Jerry Zucker and childhood friend Jim Abrahams. As a writing trio, they are responsible for five projects, out of which four are feature films and one is a short-lived TV show – *The Kentucky Fried Movie* (1977), *Airplane!* (1980), the TV show *Police Squad!* (1982), *Top Secret!* (1984) and *The Naked Gun: From the files of Police Squad!* (1988). Other projects also saw their collaboration in different positions – they directed (but did not write) *Ruthless People* (1986), they produced (but did not write or direct) *Brain Donors* (1992), and shared either producing, writing or directing credits (but never all three in a single role) for the subsequent *Naked Gun* sequels (1991; 1994). After that, even though they would still eventually collaborate with one another, as a trio they never participated in the same project again. Jim Abrahams famously wrote and directed *Hot Shot!* (1991) and *Hot Shots! Part Deux* (1993) and directed lighter comedies such as *Big Business* (1988) and *Welcome Home, Roxy Carmichael* (1990); Jerry Zucker directed the supernatural romance *Ghost* (1990), the ensemble comedy *Rat Race* (2001), and produced some dramas and comedies including *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997); and David Zucker has remained relatively active and, among other things, directed and/or wrote *Scary Movie 3, 4 and 5* (2003; 2006; 2013), other parody-like films such as *BASEketball* (1998) and *An American Carol* (2008), and produced the thriller *Phone Booth* (2002). The focus of this thesis, however, is on their first works as a writing trio.

ZAZ started performing and writing comedy as The Kentucky Fried Theater, a comedy troupe that set their shows in a rented warehouse in Madison, Wisconsin. After some time, the show built a reputation for itself. While not really knowing what they were doing, they credit a lot of their success to luck and naivety. Jerry Zucker says that “[s]o many of our mistakes were miraculously corrected. Somehow our naiveté [sic] always seemed to work to our advantage. Either this was all meant to be, or we were the luckiest guys alive!” (2023, p. 57). Jim Abrahams believes that “[o]ur motto could have been ‘Ignorance is bliss!’” (Ibid., p. 220). Actor Willem Dafoe remembers that, while being interested in a lot of things other than cinema, “[s]eeing Kentucky Fried Theater at the University of Wisconsin made me think I could do this” (Dafoe *apud* Zucker, 2023, p. 50). Eventually, they decided to move their theater to Los Angeles, on Pico Boulevard. Val Kilmer, who would eventually start his movie career as the protagonist in *Top Secret!*, was “a huge, huge fan. I saw their theater in Pico [...] about 50 times. Once my kind father even rented the entire show for a party full of classmates, so I really knew their stuff” (Kilmer *apud* Ryan, 2014). Being in Los Angeles meant they were invariably closer to

the entertainment business and surrounded by other young people trying to make a career for themselves. One of them was John Landis, who was approached by ZAZ when they started to think about bringing *The Kentucky Fried Theater* to the movies. John Landis directed it and, from there on, ZAZ were involved in the film business, soon directing and producing their own movies.

ZAZ's style is marked by a formal irreverence prompted by observational wit. Accordingly and unsurprisingly, they often mention among their comedy influences *Mad Magazine* and *The Marx Brothers*. David Zucker says that “[t]wo decades before [*Airplane!*], *MAD* magazine was our first exposure to parody. I think that was the root of *Airplane!*” (Zucker, 2023, p. 127). Director Adam McKay thinks that “*Airplane!* borrowed the idea of parody which *MAD* magazine was doing and took it to punk rock level. [...] Things were always on the edge of anarchy and really playing with form” (McKay *apud* Zucker, 2023, p. 126). Jerry and David mention something similar – and very telling of how it affected their style – when adding that

“Jerry: *MAD* magazine had a character called Marginal Marvin who would always be in the margins, outside the panels. Characters would say things like, ‘Help! I’m stuck in this stupid magazine.’

David: Yes! It was as if they were teaching us never to respect convention. To literally go outside the margins” (Zucker, 2023, p. 127).

On their praise of the Marx Brothers, Jerry explains that “[w]e became Marx Brothers fanatics when we got to college. Their films were filled with brilliant slapstick, one-liners, songs, and even surrealism. They were true anarchists, provocateurs” (Ibid., p. 187). David adds that “they had a discipline to them. Everybody around them was playing stuffy, pompous characters. [...] Not everyone was trying to be funny. We loved how they would build their gags to an impossible point where the punch line would go that one step beyond any logic” (Ibidem). On that note, Jerry⁴ further explains that “The Marx Brothers stood for a kind of freedom. They were an uncontrollable force in the midst of all those stuffy authority figures. They refused to take anything seriously” (Ibidem). This rebellion against convention, in form and discourse – in the Marx Brother’s behavioral contrast against authority and self-important pomposity and *Mad Magazine*’s formal self-awareness against the restrictions of form –, is at the heart of ZAZ’s artistic idealism. As Pirandello says, “Humor, as we will see, in its inner,

⁴ In Zucker (2023), Jim Abrahams comes clean as not being as enthusiastic about *The Marx Brothers* as Jerry and David. He says, “I’m getting up there in years, and I really don’t know how many opportunities I have left. So here it goes: I’ve never cared for the Marx Brothers” (2023, p. 188). The entire exchange including Jerry and David finding it out and having no idea Jim bit his tongue for 40 years feels and reads like a rehearsed joke. It may, however, reflect a real unenthusiasm for the Marx Brothers on Jim Abrahams’s part. We may never really know.

alluring, and essential process, inevitably *decomposes*, disorders, disagrees; whereas art in general, as taught in school, by rhetoric, was usually above all an external *composition*, a logically ordained accord” (1920, p. 63, my translation)⁵. That being the case, ZAZ can be successfully understood as humorists under Pirandello’s definition.

Their work as a writing trio is relatively short-lived but sketches a noticeable evolution and a process of maturity of their style. *The Kentucky Fried Movie* (1977), as ZAZ’s first venture into motion pictures, is the film in which structural comparisons between cinematic gags and jokes are least predominant as they were still figuring out cinematic conventions as a whole. It is a sort of collection of spoofs on the program of 1970s American television. It develops as if the audience was watching a series of commercials and bits of shows in front of a TV set in a world in which television would make fun of itself. Nonetheless, in this film, absurdity and irreverence reign supreme; and although not as “sophisticated” as what they would do in the future, it is the ground on which they stand thematically and energetically – an irreverence of discourse soon to be channeled through an irreverence of form.

Airplane! (1980) is, commercially and influentially, their most successful film. It finds them as directors who aspire to build a comedy film around a plot. This is where they find one of the defining characteristics of their oeuvre – an apparent tone of sobriety eventually disrupted by bursts of silly (sometimes loud) goofiness. It is also in this film where they start prominently working with wordplays and consequently attempting to find their structural kinship within film form. Their next project takes the form of a TV show: *Police Squad!* (1982) lasted only six episodes (being cancelled after four) and it spoofs procedural police shows. It introduces the character of Frank Drebin, who would return in *The Naked Gun* (1988), the film adaptation that, contrary to the show, became a commercial hit. Stylistically, *Police Squad!* is more similar to other ZAZ’s films than to any other TV show at the time. It was probably the reason why it failed to impress the network – it went against all conventions defined for television comedies such as laugh tracks, clear indicators of humor, and an accordance between sound and image (Audissino, 2022a).⁶

Top Secret! (1984) is perhaps the film in which the quality of their style more heavily analyzed by this thesis is most pronounced. It finds ZAZ with a somewhat developed notion of

⁵ Even though I also use an already existent English translation of this work, I believe the translation of this particular part lacks an important emphasis given by Pirandello in his original text. The English translation I avoided can be found in Pirandello (1960), page 31.

⁶ More on *Airplane!*, *Police Squad!* and *Top Secret!* can be found in Chapter 5.

craft and the ability to play with film form more extensively than before. It follows a big commercial failure (*Police Squad!*) that followed a big commercial success (*Airplane!*). Naturally, expectations for the success of *Top Secret!* were high. Unfortunately, it underperformed at the box office and was consequently seen by ZAZ as a failure despite being filled with some of their favorite cinematic jokes (Zucker, 2023). Eventually, it came to build a cult following and is nowadays a fan favorite, receiving belated accolades from special screenings at specialized film festivals and events of the sort (Ryan, 2014).

Their last collaboration as a writing trio came in *The Naked Gun* (1988). David Zucker directed it alone and came back for the role in *The Naked Gun 2 ½* (1991). For the third film of the series, however, David stepped down and focused on writing. *The Naked Gun* carries a tonal change from their previous projects – it is slightly less irreverent in form and turns the character of Frank Drebin into a show-carrying clown. Although it fits their intentions, the film is more grounded on situational and physical comedy than ZAZ's previous projects. The film is, however, a natural progression of ZAZ filmography and it stands as a very particular film, still undoubtedly carrying their signature style. Although less prolific in terms of wittily designed gags, it speaks dearly to their interest in the ridiculous of things, an interest to which all their films own their existence. *The Naked Gun* also marked their first big hit since *Airplane!* and proved to have a long life, still being critically acclaimed.

Shortly after the beginning of this research in early 2023, some important things started happening in the world of ZAZ. In late 2023 a book of oral history recounting the production of *Airplane!* and stories of ZAZ's career, from their lives as college students to recent years, was released (Zucker, 2023). This release triggered a series of new interviews with ZAZ and remembrances of their work in the media. In May 2024, a reboot of *The Naked Gun* started filming after several years of different sequel/reboot projects being in development and abandoned. This project had no involvement of ZAZ and was recently released in theaters in the second semester of 2025. The most drastic change, however, came in late 2024 with the death of Jim Abrahams at the age of 80.

Those three letters of ZAZ are now only two, and no ZZ or AZ or ZA can be as meaningful as ZAZ, together, were. No more and no less than three letters – three people. I hope this thesis can reflect on how a friendship and a shared sense of humor can have a lasting impact beyond those who live it, including – but definitely not exhaustively – in structural analyses. A single academic thesis is but a microscopic percentage of their influence; and – beyond the scope of this research – we should rather look at (in fact, consider) how humor

spreads, how it comes to affect and gather us in ways humor usually does: intuitively, unconditionally, mysteriously, disturbingly, recklessly, stupidly, and – why the hell not – Shirley.

3. ON STUDYING GAGS

3.1 THE PROBLEM WITH TAKING IT SERIOUSLY

“Dying is easy; comedy is hard”.

*Edmund Kean*⁷

One point to be covered, I believe, before delving into this research is its ambiguous and perhaps necessarily inconclusive nature. It only takes a moment for anyone to see how ridiculous (and paradoxically unfunny) it might seem to “take humor seriously”, how incongruous and possibly under-productive it can be. It is interesting to note, however, that many studies on humor are equally bothered with or understanding of this ambiguity, this “problem” that surrounds the very idea of interpreting in a serious manner something that is often not *meant* to be taken seriously; and then trying to achieve a *definition*, which could be contrary to the not at all rare anarchic qualities of humor. Simon Critchley says: “A joke explained is a joke misunderstood. In this case, what might make one laugh – albeit for dramatic irony – is the audacity or arrogance of the attempt to write a philosophy of humour” (2002, p. 2). Karel Reisz says that “[t]o theorise about laughter is a thankless task. A good joke, by its very incongruity, stubbornly eludes classification [...] – analysing a joke tends to turn it sour” (2010, p. 79). Additionally, on the somewhat mysterious and clearly unconsented nature of humor (which makes it hard to systemize and teach), Alexander Mackendrick once said that “[i]f you have ambitions to practice comedy, you won’t learn a lot from books” (2004, p. xxviii) and Arthur Asa Berger requires from the reader that in order to do comedy they must have a sense of humor – “if you don’t like to laugh (and don’t have the desire to make other [sic] laugh), if you don’t have a feel for the absurdities of life, if you don’t have a comic sensibility – I don’t think this book will help you learn how to write good comedy or analyze humor very well” (2011, p. viii). Jeroen Vandaele asks important questions: “Since humor itself is not to be taken seriously, why would we take its analysis seriously? Conversely, if the analysis of humor aims at seriousness, does it not kill the humor and thus stand opposed to its object of study?” (2010, p. 722). This is something no contemporary study on humor can detach itself from, something they are all bound to carry along its entirety – the undefining and instinctive quality of humor.

⁷ Edmund Kean was one of the most celebrated Shakespearean actors of his time. He died in 1833 and these were allegedly his last words.

We can only attempt the task of studying it while understanding and respecting that humor lies in a “sensibility”, as Berger puts it, and that it cannot be *cracked* as some sort of code or logical mystery but rather explored (in its most adventurous sense) and wondered about – it *is* a very human thing, after all. Therefore, when faced by the humbling effects of humor, one tends to wonder: why over-complicate things? But then again, one can also be marveled; and that encounter with merciless awe – for those most keen to restlessness and curiosity – can lead to anything close to obsession and passion, understandably inciting these almost quixotic quests towards making sense out of humor.

Accordingly, humor studies constantly acknowledge the incongruity, inconclusiveness, and limitations of their own efforts. Henri Bergson says that “[t]he greatest of thinkers, from Aristotle downwards, have tackled this little problem, which has a knack of baffling every effort, of slipping away and escaping only to bob up again, a pert challenge flung at philosophic speculation” (1913. p.1). Salvatore Attardo, for instance, argues that “it is impossible to define ‘a priori’ the category of humor, let alone to provide more detailed internal subdivisions” (2024, p. 92-93). After scanning through some literature on the issue and its diversity in conclusions and dead-ends, he makes the point that there is “a perhaps not unjustified pessimism on the very possibility of finding a common ground of analysis among the many socio/historical manifestations of humor, let alone a determination of the necessary and sufficient conditions for humor to obtain” (Ibid., p. 100). When trying to understand the “gap in contemporary philosophy” regarding humor and laughter, John Morreall says that “it is not that laughter and humor are too simple or too well understood to generate any philosophical questions. Even as a biological phenomenon, laughter remains an anomaly” (1987, p. x). Thorsten Schröter goes right to the flagrant observation that “[s]omewhere on the first pages of books on humour, one can usually find remarks to the effect that the topic is very difficult to define or that partially conflicting definitions abound” (2005, p. 56). As we can see, this is indeed very much the case.

Probably because of this awareness, humor studies tend to stand in a place that seems quite rare and borderline impossible – that of being sure that some things are beyond explanation and that this almost “magical” quality is what gives the whole thing life, persistency, and immortality while at the same time insistently looking for the impossible or to materialize and schematize it within comprehensible, objective terms. Bergson even argues in favor of some kind of “method” when he says that the “comic spirit has a logic of its own, even in its wildest eccentricities. It has a method in its madness. It dreams, I admit, but it conjures up in its dreams visions that are at once accepted and understood by the whole of a social group”

(1913, p. 2). If there is indeed a method (or, better yet, if it *feels* like a method might exist), even if it is impossible to be explained by the somewhat limited scope of human discourse, studies on humor will continue to bother themselves with trying to understand it despite its elusive nature.

Bergson mentions “madness”, and, in many ways, these efforts could be just that (and perhaps that is what brings it even closer in essence to its subject), but it is also about the journey and the ride. For instance, Jaime Libby writes on the introduction of his master’s thesis focused on deconstructing humor in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* the following: “So, if trying the same thing over and over again expecting to achieve a different result is the definition of insanity, it also comes partway in defining humor. We never tire of watching Puck repeatedly fail at fixing the messy love quadrangle of four foolish mortals, so let us try just one more time to deconstruct humor” (2016, p. 1-2). Humor theorists do not necessarily try the exact same thing over and over again – variations of similar things may be different enough to be considered a whole different thing. However, despite these different things having different and fresh goals, hypotheses and motives – as it should have; no ride is aimless – the *search*, rather than a conclusion, might actually be the point. This kind of disclaimer makes these studies seem very humble when dreaming big, law abiding when defying the law (and law defying when abiding the law), engaged in a quest for the complexity in simplicity, for finding literacy in instinct, and many other paradoxical definitions that speak directly to this notion of “taking humor seriously” – a realm untouchable by academicism and yet sought after by academia.

THREE THEORIES OF HUMOR

While discussing humor, Noël Carroll (2010) mentions three traditional theories of humor and laughter – the Superiority Theory, the Incongruity Theory and the Release Theory. Despite eventually leaning towards considering the Incongruity Theory – or at least more enlightening variations of it – the most fruitful of the three, he points to argumentative problems in all of them, still not departing from the common understanding that humor studies are somewhat inconclusive. Attardo (2024) is more thorough and goes through many other theories, but when covering modern theories of humor, he separates them in three families – cognitive, social and psychoanalytical. Within the cognitive family he places the Incongruity Theory, within the social family he places the Superiority Theory (mainly referring to it as Hostility Theory), and within the psychoanalytical family he places the Release Theory. These three

theories appeared earlier in Morreall (1987; 1983) as Superiority, Incongruity and Relief theories. In Morreall (1983) they are all presented as theories of *laughter* whereas in Morreall (1987) some seem to be more fitting as theories of humor than of laughter⁸. All these theories add different things to the discussion and invariably collaborate to this ongoing investigation, but none have been able to completely explain humor in all its varieties. Briefly, this is what each one represents, why none of them can be a definitive theory of humor, and what may dispel them:

SUPERIORITY

The Superiority Theory assumes, to put it very simplistically, that the reason why we laugh is because we feel superiority towards someone or something else. Both Plato and Aristotle saw laughter as malice, as amusement derived from feelings of power over others and over people more unfortunate, disabled or simply defeated (Morreall, 1987). It is a theory that sees humor as being sprung out of a “sudden glory when we realize that in some way we are superior to someone else” (Ibid., p. 19), as seen by Thomas Hobbes, one of the main philosophers to formulate this theory into shape. It implies a perceived inferiority in others or in our former selves, suggesting that humor is diminishing in nature, a necessary condition for superiority to occur – after all, one can only feel superior to a second character. Both Plato and Hobbes were suspicious of laughter, with Plato advising against it for considering it not only a loss of rational control (Morreall, 1987) but also a lack of self-knowledge (therefore, ridiculous) (Attardo, 2024) and Hobbes deeming the excess of it “a sign of pusillanimity” (Hobbes *apud* Morreall, 1987, p. 19).

It is not hard to dispel the Superiority Theory. For one, it assumes that every time laughter occurs, humor is involved. That is not always the case. There are many instances of laughter not originating from one’s feeling of superiority. For instance, what happens when a baby laughs “at the game of peekaboo [...] cannot be attributed to a sense of superiority in the

⁸ The point of this chapter is to present the complexity surrounding comedy (humor, laughter, amusement, etc.) studies. Therefore, even though establishing the difference between laughter and humor is essential when effectively studying laughter or humor – especially in philosophy and psychology (according to Morreall (1987), this “sloppiness” regarding the distinction between laughter and humor is one of the reasons why the superiority theory held the ground for so many years) –, it goes a bit beyond the needs of this thesis. Understanding why we laugh or why things are funny is not as urgent for us as the craft of ZAZ and how it provides the *possibility* of laughter. It suffices to say, however, that “laughter is a response not only to humor, but also to tickling, nitrous oxide, belladonna, atropine, amphetamine, cannabis, alcohol [sic], the gelastic seizures that accompany certain epileptic fits, nervousness, hebephrenia [...]” (Carroll, 2010, p. 398). It is fair to say, though, that between laughter and humor, what this thesis deals with is indeed humor and not laughter – the mechanics of an action rather than the effect it may or may not cause biologically. See Attardo (2024, p. 104 – 109) for more on the matter of laughter/humor.

baby, because these kinds of laughter begin before the baby has any image of itself in comparison with others” (Morreall, 1983, p. 10). Indeed, laughter can come from a variety of places and situations – not all of them are prone to be derived from feelings of superiority or of “sudden glory”. Hobbes, of course, saw as part of the human nature not only a thirst for power but a “perpetuall [sic] and restlesse [sic] desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely [sic] in Death” (1651, p. 47), thus naturally seeing laughter through the lenses of damning power-seeking. Attardo points out that “[s]ociological approaches to humor often emphasize the aggressive [...] aspect of humor” but remembers that “[b]ecause of their emphasis on the interpersonal, social aspect of humor, superiority/disparagement theories are of interest to the sociolinguistics of humor, but of limited application elsewhere” (2024, p. 166), showing that, even though the Superiority Theory cannot be (and is not) entirely dismissible, it is quite limited in scope and cannot be exhaustive.

Ultimately, it seems that “The Superiority Theory turned out to be a classic case of a theory built on too few instances, and it was later recognized that there is no essential connection between laughter and scorn” (Morreall, 1987, p. 3). As we will see further on, there are a number of comic events that are not in any way of scornful nature, for instance one of the objects of this thesis – wordplay. As Noël Carroll says: “in these cases, it is far from clear to whom one feels superior, or in what way the utterer of such word wit is inferior to us” (2010, p. 397). In *Airplane!*, when a group of reporters walk into a room and say “let’s get some pictures” and then proceed to *remove some pictures* that were hanging on the wall, we cannot identify a connection between the humor that has been aroused and any hint of superiority towards someone or something else.

INCONGRUITY

Entering the cognitive realm of things, a much better-accepted theory by contemporary scholars is the Incongruity Theory. It assumes that humor is grounded on some form of unexpectedness, some kind of sudden deviation from the norm. It sees humor as originating from a perceived *incongruity* in life, some break from an assumed natural behavior or development of things, and not essentially from social comparisons, as supposed by the Superiority Theory. Morreall says that, within the Incongruity Theory, “amusement is an intellectual reaction” (1983, p. 15) and Attardo says that these kinds of theories are “the direct ancestors of ‘cognitive’ theories” (2024, p. 163). Therefore, it is not too far to say that Incongruity Theories understand humor and laughter through an attempt of making *sense* of things, one that is frequently caught in its own process.

Although a proponent of the Superiority Theory, Aristotle – unlike Plato or Hobbes – advised, within reasonable boundaries, the use of humor for practical purposes as long as it “serve[s] the argumentation of the orator” (Attardo, 2024, p. 119); however, he warns that “buffoonery [...] should be avoided” (*Ibidem*). Also, Aristotle already hinted at the possibility of incongruity playing a part in the production of laughter. In the *Rhetoric*, “he points out that one way for a speaker to get a laugh is to set up a certain expectation in his listeners and then to hit them with something they did not expect” (Morreall, 1983, p.16). He also writes that this mechanism can be perceived in jokes containing wordplay. According to Morreall (1983), even though these ideas seem very much like the start of an incongruity theory, they were never developed by Aristotle and, therefore, left uncommented by those who later studied his work. Kant, alternatively, defines laughter as centered in incongruity when he writes that “[l]aughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (1931, p. 223). However, while Kant elaborates on incongruity influencing the *mechanics* of humor, Schopenhauer adds a reflection regarding the *elements* of humor when saying that our expectation is not only transformed into *nothing* but into *something else* that was unexpected (Morreall, 1983). The frustration of not meeting our expectations may not be in itself humorous, but a punchline or the end of a humorous situation depends on this element having a character other than nothingness.

Not unlike a variety of contemporary studies on humor, the Incongruity Theory is the one that serves this thesis better, mostly due to its proximity to the analysis of puns. Carroll links incongruity to puns when he says that “puns generally involve violations of conversational rules, shifting the likely meaning of a word or phrase in a specific context to a secondary or metaphorical meaning, or exchanging the predictable usage of a word for that of one of its homonyms” (2010, p. 399). Additionally, Attardo says that “[i]ncongruity theories are conceptually closer to linguistic theories of structuralist descent” (2024, p. 165). As previously mentioned, Aristotle tapped into incongruity and deals consequently with puns when discussing metaphors – “[w]hile discussing liveliness and surprise in metaphors, Aristotle comments on several witticisms [...], puns, and on unexpected occurrence of words” (*Ibid.*, p. 20). It is fair to say, then, that the Incongruity Theory is the one that better – or more logically – serves most linguistic studies of humor.

According to Attardo, “elements belonging to incongruity theories are often co-opted by other theories. In fact, the incongruity theory is not incompatible with the hostility and release theories” (2024, p. 165). Therefore, even when not applied directly to structural and

formal approaches, incongruity can still be considered as an important factor in humor. Carroll (2010), for example, sees incongruity as the source of humor in extreme opposites of representational figures, such as “comic teams composed of a very thin man and a very fat man (e.g., Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Abbott and Costello)” (2010, p. 399), and almost every deviation from the norm such as Charlie Chaplin “[u]sing a person as an armrest [...] or a tablecloth as a handkerchief” (Ibid., p. 400). In fact, every rebellion from the expected can be seen as either incongruity or release, depending on how it is phrased – a *deviation from the norm* will entice incongruity while “‘liberation’ from the rules of language” (Attardo, 2024, p. 167) will entice a proximity to release theories, as we will see in coming paragraphs. One much more interesting occurrence of incongruity in humor studies can be found in Pirandello (1960), where he applies it to the essence of the art of the humorist as opposed to the art of the dramatist:

“Yes, an epic or dramatic poet may represent a hero of his in whom opposite and contrasting elements are shown in conflict, but he will *compose* a character from these elements and will want to represent him as consistent in every action. Well, the humorist does just the opposite: he will *decompose* the character into his elements and while the epic or dramatic poet takes pains to picture him as coherent in every action, the humorist enjoys representing him in his incongruities.” (1960, p. 143)

Even for the purposes of this thesis Pirandello’s reflections on humor are very interesting because, while not necessarily focused on structure or form, they are very much focused on craft, on the making of humoristic material and humorists’ approach to abstracting reality into an artistic of simply crafted form.

Even though the Incongruity Theory can be applied in several cases, it is not impenetrable to possible problems. Carroll (2010), in one point, attempts to dispel incongruity as an essential factor by pointing out that it can also cause anxiety, which may block humor from being obtained. He says that “confrontations with incongruity and deviations from expectations are [often] threatening occasions, fraught with anxieties” (2010, p. 401). However, this should not be taken as a true problem. Carroll seems to subscribe to Bergson’s perception that humor demands a “momentary anesthesia of the heart” (1913, p. 5). When Carroll says that invented humor⁹ shields us from possible anxieties by deploying “various external and internal conventions in order to assure that its incongruities will not be anxiety-producing” (2010, p. 401), that it makes an effort not to call “attention to the consequences – physical, moral, or

⁹ Carroll separates “invented humor” from “found humor” in a similar way that Attardo (2024) separates, linguistically, “non-casual” from “casual” speech (with the difference that casual speech may not be humorous whereas found humor is always humorous). It essentially means that invented humor is crafted into a joke, fictional, and if not assumingly, intuitively aware of its mechanics. Found humor would be humor that happens in our daily lives without someone’s effort of shaping it into a form – it is a “casual” speech.

psychological – of the harms that befall comic characters”, and that when “some character has been blown apart, we are not reminded that he would be bleeding profusely, for that might elicit empathy” (Ibid. p.402), he agrees with Bergson’s point that humor can only affect a person that is “thoroughly calm and unruffled” (1913, p. 4). However, Bergson makes that point while defending that an “*absence of feeling* [...] usually accompanies laughter” and that “laughter has no greater foe than emotion” (*Ibidem*). I do not particularly like this position for it implies that humor is essentially cruel and that it cannot be aligned to joy, paradoxically taking the fun out of humor. Even though it could be argued that humor does not *necessarily* produce any emotion – which is not the same as saying emotion is the enemy of laughter –, to say that humor is not emotional seems not only intuitively wrong (and therefore a dubious hypothesis to be explored) but contrary even to the cruelest of theories, the Superiority Theory – as we have seen, it demands at least a feeling of *glory*.

Also, anxiety does not seem to be entirely contrary to amusement; and amusement is one of the key words to define the feeling of watching so many comedies, including early comedies’ gags such as Buster Keaton’s life-defying stunts. As an essential part of his films and persona, they keep the audience in some state of both amusement and anxiety, amused and engaged, expecting to see what will happen next while amazed by what is happening now. Expectation and anticipation are essential to most narratives (Mackendrick, 2004), and high-energy narratives may easily turn it into some kind of anxiety. Additionally, even if we do not see anxiety as partially analogous to anticipation, other occurrences of anxiety are not necessarily dried out of humor. Our bodies often feel in danger when exposed to disgusting or grotesque things even though we know them to be fictional situations. There are many instances of gross humor in television and films, defying Carroll’s (2010) point that we cannot laugh if we are reminded that a character is bleeding or suffering graphically: TV shows like *South Park* and *Family Guy* are comedies filled with scenes that are potentially disturbing to one’s stomach. Even *The Simpsons’ Treehouse of Horror* Halloween specials are prone to put beloved characters in positions of ruthless death, profuse bleeding and extreme violence. Frank Drebin, the main character of both *Police Squad!* and *The Naked Gun*, is often seen detailing the gruesome deaths or accidents of victims to their loved ones without realizing how unsound that is and believing it to be thoughtful. The point is that feeling uneasy or uncomfortable may not be a sure enabler of humor at all times, but it cannot be concretely impervious to it as well. Vandaele (2010) considers *tone* as an important factor of humorous narratives as well. He says that “[b]lack comedies like *Burn after Reading* (2008) by Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, for

instance, show that constant pain and final catastrophe – on the story level – may go hand in hand with tremendous laughter” (2010, p. 777). He further says that “[t]he comic tone invites the participants to find humor in what is communicated” (Ibid., p. 778). I would even add that *how* things are communicated may also be important for establishing or allowing humor. There is a clear incongruity, for example, in the endless chain of misfortune that befalls the characters of Voltaire’s *Candide* (2021); also, in how relentlessly they are recounted to the reader. On *Candide*, Italo Calvino says: “Rapidly and lightly, a succession of misfortunes, plight, and massacre runs through the page, bounces from chapter to chapter, branches and multiplies, causing in the reader’s emotions *no other effect but a hilarious and primordial vitality*” (1991, p. 125, my italics, my translation). Incongruity-based humor is largely based on a break of expectations, and this break can sometimes take us to uninviting situations without necessarily losing its ability to produce humor not only through an incongruity that might amuse us but also some other comic factor that can coexist in rich narratives and effects found in films.

There is, though, a true problem with incongruity as a theory of humor. Although a very flexible theory with exciting possibilities, the Incongruity Theory is not exhaustive or representative of *all* kinds of humor and laughter. Not only is incongruity itself not necessarily or inherently funny, but one important problem with this theory is “the very notion of incongruity. For we do not have a clear definition of it” (Carroll, 2010, p. 403). Perhaps precisely because of its flexibility, incongruity is sometimes seen as too ample or too unspecific to provide clear grounds for an understanding of humor. It is clear that incongruity – although a very promising theory of *humor* – may not be a very encompassing theory of *laughter*. Morreall says that “the central weakness of the incongruity theory is that it is not comprehensive enough to explain all cases of laughter” (1983, p. 18). He points out that incongruity is intellectual but that not all cases of laughter are as sophisticated as that. He even adds that “there are cases of laughter that do involve intellectual understanding but do not involve incongruity” (*Ibidem*). When going through Aubouin’s (1948) concept of “justification” in humor, Attardo says that he “notes that two incongruous objects per se are not perceived as funny, and in order to be perceived as humorous, the two objects have to be ‘accepted’ simultaneously” (2024, p. 316). Carroll points out that the examples of incongruity “run a very broad gamut of cases, ranging from conceptual and logical errors to inappropriate table manners, to subverted expectations in general” (2010, p. 403). The problem is, then, the definition of incongruity and a dependence on how it should be applied. How can one say scientifically that all humor arises from incongruity when this incongruity can go by different names or, more importantly, when

other factors possibly akin to humor (including those related to superiority or release) may be contributing to the production of humor? How can incongruity itself be the sole cause of humor if not all incongruities are inherently funny and might depend on an application that highlights its comic possibilities?

RELEASE

A third theory, one which Attardo (2024) places as part of the psychoanalytical family of theories, is the Release Theory. In short, it looks at laughter as a physiological phenomenon and assumes it is a relief of accumulated energy; from there, it builds on humor and looks for reasons related to liberation and discharge to explain what humor and laughter is. Morreall says it treats laughter as “the venting of excess nervous energy” (1987, p. 6) and Attardo says that “[r]elease theories maintain that humor ‘releases’ tensions, psychic energy, or that humor releases one from inhibitions, conventions and laws” (2024, p. 167). Morreall (1983) mentions how this theory can be linked with both Superiority and Incongruity theories; and because of that, it “is not necessarily competing with the other two theories of laughter we have discussed; it is simply looking at a different aspect of the phenomenon” (1983, p. 21). Therefore, this theory gets more interesting when we look at it as related to concepts of freedom or when complementing other explanations for humor.

As we have already seen, Attardo (2024) interestingly points release to linguistic behavior and finds it explaining puns as sorts of linguistic criminals, subverting the laws of language. Carroll momentarily proposes that it be rephrased as something more procedural and cognitive by thinking of the release of expectation – “expectation builds as we await the punchline. When it arrives, the pressure of those expectations is released or relieved, and laughter ensues” (2010, p. 404). Morreall (1983) mentions a similar approach to this theory, one also involving narrative and the emotions it may arise in us. He says that when, “at the punch line[,] the story takes an unexpected turn, or the characters are shown not to be what we thought they were, [...] the emotional energy which has built up is suddenly superfluous and demands release” (1983, p. 22). He presents that view by contrasting it to another possible interpretation of relief – that of sexual repression being broken by a comedian rupturing a taboo, for example. Relief, here, is taken as the release from prohibitions, explaining in some way the amusement felt by experiencing daring humorists and comic materials. Freud (1960), of course, writes about humor while understating it as some sort of release from repression – including sexual. According to Attardo, “[t]echnically speaking, Freud's theory would fit under the “release” theories” (2024, p. 172) and an “important aspect of Freud's thought, [...] is the

"liberation" from the constraints [sic] of mature, adult, logic that humor provides" (Ibid. p. 178). However, he analyses Freud's theory on the basis of linguistics and even mentions the possibility of it being understood as belonging to an incongruity theory. He remembers that, even though Freud's theory is understood as a release theory, his work on jokes deals with *technique* and *mechanics*, which sounds a lot like linguistics; and, as we have seen, "linguistics is much closer conceptually to the so-called incongruity/contrast theories" (Ibid., p. 177). Additionally, he points out that "Freud's work is still very important in German linguistic research [...] and elsewhere" (*Ibidem*). In accordance to these reflections, this thesis will not shy away from release theories if it fits or if it can add or enrich an argument.

It is a lot easier to dispel the Release Theory than to defend it. Morreall says that it "does not seem to capture the essence of laughter or humor. [...] More importantly, even if some cases of laughter do involve the venting of excess energy, it does not seem that our amusement *is* just that venting of energy" (1987, p. 6). Carroll points to the fact that the very notion of stored energy waiting to be released and these "hydraulic views of the mind" have "scant scientific grounds" (2010, p. 403). The problem, then, seems to be – again, like incongruity – the definition of the very subject; only in this case, a much more metaphorical subject. When discussing Freud's views, Morreall says: "[i]f Freud wants to explain laughter in joking as the release of 'saved' inhibitory energy, in short, he should first explain just what this kind of energy is and how we might measure, or at least detect, it" (1983, p. 30). Therefore, a lack of definition plagues the objective research of humor. Specific occurrences can be explained, but a general theory seems to be evasive.

Morreall concludes his account of Freud's theory by saying that "Freud's complex relief theory, to conclude, is plausible only where the simpler relief theory is plausible, and that is in pointing out that laughter situations *sometimes* involve a release of nervous energy" (Ibid., p. 37). Even when relief can be perceived through narrative, as we have seen, Carroll remembers that not all humor has closure – "even if we accepted the Release Theory as an account of the play of expectation in temporal forms of humor, like jokes, it could not be extended to forms of humor that do not build up expectations over time" (Ibid., p. 404). Therefore, release does not seem to be consistent or useful enough to be considered as a general source of humor; and even though the Release Theory can help explain certain occurrences of humor, it does not always manage to do so by itself, often not being applicable at all.

Another way through which humor has been attempted to be taken seriously is in relation to the less-than-objective matter of *Art*. Noël Carroll (2010) reserves a little less than two pages on the issue and states that “some comedies are art” (2010, p. 409), but only by pointing that “if anything is art, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is” (*Ibidem*). He is much more resistant to accept jokes as art, though. Even though he starts by pointing out that jokes, “[l]ike artworks, [...] mandate audiences to complete them” (*Ibidem*) and that because of this common feature they could be considered as artworks, his last paragraph is dedicated to important differences between art and jokes. I will briefly go through this paragraph and question his arguments not to claim jokes as art, but to insist on the complexity of the matter as opposed to Carroll’s simplistic dispelling of it – one that serves more the belittlement of jokes as a subject worthy of study than the understanding of humor.

Carroll’s (2010) arguments are mainly based on one characteristic of artworks, that of sustained contemplation. He says that “[i]n the ideal case, one returns to the artworks again and again, each time taking away a new or enriched insight. Jokes, on the other hand, are not usually like this”. However, it should be said that jokes are perfectly capable of producing different insights at different times. One can be affected in different ways by the same joke in different times, when told by different people or simply remembering it afterwards. Jokes have both representative and formal elements just like literature, paintings or films, and one’s attention might focus on different aspects of those elements – or on how they intersect – by hearing it from different people, reading it elsewhere or simply contemplating it in memory. Like other “artworks”, jokes can be the subject of analysis, of structural studies, of plot design, of their communicable ways and the mysteries that they can elicit – the uncertainty of humor and its effects. It seems rushed to say that jokes are simply “not usually like this”.

Carroll says that jokes “are generally one-shot affairs. One listens to jokes, gets them, and that’s that” (2010, p. 409). But this is not exclusive to jokes. The same *can* be said about films, for instance. Movies are not elevated to art status only when they are not immediately understood. In fact, a lot about film craft regards clarity in communication, in producing the right dramatic effects (Mackendrick, 2004). With either artform, it depends on one’s appreciation of it rather than the artform’s apparent ability of being appreciated. Anyone can say they watch films, get them, and “that’s that”. We know, however, there is *more* to that. Then why exactly, and based on what, can’t the same be said of jokes?

Carroll then says that even if jokes are remembered and retold, “one does not normally contemplate them, seized by their structural complexity and ingenuity, or intrigued by their

perspective on the human condition” (2010, p. 409). How can this be assumed? What is the best of observational stand-up comedy (a style so often based on joke-telling), even in a one-liner context, if not a “perspective on the human condition”? How is Norm Macdonald’s *Moth Joke*¹⁰ not only funny but also a Russian-influenced pessimistic view on helplessness and human condition (and perhaps funnier because of that)? When Mitch Hedberg says “I haven’t slept for ten days, because that would be too long” (Strategic, 2003) or when Steven Wright says “I’ve been getting into astronomy, so I installed a skylight; the people who live above me are furious” (Wicked, 1990), why do we laugh if not, among other things, seized by structure? What is this thesis if not one seized by the structural complexity and ingenuity of jokes? It seems, again, rushed – and, perhaps, uninterested – to conclude that jokes are not usually contemplated like that.

Carroll shields his argument, in a way, by implying that exceptions exist and assuming that an argument is scientific by considering what is *generally* true – “[s]ome jokes may be capable of affording such responses, but the vast majority are not” (2010, p. 409). The problem with this argument is that it seems to incline towards defining jokes as “less than art” in *opposition* to “real art”. However, there are no objective definitions of all the necessary conditions for a craft to be elevated to art status. If this gap in scientific rigor is accepted when considering what is and what is not art, then the same could be said about other mediums such as painting, music or films; and some paintings, songs and films would not be considered art, therefore hindering their entire category’s “real art” status. And even if there could be a specific proportion of “undeserving” artworks that would objectively affect their entire class’s art status, how can we talk scientifically about the “vast majority” without actual data? It seems deliberate, even if it serves the point Carroll is trying to make. We are bound to yet another inconclusiveness in the realms of humor studies, but to dismiss jokes as something as highly praised and respected as art on such faint grounds is surely not helpful. Even if it is not possible for us to claim jokes or humor as art, the point is that *there is no need to define anything as art in order to study it*.

Overall, there is an argumentative failure in Carroll’s paragraph – to scientifically say that something is not art supposes that a broadly accepted, unambiguous and unconditional definition of art can be employed. That is not the case. Carroll himself says: “Why suppose that [art forms] share a single common property or even a single set of common properties?” (2010,

¹⁰ Found in Macdonald (2016); chapter 23 – “Make a wish”.

p. 38). Curiously, Carroll's criticisms of formalism¹¹, for instance, are grounded on the lack of principles that discriminate significant from insignificant form (art from non-art). Here, however, the lack of principles does not seem to matter when setting art and non-art apart.

We can study jokes for what they are and how they function – and how well they function towards their intentions and/or effects – but not for how “artistic” they manage to be. *Well-crafted* might be a better term for working reflections. *Art* has a feeling of obscurity, of mystery, a touch for the poetic and the unknown, of delightful uncertainty, of instinct, of wonderful things, one that may not always suit less than obsessive and sublime-seeking academic endeavors. If humor studies have been troubled for centuries by unclear conditions for humor to be obtained, how can we expect art to be any less complicated? Therefore, how can we declassify (or classify) humor or jokes – or anything, really – as art? Thankfully, being art is not a necessary condition for jokes or humor to be studied while still amazed by its powers. According to Alexander Mackendrick, on the subject of cinema, films cannot be taught, at least “no more than anything else that is an ‘art’ can be taught. On the other hand, it may just be possible to call to the attention of the beginner the usages of the ‘language’ of cinema that have so far developed” (2004, p. xxxvii). Art cannot be taught, but the means to it surely can – the craft, language, structure; the way through which something sublime may or may not be achieved. Let us, then, not talk of jokes and films as art, but as craft, language and structure and as the means to something funny and/or sublime.

¹¹ In Carroll (2010); “Formalism” chapter.

3.2 GAGS AS NARRATIVE UNITS

Gags *are* narrative units. If we consider them to be the performative counterparts of jokes, this becomes quite clear. Despite shunning jokes as smaller occurrences of humor and deciding to focus on things with “magnitudes greater than that of the joke” (Carroll, 2010, p. 417), Noël Carroll does recognize that “[a] great deal of the humor that we encounter is narrative in form. This is obviously the case with many, if not most, jokes” (*Ibidem*). Additionally, Attardo says that “any joke has to be cast in some form of narrative organization, either as a simple (framed) narrative, as a dialogue (question and answer), as a (pseudo-)riddle, as an aside in conversation, etc.” (2024, p. 438). He also says that “it comes as no surprise to find that they [jokes] would embody the most elementary type of narrative structure” (*Ibid.*, p. 229) and that “it may well be that all forms of jokes are, or can be reduced to, narrative” (*Ibid.*, p. 230). On narrative humor, Vandaele says that “humor is narrative when it creates and/or exploits incongruity and superiority relations among the participants of narrative texts” (2010, p. 732). David Bordwell opens his “Narration in the Fiction Film” with a joke and goes on to say that “[a] joke is usually a narrative” (1985, p. xi). He then proceeds to go through three different ways of studying storytelling – representational, structural and procedural (or narratorial) –, all using his joke as an example. As we will see further on, this is not the only time Bordwell uses jokes in order to build arguments regarding narratives. Even if it was, to open a book on narration with a joke and sketching approaches to narrative having that joke as an example is a *very* strong consideration of the narrative aspects of jokes.

Although jokes, as verbal occurrences, are prone to be accepted as narratives, non-verbal gags may find a greater difficulty in being considered as such. To build an argument in favor of gags as narrative (albeit *condensed* narratives) – based on narrative and dramatic structure studies on film and equally significant reflections – I will turn not only to Bordwell but also to Alexander Mackendrick. Bordwell is very well-known in film studies, but Mackendrick is yet to be referenced in researches that are open to a focus on film craft as a way to film theory. Despite him being a notable film teacher for the latter half of his life – someone with a very practical approach to teaching very practical things – Mackendrick is not frequently remembered in studies of filmmaking. However, his reflections on narrative and dramatic structure carry the formal *and* discursive qualities (without excluding one from the other) that are fundamental to the argument and objectives of this thesis.

For example, on the matter of condensed narratives and movement (and, consequently, on jokes and gags), Mackendrick formulates very useful one-liners regarding comedy and

structure, such as: “[c]omic structure is simply dramatic structure but MORE SO: neater, shorter, faster” (2004, p. 41) and “[w]hat is happening NOW is not as exciting as what may or may not HAPPEN NEXT” (Ibid., p. 42), which is an assumed rephrase of William Archer’s definition of drama – “expectation mingled with uncertainty” (1913, p. 173). Based on that first definition, we can employ Mackendrick’s reflections on dramatic structure as conversing validly with gags and jokes, provided we can identify similar points in their structure that, despite being in a shortened overall narrative, are also present in longer constructions. If we take into consideration that the place between *now* and *next* exists in both condensed and stretched materials and incidents with hardly any change in character, these similar points are probably always there. For example, in the roughly 40 seconds of Louis Lumière’s *L’arroseur Arrosé* (1895), a sequence of actions performed by two characters (who act and react to these actions) communicate with one another and create a narrative. The elements of this short narrative are these:

1) A character is introduced – a gardener who is watering the grass. 2) Another character, the boy, is introduced and acts as an antagonist. He sneaks unseen behind the gardener and steps on the hose. 3) The water is cut off and puzzles the gardener. We know why; he does not. 4) As the gardener looks down at the end of the hose, the boy removes his foot and water is splashed all over the gardener’s face. 5) The gardener chases the boy around, finally catches him and proceeds to spank him.

In this short narrative, generally understood as a gag, we are presented to characters whose intentions clash (1 and 2); a tension that ensues and a question that is asked: “what will happen next?” or “will it actually happen?”, i.e. drama – Archer’s “expectation mingled with uncertainty” (3); a release, the punchline, the answer (4); and a conclusion, a solution (5). It should not be taken lightly that *L’arroseur Arrosé* is considered to be the first fiction story ever filmed¹²; and also that it is not only a comedy, but a gag. Just like Bordwell begins his exploration of narrative with a joke, cinema’s first steps into classically structured fictional narratives – employing concepts of expectation, antagonism, preparation, and climax – are with a gag.

¹² Cinema’s firsts are constantly being questioned. It is, of course, perfectly possible that by a number of different aspects (the definition of fiction in films, the discovery of films once lost, the fact that several films from the first years of cinema have been destroyed, etc.) *L’arroseur Arrosé* may not actually be the first fiction film ever filmed. This is only generally assumed; but the fact is that, from a *very* early age, cinema was already mixing narrative and humor.

Mackendrick states that “[s]torytelling is the knack of swiftly seizing the imagination of the audience and never letting it go” and that the audience “will hopefully be so taken with the story being told that they will, at every step of the way, want to know what happens next” (2004, p. 77). In a joke, the expectation of a punchline or something that carries a similar function – that of somehow releasing some form of tension –, is often an essential and concluding/climaxing part of it. Even in “punchlineless” forms of humor like the one aimed by the famous British comedy troupe Monty Python, the audience still expects something to come next regardless of laughter having been already aroused by the accumulation of humorous and nonsensical situations and speeches. Noël Carroll points that “[n]ot all narratives have closure” and that “narrative closure is not [...] a necessary condition of all narratives. Some narratives just stop or come to rest, rather than ending or concluding” (2010, p. 356). He then argues that closure can exist even when not concluding anything: “The notion of closure [...] is the impression that exactly the point where the work does end is just the *right point*” (*ibidem*). Therefore, if closure is not an essential condition, gags can still be considered narrative even if not possessing a punchline/closure. There is a kind of “deal” in narrative and occurrences that guarantees us that there is indeed something waiting to come *next* (up until a conclusion or a full stop); and that promise, in jokes, is only ever broken by the poor quality of a punchline or a deliberately underwhelming one – nonetheless, a punchline. Even in those cases, the structure (and the joke) is there¹³. Regardless of the medium, when it comes to narrative, “[t]he two virtues in the game are tension and surprise” (Mackendrick, 2004, p. 85). Bordwell makes a similar argument after presenting us with a short lawyer joke by saying that

a story can be presented not only in language but also in pantomime, dance, images, and even music. My lawyer joke could manifest itself in a comic strip, a radio skit, or a TV sketch. In certain respects, we can think of narrative as a preverbal phenomenon. (2008b, p. 87).

With all that in mind, we can understand narrative as being a chain of *nows* and *nexts* and not necessarily verbal. *This is, then, our ground to see formal gags in ZAZ movies as being possibly parallel in construction to verbal jokes and puns.* On this matter, Mackendrick argues that

[...] directors who have made the best use of the film medium have used the camera to communicate to audiences at a level far more immediate and primitive than the spoken word. By primitive I don't mean more simplistic and less subtle. [...] Cinema deals with feelings, sensations, intuitions and movement, things that communicate to

¹³ In some cases, an underwhelming punchline that follows an extremely elaborate and long set-up is essential for the joke and even characterizes it. I urge you to look for Norm Macdonald's telling of his joke about “Jacques de Gatteau” (containing as punchline a wordplay – “purpose” / “porpoise” – possibly inspired by Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*) and, yet again, “The Moth Joke”.

audiences at a level not necessarily subject to conscious, rational and critical comprehension. [...] A recurring theme of these notes is that cinema is not so much non-verbal as *pre-verbal*. (2004, p. 3)

If jokes are made out of narrative and narrative is not necessarily verbal – but pre-verbal, as both Bordwell and Mackendrick put it – then we can assume that films, by their own particular formal characteristics, are capable of telling jokes. Mackendrick uses the word *communication* to point out that narrative communicates both verbally and/or visually. If that is the case, ZAZ was perfectly able of writing jokes in film form.

3.3 GAGS AS PUNS AND WORDPLAY

If the field of humor studies can be somewhat inconclusive, it is to be expected that, equally surrounded by complicated and unclear definitions, the field of linguistic studies on humor – for our purposes here, jokes, puns, and wordplay (even if these definitions themselves are not quite as clear cut as we might wish) – also presents us with difficult taxonomies, questionable simplifications, or unproductive and unmanageable elaborations. When reviewing the studies on puns, Attardo starts off by saying plainly that “the research literature on puns is vast, but largely inconclusive” (2024, p. 259). He goes on to say that structuralist linguists have been “more attentive” (*Ibidem*) to punning, but that they have mostly focused on establishing different kinds of taxonomies, something Attardo understands as being effective in certain ways but neglecting in others – “No taxonomy can classify all the possible factors of ambiguity in language, so no taxonomy of puns can be exhaustive” (*Ibid.*, p. 261-262). Delabastita has similar worries regarding taxonomies and adds that

the linguistic and textual complexity of wordplay is such that a very wide variety of descriptive categories offer themselves as potentially relevant [...] Faced with this situation, the taxonomist of the pun has to choose between two evils: either ignore some of these categories to keep the typology down to a manageable size (at the price of reducing its descriptive force), or allow new categories to multiply the number of possible subdivisions (at the risk of at once rendering the classification unwieldy and blurring what the categories have in common) [...] each new descriptive category one might want to envisage risks upsetting (even more) the stability of the classification. (1994, p. 236-37)

Therefore, there is apparently no exhaustive way of classifying and categorically describing puns and wordplay. Additionally, Attardo points out the efforts of literary criticism and its interest in puns; but “unfortunately, most of the studies on puns in literary criticism focus on the puns of a given author/period and analyze their relevance to the author's literary achievements, and so having little to say from a structural, or essentialist, perspective” (2024, p. 260). Attardo’s fair criticism of the lack of a structural perspective (even if to then argue that taxonomies attempted by structuralists cannot be exhaustive) builds to Delabastita’s impressions of post-structuralist attempts when he says that works pursued along those

lines [have] tended to embody the belief that wordplay defies all attempts at definition and classification, in spite of — or because of — the pun’s pervasive and ubiquitous nature. [...] Thus, a very acute awareness of the multifarious forms and operations of the pun goes hand in hand with a reluctance to attempt a systematic account of these forms and operations, in a way which may seem paradoxical. (2014. p. 2)

Other researchers have pointed out similar things. Robert Crapo, while making a case for a different approach to puns, backs this up by saying that “pun taxonomies across linguistic studies lack uniformity. Although some researchers have investigated pun structure [...] there

is still work to be done in understanding puns as a humor strategy” (2018, p. 1). Esme Winter-Froemel, Verena Thaler & Alex Demeulenaere make a good point by remembering that “[i]n spite of its ubiquity, however, wordplay also appears to be to a certain extent ephemeral: the ludic character of utterances can get lost over time as they become reused in other contexts”. Additionally, they claim that it “appears to be a complex phenomenon which is difficult to grasp, but which at the same time appears to be a highly interesting and relevant one, as it can reveal basic principles of language and communication” (2018, p. 1). With all that in mind it seems fair to say that the field of punning is highly inconclusive but – and therefore – constantly fed with studies and different theories and hypotheses. Another paradoxical notion to our count.

When it comes to understanding gags as puns, a few things should be considered. First, the evidence of possibility provided by this thesis while making a point for gags as narrative and visual-based counterparts of jokes – if puns are jokes and if there is a narrative to both jokes and gags, then a gag *can* be understood as a visual-based counterpart of puns; or at least as having shared mechanisms that can be applied to analyses, making it another tool to study cinematic humor. Secondly, puns are largely approached by structural linguistics and analyzed through its mechanics and *anatomy* (Attardo, 2024), providing us with reliable grounds onto which a comparative analysis of gags can be established.

In his text “Notes on the Sight Gag”, Noël Carroll (1991) characterizes six types of gags. Two of them bare structural similarities to puns – he calls them “the switch image” and “the switch movement”. One of the examples he provides for a switch image gag is the first scene of Buster Keaton’s *Cops* (1920) (I) in which we see a shot of Keaton, behind bars, talking to a lady on the other side (Ia). We assume he is in jail but then the following shot reveals the couple is only separated by a gate (Ib). Another example we can look at – from *Police Squad!* – (II) is the moment in which Frank Drebin leans slightly over his desk at the police station as if pressing the button of a sort of intercom and says: “Get me Pete Preussing” (a character from the homicide division), as if talking to a secretary (IIa). We then see a reverse shot that reveals a small cop standing in front of his desk – “Right away sir!” (IIb).

Figure 1 - Keaton's *Cops* gag and *Police Squad's* intercom gag

Source: Author's compilation from Buster Keaton's *Cops* (1920) and *Police Squad!* (1982)

For the switch movement gags, Carroll provides examples from Charles Chaplin's *The Pawnshop* (1916). One of them is a scene in which the Tramp prepares himself to punch his quarreling coworker when their boss walks in and he is forced to change the punch into an exaggerated move that leads him to scrub the floor. As Carroll says: "One movement – the punch – is transformed into another – washing the floor – in one seamless line of movement" (1991, p. 35). This type of gag, then, is one that relies on some physical movement from the characters. Unlike the switch image gag, any reinterpretation that may occur between the first and second interpretation is prompted by physicality and not by cinematic elements/tools. Carroll says that "[s]witch movements are to actions as puns are to sentences. They derail one line of thought and send it in another direction" (*Ibidem*). However, the *action* meant by Carroll is strictly bodily action and not one constructed by cinematic tools such as editing or camera movements. Therefore, switch movement gags are not like puns in the sense that a pun relies on its verbal tools to derail a line of thought. For a neater comparison, cinematic tools other than staging should be considered.

Also, it seems to me that the intentionality of a pun is not quite the same. Even though the switch movement does derail a line of thought, it does so not in a premeditated way – it *becomes* something else out of necessity: the Tramp sets a punch in motion with all the

intentionality of a punch. What we see and what is meant are the exact same thing and we are not misguided as to the intention of that movement. It then transforms into something else in order to *conceal* his intention, not to reveal it. That is not the case with puns. The first movement¹⁴ of a pun presents us with information we *assume* is one thing which is then revealed by the second movement to be something else. Once this “transformation” is complete, it becomes clear that the first movement actually meant something other than what we assumed¹⁵.

According to Attardo, regarding jokes, “in the first part of the process, a first isotopy/sense (S1) is established, until the recipient encounters an element that causes the passage from the first sense to a second sense (S2)” (2024, p. 234). Curiously, this is similar to how Carroll describes the *switch image* gag. He says that “[a]t first, it seems to mean one thing unequivocally in terms of its visual information, but then it means something entirely, and unexpectedly, other. Switch images are lessons in *visual ambiguity*” (Ibid., p. 33, my italics). In fact, the ambiguity of words (or, in this case, images) and their disambiguation are essential conditions for a pun to exist. Attardo says that “every lexical item of the general nonrestricted vocabulary [...] is ambiguous” (2024, p. 232) and that the process of *disambiguation* – essential for reinterpreting information – happens when “[c]ontext (both linguistic and situational) reduces the level of ambiguity of an utterance to zero” (Ibid., p. 233). In our examples, the first sense (an ambiguous word or image) is eventually put into context and becomes the second sense (a disambiguated word or image). Once the first sense becomes the second sense, we realize the meaning was that of the second sense all along. It seems, then, that the switch image gag bears more similarity to the pun than the switch movement gag.

In the switch image gag, even if the movements and behavior of a character – and other filmic elements, like framing and set design – can help *sell* a misguided interpretation to the audience (Keaton positions his body over the cell like someone who is incarcerated and the brick wall behind him helps with this impression; Frank Drebin’s hand is out of frame and our assumption that work desks have an intercom of some sort fools us immediately), they are not responsible for the redirecting of our first interpretation to the one that quickly follows. In these cases, the movements only collaborate to what the image makes us assume but do not, in themselves, redirect us from one sense to another. Linguistically, this effect of redirection in a

¹⁴ This nomenclature is following Carroll’s line of thought. Popularly, in a joke, we could call his first and second movements, respectively, “set-up” and “punchline”.

¹⁵ See the analysis of “the horse gag” in chapter 5.4.

joke is triggered by what Attardo (2024) calls a *disjunct*. In his words, “[t]he disjunct causes the passage from S1 to S2” (2024, p. 236). Any disambiguation that must occur in a joke can only be possible through a disjunct and a connector¹⁶. According to Attardo, “[a] connector is any segment of text that can be given two distinct readings” (*Ibidem*) and “[t]he disjunct causes the passage from one of the possible actualizations of the connector to another which had previously been discarded by the process of selection” (*Ibid.*, p. 236-237). In our examples of switch images, the connector would then be the gate in *Cops* and Frank Drebin’s leaning forward in *Police Squad!*. They can be given two distinct readings – a prison gate or a normal gate in *Cops* and the motion to press a button on the desk or to talk to a short person across the desk in *Police Squad!*. The disjunct, in both cases, is the change of shots – both act like counter shots and provoke a different interpretation to what we saw in the first shot. In both cases, a shot from the back of the character reveals a perspective that the first shot was hiding.

Alternatively (or, perhaps, complementarily) to a linguistic reading, other approaches to the analysis of gags have been proposed. A very interesting one can be found in Audissino (2022b). It is a Gestalt-influenced approach that draws from the role of *perception* as prior and more immediate than *cognition*. In which case, perception is a “primary process” while cognition is a “secondary process”, the one mostly dealt with by linguistics. Audissino says that “[i]n watching a film, for example, the perception of movement and the figure/ground separation would be a matter of primary processes – and not much cognitive processing is required – while the mental reconstruction of the ‘fabula’ from the ‘syuzhet’ would be a matter of secondary processes” (2022b, p. 98). He then poses the possibility that understanding audiovisual humor may be a matter closer to primary processes than secondary ones. His argument is that the juxtaposition of elements (what he calls “micro-configurations”) at first perceived as incongruous give rise to a new perception (“macro-configuration”) that may not be a cognitive process but a problem-solving reaction to the perception of incongruous elements. As an example, he mentions the image of a smiling face paired with threatening music – “the two micro-configurations (smiling face, threatening music) reconfigure one another and a macro-configuration of ‘creepy person’ finally emerges. We perceive an incongruity between the two micro-configurations, the incongruity is made noticeable as a problem, which alerts us

¹⁶ More on *disjunct* and *connector* will be found throughout the text.

that interpretation (problem solving through productive thinking) is needed” (Ibid., p. 100). This would be, then, also how we perceive audiovisual puns.¹⁷

Audissino points out that much of audiovisual humor, especially ZAZ’s approach to it and their extensive use of audiovisual puns, can be understood as the pairing of two micro-configurations that are incongruous with each other and that, out of problem-solving paths, generate a *humorous* macro-configuration. He mentions, as an example, the types of gags in which “[v]iewers are tricked into believing that music is non-diegetic (coming from outside the narrative world) but then they suddenly realise it is in fact diegetic (it comes from some source within the story-world)” (Ibid., p. 102). I shall offer my own example: in Mel Brook’s *High Anxiety* (1977), Brophy, while driving the car, tells the Doctor in the back that he suspects a woman died from foul play. At this moment we hear ominous music. We then see a bus carrying the Los Angeles Symphonic Orchestra pass right by, revealing the source of the song within the story-world.

These kinds of trickeries on our perception have been linked by Audissino to our understanding of multistable images, which are images that can be understood as being either one thing or another, such as “The Duck/Rabbit, the Old Lady/Young Maid, or the Rubin Vase” (Ibid., p. 103). These can also be called *ambiguous* images. Audissino says that “[i]n such figures, two co-existing sets of stimuli are juxtaposed, liable to be arranged into two or more different macro-configurations” (*Ibidem*) and that when the problem of clearly interpreting them presents itself, “we eventually ‘solve the problem’ by noticing, from another angle, that there is another relation between the micro-configuration sets of stimuli” (*Ibidem*). He points out the functionality of some audiovisual gags as being similar to multistable images when saying that “we first see something and then suddenly our perception is flipped to something else, and when we realise the trickery at the base of the image, we experience amusement” (Ibid., p. 104).

However, if “the flipping from one meaning to another” (*Ibidem*) is at the basis onto which audiovisual puns can be interpretable in terms of multistability, I must point to a possible problem: the lack of linearity or narrative. Let us take the Duck/Rabbit image, for instance. It does not matter if we first see the duck or the rabbit, the point is that we see both; and part of

¹⁷ Audissino prefers the term “audiovisual pun” as opposed to “visual pun”, as coined by Leonard Maltin (1980). Indeed, some of these kinds of cinematic play rely on aural elements and cannot, therefore, be strictly visual. However, the term “visual pun” is good enough to separate *cinematic* puns (which need images even if sound plays a part as well) from verbal (written or spoken) ones and, throughout this text, should not be understood as relying exclusively on visual information.

the amusement, then, comes from switching willingly from one to the other – we are at least partly amused by the workings of our brains and by how our perception can suddenly change or go back and forth. Even though a joke or a gag provokes the feeling of being caught in our own assumptions, this does not happen continuously as with a multistable image. Once a punchline is delivered, we cannot switch back to our first perception because a linearity was established and the interpretation is complete, whatever came first has been disambiguated. A multistable image, however, remains ambiguous – there is no conclusion.

If we consider our example from *High Anxiety*, once we know the Los Angeles Symphonic Orchestra's bus is driving past the characters, it is impossible to access the previous moment and again interpret the music as non-diegetic. Multistable images are not placed within a narrative, therefore all possible interpretations live on the same plain. Gags, however, demand a linearity, an *order* of presentation. We cannot “see the rabbit” again once we have seen it is *actually* a duck¹⁸. As Bordwell says: “In watching a film, the spectator submits to a programed temporal form. [...] You cannot [...] jump back to an earlier passage or start at the end of the film and work your way forward. [...] It is evident that in cinema many processes of narration depend upon the manipulation of time” (1985, p. 74). If a multistable image allows the perceiver to willingly change perspectives, a gag or a pun does not – they control it all the way; they are crafted and planned in order to provoke a certain perception (or assumption) that is then revealed to be wrong and can only be understood as something that goes from A to B.

Therefore, it seems that a look on gags as puns and wordplay within the sense of humor linguistics is a fruitful way to analyze cinematic structure and the production of humor. And, perhaps, it may be even more fruitful for humor studies that these different forms of trying to understand audiovisual humor's functionalities can work together. If we are helplessly bound to a certain level of inconclusiveness in humor, then sure enough it can only help that different perspectives on the same matter can be joined. As mentioned previously, although the Incongruity Theory is the one that better serves this research, we cannot shy away from other perspectives that may explain aspects neglected by incongruity. The laughter that comes from a problem-solving reaction – defined as a primary process of perception by Audissino – is a matter somewhat related to Release Theories, and I agree when he says that “it is not my intention here to defend psychophysical isomorphism or outdated ‘hydraulic’ views of the mind

¹⁸ Assuming, of course, for the sake of argument, a scenario in which there would be a correct interpretation of it. There is not.

but to submit that it would be perhaps enriching to integrate the Incongruity Theory with the Release Theory” (2022b, p. 112).

Even though Audissino’s Gestalt-influenced approach to ZAZ’s gags is very helpful and serves one important level of understanding audiovisual puns and the overall style of ZAZ – including their humoristic perception of fiction and situations and their kinship to absurdity – there are unanswered problems that could be solved by the kind of analysis proposed by this thesis, meaning there is enough room for this kind of research within film comedy studies. As Audissino himself says: “the more resources we can mobilise to study humour, the better it is” (2022b, p. 113). All these matters considered, I therefore propose a linguistic/narrative-inspired approach to cinematic gags, especially those of ZAZ.

It should be said that the application of humor linguistics, for the purposes of this research, shall not be overly complicated or representative of its complexity. They are kept to a comprehensive, applicable and effective level; and this is for a couple of reasons: 1) as we could see here, this field is incredibly vast and diving into it while unrestrained might prove to be disorienting and the focus of this research could possibly find itself lost; and 2) any structure eventually proposed here might only be functional as a pairing with film and not necessarily applicable to other iterations and interactions of jokes and puns. The analytical point of this research is to specifically provide a detailed discussion of ZAZ gags.

4. WHAT MAKES A ZAZ GAG

Simply put – *the object of a ZAZ gag is film itself.*

In order to elaborate on that, we must understand what a gag is. And it becomes rather useful to clarify not only the difference between puns and gags but also – and firstly – puns and wordplay. Both terms have been used so far with almost identical intentions and here is why:

Pun and wordplay are very similar things. The best of the literature available on the matter often uses these two terms almost interchangeably. I will bring here a few examples so we can see how these words are used. As we have already read, Delabastita writes that “work undertaken along post structuralist lines has tended to embody the belief that *wordplay* defies all attempts at definition and classification, in spite of – or because of – the *pun*’s pervasive and ubiquitous nature” (2014, p. 2, my italics) and also that “[t]he difficulties inherent in rhetorical (or indeed other) classifications of the *pun* are real enough. In fact, they have led many to simply give up the search for a precise definition enabling a line to be drawn between *word play* and non-wordplay” (*Ibidem*, my italics). When talking about studies that tend to blur the line between pun and non-pun, he paints quite clearly *pun* and *wordplay* as being interchangeable terms by writing that “[w]e have then reached the point where the term *pun* **or** *wordplay* can arguably no longer be used to mean anything” (*Ibid.*, p. 6, my italics and emphasis added). However, he also suggests a *functional* difference between the two when writing that “according to another well-known distinction in the *literature on wordplay*, many *puns* are based on [...]” (*Ibid.*, p. 5, my italics), also implying a sort of co-dependence between the two – wordplay as being a more general thing with literature about it and pun as a product of wordplay. On the matter of “near-puns”, Crapo says that “[a]lthough this type of *wordplay* may not be as effective as perfect *puns*, its manifestations are still seen as puns” (2018, p. 15), assuming that puns are a type of wordplay. Surprisingly, Attardo’s (1994) only use of the term wordplay is when he discusses “release theories” of humor; here, as Crapo, he sees puns as being a kind of wordplay – “[i]n terms of linguistic behavior, release theories are interesting because they account for the ‘liberation’ from the rules of language, typical of *puns and other word-play*” (1994, p. 50, my italics). However, in a second edition (2024), he says that “wordplay is broader than punning, as it includes crossword puzzles and all sorts of other language games”. (2024, p. 31). Zabalbeascoa also understands puns as a type of wordplay when saying that “[h]umor may be produced by *wordplay*, as in *puns*, one liners, limericks, witticisms [sic], and so on” (2005, p. 10, my italics). It is even clearer when he says that “[w]ordplay forms include pun, acrostic, rhyme, anagram, witticism, etc.” (*Ibid.*, p. 12). The

picture that is painted by all these utterances here is that puns are generally jokes, meaning they are almost always carried with *humorous intent* (or simply that they are humorous). Wordplay, on the other hand, is not necessarily humorous.

We can safely say, then, that wordplay is the process through which a pun is achieved. Wordplay is the *action* of playing with words, exploring its properties, form, sounds, context and ambiguity, whereas a pun is the *result* of playing with words – the result of wordplay. Even though one term is an action and the other a result, humorous wordplay can only be experienced if resulting in a pun, meaning one cannot exist without the other, making them, for all effective purposes, the same thing.

A gag, however, is a visual thing, a *performative occurrence*. It cannot fully exist verbally. It relies on some kind of matter. François Mars (1960), in fact, says it is entirely dependent on an *object*. The range of what can be considered an object, however, is considerably wide. The point made by Mars is that the gag is much more dependent on an *objectivation* of things rather than on a proper object. He says that “even the more genius of all clowns, alone and naked in a deserted plain, [...] won’t be able to commit a gag, properly speaking, if not depersonalizing a portion of his body so to give it the passive independence of an instrument” (1960, p. 23, my translation). Indeed, when Georges Méliès inflates a double of his own head to the point of explosion in *L’Homme à la Tête en Caoutchouc* (1901), he is depersonalizing his head in order to use it as an object; and he does that by *exploring the possibilities of film* (an essential perspective in order to understand the nature of ZAZ gags). The object of the gag then becomes not only the head but film itself – the artistic handling of filmmaking tools.

Part of the ZAZ style is grounded on their playfulness around the mechanisms of film, drastically disrupting the “invisibility” of form by making it undeniably noticeable and destroying the illusion of casual discourse (or “naturalness” in film) by acknowledging its processes. Even Bergson (1913) touches on the phenomenon of laughter being aroused when a person resembles an object, when the mechanics of the body become in a way deprived of its “soul”, thus becoming a mere thing that can only be animated by the will of the artist/comedian. This concept of playing around with concrete elements that are used to create art (comedy) and bringing attention to them and their “stiffness” permeates the whole of the ZAZ style. They objectify the mechanisms of film by making them apparent, therefore using them as the object for the gag, juggling film itself as a clown would juggle a hat.

4.1 SKETCHING THE ZAZ STYLE

Before detailing cinematic aspects of ZAZ's comedic style, we should first have an overall understanding of the generalities that constitute their work; that is, the things that separate them from other comedy directors of their and other times. Even though the answer will possibly more richly lie on formal aspects that will be further explored, there are more direct elements that set them apart from other filmmakers with similar comic sensibilities. Let us, then, try to sketch a general definition of the style of ZAZ before delving into the specifics:

Contrary to what one may assume, ZAZ do not credit their shared sense of humor to comedians, comic actors or filmmakers, but to a somehow inherent humoristic perception of things that were considered serious. This is flagrantly at the root of one of their most discerning characteristics – the deadpan delivery of stupid jokes. As Jerry Zucker says:

“The seeds for our kind of humor were planted when we were kids. Growing up in the 1960s in Milwaukee, we consumed a steady diet of hard-hitting dramas like, *The Untouchables*, *Sea Hunt*, *Dragnet*, and *Mission Impossible*. Shows where the characters just took themselves so seriously, and we'd blurt out ridiculous lines for them to say. Later, we'd dub old movies, and then in *Airplane!* we actually got those same tough-guy actors to say the lines we always wished they would have said”. (2023, p. 6)

According to Audissino, “[w]hen ZAZ's comedy is discussed, the specificity of their authorial mark is often missed” (2021, p. 84). As an example, he points to Thompson and Bordwell's (2003) mention of the trio as performing “zany treatment of genre conventions [that] had already been employed in silent slapstick and in the comedies of Bob Hope and Bing Crosby and Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis” (2003, p. 528). Audissino counters that argument by saying that “[a] first essential element that is overlooked here, and which precisely distinguishes ZAZ from the likes of Bob Hope and Jerry Lewis, is the absence of comedians” (2021, p. 84). He continues to say that “[t]heirs, essentially, is the opposite of the ‘comedian-comedy’ mechanism: we do not encounter a comedian that, put in serious situations, overturns them with ridiculous antics, but instead we have a serious actor placed in ludicrous situations that have no impact at all on her/his wooden composure” (Ibid., p. 85). In that sense, ZAZ could be understood as the opposite of Mel Brooks, for instance, another filmmaker widely known for comedies that perform – not unlike ZAZ in some formal aspects and often placed together within unclear definitions of “film parody”¹⁹ – those zany treatments of genre conventions

¹⁹ Dan Harries (2000) attempts to identify the codes of film parody as a film genre but falls short on detecting the different uses of these codes and how differently they emerge from different filmmakers (Mel Brooks's Broadway and showbiz-life stylistic affinities vs. ZAZ's observational sarcastic wit, for example). Linda Hutcheon's (1989) chapter on film parody (or, rather, parody in film) and Hutcheon (2000) focus strictly on discourse, avoid

mentioned by Thompson and Bordwell. If we think of Marty Feldman's brilliant performance as "Igor" in *Young Frankenstein* (1974), we see that his entire presence is one of ironic commentary. Every time he moves and speaks he points to the ridiculousness of it all, even to the ridiculousness of *performance* itself.

In ZAZ's movies, the comment on how silly movies can be is left to stupid script lines that emerge from stern faces and cinematic form. Audissino says that the characters often "look like *clueless pawns in the comedic game*" (2022a, p. 184, my italics). Jerry Zucker confirms this statement by providing an insight on their directing process regarding the deadpan approach taken by many of their actors when saying that "[w]e would never tell actors to play it straight. We always told them to act like they had *no idea they were in a comedy*" (2023, p. 10, my italics). So much was this a stylistic decision that, when directing Peter Graves in *Airplane!*, David Zucker says they would "dial in his actions by the numbers: look left, look down, grab the wheel, look away, say the line, put your arm around the kid – there was no leeway. To pull that off, it had to be exactly crafted" (Ibid., p. 16). On wondering whether Robert Hays would be a good casting choice for the main character, the trio remember having second thoughts when seeing him in a sitcom because they "were so focused on our own particular brand of humor, [that] seeing Bob in the *Angie* sitcom was a little jarring to us. Watching him in this setup, joke, laugh-track rhythm gave us a brief scare" (Ibid., p. 45-46). It becomes clear then how much of ZAZ's humor and approach to comedy lies on craft and a stylistic self-consciousness. We cannot, therefore, ignore these aspects from any analysis of their style or place them within a common understanding of historical cinematic humor and risk jeopardize the stuff that grants any specificity to their work. The incongruity that arises from austere deliveries of silliness is at the center of ZAZ's work and extremely influential to the way they structure and concretize gags.

discussing popular comedy or humor, exemplify certain arguments with factual errors and, most importantly, come out too unspecific – the difference between terms such as *parody*, *intertextuality*, *reference*, *homage* and even *post-modernism* becomes very unclear.

4.2 POSSIBLE AND IMPOSSIBLE TAXONOMIES

As we saw in previous chapters, taxonomies can either be neglecting or unmanageably detailed (which might, in turn, make them useless if taken as a rule). Therefore, this section will try, while understanding its limitations, to provide some kind of *possible* taxonomy to the characteristics of ZAZ gags. For that, I will acknowledge within the gag basic elements such as *misdirected participants* and who they usually are (the audience or the character), *the joke narrator* (could be the character, the camera, or the decoupage), and the general world of absurdity that surrounds and sometimes overtakes their films. Examples will be used not only from the films further analyzed, but also from other films from their extended filmography (meaning, films in which they did not work together as a writing trio but as a pair or as collaborators in directing and/or writing) and possibly films from other filmmakers who might share similarities to their work. That being said, and before getting into the elements identified by this research, we should first go over a few points regarding the possibilities and the impossibilities of taxonomy and why and how it can be useful:

It is only natural that some inclination towards categorization be heeded when attempting to explain some observed phenomena. One cannot help but look at the most material aspect of things first. According to Attardo, “descriptive theories are often the first step towards predictive, and hence explanatory, theories” (2024, p. 260). Taxonomies are limited; however, they do “provide order” (*Ibidem*) and “may have a productive character” (Delabastita, 1997, p. 3) that may be useful for certain arguments and investigations. They can simply allow us to understand something about what we *mean* when defining a joke in one way or another – “knowing to what class a pun belongs reveals something about its internal structure or functioning” (Attardo, 2024, p. 261) – and may inform something regarding a theory and/or a thought process behind that classification: “It is possible to decide what constitutes a class of puns only if a decision has already been made about what the relevant features in the object of analysis are” (*Ibidem*). Precisely because it exemplifies a theory, taxonomies are of some use to this research.

Of course, we must not forget – as we have seen repeatedly – that taxonomies cannot be exhaustive, as the entire field of humor studies in all its branches (psychological, linguistic, philological, physiological, philosophical, and so on) is highly inconclusive and complicated. When devoid of “analysis and theory building”, they “lack explanatory power” (*Ibidem*). A taxonomy is prone to be more explanatory the more general it is; however, paradoxically, “the more general a taxonomy gets, the less interesting it becomes” (*Ibid.*, p. 262). As a problem,

this should not be ignored. This thesis, however, does not aspire to fully explain in unquestionable categories the gag mechanisms of ZAZ, but rather to propose one way of looking into it through a method and a theory that may contribute to discussions on audiovisual humor and the style of ZAZ.

4.2.1 MISDIRECTED PARTICIPANTS

DRAMATIC IRONY: UNBEKNOWNST TO WHOM?

Dramatic irony here is employed following Alexander Mackendrick's (2004) reflections on it. According to him, "in any situation where we, the audience, are aware of significant circumstances of which one or more of the characters on stage or screen are unaware, there is an element of dramatic irony" (2004, p. 92). He also provides another definition for it, taken from The American Heritage Dictionary: "The dramatic effect achieved by leading an audience to understand an incongruity between a situation and the accompanying speeches, while the characters in the play remain unaware of the incongruity"²⁰ (1992, p. 2279). As an example, he uses an image proposed by Alfred Hitchcock (Truffaut, 1985) when defining suspense – a scene in which two people are having a normal, mundane conversation while sitting across from each other at a table. Under the table, the audience can see a bomb that is about to go off, but the characters are fully unaware of it. That, then, is dramatic irony – someone is completely oblivious to something someone else is entirely aware of. Shakespeare's "The Comedy of Errors" and the whole sub-genre that it named, for example, are built around this dramatic resource²¹ of placing the audience as powerless all-knowing observers of the actions of clueless characters. When we apply that concept to humor, the notion of *misdirection* becomes apparent.

Let us think of the famous mirror gag in the Marx Brother's *Duck Soup* (1933), for instance. In it, Harpo is dressed as Groucho and accidentally breaks a mirror. The real Groucho hears it and enters the room to investigate. When Groucho looks at where the mirror used to be,

²⁰Although Mackendrick mentions the source, he does not provide the edition he is quoting from. However, I consulted a 3rd edition from 1992, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and found the exact same definition. The current definition, from the 5th edition published by HarperCollins Publishers in 2022 (as appearing in the dictionary's website) is somewhat different: "A contrast in storytelling, as in a play or novel, between what a character believes is true, as revealed by dialogue or action, and what the audience or reader knows is true" (Dramatic irony, 2022). I must say, the former definition is much more interesting.

²¹ Not to forget Mackendrick's definition of comic structure as "simply dramatic structure but MORE SO: neater, shorter, faster" (2004, p. 41).

Harpo takes his place in the gap and, while still perfectly dressed as Groucho, starts mimicking him – tricking him into believing Harpo is a reflected image.

Figure 2 - Mirror gag from *Duck Soup*



Source: *Duck Soup* (1933), directed by Leo McCarey

The scene depicts Groucho suspecting something is wrong and performing a series of wacky, unpredictable movements in front of the “mirror” to see if he is being fooled by someone or if he is indeed in front of a mirror. As the audience, we wonder when Harpo will make a mistake big enough so that Groucho catches him. As characters, Harpo is misdirecting and Groucho is being misdirected. The audience, however, knows exactly what is going on. At one point, Groucho spins and Harpo does not; but, since Groucho had his back against the “mirror” when spinning, he could not see whether Harpo moved or not. We, on the other hand, saw everything and are completely aware.

Film offers very interesting possibilities and unique tools for elaborating dramatic irony. Mackendrick says that “[t]here is a sense in which the most basic elements of film grammar have potential for dramatic irony” (2004, p. 93). When it comes to placing the audience in a vantage point dramatically, a master-shot is ideal – “[i]t is a God’s-eye-view that makes the audience aware of the situation as a whole. It allows us to locate ourselves spatially within the shot, to see exactly where the characters are in relation to each other and their environment, and to observe these interactions from the outside” (Ibid., p. 93-94). If we consider ZAZ’s use of cinematic tools for the creation of humor, we find how flexible they can be if used creatively. In their movies, a master-shot may have the *opposite* effect from giving us an all-knowing perspective on things. The further analyzed “horse gag” from *Top Secret!* (1984) (chapter 5), for instance, uses the master-shot against us; to hide stuff and misdirect us into believing one

thing when something else was happening. A close-up reveals something we *could not* see from the distance of a master-shot, something that *we*, instead of the characters, were unaware of.

In fact, when we think of dramatic irony in jokes, it often is the case that the audience is not (and *cannot* be) aware of the full context. As we will further see in more detail, the linearity of a joke (most prominently in puns) implies that the audience is first misled by an ambiguous term that does not seem ambiguous at first and is then disambiguated by the following information (Attardo, 2024). We must be fooled, in a sense, but mostly unaware. Therefore, dramatic irony in jokes implies a change in who is devoid of awareness – it becomes quite frequently the audience. This possibility, then, gives rise to two modes of dramatic irony: two participants of the narrative process can be unaware, misdirected, and oblivious to what is happening – the characters or the audience. Things happen not only unbeknownst to the characters but, alternatively, to the audience. Hence, dramatic irony elements in jokes are present when the structure is that of someone being misdirected and driven to assume one point of natural progression or conclusion only to be struck with a completely different, absurd, ridiculous alternative. The point of dramatic irony is that *some participant* is unbeknownst of the whole fact and the entire circumstances of a situation.

Another type of ZAZ gag that features clear elements of dramatic irony is the background action gag. In these gags, something ridiculous and absurd happens in the background while the characters usually have a serious, procedural and very unfunny dialogue in the foreground, usually completely unaware or seemingly ignoring the wacky movements happening behind their backs. David Zucker says they called that dialogue “‘floochee’ dialogue, a word we made up to mean ‘filler’” (2023, p. 9). These gags are, in certain respects, more directly similar to Hitchcock’s “bomb under the table” example, although they do not serve any suspense, but a thorough enjoyment of the incongruity that presents itself. In fact, it is interesting to note the use of the word “incongruity” in the American Heritage definition of dramatic irony pointed out by Mackendrick. Curiously, another dictionary definition, this time from Merriam-Webster, not only mentions incongruity as well, but also serves as a good description of ZAZ’s background gags – it says that dramatic irony is “incongruity between a situation developed in a drama and the accompanying words or actions that is understood by the audience but not by the characters in the play” (Dramatic Irony, 2025). These gags are built precisely around the incongruity of a crazy situation happening in the background while a “floochee” dialogue or action occurs in the foreground.

In this case, the concept of *misdirection* is fainter than in other ZAZ gags (although the concept of *unawareness* is still very present), but incidentally these gags are also the ones further from the mechanics of jokes. They are more successfully approached by Audissino's (2022b) Gestalt-influenced multistable comparative analysis than one influenced by the linguistics of jokes, precisely because the incongruity is not established linearly but at the same time – two actions occurring simultaneously, in the same shot and camera placement, only in different depths of field. They are, however, good for exemplifying this grounding aspect of dramatic irony.

The rule of thumb, however, for ZAZ gags is that of a linearly established misdirection. The audience is presented with a certain situation that seems unambiguous only to, in a second moment, realize that they had been misdirected and the real sense was one that was absurdly unpredictable. As we have already seen, that is also the logic applied by many kinds of jokes, especially puns. At least one participant in the dramatic and narrative process has to be unaware of something. Dramatic irony employed for suspense generally makes the audience all-knowing and the characters oblivious. Alternatively, dramatic irony employed for cinematic gags generally makes the audience oblivious so that it can later reveal they were misdirected. That being the case, dramatic irony in humor allows for two kinds of misdirected participants – the audience and the characters – and here we will see how they function:

THE AUDIENCE

A considerable number of ZAZ gags function by placing the audience as misdirected participants. Like in most puns, the audience is led to assume one sense of a sentence or situation by a context that seems to corroborate this first sense. Then, an opposite or unpredictable alternative presents itself and it reconfigures the first sense even if the context now appears absurd. A verbal joke may do that by omitting relevant words, using homonyms, double-meanings, ambiguous scenarios and terms, and so on – it uses linguistic tools for crafting non-casual speech²² and meaning in order to successfully build a joke that functions in favor of its intentions. Accordingly, cinema uses its own tools for crafting scenes and meaning in order to do precisely the same thing. Having the audience as the misdirected participant of a gag implies the film is trying to “fool” the audience, in a way, by using artifices such as camera placements and movements, sound, editing, visual illusions, depth of field and others. As Victor Raskin

²² See Carroll's (2010) use of “invented humor” compared to Attardo's (2024) non-casual speech in the *Incongruity* section of this text, the “tunnel gag” analysis in chapter 5, and Attardo (2024) for more on casual and non-casual speech.

puts it: “any ambiguous text is compatible with two or more scripts but certainly not every ambiguous text is funny” (1985, p. 100). Therefore, even if ambiguous terms are central to the creation of a joke, the subsequent disambiguation and the craft put *around* it are essential.

Verbal jokes and puns often work by having the audience as the misdirected participant. Let us briefly look at this joke by Steven Wright:

“I’ve been getting into astronomy, so I installed a skylight.
The people who live above me are furious”. (Wicked, 1990)

The first part suggests the image of a house or a penthouse or any living place with nothing above *but* the sky. The second part, however, reveals the image of angry upstairs neighbors seen through a transparent roof. The way the first part is structured and the information we are given mislead us into imagining a skylight with a view of the night sky – there is a *logical* account: because the character is “getting into astronomy”, he installed a skylight; as logic dictates, the skylight will allow him to see the stars. Therefore, nothing must separate this skylight from a view of the sky. Following how the sentence is phrased and the context that it had apparently established, logic could not have taken us to any other conclusion. The purpose of this first part is to effectively *misdirect the audience*.

Comparatively, a misdirected audience gag is similarly structured. The difference is that it employs more elements of cinematic nature other than words. In *Top Secret!*, for example, there is a scene in which we see Nick Rivers breaking into a prison from under a fence (I). As he crawls forward – the camera following him on ground level –, he stumbles onto a pair of boots standing right in his way (II). He looks up terrified, thinking a guard has caught him. The camera moves away a little and reveals the pair of boots is just a pair of boots – nobody is wearing them (III).

Figure 3 - The boot gag



Source: Author’s compilation from *Top Secret!* (1984).

In this scene, the first part shows Nick Rivers encountering a pair of boots. Because of the context – characters swiftly breaking into a prison to rescue someone –, the presence of prison guards is expected and the suspense of being caught is established. The camera being on ground level reveals within the frame only the boots of what we assume is a person. We “fill” those boots, in a way, with our assumption that a person inhabits them; and not just a person but, in that context, a prison guard. Again, logic *completes* the restricted information that is given to us. We do not know, however, at first, that the information had been deliberately incomplete and devised to misdirect us. As Audissino puts it, regarding a different scene from *Top Secret!* involving empty boots: “do not presume the presence of legs only because you see boots!”. (2022b, p. 109). Similarly to how the joke is phrased with carefully placed words to serve an effect, the scene is constructed with carefully chosen artifices – framing, camera movement, music, and so on. All filmic elements, including characters, are invested in misdirecting the audience.

In order to concretize the concept of misdirection onto the most pragmatic and technical aspects of filmmaking, it is useful to think etymologically – if a director *directs*, they can also *misdirect*. According to Mackendrick, “what a film director really directs is his audience’s attention” (2004, p. 200). Not only do ZAZ “disrupt our perception” (Audissino, 2022b, p. 111), but they do so by *manipulating* it. The position of the camera, the way it moves, the cuts, the music, are all “ultimately means to another end: manipulating the perceptions of the film viewer. Direction is a matter of emphasis. In telling a story, the task of the director is to emphasise what is significant by under-emphasising what is less so” (Mackendrick, 2004, p. 200). The audience is directed as to where and *how* to look. That being the case, and through directing what the audience sees, we can also be misdirected from full disclosure by being shown only details of the full picture or restricted points of view. The craft of the director, for Mackendrick, lies precisely in manipulating and directing the audience towards a dramatic or humorous effect.

It should be briefly pointed that a misdirected audience is not necessarily a truly *deceived* audience – there is no true breach of trust or directed offense that affects the audience’s feelings causing it to distance itself from the film. The audience is *willingly* fooled and amused by the misdirection. When discussing Aubouin’s (1948) concept of “justification” in jokes, Attardo says that “Aubouin seems to believe that it is necessary for the hearer to be really misled by the humorous text” and that he “links humor to a factual error on the hearer’s part” (2024, p. 317). However, every fictional occurrence and crafted abstractions inspired by reality suppose

a willing suspension of disbelief – a temporary condition of suspending the disbelief on things that are not real, nor actually happening as we experience them (things with knowingly fictional aspects), in order to enjoy a piece of artistic work. Mackendrick defines it as what happens when the audience “willingly collaborate[s] with the storyteller in accepting as logical what is plainly incredible, nonsensical and/or absurd” (2004, p. 111). Attardo makes the point that, in most jokes, “the hearer will be perfectly aware that he/she is violating a linguistic (or cognitive) rule” (2024, p. 317). He finishes by saying that “Aubouin's claim that an actual error needs to occur in humor turns out to be unnecessary, besides being incorrect: if puns involve a metalinguistic reflection, the rules of language can be suspended” (Ibid., p. 319). This “metalinguistic reflection” is simply a “knowledge about language” (Ibid., p. 318), which the audience possesses and through which it can successfully understand the joke and be amused. A knowledge about *film* language, or simply an acquired movie-watching familiarity with how moving images signify meaning, is similarly enough for a willing suspension of disbelief to occur and for the audience to be amused by misdirection.

THE CHARACTER(S)

Although the most common misdirected participant in ZAZ gags is the audience, there is not a lack of gags performed around the notion of a misdirected character. However, because we witness the onset of the misdirection and relish the witnessing of its unravelment, we also perceive the misdirected participant as *unaware*. Therefore, unawareness is a perfectly fine substitute term and it is rather useful to think of it in both ways. As we have seen before when understanding it as dramatic irony, a misdirected character means the character is not aware of something that the audience is.

This type of misdirected participant is the most prominent in silent comedies. Every scene consisting of Chaplin or Keaton running from the police or any other authority figure features a series of misdirections performed by the main characters against those who chase them. Carroll's (1991) “switch movement gags”, discussed in an earlier chapter, are good examples of gags featuring misdirected characters instead of a misdirected audience. Physical comedy from the sound era similarly acts on kinds of dramatic irony and by putting the audience in an all-knowing position – Jerry Lewis' disruptive antics, Jacques Tati's choreographed chaos and observational style and the Marx Brothers' street smarts are all examples of active misdirection. Peter Sellers, in *The Party* (1968) and in *The Pink Panther* movies, portrays characters that bring chaos wherever they go and whatever they do, often not being aware of it and leaving a trace of destruction behind. In certain ways, we can amuse ourselves by calling

this characteristic of dramatic irony in comedy the “Mr. Magoo effect”²³. It turns out that the “Mr. Magoo effect” is as illustrative for dramatic irony in comedy as Hitchcock’s “bomb under the table” is for suspense.

If in earlier gags, this type of misdirection often demands acrobatics from the performers, in ZAZ gags they require a formally anarchic quality in filmmaking and more acrobatics from the film crew than from performers. For example, every episode of *Police Squad!* ends with a fake freeze frame of Frank Drebin and Ed Hocken at the police station trying to stay “frozen” while other things keep happening to them and behind their backs. With every episode it gets increasingly more extreme. The sixth and final episode has the entire police station collapsing behind them – pieces of ceiling falling down and lamps breaking as they try to remain still. ZAZ even shot a bigger “freeze frame” for what would be the ending of an abandoned project of joining the episodes into one movie. It features Frank and Ed in a courtroom, frozen in a handshake, when something explodes and suddenly there is fire in the room. Fire fighters walk in and start breaking things, throwing water everywhere, and carrying mannequins posed as extras out of the room. Meanwhile, Frank and Ed stay positioned. Every exaggerated action occurring in these scenes is mostly performed and organized by the crew.

Of course, there is also an added characteristic to these gags which is that of making filmmaking visible. However, that is a characteristic that permeates the whole of ZAZ’s works. Similarly, as jokes require a metalinguistic reflection (Attardo, 2024), these plays on film language and cinematic artifices abound in each and every scene discussed in this thesis. Once we are caught by our own misdirected assumptions, we are made aware of cinematic tools, techniques, and the rigs and structure of films – we are made aware of camera movements, cuts, framing, depth of field and all that is used to visually convey a story.

Another type of ZAZ gag that is grounded on some kind of unawareness *and* misdirection, but not entirely on linearity, is what we could call the “general confusion” gag. In it, we see a group of characters misunderstanding each other, provoking unintentional misdirection and bouncing unawareness off one another often by immersing themselves into a chain of confusing names, interpretations, and double meanings – resulting in a snowball of increasing confusion.

²³ In reference to Mr. Magoo, the cartoon character – an extremely near-sighted elderly man who gets himself in ludicrous situations, causing trouble to whoever he meets, but always completely unaware of it because he is never hurt or affected by any of the chaos surrounding him.

For instance, the inquiry in the first episode of *Police Squad!*: Frank Drebin needs to ask a witness whether she saw a certain Mr. Twice shoot Mr. Once once or twice. He also tries to clarify if a man called Jim Fell shot first or if the shot came after some other guy named Jim fell. An incredible mess. Somebody is always unaware of what is actually being said while someone else is unintentionally misdirecting some other misdirected participant. The thing about these gags is that not only are the characters being misdirected interchangeably, but also, in a way, the audience. At every new sentence we reinterpret the context; and the accumulation²⁴ of micro-processes of disambiguation and constant misdirection, instead of one disambiguation and the realization of having been misdirected (the most common structure in ZAZ gags and puns), is what amuses us.

Another example of a general confusion gag happens in *Airplane!* when, in the cockpit, during take-off, Captain Clarence Oveur answers the tower through the radio by saying “roger” (as in “confirmed” or “understood”), but the co-pilot’s name is Roger and he answers Oveur with a “huh?”. The third pilot, Victor, says to the radio: “Request vector; over”. It is now Captain Oveur’s turn to answer Victor with a “huh?”. Roger then says: “We have clearance, Clarence” followed by the captain saying “Roger, Roger; what is our vector, Victor?”, and so on. Every character is lost – they are all equally unaware as none of them knows exactly who knows what better, who misunderstands what, what the context is, what is literal and what is not. As it all happens, the audience enjoys these constant misdirections and accumulated unawareness.

A misdirected character, then, amuses the audience even if we are not caught as misdirected participants by our assumptions. These gags are a thorough enjoyment for an audience that is either all-knowing or acceptant of a generalized confusion, not necessarily waiting or set-up for a punchline – not involved in a linearity of disclosure –, but thrown into a tension-free contemplation of absurdity and chaos.

4.2.2 THE JOKE NARRATOR

In the most basic sense, it is fair to say that *the narrator delivers information*. On that note, it should first be clear that what I mean by “the narrator” is *not* exclusively a fictional

²⁴ One term Audissino uses to define an important characteristic of the style of ZAZ is precisely that of “nonsensical accumulation” – “[n]onsensical accumulation is a defining staple of ZAZ’s comedy, and it comes either in dialogue or in an absurd piling up of events, with the comic effect being produced not so much by the single event [...] as by the paradoxical climax reaching ridiculously preposterous heights” (2022a, p. 189).

character created by the author and designed to represent a personified storyteller. What I mean is simply that a narrator (including any artifice whose function is to narrate) is responsible for *unveiling the narrative*, for guiding us through the elements that make the joke and taking us from one point to another. According to Vendaele, “the narrator communicates what the author invents” (2010, p. 730). Therefore, the narrator can be who or *what*, within the fictional and crafted plane, keeps and manipulates the information from/to the audience.

As we have established in previous chapters, jokes are narrative utterances. That being the case, a narrator can be identified. However, there is no real *need* to identify the narrator in a written joke – thinking formally, even if we identify a character whose point of view dictates the narration, the narrator (that is, *the thing that delivers information*) is always ultimately the text. Written jokes do not exist in any form other than textual²⁵. If a joke takes the shape of an exchange, as is often the case, the narrator is still the text because usually the characters are *artifices of the text* and do not necessarily tell each other intentional jokes or have any control over the presentation of it. However, when a joke is told/heard, as in a stand-up comedy performance, then the narrator becomes the *speaker* because now the text does not really exist – the audience cannot read it. The material source of what is being communicated is the speaker. Therefore, we can establish a comparison: if the audience *reads*, then the narrator *writes*; if the audience *hears*, the narrator *speaks*.

In films, the sources of communication are varied and they usually work together. Because of this plurality of communicative artifices, we are capable of identifying different narrators – different cinematic techniques that are responsible for telling a joke. And, of course, what I mean by “telling a joke” is what we have so far discussed – presenting a situation, controlling the context, disrupting a sense and revealing the whole. To put it in other words, and closer to the concepts we have been dealing with: on a mechanical and structural level, there are elements of storytelling that are held responsible for hiding and revealing information, for setting a misleading context and later disambiguating linguistic or visually ambiguous information – for establishing the functionality of a set-up and a punchline, essentially. Vendaele (2010), while writing about Edmond Wright’s (2005) reflections applied to jokes and narrative, says that “ambiguous evidence receives its specific meanings through various switches in intentional perspective. More or less *cued by the communicator* (joker, narrator, speaker, author), the hearers or readers bring a variety of perspectives to bear upon the

²⁵ Following that line of thought, *language* could also be considered the narrator, but I believe it would be perhaps too immaterial of a hypothesis to be dealt with pragmatically. Language itself has no form.

ambiguous elements of stories and jokes” (2010, p. 726, my italics). Therefore, what causes the audience to reinterpret or disambiguate elements of a joke, is directly influenced by whatever is communicating and presenting changeable contexts and situations.

Raskin (1985) establishes jokes as a *non-bona-fide* communication as opposed to a *bona-fide* communication. He says that a bona-fide communication is when the speaker’s “intention is to make an unambiguous statement” (1985, p. 100), and, if there is any ambiguity in their speech, they are “not aware of the full or partial ambiguity which is created. He is engaged in ***bona-fide communication***, i.e., in the earnest, serious, information-conveying mode of verbal communication” (*Ibidem*). We can understand a similarity between a bona-fide communication to what Attardo (2024) points out as a “casual speech”: “In casual speech, the speaker and the hearer are not aware of the phonological structure of the utterance. [...] In this mode of speech, speakers are only aware of the phonemic string’s meaning” (2024, p. 258). Both terms define a communication that is not intent on crafting a form and structure to convey an effect²⁶. If I may, let us think of this non-bona-fide/bona-fide and non-casual/casual dichotomy also as “crafted” and “non-crafted”.

The category that encompasses jokes is then that of non-bona-fide communication. A crafted utterance. According to Raskin, a non-bona-fide communication is when “the speaker is fully aware of the overlap [of different senses] and the resulting partial or full ambiguity” (1985, p. 101). He says that “[t]he purpose [...] is not to convey any information contained in the text he is uttering but rather to create a special effect with the help of the text, namely to make the hearer laugh” (*Ibidem*). A non-bona-fide communication, therefore, uses whatever communicative tools it is communicating through with a clear purpose – the intention to create an effect. It is a crafted form of communication as much as it is a non-casual speech, which implies it is well aware of its own structure. That being the case, the joke narrator is aware of its tools and uses them accordingly to go through the stages of building a text that works and affects like a joke.

Having established the role and definition of a joke narrator, we can now understand that a gag can hold different communicative agents responsible for conveying and acting upon its delivery. That being the case, we can identify three possible narrators in a ZAZ gag – *the character* (usually when they perform a joke, with or without the intention to do it), *the camera* (referring to all filmic elements within a shot and not strictly camera work – sound, staging,

²⁶ Carroll (2010) employs “found humor” and “invented humor” for similar purposes.

lighting, and so on), and *the decoupage* (the shot-to-shot relations put into effect by cutting shots together). Here is more on each one:

THE CHARACTER

When considering the character as a narrator, one problem should be at least partially solved: if the character cannot be the narrator (in the terms defined above) of a written joke because they are an artifice of a crafted text, why could the character of a film gag not be similarly considered a mere artifice of a crafted cinematic work? In a way, they could – if we understand that *film* is the only narrator in a movie the same way we can understand that text is the only narrator of a written joke, then not the character, the camera, nor the decoupage could be considered narrators. However, as we have seen, films work by employing different communicative artifices (sometimes together) – text, speech, camera movements, framing, sound, etc. – in order to deliver a story and cause a desired effect. This plurality opens for film the possibility of relegating and alternating between each of these artifices the role and responsibilities of the narrator.

Mackendrick says that “the essential and underlying meaning of film dialogue is often much more effectively transmitted by a complex and intricate organisation of cinematic elements that are not only not verbal, but also can never be fully analysed by verbal means” (2004, p. 3). As it has probably already become very clear (if not, it will), film scenes are “far clumsier to describe than to play out on film” (Ibid. p. 4). In other words, cinematic elements are much more effective at narrating films than words. Therefore, if there are cinematic elements that are directly responsible for unraveling a narrative and carrying the audience from one point to the other – to reveal and withhold information, to create mood and effects, and manipulate our attention (all of which is done by the text alone in jokes and literature) –, then we must consider them as separate narrators that may or may not assume that position depending on the scene or, for our purposes, the gag.

That being the case, the most easily identifiable type of ZAZ gag that features a character narrator is whenever a textual wordplay is put to action by a character. Two recurring gags in *Airplane!* are good examples of this – the “what is it” gag and the “surely/Shirley” gag. As one of the most referenced lines from the movie, the “surely/Shirley” gag has become perhaps the best identifier of ZAZ’s influence in American pop culture: as the utterer of that line, Leslie Nielsen said “I had no idea that would stick with me forever” (Nielsen *apud* Zucker, 2023, p. 58). The gag is an exchange between Ted Striker and Dr. Rumack: the pilots are down with

food poisoning and Ted, a traumatized former war pilot, is told by the doctor that he will have to fly and land the plane.

Ted Striker: Surely you can't be serious.

Dr. Rumack: I am serious; and don't call me Shirley.

The wordplay is quite obviously on the homophony of “surely” and “Shirley”. Given the context, there is no reason for anybody to assume that “surely” could mean anything else other than “certainly”. For the audience, to realize that Dr. Rumack thought that Ted had called him Shirley means establishing the possibility of homophony (one that had not been previously considered) and finding humor in the incongruity of what was said against what was heard. For all effective purposes, the pun is presented to the audience by what we hear from the characters. They are, therefore, the narrators. They are the ones who present us with a situation and then lead us to reinterpreting it; they are effectively responsible for clashing the two senses of the same sound – an adverb and a female name.

The “what is it” gag is similarly structured, only instead of working on homophony it uses double meaning. The first appearance of it has Dr. Rumack, after examining on a passenger, saying to Elaine, the stewardess:

Dr. Rumack: You better tell the captain we've got to land as soon as we can. This woman has to be gotten to a hospital.

Elaine (concerned): A hospital? What is it?

Dr. Rumack: It's a big building with patients, but that's not important right now.

Again, the pun is presented, driven, falsely contextualized and disrupted by the characters. Here we have “what is it” meaning “what is the problem” and the more literal interpretation of “what is a hospital”.

As it is with verbal jokes, we can identify, in both examples, verbal connectors and disjunctors, as pointed by Attardo (2024). The connectors are, respectively, the homophony “surely/Shirley” and “what is it” – terms that sound the same in both interpretable senses. The disjunctors of one is “don't *call* me Shirley” while the disjunctors of the other is “a big building with patients” – information that establishes only one sense for all occurrences of the terms (at least for one of the characters in the exchange).

In this kind of gag, one important characteristic that reinforces and illustrates a defining stylistic element in ZAZ's films is the character's constant unawareness of comedy. Even though the characters are delivering the joke, they are generally unaware of its comic nature. This is, as we have seen, a stylistic decision often taken as a rule by ZAZ. Robert K. Weiss, producer of *The Kentucky Fried Movie*, *Police Squad!* and *The Naked Gun* trilogy, says that "as they [ZAZ] defined their style, they actually evolved a set of rules that provided boundaries" (Weiss *apud* Zucker, 2023, p. 129). One of these rules was precisely "Don't acknowledge the joke, or that you made a joke" (Zucker, 2023, p. 131); although – and this is also one of their rules – they also claim that "We try to follow these rules as closely as possible, realizing that perhaps what is most important is knowing when to ignore them" (*Ibidem*). What this entails is that, generally, ZAZ's characters are unaware of being in a comedy even when they are effectively performing a joke.

Interestingly – and this is one of the characteristics that separate ZAZ from other comic filmmakers with parodic affinities –, this unawareness on the part of the joke narrator implies that the character is engaged in a bona-fide communication because the ambiguity in his speech is unintentional, but still "the ambiguity which he does not control defeats him in this purpose" (Raskin, 1985, p. 111). In fact, every punning exchange between two or more characters in ZAZ movies have all characters involved unaware of any humor. Of course, this is all a product of crafted humor, non-bona-fide communication (Raskin, 1985), non-casual speech (Attardo, 2024) or even invented humor (as opposed to "found humor") (Carroll, 2010), whatever definition may seem more fit. The characters are fictional – an artifice of humor delivery – and even though they seem to be engaged in serious and earnest communication, it is only on the secondary level of fictional speech. Therefore, it is interesting to note how it is all made to *appear* the opposite (non-crafted, bona-fide, casual and found) while giving rise itself to a humorous incongruity of actions and reactions.

THE CAMERA

Let us consider now the camera as a gag narrator. As mentioned before, it should be made clear that what I mean by "the camera" is not just camera work. For the purposes of this thesis, what is meant by "the camera" is every element of film that is presented and perceivable to us within a shot (*and* all camera movements). This is not, by any means, a conventional definition of this term; however, I find it useful when regarding not only any camera movement within a single take, but the various communicative elements that are present in a shot. We should think of it as *what and how* the camera *sees*, *hears*, and *shows* us – movement, staging,

lighting, depth of field, sound, and so on. It is a practical encompassing even if a somewhat unorthodox way of thinking of “the camera”. Another useful quality of this definition is that it separates from this group editing and shot-to-shot relations, which will be dealt with further on as “the découpage”.

One question that could be raised by this encompassing of various elements is: why not simply call it *mise-en-scène*? The reason is that the term has been used to define different things throughout the history of cinema; and I do not think that, to this day, the mention of *mise-en-scène* is able to provoke the same understanding for all readers equally. Bordwell has said that “[f]ew terms in film aesthetics are as polyvalent as this one. In French it chiefly means what we in English call ‘direction’” and also that “some French critics have treated *mise-en-scène* as simply the entire process of directing a film, including everything from staging to editing and adding music” (2005, p. 11). Alternatively, the critics of *Cahiers du Cinéma* saw that the “*mise-en-scène* director tended to avoid cutting, creating significance and emotion chiefly by means of what happened within each shot” (*Ibidem*). Oliveira Jr., however, mentions that, in the *Cahiers* of the 1950s, *mise-en-scène* would be “considered under the prism of a condensation of the main activities in the reach of a filmmaker, and would cease to represent one level of intervention over others. Everything would be within *mise-en-scène*” (2010, p. 13, my translation). Truffaut called it “at once the story that is being told and the *manner of telling it*.” (Truffaut *apud* Bordwell, 2005, p. 12, my italics). Therefore, if no clear definition is established – and if in many definitions *mise-en-scène* includes essentially all elements of film, including shot-to-shot relations²⁷ –, I prefer to settle on a different term to define what is *sometimes* defined as *mise-en-scène*.

One very good gag to exemplify the use of camera movements *and* staging is what we can call “the train/station gag” from *Top Secret!*. In it, the camera is with Nick Rivers inside the train, positioned in a way that frames him, the window and the station outside (I). At the station, German soldiers seem to prepare for the departure of the train. The camera holds its position as we see the train starting to move, which is evidenced to us through the window by the movement we see outside (II). However, as it continues, we quickly understand that in fact it was the *station* that had started to move, not the train (III; IV). The camera pulls closer to the

²⁷ Being a borrowed term from theater (Bordwell, 2005), the inconclusiveness makes sense: *mise-en-scène* would define everything that is *put in scene* – everything that fills the frame of the stage –, which in theater is, in fact, *everything*. Shot-to-shot relations, however, are stuff of films; frames are varied and “to put in scene” is not as exhaustive in films as it is in theater.

window as a gentleman outside runs after the station (as if running after a train) (V) and eventually looks outside, where we can see the station moving away (VI).

Figure 4 - The train/station gag



Source: Author's compilation from *Top Secret!* (1984).

At first, we observe what seems to be a very unambiguous image – we are inside a train that is about to start moving. Once the outside view starts moving, we assume – without ever questioning ourselves – that the train has departed. Everything is built to comply with that assumption: the soldier's actions and reactions, the context, the resemblance to the movement we normally see from the window of a train; everything points to one particular and logical interpretation. Thus, a first sense has been established. When we understand that the station is moving, which becomes evident through the reveal of a still background behind the station, we reconfigure the feeling of that first sense and realize/accept that we have been misdirected.

When considering the narrator, the question is *how* are we being misled? What are the artifices employed in making us wrongly assume the first sense? The movement that we perceive outside the train – what looks like a moving train when in fact is a moving station – acts as the ambiguous term, a connector of senses. The still background, revealed as the station moves away, grounds the train as a non-moving object; therefore, it establishes that we were witnessing a moving station instead of a moving train. The still background is what disambiguates the movement. Mackendrick says that “[a]ll movement is relative. For the film-maker this means that the camera and the eye will observe an object in movement only when it is seen *in relation to something else*” (2004, p. 272-273, my italics) and that “[a]mbiguity in perception is one of the most interesting tricks the film-maker can employ” (Ibid., p. 273). Movement implies time and a “relation to something else” implies a comparison of sorts.

Therefore, we can understand that *staged action* (the organization of objects moving in front of the camera) and *setting* are the elements that guide us from A to B and create possible humoristic effects – they linearly play with our perception, not just on the same perceivable plane (as with ZAZ’s background gags) but on organized (crafted) time-dependent perception. An order of occurrences is essential for the functionality of jokes and gags. Vandaele says that “much humor (especially jokes) and much narrative hinges [...] on ‘garden-path’ telling in which the reader or viewer is sent down the wrong interpretive path before the right path is revealed” (2010, p. 728). Indeed, the first part has to misdirect us so that the second part can reveal we were misdirected.

At the end of the gag, the camera moves forward and looks outside the window, to the back of the train, where we see the station go and a man running to “catch” it. Even though this part is not essential to the disambiguation of the gag (after all, that the station was moving we already now), it serves as a kind of humoristic comment – an addition in order to reinforce the surrealistic “logic” that has presented itself once we accept that a station can move. When discussing Logical Mechanism (LM) as one of the six Knowledge Resources that constitute a joke according to the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), Attardo says that “[t]he LM parameter presupposes and embodies a ‘local’ logic, i.e., a distorted, playful logic, that does not hold outside of the world of the joke” (2024, p. 441). According to him, this represents “complex errors in reasoning, such as false analogies, Garden-Path phenomena” (*Ibidem*) and “figure-ground reversals” (*Ibidem*) such as the one we see here in this gag between the train and the station. Attardo’s example features a person screwing a lightbulb by holding the lightbulb and having their bodies turned – a reversal of movements, in a way. Similarly, the gag features a reversal of movements between the train and the station. This last part, with the camera moving forward to look back and the man running after the station, reinforces comically this surrealistic logic that has been established exclusively for the world of this gag.

THE DECOUPAGE

Decoupage is most commonly used as a technical term for film production than as a theoretical term for film analysis. It does, however, provide a very good understanding of what I mean by shot-to-shot relations and some editing as being joke narrators and active participants in the planning and crafting of a gag. Noël Burch defines it as “the spatiotemporal characteristics of the match, the relationships between screen space and off-screen space, and plastic interactions between shots” (1981, p. 51). He also provides a more practical definition here:

“[D]*écoupage* refers to the final form of a script, incorporating whatever technical information the director feels it necessary to set down on paper to enable a production crew to understand his intention and find the technical means with which to fulfill it, to help them plan their work in terms of his. By extension, but still on the same practical workaday level, *découpage* also refers to the more or less precise breakdown of a narrative action into separate shots and sequences *before filming*” (1981, p. 4)

Crafting a narrative structure implies (although it certainly is not limited to) *pre-conceiving* it before the shooting of a film. Shot-to-shot relations can be externally analyzed from outside the film production aspect – it may analyze a finished work (the movie) and the effects it has without necessarily accounting for a reflection on craft. Therefore, I avoid calling this narrator “editing”, because it is a term that reflects a post-production performance – editing figures out a way of telling and narrating *after* the shooting and has usually very little effect on the planning of a structure. It is not likely (certainly not in ZAZ films) that a gag can be *discovered* in the editing process. Through *découpage*, shot-to-shot relations dictate the shooting. In editing, shot-to-shot relations are found from the shooting.

Of course, editing is still the mechanical act of putting things together and most movies would not exist without it. We simply cannot talk about the *découpage* of a finished film without talking about editing. Shots have to be edited together so that the plan of *découpage* can be effectively materialized. However, the point is that, specifically with ZAZ gags, we can assume that the narrator of a gag that functions by shot-to-shot relations is the *découpage exclusively* because such shot-to-shot relations are pre-conceived before any shooting takes place. For ZAZ, the pre-conception of a specific match between shots is often essential for a humorous effect to exist. This means that, for a ZAZ gag, when discussing a gag that functions comedically through how shots relate to each other in a spatiotemporal way – even if effectively these relations are established through editing –, we are more correct to consider *découpage* as the narrator rather than editing. Editing, for ZAZ gags, is a tool of *découpage*.

Reisz (2010) is in tune with what we have been seeing so far regarding humorous structures, the linearity of jokes and puns, and acts of misdirecting. When writing about editing comedy sequences, he says that “the editor must first convincingly evoke a false reaction before he can effectively surprise the audience” (2010, p. 86). His example of a humorous anecdote is one which “principle [...] is simply that a false inference is created and then debunked” (*Ibidem*). He says that “[n]ot only does he [the editor] not tell us what is going to happen, but he deliberately misleads us” (*Ibidem*). If we consider that the structure of jokes is based on setting a first sense – inducing and misdirecting the audience towards an acceptance of that first sense through context and apparent unambiguity – and then revealing a second sense contrary

to the first and that the first understanding was an induced “error of judgement”, Reisz is not only describing the structure of a joke told cinematically through shot-to-shot relations but of written jokes in general. He is effectively describing a humorous scene narrated by shot-to-shot relations.

The previously seen “intercom gag” from *Police Squad!* (so as Buster Keaton’s gate gag from *Cops*)²⁸ is a good example of a humorous effect indebted to decoupage. The gag is composed of two shots – 1) Frank Drebin leaning forward and assumingly pressing the button of an intercom and 2) a small police officer answering him. Independently, these two shots are not inherently humorous. They depend on being placed together, thus establishing continuity, linearity, repetition of elements, ambiguity and disambiguation. Frank’s ambiguous movement (pressing a button / approaching an officer, i.e. the connector), only becomes ambiguous when seen in relation to the second shot (which acts as the disjunct, disambiguating the connector). These functions are only created by putting these two shots together. Following Reisz’s (2010) comedic linearity, the first shot makes the audience assume something and the second shot reveals we were misdirected. Mechanically, the misdirection and the reveal are put to effect by the change from one shot to the other. This specific chain of information does not occur as bona-fide communication or casually, but through the efforts of a crafted sequence; that is, a non-casual “speech” aware of its tools and mechanisms. Therefore, it is the object of a pre-conceived idea – a shot-to-shot relation devised before the shooting of those two shots, not only at the stage of decoupage a screenplay²⁹ but as *integral part of its creation*.

Another fun example of a decoupage-narrated gag can be found in episode 1 of *Police Squad!*. A confrontation between Frank Drebin and Sally Decker culminates in a shoot-out between the two. Frank hides behind a bench, Sally hides behind a trash can, and they fire against each other while taking cover behind their respective protection (I; II). Then comes a master shot that shows that they are actually *very* close to each other (III), disrupting our assumptions that a considerable distance separated them.

²⁸ Chapter 3.3.

²⁹ In the anglophone world, a decoupage screenplay is often called a “shooting script” – a script that is broken down into shots, acting as a sort of descriptive storyboard. Burch mentions that it is “called a ‘shooting script’ in English and a *copione* in Italian” (2010, p. 3).

Figure 5 – The shooting gag



Source: Author's compilation from *Police Squad!* (1982)

Again, we are set to assume something. From seeing the close shots of Frank and Sally shooting at each other, we “fill” the space between them with a distance that seems appropriate to what we imagine a shoot-out looks like. We are not given any information regarding their distance, but it seems unambiguous and it makes sense to assume that there is a good distance between the bench and the trash can. However, their distance is only truly revealed by the master shot – it disambiguates a seemingly unambiguous distance. The structure, per usual, is that of a first sense the audience is misdirected to assume followed by a second sense that was the “true” sense all along. Decoupage is the narrator – the shot-to-shot relation between the close shots of Frank and Sally is responsible for inducing the assumption of a distance; accordingly, the placing of the master shot reconfigures the first assumption and establishes a humorous combination of shots. On shot-to-shot relation's power of creating spatial assumptions, Mackendrick says that

“physical space and real time can be made subordinate to montage. The sense we sometimes have of geography (our perception of a consistent spatial relationship between people and objects and furniture, interior architecture or exterior landscape) may, in film or video, be quite fictitious. It is something the imagination pieces together as the mind's eye and ear synthesise the images and sound presented to them into a logical and believable, if non-existent, environment” (2004, p. 206).

This illusion of time and space is intrinsic to the craft of filmmaking. Pudovkin says that “the material of the film director consists not of real processes happening in real space and real time, but of those pieces of celluloid on which these processes have been recorded. This celluloid is entirely subject to the will of the director who edits it” (1954, p. 56). When describing an experiment by Kuleshov that consisted of making two very different locations look like they belong in the same action, Pudovkin mentions that “by the process of junction of pieces of celluloid appeared a new, filmic space without existence in reality” (Ibid., p. 61). If the non-casual condition of puns bring attention to its form, so does these plays on filmic construction of time and space – filmmaking is made “visible”, in a way, through the playful

use of its mechanics, techniques, and conventions. Concluding from the same experiment mentioned by Pudovkin (1954), Kuleshov himself says that “the basic strength of cinema lies in montage, because with montage it becomes possible to both break down and to reconstruct, and ultimately to remake the material” (1974, p. 52). Not surprisingly, a substantial number of ZAZ gags are narrated by shot-to-shot relations.

THE SUPPORTING NARRATOR

At this point, it should be noted that ZAZ gags can feature more than one narrator, or rather a cooperation of the narrators categorized by this chapter. Another example from *Police Squad!* serves as a good example: Frank Drebin meets Buddy Briggs, a young boxer, at a bar. Frank is looking for Saul Cooper and Montague Martin, crooked boxing managers who fix fights in order to pocket gambling money. After settling on his seat, Frank asks Buddy, “Is Cooper and Martin here?”. Buddy answers, “Yeah, they’re sitting at the table with a couple of *tramps*” (I). We then see Cooper and Martin laughing and drinking at the table together with *two homeless men* (II). Given the context, we assume that *tramps* is used as a depreciative term for *prostitutes* when in fact it is a depreciative term for *homeless people*. The situation is presented to us verbally by the characters (the connector – *tramps* – is heard) but revealed visually by a different shot (the disjunctur – the image of homeless men – is seen).

Figure 6 – The tramps gag



Source: Author’s compilation from *Police Squad!* (1982)

As a concept, this cooperation of narrators should be further investigated beyond the limitations of this research; however, even though it is not *essential* to our effort of identifying different gag narrators, it is interesting to apply a basic understanding of it to the gag analyses. Therefore, let us assume – shortly and rather primitively – the existence of a *supporting*

narrator that may or may not work together with the narrator. One problem that could be posed by that nomenclature is: if a narrator and a supporting narrator both exist, it must be assumed that one holds more responsibility over the disclosure of information than the other; but if they work *together*, why not refer to them equally as co-narrators, double narrators, or something of the sort?

Indeed, as we have seen in the “tramps gag”, these types of gags can only succeed in their humoristic structure through the action of two narrators – no narrator is dispensable. However, even though both narrators are responsible for different information, only one may hold the *humoristic responsibility*. Effectively, what it means is that only one narrator is responsible for the disjunction of a gag. According to Attardo, the disjunct is “the element that causes the passage from the serious to the humorous sense, and hence is *responsible for the humorous effect itself*” (2024, p. 225, my italics). Therefore, it makes sense that we consider the existence of a narrator *and* a supporting narrator on the basis of humoristic responsibility. That being the case, the narrator is the one with humoristic responsibility while the supporting narrator is there to provide the information that will eventually – when completed and disambiguated by the punchline/disjunct – become humorous. In other words, the narrator is always the one that disjuncts the gag while the supporting narrator, when different from the narrator, sets it up.

Applied to the “tramps gag”, the supporting narrator (in this case, the characters) provides us with the connector (*tramps*) and is not, in itself, humorous when delivered first in the linearity of the gag – we assume Buddy is talking about prostitutes, which, in the context of a sketchy bar and the world of gambling, is the assumption that makes better sense. Through decoupage, we are then informed of the presence of two homeless men, which makes us reconfigure the meaning of *tramps* by disambiguating what seemed already unambiguous and thus creating a humorous effect. For all purposes, we can understand this gag as a decoupage-narrated gag with the support of characters³⁰.

A lot of ZAZ gags feature this particular characteristic and we will still look at a few in the coming analyses. When this cooperation is identified, it often features a supporting character providing the set-up to a visual punchline/disjunction. Sometimes the disjunction is narrated by

³⁰ It could be said that, in a way, every filmic element “supports” a gag, after all a film is the result of several different things (all of which are communicative in some level). But it should be clear that I am focusing on the most directly influential aspects to the humorous structure and linearity of a gag. Of course a funny face can indicate humor, but it is much more on a socially/psychologically interpretative level than on a mechanical one.

decoupage, as in the “tramps gag”, and sometimes by the camera (camera movements, figures that walk into frame, and so on). Usually, it materializes an interesting form of wordplay – words are uttered but they come in contrast not with words, but images they may represent (the word *tramps*; the image of homeless men). Although it is still an initial investigation of this function, I do not believe it should be ignored from this thesis and I hope to see it further explored and, perhaps, expanded.

5 THE FILMS (GAG ANALYSES)

In this chapter, I will select a series of gags from three of ZAZ's works – *Airplane!* (1980), *Police Squad!* (1982), and *Top Secret!* (1984). The reason I left out *The Kentucky Fried Movie* (1977) and *The Naked Gun* (1988) is that this selection better exemplifies the ZAZ style in terms of what has been discussed so far. *The Kentucky Fried Movie* sees ZAZ fresh out of the theater and discovering what it was like to *be involved in* (not make) a movie. They are not the directors and the style is, formally, not as characteristic as in the projects they directed as a trio. *The Naked Gun* illustrates a new moment in their career – although their style remains unmistakable, they rely more on physical comedy and characters who, contrary to their earlier films, seem to know they are in a comedy. At this point, Leslie Nielsen has been given a second career as a comedy actor and the character of Frank Drebin becomes a (somewhat) lovable clown. Therefore, stylistic, there is more in common between the three works analyzed in this chapter than between the two that were left out. It is not a light-hearted decision by any means. These two movies are great for understanding ZAZ's progression as filmmakers and as creative minds working within the movie industry – two different levels: one that was marginalized from it (and trying to step into it) and another that was integrated to it. The chosen selection, however, is pragmatically more representative of the arguments, hypotheses and solutions raised by this work.

What follows are brief gag analyses from the first three projects directed by ZAZ. I will select a portion of gags from each work and analyze them within the scope of terms and concepts that were suggested by this research. I will also approach each of these films more generally and establish where they stand both artistically and historically within ZAZ's filmography, their comic tone, and what it says about their overall style.

5.1 BOY TRAPPED IN REFRIGERATOR EATS OWN FOOT – *AIRPLANE!*

Airplane! (1980) is ZAZ's first attempt at directing a feature film. Even though they had previously written and conceptualized *The Kentucky Fried Movie* (1977), John Landis directed it. With *Airplane!*, ZAZ succeeded for the first time in structuring a film around a plot. According to David Zucker: "At that time, we didn't know anything about structure and plot. We were coming off *Kentucky Friend* [sic] *Movie*, which had absolutely no plot, just twenty or so unrelated sketches" (2023, p. 223). As newcomers to the film industry, their unorthodox humor and inexperienced business manners was met with confusion and misunderstandings.

David Zucker says that “[p]lenty of actors turned us down for *Airplane!* [...] it wasn’t that they didn’t want to do comedy; it was just that they didn’t understand what we were doing” (Ibid., p. 14-15). Peter Graves, who plays Captain Oveur, apparently hated the script and actually turned it down initially – “I did more than turn it down. I was upset. I thought it was trash! I read the script and threw it across the room! I said, ‘This is insane! And not only that, it’s the worst taste I’ve ever seen – from any piece of material I’ve ever read!’” (Graves *apud* Zucker, 2023, p. 14). Robert Stack, who plays Rex Kramer, was chased by ZAZ for “about two and a half years” before finally, and advised by his wife, agreeing to do it “under great trepidation, of course” (Stack *apud* Zucker, 2023, p.7). Producers did not understand their casting choices and actors themselves questioned their suitability for the part. Peter Graves even suggested Harvey Korman (famous comedian and omnipresent figure in Mel Brooks movies) for his part (Zucker, 2023). Robert Hays, who plays the protagonist Ted Striker, remembers seeing Lloyd Bridges, who plays Steve McCroskey, trying to rehearse a scene and being confused – “Lloyd was kind of just trying to figure the whole thing out. [...] I remember Lloyd being kind of a little frustrated and confused, and saying, ‘What the hell’s going on here?’ Because it was so stupid! It was so crazy, and he didn’t quite get it” (Hays *apud* Zucker, 2023, p. 9). ZAZ’s entire concept, however, was precisely to have non-comedian actors who could play it straight.

If with *The Kentucky Fried Movie* ZAZ met John Landis and started learning how to format a screenplay³¹, with *Airplane!* they learned how to compose shots, frame dialogue and action, move the camera, decoupage, and so on; essentially, they learned how to tell a story and provoke effects in cinematic terms – and they learned that by copying. It would not be too far from the truth to claim that *Airplane!* is a comedic rip-off of *Zero Hour!* (1957), a B-movie caught by ZAZ on a video machine they used to leave recording overnight “in order to capture the dumbest commercials” (Zucker, 2023, p. 124). Structurally, *Zero Hour!* is quite literally the template for *Airplane!* – various lines are exactly the same, shots are often similar, the plot is almost identical and even character’s names are recycled (the protagonist of one is called Ted Stryker while the other is Ted Striker). When we compare them, it feels like a disaster movie was hijacked by comedy directors and turned into a farce. Being new to the world of filmmaking, ZAZ learned much about the craft from simply carefully observing *Zero Hour!* and trying to reproduce it. Jerry Zucker says that “[w]e loved *Zero Hour!* And it was actually a

³¹ ZAZ approached Landis and asked for his help in making a movie (at first, a primitive idea for *Airplane!*). However, they had no script or the knowledge of what a script was. Landis gave them his script for *An American Werewolf in London* so they could learn how to format it (Zucker, 2023).

very well-constructed plot. You could actually use it to teach film structure” (*Ibidem*). Additionally, Jerry and David are very clear as to how much *Zero Hour!* shaped *Airplane!*³²:

“David: We thought about overdubbing it, like Woody Allen had done in *What’s Up, Tiger Lily?* But then we figured, why not just remake it with straight actors, in black and white, and on a prop plane?

Jerry: We knew nothing about screen writing, no clue how to write a story with three acts, character arcs, etc. But in *Zero Hour!* it was practically all there for us. All we had to do was add the jokes” (*Ibidem*).

Despite working on pre-existent material, ZAZ’s creative input should not be by any means disregarded; similarly, their seriousness of craft cannot be overlooked. Producer Robert K. Weiss provides an outside perspective of their work:

“I came over to sit in on a writing session. They’d gotten a copy of *Zero Hour!* and would go through it scene by scene on their video recorder, and very carefully. They were like comedy surgeons. They’d take the serious parts of the movie, and that was the skeletal structure of the narrative of the story for *Airplane!* Then they’d take lines and setups and supply the punch lines” (Weiss *apud* Zucker, 2023, p. 137).

Therefore, even though they had a template to work from, they had to be mindful of all aspects of cinematography; consequently, they were apparently learning while doing. What may seem like an easy way out can also be understood as an immersion on filmmaking craft – after all, copying implies understanding how something was made. This approach also gives *Airplane!* its very particular tone, one that is not necessarily present in other ZAZ films. This feeling of watching a film that was raided by lunacy is especially stronger in *Airplane!*. As the kickstart of their directing careers, it also provides a good object of study regarding their style – it is the movie in which they start prominently writing jokes in film form. The process of adding punchlines to what seemed like a serious scene speaks directly to the structure of jokes and puns – to appear to be one thing when in fact it is a humorous alternative. If this is an integral part of their style (which I argue to be the case), the process of turning *Zero Hour!* into *Airplane!* is perhaps the genesis of this particular characteristic of their work this thesis is most concerned with.

THE GIRL SCOUT PROLONGUED PUNCHLINE

Airplane! is entirely built around constant breaks of expectation. The disjunction of our understanding of things is central to every joke and gag. From the gag that exaggerates the

³² In fact, ZAZ actually bought the copyrights of *Zero Hour!* in order to avoid being sued for plagiarism due to the similarities between films. Jerry Zucker says that “[a]t some point, we realized we were using a lot of *Zero Hour!* Like the entire plot” and also that “buying the copyrights wasn’t very difficult back then. The studios didn’t see any value in those old B movies. It was found money for them” (Zucker, 2023, p. 135). Jim Abrahams adds that “[t]he option was \$2,500. We could afford that. Plus we were able to remake the movie without worrying about being sued for plagiarism” (*Ibid.*, p. 136).

length of an airplane control panel (figure 7) to the fake Spanish written in warning signs (figure 9), the punchline is always at the disjunction of our expectations – against what is expected. Regarding the linearity of jokes, Attardo says that “the punch line must occur in the last of the narrative functions in which the text is analyzed” (2024, p. 239), but also that “in all the cases of jokes with non-final disjunctors, [...] whatever linguistic material occurs after the punch line [...] is superfluous for the fruition of the text as a joke” (Ibid., p. 241). That being the case, the punchline can be unorthodoxly extended for *additional* humorous purposes (that is, beyond the function of a joke/gag) without hindering its condition as punchline as long as it maintains its disjunctive function. Similarly, it can be compressed to the point of almost being merged into the set-up but still, ultimately, maintaining its secondary and final position.

Figure 7 – The control panel gag



Source: Author's compilation from *Airplane!* (1980)

On the exaggeratedly large panel gag, what the audience expects from a camera movement that shows the panel in the airplane's cockpit is that it concludes within the limits of what seems *physically* possible. However, it continues to pan through a panel that seems endless. The gag needs linearity and is *perceived linearly*. As the misdirected audience, we realize that our assumption was misdirected by the *continuation* of that movement, which acts as the disjunctor. If a joke can be understood as being composed of three functions, out of which “[t]he first two functions establish a probable sense which is belied by the third function” (Attardo, 2024, p. 225), the continuation of the movement acts precisely as that third function; therefore, it can be considered a disjunctor. Once the continuation seems physically impossible and the audience perceives the misdirection, the gag could be finished. Alternatively, what happens is a further continuation of it – an exaggeration that is in itself humorous. It extends beyond the mechanical necessities of jokes and amuses purely by exaggeration.

An interesting exaggeration of a punchline can be found in the first flashback scene, when Ted Striker recounts how he first met Elaine. The scene is at a dive bar which Striker describes as “a rough place; the seediest dive on the wharf” in voice-over narration. He then mentions that fights would usually break out every night. As he says that, we see a close shot

of two hands playing poker. One hand catches the other stealing with an extra ace under their palm. The camera backs away and reveals the hands belong to two girl scouts who then start getting into a fist fight. They start fighting aggressively, throwing each other on top of tables, breaking beer glasses on their heads, punching profusely, and throwing chairs.

Figure 8 - The girl scout gag



Source: Author's compilation from *Airplane!* (1980)

Up to the reveal, the gag plays out as a camera-narrated gag with misdirected audience. Given the context, “the seediest dive on the wharf”, we do not normally picture the presence of girl scouts in such a place. The close up of the hands playing poker does not provide any additional information regarding the gender, age, or general look of the players – the shot is deliberately too close. As the camera moves, it progressively reveals more information regarding the players and soon we understand they are girl scouts, which is incongruous to the place and unpredictable to the audience. We understand we were misdirected into thinking that those hands belonged to some of the sketchy people and outlaws who we see sitting around at the bar.

The gag itself has been through disjunction and could have ended there with no harm to the humorous effect. However, it explores the incongruity and extends the punchline beyond its function – after disambiguating the hands, it moves on to become something else entirely. It becomes (or rather, it remains) humorous not as a directly unexpected progression of information, but as sheer visual incongruity. The film has established that the girl scouts are

there at the bar but their presence continues to be incongruous, especially added by the fact that they keep fighting an unexpectedly violent fight – the incongruity and *some* unexpectedness remain. Information is not necessarily withheld from the audience nor are we misdirected in any further way, but the incongruous juxtaposition remains humoristic. Like in the control panel gag, even after the “surprise” prompted by disambiguation the audience continues to relish at the exaggeration and the impossibility/improbability/incongruity.

For the sake of completion, let us take a very brief look at the previously mentioned running gag of airplane signs with fake Spanish translations. When the plane starts to prepare for take-off, a sign is lit up: “No smoking”. Directly under it, a “translation” reads “El no a you smoko”. Then, another sign lights up right underneath it: “Fasten seatbelts”, translated as “Putana da seatbeltz” (I). Later on the film, due to an error by Ted Striker, the plane starts plummeting and another sign lights up: “Return to seat”, translated as “Gobacken sidonna” (II).

Figure 9 - Fake Spanish signs



Source: Author's compilation from *Airplane!* (1980)

In these cases, the punchline is so compressed that it almost merges with the set-up. In fact, it could be argued that there is no customary joke mechanism in effect and no linearity in the perception of incongruity. However, there is good reason to believe that linearity still acts upon this gag: we tend to read in a certain *order*. On the matter of cartoons, Hempelmann and Samson argue that “[i]n the picture part of a cartoon, [...] usually no clear order of processing is forced in the way text does, but there are tendencies to follow a general order, which can crucially be directed by the artist creating entry points and paths in their picture” (2008, p. 617). If even in cartoons an order of processing is arguably to be considered, in text it may be a better accepted assumption. The process of interpreting this gag is prompted by *comparing* what is written in English to what is written in fake Spanish. Even though the original and the translation appear together, the order it is presented in (and, consequently, the order we read it) is English first and fake Spanish second. The fake Spanish is the humorous information and it

occupies the last position – by the definitions we have seen, it is the disjunctive and the punchline; it acts effectively against expectations. Raskin says that “[i]n a joke, the surprise is usually delivered by what is known as the **punch line**” (1985, p. 33). The surprise in this case is quite clearly the fake Spanish.

An interesting thing happens when the same mechanism is repeated. When the “Fasten seatbelts/Putana da seatbeltz” sign lights up the audience is already engaged in the humorous effect triggered by the first sign. The joke is essentially repeated but no longer acts according to the same mechanisms – it simply explores the humorous effect beyond the conclusion of the gag. It acts, curiously – not unlike the continuation of the girl scouts punchline – as an extended punchline. We know what to expect, but the comparison between English and fake Spanish is still incongruous and amuses the audience.

THE MIRROR GAG

As we will see further in this chapter, the mirror gag from *Airplane!*, is what ZAZ calls an “illusion” or a play on perspective, something they will greatly enforce later in *Top Secret!* (Zucker, 2023). When summoned in his house to help Ted Striker land the plane, Rex Kramer stops in front of a mirror to fix his clothes. As he does that, he talks to his wife, who is also in the shot looking at him (III). He then leaves but not as we expected – his “reflection” approaches the mirror and walks right through it (IV; V).

Figure 10 - The mirror gag



Source: Author's compilation from *Airplane!* (1980)

This is an interesting gag for a few reasons but let us first go through its most primordial. Applying what has been discussed, this is yet again a “camera”-narrated gag. Only this time it uses not camera movements but staging and set design – it is the use of these artifices that guide the audience through the joke. Rex Kramer going through the mirror is what disjuncts the previously established meaning of the shot, which was that of a man looking at himself in a mirror. Therefore, according to what we have seen before, staging and set design hold the humoristic responsibility, establishing a second sense over the first. The misdirected participant is noticeably the audience – we are the ones who are led to believe, by all elements engaged in delivering the set-up and establishing a meaning to it, that the shot shows the reflection of Rex Kramer in front of a mirror when, in fact, it is not a reflection.

There are elements, however, that precede this primordial part of the gag and add to its successful completion. They are not indispensable parts of the gag but they also better allow the functionality of the joke mechanisms that are employed. Overall, they help with the effectiveness of the humorous effect. Before the shot in which Kramer goes through the mirror (let us call it “the gag shot”), there are two other shots: one very similar to the gag shot (I) and one that features the airport employee getting mauled by Kramer’s golden retriever (II). The way they are put together and how they precede the proper gag is helpful to the misdirection of the audience; furthermore, they serve a practical purpose to the *execution* of the gag – it is intrinsically related to craft. The first of these two shots consists of a mirror, Rex Kramer, and his wife. It is almost identical to the gag shot, except that it features a *real* mirror and a real reflection. This is evidenced by the beginning of the shot – it shows both Kramer *and* his reflection (I) whereas the gag shot features only one of them (III). As director Edward Dmytryk points out: “Film is a deceptive art” (1984, p. 11). Indeed, the role of that first shot (I) is to further deceive the audience with proof that the mirror really is a mirror. Even though the existence of a mirror is not contested at that point, the shot helps *prevent* any suspicions that could have been raised by the gag shot – it is supporting the misdirection that will be executed within the gag shot. Therefore, if we consider the existence of a supporting narrator, this shot would be arguably it. Although not an *essential* part of the joke mechanism, it supports a proper delivery.

On a perceptual level, these two similar shots can only succeed in their misdirection if not seen directly next to each other. Similar – but not identical – shots often generate some kind of confusion and disorientation when placed together. Walter Murch says that

“[t]he new shot in this case is different enough to signal that something has changed, but not different enough to make us re-evaluate its context: The displacement of the image is neither motion nor change of context, and the collision of these two ideas produces a mental jarring – a jump – that is comparatively disturbing” (2001, p. 6-7).

That being the case, the second shot featuring the airport employee and the golden retriever (II) prevents a disorientation that would surely be ensued by the first shot (I) and the gag shot (III). It also serves a very practical purpose – the difference between the other two shots is not only a slight reposition of the camera, but an entirely reconstructed set. One features a real mirror reflecting Kramer and the rest of the house while the other contains a hole where the mirror used to be and, behind it, the rest of the house. To avoid the comparison – which would surely hinder the illusion and not only disorient the audience –, an entirely different shot strategically placed between them (II) serves this purpose.

Additionally, the second shot has a humorous effect. It reinforces a background gag that is established from the beginning of the scene. As soon as the airport employee arrives at Kramer’s house, he is attacked by a golden retriever and as the scene progresses continues being attacked. Not Kramer nor his wife seem to acknowledge the attack. They carry on with the scene as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. According to what we have seen in previous chapters, this can be considered a background gag on account of the seeming unawareness that affects the characters – the “Mr. Magoo effect” reflective of dramatic irony in humorous situations. That being the case, it would not be impossible to consider that two gags are happening at once – the mirror gag and the golden retriever gag. In a functional level, while the first is partially dependent on the other (the shot that is needed to prevent disorientation also reinforces the background gag) the second is completely independent of the first (the misdirected characters do not necessarily need to be engaged in a different gag). Therefore, curiously, two gags – one with misdirected audience and the other with misdirected characters – happen simultaneously and relate with one another, serving either a practical function or an addition to the general comicality of the scene.

5.2 MY BOSS WAS ALREADY AT THE SCENE – *POLICE SQUAD!*

Arguably, along with *Top Secret!* (1984), the TV show *Police Squad!* (1982) is where ZAZ reached the pinnacle of their form. The tone first established by *Airplane!* is unquivering and mature, their interest in wordplay and double meanings is at its all-time high and their playfulness around film form is free and startlingly creative. Looking at it now, it seems fitting to the *tour de force* that it is that it did not last very long. Sadly, the show was “cancelled by ABC after only four episodes – with the remaining two, already filmed, later broadcast in the slower summer season” (Audissino, 2022a, p. 178). It was deemed too daring at the time and too unlike other comedy shows on TV to be given a second chance, unfortunately.

As a television comedy show, *Police Squad!* evades every definition of comedy made for television or sitcom descriptions. It does not fit and even challenges the perception that TV content is one that should be able to communicate the essence of its ideas and substance not only through the combination of audio and image (an audiovisual work, of course), but competently through audio alone – a network’s belief that TV audiences may not be paying close attention to the formal qualities of image or their intersection with audio. According to Audissino (2022a), *Police Squad!* goes against the “cue theory” (as proposed by Brett Mills (2009)) that formulates comedy shows – the idea that, structurally, there is a recurrent and established point, aided by technical markers, that hints the audience to the delivery of a joke; a motion that indicates a punchline. Often, it is a very comprehensible laugh track that unmistakably communicates to the audience that a joke was made and that it is time to laugh.

This was a show that required full attention from the viewer – actors were not strictly comedians, background action (and the contrast with foreground action) was where comic intention was often developed, gags mixed verbal and visual elements and if distracted one could easily miss them, and it was not filmed with the same regard to television comedy that was common to other TV shows at the time. For instance, there was no abundance of action-reaction shots built for laughter nor overall editing artifices that enhanced a characteristic rhythm of television humor. It demanded – contrary to what television demanded from the audience – unrestricted attention; otherwise, the desired effect could be lost and audiences could feel alienated in the process.

This “rebellion” against the TV norms for comedy was very decisively³³ the reason why *Police Squad!* was cancelled so soon. It bears more in common with ZAZ’s movies than with

³³ For a detailed argument on this, see Audissino (2022a)

any other TV show of its time; therefore, it makes sense that the reflections of this thesis are well valid not only to their work in films but also on television. That being the case, to deny *Police Squad!* as a valid object of study in this thesis is highly unproductive and would be a noticeable gap in its focus. Being a very important depiction of their style, this TV show should not be avoided exclusively on account of being a different *medium*. Every other aspect of it vouches for its inclusion. *Police Squad!* “failed” as a TV show precisely because it communicated more like a film than what TV audiences (but mainly producers and network owners) expected. As Audissino puts it: “Television substance at the time was a predominance of sound over image that resulted in audiovisual mirroring; the substance of ZAZ’s filmmaking was a predominance of image over sound, and even image that contradicted sound, which resulted in audiovisual disjunction” (2022a, p. 187). As we have seen, audiovisual disjunction (the meta quality of their work and the films’ awareness of its own form – not unlike jokes) is one of the most readily noticeable characteristics of ZAZ’s style; and, regardless of being found in television or films, it is one of the direct interests of this thesis.

ACTUAL WORDPLAY

Unsurprisingly and as seen in previous examples, not only do the mechanisms of jokes and puns surround ZAZ’s gags, but they also frequently write actual wordplay into their scripts. Many are the dialogues that feature some kind of wordplay that is both set up and disambiguated verbally and that do not necessarily need a visual aid to be effective. All films written by the trio feature actual wordplay either more or less prominently. We have already seen two famous examples in *Airplane!* (the “surely/Shirley” gag and the “what is it” gag), so let us now look at actual wordplay in *Police Squad!*, which also features it prominently and independently. It should be said, however, that regardless of these wordplays being self-contained and solely responsible for the joke’s humoristic effect, they are all aided by the *delivery*.

The delivery, naturally, includes not only the actor’s performance (generally engaged in what *appears* to be a bona-fide communication; that is, without the intention to perform a joke (Raskin, 1985)) but every other element of film that deliberately does not comply to the joke and refuses to provide any formal indicators of laughter such as laugh tracks or exaggerated reactions. To deny these reactions around a joke is also a communicative choice and may add to the humor of a scene. Dmytryk says that “[i]n the theater, dialogue may be ‘king’ – in films, the reaction is where most things happen. [...] In comedy it can range from the deadpan reaction of a Buster Keaton, through the wicked leer of a Groucho Marx, to the screamingly broad distortions of a Jerry Lewis or a Martha Raye” (1984, p. 65-66). Somewhat accordingly,

Mackendrick says that “cinema is not so much a medium for action as it is for reaction. It is with the timing of a reaction that the editor punctuates the significance of the action” (2004, p. 262). That being said, despite the characteristic deadpan reaction of ZAZ’s characters’ contribution to the overall comicality of a scene, let us look at a few puns written into the script and that function – as joke mechanisms – independently from visual aids.

In episode 4, titled “Revenge and Remorse/The Guilty Alibi”³⁴, Det. Frank Drebin and his boss, Capt. Ed Hocken, visit Lana Casales, the ex-wife of a suspect. She is visibly emotional and tells them that she has not heard from him since the divorce and that he now dates a dancer called Mimi Du Jour:

Ed Hocken: Du Jour. Is she French?

Lana Casales: That’s just her stage name. Her real name is Mimi Coffee.

Ed Hocken: Coffee?

Lana Casales (crying): No, thank you.

As we can see, this joke is perfectly capable of provoking the desired humorous effect with no visual assistance. It is perhaps funnier that the scene is shot with no particular emphasis on the fact that a joke is being made. The characters also seem to deliver it honestly and cluelessly, contributing to the *tone* but not to the mechanisms employed to create and disjunct a given sense. On these mechanisms, we can identify the usual functions: the connector is quite clearly the word *coffee*. It is first presented as a last name and seems to be unambiguous by the context of the conversation – it is explicitly uttered as a last name in a conversation regarding last names: “Du Jour” is a fake name; the real one is Coffee. Still, when Ed repeats the name in what appears to be a confirmation question, Lana responds it as if he had offered her coffee.

The disjunct is established when Lana says “No, thank you” and a different possibility of interpretation emerges against the audience’s expectations. What we thought was an unambiguous term (*coffee*) becomes unexpectedly ambiguous by the process of disambiguation triggered by the disjunct (*no, thank you*). The passage from one sense to the other not only disambiguates the first sense but makes it ambiguous. As the audience, we are misdirected. Even though the characters look unaware of the joke, they are fictional artifices employed in joke-telling – they appear to be engaged in bona-fide communication but only within the

³⁴ All *Police Squad!* episodes feature two titles: one that appears written in the opening credits, and the other that is simultaneously read by the narrator. These double titles are a joke of their own merit – an incongruous pairing of information. The narrator reads everything that appears written on the screen exactly as it is written. The title is the only information read differently, going against the audience’s expectations.

fictional world created by the filmmakers, who are actively engaged in non-bona-fide communication and crafted speech.

Another interesting example of a wordplay gag in *Police Squad!* can be found in the same episode. Frank Drebin and Ed Hocken are at the police station questioning Eddie Casale, the suspect. They suspect Eddie was at a place called “Club Flamingo” but he claims he was at the movies. Frank and Ed are pressing Eddie and supposing different scenarios:

Ed Hocken: All right, Eddie. Let’s say you did go to the movies.

Eddie Casale: Okay.

ALL: “You did go to the movies”.

Frank Drebin: Then let’s say that you were nowhere near the Club Flamingo.

Eddie Casale: All right.

ALL: “You were nowhere near the Club Flamingo”.

This gag explores the two meanings that could be interpreted from “let’s say ____”. One, of course, means *let’s assume* while the other is more literal – *let us speak; utter*. Therefore, the ambiguous term is *let’s say* and its literal interpretation disambiguates it. Despite being an independent wordplay, it relies on the need of a performance of some kind – the disjunctive is “you did go to the movies”, but in itself (separated from the context) it is merely a repetition of what was said in the first sense. To successfully disambiguate, the audience has to be given the information that all characters involved are repeating the sentence. In the movie it is provided by the image and sound of the characters repeating it; in this transcription, by the indicator “ALL”. Both are communicative artifices from their respective mediums and are responsible for disambiguating the first sense to an audience that was not initially engaged on a literal interpretation. That being the case, this is a character-narrated gag with a misdirected audience.

Interestingly, the gag is not finished when the disambiguation occurs; and not only does it continue but it repeats the same mechanism. As a joke it could be finished when all characters say “you did go to the movies”, but it goes on to immediately repeat the same process to an audience that is no longer misdirected. When the joke is repeated, even though the surprise becomes an impossibility (disambiguation has already occurred) the content of the repetition and its presentation remain incongruous – we are still amused by an absurd response that *continues* to take place in a clear inquisitorial tone. Not too unlike the girl scout’s punchline from *Airplane!*, this repetition produces a different effect resulting from a kind of prolonged

punchline. The difference, however, is that – unlike the girl scouts punchline – it produces a different effect despite employing the exact same mechanism. This shows that even if the joke presents itself as an already disambiguated joke, it may be humorously effective. Still, the audience may relish on the structure and laugh again at the mechanisms. Noël Carroll’s (2010) arguments against the consideration of jokes as art (discussed here in chapter 3.1), are all quickly dispelled by the observation that two jokes with the exact same structure and so close together can be enjoyed by audiences. When observing this gag, Carroll’s arguments that jokes are “one-shot affairs” (2010, p. 409) and that one cannot take away new things from the same joke seem quite rushed.

WORDPLAY-BASED GAGS

The entire point of this thesis is to investigate the influence of pun structure and mechanisms on the comedic and cinematic style of ZAZ. And, as we have seen, despite the recurrent use of actual wordplay, many gags are crafted revolved around the idea of providing visual disjunctors to verbal utterances (accordingly, one ambiguous sense to the connector provided verbally and one disambiguated sense provided visually); in other, simplified, words: a visual punchline to a verbal set-up.

One example already looked at in a previous chapter is the “tramps gag”, also from *Police Squad!*. Another similar gag can be found in episode 1, “A Substantial Gift/A Broken Promise”. At the very end, after successfully arresting the culprit Sally Decker, Ed Hocken congratulates Frank Drebin on the police work and asks him how he knew she was responsible for the crime. Frank says, “Just a little hunch back at the office” (I). Ed says, “Though so. I brought that little hunchback with me. Charlie, come out here!”. A little hunchback man walks into frame and him and Frank shake hands (II).

Figure 11 - The hunchback gag

I



II



Source: Author's compilation from *Police Squad!* (1982)

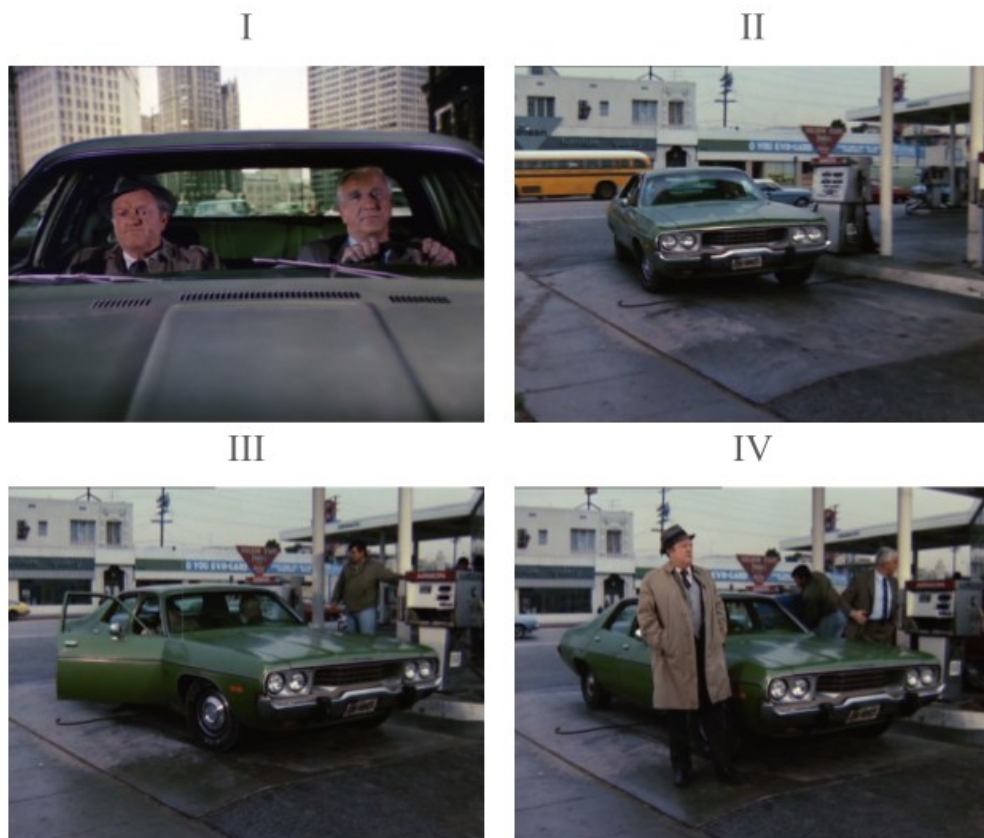
Let us first see again a definition for connector and disjunctive. Attardo says that “the (usually lexical) unit that allows the two senses to coexist is called a *connector*, while the unit that forces the presence of the second sense is called a *disjunctive*” (2008, p. 106). The connector in this gag is the homophony between *little hunch back* and *little hunchback* – the falsely unambiguous sense understands *hunch* separated from *back* and makes *little* an adjective to *hunch*; the disambiguated sense understands *hunchback* as one word and makes *little* an adjective to *hunchback*. The disjunctive can only effectively be the little hunchback man walking into frame, but some confusion is already created in Ed's speech – to “bring a hunch back” with him is semantically confusing and does not seem to make sense. When he calls Charlie, the connector is in position to be disambiguated but does not seem effective enough. The true unambiguous and unconfusing information is the image of Charlie, a visibly hunchback man of small stature, walking into frame. Only then is the first sense successfully disambiguated and the gag in concluded.

Therefore, if the first sense is disambiguated by the appearance of a figure, this is a camera-narrated gag. Accordingly, if the audience is misdirected into believing one sense while another was the case, the audience is the misdirected participant. However, like the “tramps gag”, it is possible that we assume the presence of a supporting narrator. The establishing of the first sense is performed verbally by the characters and not by any strictly visual means. Still, the humoristic responsibility lies on the disjunctive (the appearance of Charlie, the little hunchback) and even though an information provided by the characters is essential to the overall comprehension and functionality of the gag, it serves – within itself – a non-humorous effect. Thus, we have a camera-narrated gag with the support of characters and a misdirected audience.

Two other gags we can look at happen subsequently in episode 3, “The Butler did it/A Bird in the Hand”. Frank and Ed are looking for Terri, a kidnapped girl. As we see them driving around town, Frank narrates in voice-over: “Time was running out for Terri. Ed and I drove around for hours for no particular reason. We came up empty” (I). The next shot shows them stopping at a gas station to fill the tank (II). The connector, which is given two possible senses, is *to come up empty*. In this case, it seems to mean *to find nothing* when in fact it means *to be out of gas*. Interestingly, it fits two contexts that are, in fact, cunningly present in the first sense; however, only one of these contexts is forced and misdirected onto the audience. The context which the audience assumes is that of police trying to find a missing person – *to come up empty* appears to mean, unambiguously, that their search resulted in nothing. The other context is that

of a car driving around for hours – *to come up empty* is the result of burning gasoline out of the gas tank. Of course, we are led to assume only one of these contexts because it is the one that seems more relevant with the narrative. The audience is misdirected into choosing the wrong thing without even realizing they are making a choice. The disambiguation occurs when the narrative cuts to a shot of the car arriving at a gas station to fill the tank. Frank says to the gas station attendant “Fill her up!” (III) and triggers the beginning of a subsequent gag.

Figure 12 - The empty gag / The fill her up gag



Source: Author's compilation from *Police Squad!* (1982)

After asking to “fill her up”, Frank and Ed step out of the car and walk to the front of it. In the background, the gas station attendants start putting random objects like surfboards and cellos inside the car (IV). They “fill her up”. This gag, attached directly onto the end of the other, has as connector a phrase that could act as reinforcer of the disambiguation needed for the previous gag – although the image of the car pulling up at a gas station effectively disjuncts the gag, the phrase may additionally leave no doubt regarding the gag’s disambiguated meaning. In the second gag, however, “fill her up” is the connector. It is uttered in the sense of *filling the tank*, which, given the context of a gas station, is the meaning assumed by the audience. When the attendant picks up a surfboard and puts it inside the car, the meaning becomes something else – to literally *fill the car*.

Despite being so close together, the two gags have different narrators: the first is disambiguated by the introduction of a different shot, a continuation that is established by a shot-to-shot relations and not by a camera movement or movement within the frame; the second, however, is disambiguated precisely by movement within the frame. Therefore, the first is a decoupage-narrated gag while the second is camera-narrated. Both gags find a supporting narrator in the character of Frank Drebin – the first defines the connector through Frank’s voice-over narration and the second through his request to the gas station attendant.

In both gags, the audience is misdirected. The second, however, presents an added factor. As we have seen, background action in ZAZ gags is often putting characters as misdirected participants engaged in a sort of “Mr. Magoo effect”. This seems to be the case with this gag, although it should be pointed out that the disambiguation is effectively concluded – and, therefore, the punchline is delivered – as soon as we see the attendant filling the car instead of filling the tank. What follows may be similar to the girl scouts prolonged punchline: a punchline continues in the background and amuses on basis of its sheer incongruity; and, throughout the scene, continues to engage the audience through a humorous interpretation of the phrase “fill her up” even after serving its purposes as disjunctive.

5.3 SOUVENIRS, NOVELTIES, PARTY TRICKS – *TOP SECRET!*

ZAZ's second film as directors finds them with a somewhat developed awareness of craft. Whereas *Airplane!* came from what *Zero Hour!* and John Landis had taught them, *Top Secret!* came from what they learned with *Airplane!* and *Police Squad!*. It is a film with no clear source, an ambiguous setting (nazi Germany, 1950s and 1960s American music culture, war movies and musicals), and an original plot. They were not disrupting the seriousness of one particular previous template but still managed to create a film that followed a similar tone. The creative freedom they found in *Police Squad!* is now applied to a feature that, unlike *Airplane!*, is the result of filmmaking experiences and not necessarily an effort to learn it. *Top Secret!* seems to feature a more acute dominance of their tools. What that results in is a film that looks formally more concise in terms of knowing how to materialize an idea – it finds a kind of freedom derived from *knowledge of craft*, of knowing *how* to put an idea to formal action; as ridiculous as they might be, they are effectively developed. Overall, as a piece of work, *Top Secret!* feels looser than *Airplane!* in the sense that it succeeds – seemingly unrestrained – in giving wings to lunacy.

Top Secret! is perhaps the film in which ZAZ experiments visually with “illusions” the most, something that could only be achieved through some familiarity with the craft. They started testing it in *Airplane!* – “that’s where we first experimented with some of our own cinematic tricks, like when Robert Stack seems to walk right through a mirror. [...] Even though it didn’t get a big laugh, we loved that scene because it was so bizarre. We did a lot more of this in *Top Secret!*, but that scene was the forerunner” (Zucker, 2023, p. 299). Indeed, “perceptual pranks” and visual misdirection abound in *Top Secret!* and grant it with its particular style even within ZAZ’s oeuvre. It is possibly also one of the reasons it was considered a box office failure – according to ZAZ, the film had no real plot and characters were underdeveloped (Ryan, 2014). It is, instead, a “joke book” of sorts (Zucker *apud* Ryan, 2014), a film in which they feel they have put their best jokes and formally disruptive ideas but failed to encompass them in a well-structured plot.

It is my opinion, however, that a collection of gags revolved around an unimpressive plot is precisely what makes *Top Secret!* such an endearing film. In a certain way, the plot is a mere *medium* onto which these gags attach themselves and find some reason for being. There is a scene in which Nick Rivers, the protagonist, describes the plot of the film up to that point and Hillary’s response is: “it sounds like some bad movie”. Then, they both awkwardly acknowledge the presence of a camera. The fact that the plot is that of a “bad movie” is

acknowledged and, for all critical purposes, it becomes a perfectly fair template onto which ZAZ were able to design their gags as creatively and wildly as they could.

Despite failing commercially, the film gained some cult status and is now fondly remembered as essential part of their oeuvre and comedic style. Jerry Zucker, upon reflecting on the film, says that “I really like it. It’s a stupid thing to say that I like it, but there’s something about the mix of the three of us that is just unique and different and we just call it ‘ZAZ’ for lack of a word, but that ZAZ thing is very in evidence in ‘Top Secret!’” (Zucker *apud* Ryan, 2014). Indeed, there is something very “ZAZ” to *Top Secret!*, and it is probably only there *because* of how much the plot structure simply serves as the basis onto which they could formally explore their gags. If the formal restrictions they had in *Airplane!* forced them to creatively figure out punchlines for a previously established set-up, *Top Secret!*’s freedom allowed them to creatively figure out punchlines *and* set-ups in visual terms. This is where they more prominently explore the mechanisms of jokes and puns through cinematic artifices.

THE WATCH GAG

One very good example of a gag entirely built around very particular artifices of filmmaking is what I will call “the watch gag”. Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein is very didactic (although not at all simplistic) about shot-to-shot relations and juxtapositions – the organization and careful placing of different elements within a linearity that creates narrative movement. He writes, for instance, that “[t]he full picture of the whole, as determined both by the shot and by montage, also emerges, vivifying and distinguishing both the content of the shot and the content of the montage. It is cases of this kind that are typical for cinematography” (1957, p. 10). Here he is talking about there being a third thing that is generated by the juxtaposition, the encounter, and the relation between one shot and another – this third thing (the narrative unit) gives life to itself and a reason for the individual shots to exist as part of something, establishing a meaning to the montage. In a non-linear perspective, Audissino (2022b) also mentions the rise of a third thing when exemplifying that the juxtaposition of threatening music over a smiling face results in a creepy person. He says that “[t]he ‘creepiness’ configuration is neither in the image (the face is smiling) nor in the music (the music is threatening), but it appears as the product of the fusion of the two elements” (2022b, p. 99). If we continue to think about this juxtaposing concept in linear terms, as meant by Eisenstein, this third thing essentially means that everything becomes interdependent even if what the audience sees, pragmatically, is a *chain of individual shots*. We understand the whole by how the shots

are put together and not necessarily by their individual portions; we cannot, however, separate one from the other when watching them.

With that in mind, let us look at the watch gag from *Top Secret!*. We first see Nick Rivers, Chocolate Mousse, and Déjà Vu in a wider shot – they need to rescue Dr. Flammond from prison and are now stealthily walking around its premise (I). Then, in a close-up, Chocolate Mousse turns to Déjà Vu and asks him how long for their friends to cut the power and turn off the electric fence (II). In a similar close-up shot, Déjà Vu looks down and we can see him slightly raising his arm, as if looking at his wrist (III). The following shot is a very close detail of a Rolex watch occupying the entire frame (IV). The film then cuts back to a wider shot and we see that Déjà Vu has a giant, ridiculous-looking watch (a clock, essentially) attached to his wrist (V).

Figure 13 - The watch gag



Source: Author's compilation from *Top Secret!* (1984)

Up to shot number IV, everything occurs in a way that is expected within a narrative sense – Déjà Vu looks down at his watch and the audience feels like they are seeing what he sees. The context makes us assume that Déjà Vu is looking down at his watch. The full-blown image of the watch is not incongruous to the audience because it follows a narrative *sense* – the shot seems to show not an exaggeratedly big clock, but a close-up of Déjà Vu's point of view. The last shot, however, reveals that it was not a normal-sized watch but indeed an exaggeratedly big one. Up until this last shot, the context that was created left no room to assume that the close-up of the watch could hold any ambiguity. The disambiguation revealed not only the

“true” size of the watch but that a seemingly unambiguous context was in fact ambiguous. That being the case, if we were to identify a connector and a disjuncter in this gag, they would be, respectively, the watch and the last shot. The formal decision of showing the watch in a close-up contributes to the deceiving context that the gag works on establishing from the start. As absurd as it may seem, the disambiguating shot proves that, as unambiguous a context may seem – especially within a craft work –, creativity may disrupt it. Employing the categorization proposed by this thesis, this is a decoupage-narrated gag with misdirected audience: both connector and disjuncter are presented and established through shot-to-shot relations; together they configure a context only to misdirect the audience and reveal its humorous alternative.

On a perceptual and representative level, the gag plays with the notion of a big close-up, a detail, not only *appearing* gigantic on screen (despite the audience knowing its proportion is but a narrative device), but actually *being* gigantic, disrupting an apparently natural progression through absurdity and, therefore, creating humor. A very important quality of this gag is that it makes it easy to visualize one of the most telling characteristics of ZAZ – the visibility of the filmmaking craft itself. Eisenstein’s arguments on the process of juxtaposition and the creation of sense are very successfully highlighted – the disruption of the “third thing”, which is the sum of all things, brings attention to the fact that shots are often individual but not independent.

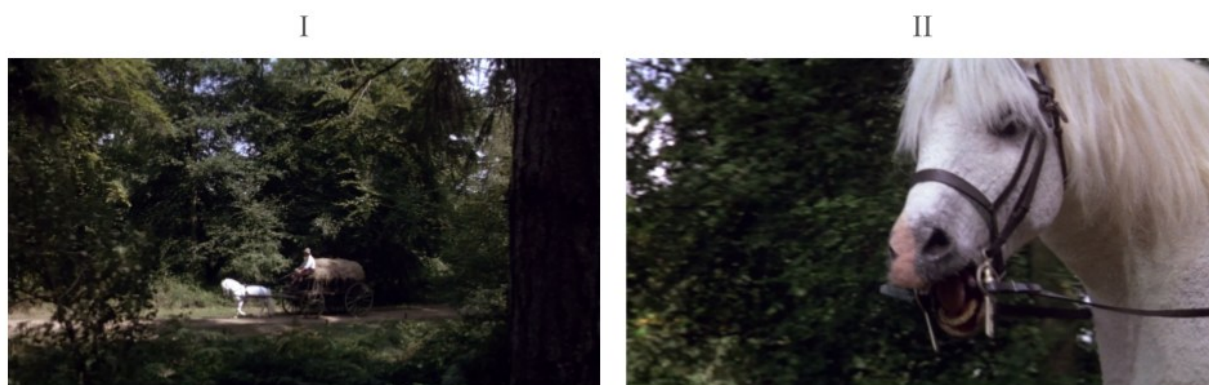
Eisenstein, according to Mackendrick, “held that each shot in itself was without much meaning until it had been organised into a pattern of editing. Thus the whole is not just greater than the sum of the parts but something different” (2004, p. 204). By disrupting a natural understanding of shot-to-shot relations as the means to create a whole, the gag points out that a shot of a watch that occupies the entire frame may in fact not only be contextualized within a narrative string of shots but also independently perceived as a very big watch. Mel Brooks also enjoyed making filmmaking visible but by means of bringing attention to the film production itself, revealing crew members and the filmmaking business – i.e. the ending of *Blazing Saddles* (1974) when the whole movie, a western, breaks out from the studio lot and invades other productions; Lord Helmet from *Spaceballs* (1987) mistakenly hitting a crew member with his lightsaber. ZAZ, however, usually does it by deconstructing the processes of filmmaking craft rather than the act of film production. The watch gag, for instance, brings attention to the fact that films are a construct and that cinematic conventions provoke essentially an illusion of naturality – the audience is constantly assuming things that are not necessarily there but that are indicated by the film. As an organized chain of shots, the watch gag’s disjunction makes the

chain more visible. As a result, the amusement of seeing *how* our assumptions were played sets in.

THE HORSE GAG

Another perfectly deceptive gag can be found in a point of the movie in which Nick and Hillary are going to meet the French resistance. The gag is composed of as little as two shots: the first is a wide shot that shows, in a distance, a coming wagon filled with hay, pulled by a horse, and conducted by what the audience can identify as a bearded man (I). We hear some distant singing in German, which suggests the coachman is singing while driving. The next shot is a close-up of the horse, revealing that in fact it is the horse, and not the coachman, doing the singing (II).

Figure 14 - The horse gag



Source: Author's compilation from *Top Secret!* (1984)

Of course, the conclusion that a horse was singing in German is far from being among most people's possible descriptions of what they were seeing in the first shot. Again, as in the watch gag, absurdity is present at the disruption of the audience's assumptions and understanding of continuity. Once again – although in a less pronounced, more natural way – film form becomes evident. This gag, however, can be very interestingly compared to verbal jokes, given its mechanisms and a very simple construction. As usual, in this gag humor is partially raised from a reinterpretation of contexts. On a general condition of verbal jokes, and not far from all we have seen so far, Noël Carroll writes that

“[v]erbal jokes generally culminate in a punchline that at first glance is incongruous by virtue of its appearing to be nonsense. Once the punchline is delivered, however, the audience has to give it an unexpected, although latently predictable or retrospectively comprehensible, interpretation that makes sense out of the incongruity. Succeeding in this, the audience is amused and the result is standardly laughter” (1991, p. 27).

Carroll seems to agree with the common understanding that jokes are composed of two parts (Attardo, 2024; Raskin, 1985). On puns, Attardo says that “[p]uns involve the presence of (minimally) two senses, but need not involve two ‘words’, the two senses can come about via the interpretation of any string and can come about as a result of syntactic, as well as morphological, ambiguity” (2008, p. 105). That being the case, let us assume that this gag has, accordingly, two parts – the wide shot (showing the wagon, the man, and the horse) and the close-up (showing just the horse). A similar structure can be identified in the following joke by Rodney Dangerfield, famous comedian known for his fast delivery of short jokes and a self-deprecating persona:

“Things are going real good to me – I just finished my first book!
Now I’m gonna read another one” (Dangerfield, 1982).

Of course, when he talks about finishing his first book – him, a popular comedian, public person, and a man over 50 years of age – we assume he is talking about *writing* a book. The disambiguation, however, reveals that he was talking about *reading* a book. Looking back at the sentence, having the knowledge of what he is actually referring to – even though a deception is intended through structure and choice of words –, there is nothing semantically absurd: he just finished (reading) his first book and he is about to read another one. The joke is not on the fact that Rodney has never read a book before, but on our assumption that the first sense meant something other than what we were led to assume by the writer of the joke. We are caught on our own process of understanding and making sense of sentences and chains of information; we are effectively surprised by form.

The horse gag in *Top Secret!* occurs similarly. The two shots (two moments, two senses, whatever we might choose to call it) are respectively the wide shot (I) and the close-up (II). In retrospective evaluation, if Rodney’s first part tells us (after being disambiguated) that he just finished reading his first book, the gag’s disambiguated first part shows us a horse singing in a wide shot. Again, after disambiguation, there is no contradictory information between the first and the second part – in both the horse is singing, as absurd as it might be. Creating the joke, then, lies not necessarily on *what* is happening but on *how* the first sense is presented in a way that misguides the audience – the choice and organization of words in Rodney’s joke (the omission of the word *reading* and the very beginning emphasizing that “things are going great for me”) and the choice and organization of cinematic “words” and artifices in the gag (the composition; the use of a wide shot unspecifying the origin of the singing paired with the

deduction that it comes from the only visible human figure; the sound possessing the quality of diegetic instead of non-diegetic music, *a cappella*, hence belonging to a source within the shot).

On this subject, Attardo writes the following while going through A.J. Greimas' (1966) analysis of jokes: "1) jokes are composed of two 'parts'; and 2) jokes contain an "opposition" or a 'variation' [...] of an isotopy, and at the same time a 'camouflage' [...] of the opposition, performed by the connecting term." (Attardo, 2024, p. 185-186). The "connecting term", of course, is what Attardo (2024) later calls connector. This function is very well illustrated in Greimas' example (a simple joke using the double meaning of the word *toilettes* in French – either *dresses* or *lavatories* – and that is meant as one by one character and understood as the other by the other), but it is not as easily delivered in our examples – none are double-meaning single words. In the gag, it is curiously a sound connector: the singing; and in Rodney's joke it is *to finish a book*, which is an ambiguous term that could mean either *to finish writing* or *to finish reading* a book. In both cases, the audience is misdirected.

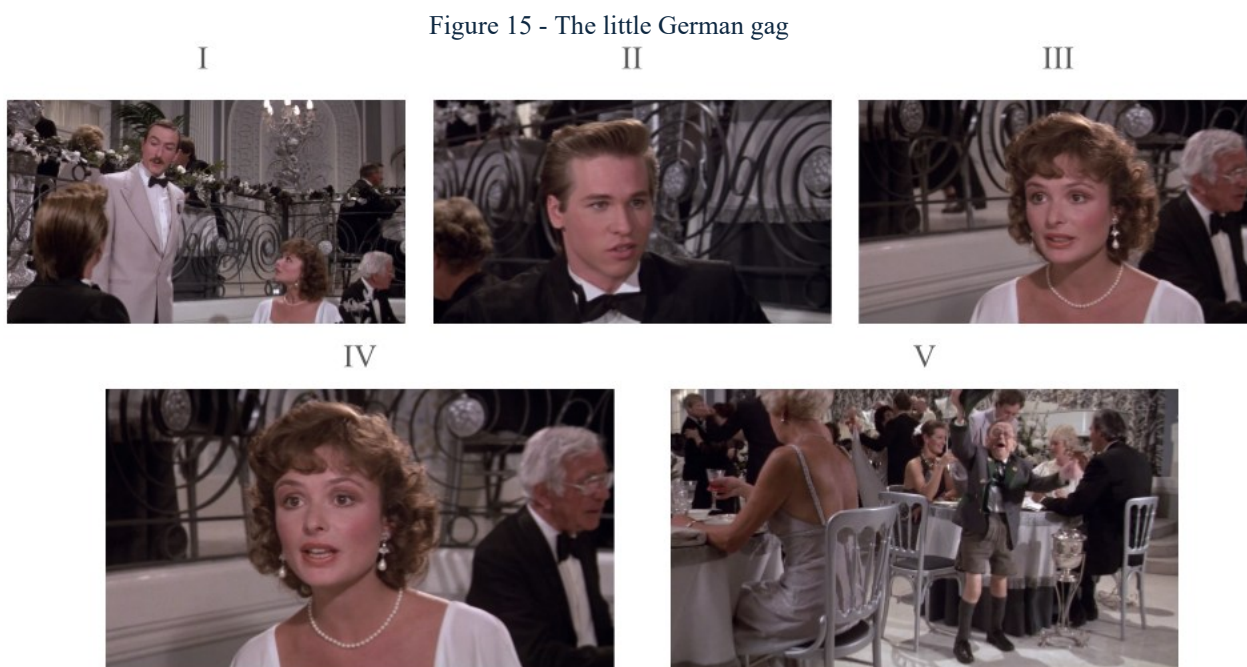
This misdirection performed by the artist is somewhat tackled by Mackendrick when he talks about the narrative distinction of a cut that produces suspense and another that produces shock: "If suspense is aimed for, the spectator must first be shown what to wait for. If a shock is intended, the pre-warning must be, so to speak, negative: the spectator must be deliberately led away from the significant event before it can come to him as a surprise" (2004, p. 254). In our examples, the disambiguation is always a shock and it is built as one, meaning the narrative is built in a way that leads us *away* from something we might assume. Interestingly, it does show us something to wait for – what Mackendrick defines as the mechanics for suspense and not for shock – but it is *not* what we might get. In a traditional suspenseful narrative, what the spectator is set to expect can only (usually) either happen or not. In the comedic design of this logic, a shock can still exist within the realm of absurd possibilities and *anything* can happen – the mechanics of suspense and shock can, therefore, co-exist.

Finally, applying the categorization developed by this thesis, the horse gag is a decoupage-narrated gag with misdirected audience. I must admit, however, the struggle in identifying whether the supporting narrator is the character or the "camera". On one hand, the singing (the connector) is being uttered by a fictional creature; therefore, a character. On the other, it is a sound connector, therefore it is encompassed in what I describe in chapter 4.2.2 as "the camera". The problem is that, if any character-produced sound (singing, yelling, or dialogue) is a sound encompassed in "the camera", then the character-narrator should not exist, as it would always ultimately be the camera. However, words communicate beyond its

condition as sound. So far, every example of characters as supporting narrators features ambiguous *words* that will be disambiguated by the disjunctive – the character provides information that is more meaningful than simply sound; and for sound to be considered the connector, it must communicate ambiguously *in itself*. That, in fact, is the case with the horse gag – words do not act as the connector; sound itself does. On this condition, I believe I can disregard the character as a supporting narrator because it does not add any ambiguous information *within* the singing; that is, no word is uttered in order to be disambiguated. The ambiguous element is the *source* of singing.

THE LITTLE GERMAN GAG

A particularly interesting gag, in terms of analyses, happens during the first conversation between Nick and Hillary in a German restaurant. They sit down and the waiter approaches them in German (a gibberish kind of German with non-sensical words and ridiculous sentences) (I). Nick looks confused and says “I’m sorry, I really don’t know any German” (II). Hillary then says “That’s alright. I know a little German (III); he’s sitting over there” (IV). She looks off screen and we see a reverse shot of a little German man standing up and greeting her from afar (V).



Source: Author’s compilation from *Top Secret!* (1984)

Let us analyze this joke by applying again some of what we have already seen: it is easy to find the connecting term here. According to Attardo (2024) (in this portion of his text, already calling it a “connector”), “[a] connector is any segment of text that can be given two distinct

readings” (2024, p. 236). Therefore, the connector is “little German” as it can both mean *a little bit of the German language* or *a little German person*. Nothing very out of the ordinary happens here in terms of joke structure and wordplay, but the way it is built around strictly cinematographic artifices and out of the need of a conversation between moving image and words makes it, as we have seen in other gags, particularly interesting.

Here we get a visual punchline to a verbal set-up – the “little German” appears and becomes a materialized punchline. Since Hillary only says “he’s sitting over there” – establishing that she is talking about a person and not a language but not concluding the punchline –, the gag does not seem to fully work unless we get to see the little German character sitting “over there”. As in the similar “hunchback gag” seen in the *Police Squad!* analyses, the verbal information, although halfway to disambiguation, is still somewhat confusing and non-conclusive. It would be a fully verbalized joke (and free of the need of a visual aid) if Hillary would add the existence of, specifically, a German man of small proportions in her speech. It is fair, for the sake of coming arguments, that we try to imagine what a fully verbal joke could look like; and perhaps it could be something like this: “That’s alright, I know a little German; he’s about 4 feet tall!”. This information would then be undeniably a full punchline, making it unnecessary that she points to the character sitting “over there”.

This verbal version of the joke, however, is not what we are dealing with. The actual gag presents us with further complications. To add some *color* to the joke, ZAZ makes the German character a German stereotype, wearing traditional German garments. Although this may not seem structurally relevant to the joke, it does not only add to it but, in a visual setting, becomes *necessary*. Had the joke been performed fully verbal, as we have imagined it, no German characterization would be necessary to the character – the information that he is German and small is already there in the set-up and any image of a German man can be easily formed in the audience’s mind without hindering their perception that they are seeing a man of German nationality. However, if the punchline is visual, it is necessary that the German man is clearly not only short but visually identifiable as German (and, of course, the sillier the better). In this case, the image cannot and will not be formed in the audience’s mind, as the film is already providing it. A short man in common dinner attire would perhaps be too unspecific and not enough for the gag to fully function – a short man who is visibly German leaves no room for wondering and all space left can be filled with laughter. This particular information could also be translated to a fully verbal version by adding, let us say, a typically (almost stereotypical) German name – something like: “That’s alright, I know a little German; his name

is Fritz and he's about 4 feet tall". It becomes, in this version of the joke, a more dispensable information even if it helps the certainty of the information and adds something to the humor of it.

Clearly, the visual narration and the use of cinematic artifices and language are crucial for the successful delivery of this unsuspectingly well-layered gag. When Hillary says, "*he's sitting over there*", the joke is already being split in two parts because the audience learns that the connector "little German" is a reference to a man and not a language, thus materializing in the audience's mind the possibility and existence of both meanings. However, the punchline is only concluded and fully delivered by the sight of a short German man in German garments.

As we have seen, the disjunctive is a "part of the sentence which redirects the interpretation of the connector" (Attardo, 2024, p. 237). This begs the question of what element in this gag is in fact the disjunctive – "*he's sitting over there*" or the shot of the little German standing up and greeting her? As we have seen, Hillary's speech alone seems to be an incomplete punchline; it *needs* the visual confirmation since films are a visual medium and the sentence points us to an "over there". Even though the pronoun "*he*" effectively *disjuncts* the sentence and makes us reinterpret the connecting term, it is only fully functional when combined with the visual aid of that shot. Attardo (2024) points that, even if there were to be some information after the disjunctive, "the linguistic material occurring after the punch line could be ellipsed and/or eliminated altogether without ruining the integrity of the joke"³⁵ (Ibid., p. 241). Therefore, because the material (the little German man) that follows the verbal disjunction ("*he*") is not in any way dispensable, the disjunctive can only be those two elements combined. The only way this could have been a full verbally-functioning joke was if the disjunctive had verbalized the information provided in image – that of a short German man –, much like the one version we came up with for the sake of argument. The gag is decoupage-narrated with a misdirected audience. It cuts from the shot of Hillary to a shot of the German man standing up and greeting her with a wave of his hat, i.e. the punchline. As other wordplay-based gags analyzed before, this gag has the character as a supportive narrator – the information to be disambiguated is provided by Hillary.

When analyzing the purely verbal part of this gag, it is interesting to note that, despite "little German" being the connector, the punchline also forces two different interpretations of

³⁵ For the purposes of this research, let us consider as "linguistic materials" also visual information; after all, we are directly talking about film language as being parallel to actual language.

the verb “to know” – one meaning *to be acquainted with* and another meaning *to have knowledge of*. We are driven to reinterpret this verb just as much as “little German”, only not substantially enough to build a punchline but indispensably enough to build syntax, to make sense of a sentence. Attardo (2024) says that “[t]he passage from one sense to another is not the only function of the disjunctive/connector in a joke. They also serve the cognitively and psychologically important function of establishing a ‘resolution’ of the incongruity triggered by the disjunctive” (2024, p. 237). If the effect of the joke relies on successfully reinterpreting contexts, that new context must make some syntactic sense, even if it illustrates a completely absurd situation. This reinterpretation, of course, is only successful through disambiguation.

The process of disambiguation happens in a very particular way in this gag and many others from ZAZ. As we have seen, disambiguation is a joke mechanism (or simply, in the natural world and in casual speech, a phenomenon) that takes place when words become clear and lose their natural ambiguity, usually revealing the context to be different from what we first assumed or even changing and reinterpreting (often misunderstanding) the context that was first established. Attardo (2024) says that “it may be safely assumed that ambiguity (that is underspecification) in language is the norm in general, rather than the exception” (Ibid., p. 233) and that “practically every lexical item of the general nonrestricted vocabulary [...] is ambiguous” (Ibid., p. 232). He points out that, “[f]or example, the lexeme ‘point’ in English has, according to Webster, 17 different meanings” (*Ibidem*). The lexemes “know”, “little”, and “German”, for instance, neither have less than 3 meanings. If the ambiguity of words and their disambiguation in speech are not particularly humoristic phenomena in themselves, the non-casual, artistic use of it is often filled with comic intention.

Context in real life is usually not crafted, designed or conceived by rational impetus; it rather appears spontaneously. In narratives such as dramatic stories and jokes it is always intentional or at least agreed upon (even if it happens accidentally in improvisation there is still a conscious choice to keep it). ZAZ plays around with it with very little regard for the laws of reason and sometimes even the laws of physics. Even – and especially – when things are clear and nothing seems to be left disambiguated, they show us that, against all odds (although with ZAZ nothing really feels like an impossibility), we might have been assuming the wrong thing this whole time. Disambiguation is defined by Attardo (2024) as what happens when “[c]ontext (both linguistic and situational) reduces the level of ambiguity of an utterance to zero (or rather to levels pragmatically acceptable for the purposes of communication)” (2024, p. 233). When Hillary says to Nick Rivers that it is “alright” and that she knows a little German, in a German

restaurant, after he failed to understand a waiter who spoke to him in German, common sense would tell us that ambiguity has been reduced to a level of zero. Absurdity comes in and the laws of imagination rule the scene; a new, completely goofy context has been made possible and we were willingly led to believe one thing when in fact another, way more ridiculous, was in place – no context, within the ZAZ world, is a *safe* context to assume disambiguation has already happened.

THE TUNNEL GAG

In another gag, absurdity again plays a role when Nick Rivers enters the cell of Dr. Flammond to rescue him. The doctor is under his bed removing small amounts of dirt with a spoon – he is digging a tunnel. Nick says they have come to rescue him, to what the doctor responds: “How ironic. Another day and I would have completed my tunnel”. Nick then hops over the bed to check the tunnel. He looks into the hole (I) and it cuts to what we interpret as his point of view – the image of a fully built, empty road tunnel (II). We go back to Nick who says: “Nice work!” (III).

Figure 16 - The tunnel gag



Source: Author's compilation of *Top Secret!* (1984)

In this example, laughter is aroused by our reinterpreting of the concept of a complete tunnel being considered *complete* not only in a sense of ending somewhere, but also in a sense of being adorned, paved, lighted, and fully functional for the purposes of car traffic – a city's mobility's sense of completion. Not *just* a tunnel, but a *road* tunnel³⁶. As absurd or unrealistic as it might be, it makes sense retrospectively and against our initial assumptions. The usual image we grant to the word *tunnel* being uttered in the context of a prison is one while that belonging to an urban context is another; here, however, they clash. *Tunnel* is the connector while the shot of the tunnel is the disjunctur. This is a decoupage-narrated gag (the shot of the tunnel is inserted and disambiguates the word) with a misdirected audience. It finds the

³⁶ Inside the tunnel we see a sign that reads: New Jersey – 1 mile. My lack of New York knowledge prevents me from being sure, but it looks like either the Holland Tunnel or the Lincoln Tunnel.

character as a supporting narrator – Dr. Flammond establishes the word *tunnel* in a context that seems, at first, unambiguous.

In this gag, space is an impossibility and it adds to the ridiculousness of it all. Again, it turns the process of filmmaking more visible to audiences. In fact, it helps the humorous effect – the illusion is unveiled by a comedian (*comedians*; in this case, ZAZ). As Walter Murch points out, films are all about discontinuity posing as continuity:

At any rate, the discovery early in this century that certain kinds of cutting “worked” led almost immediately to the discovery that films could be shot discontinuously, which was the cinematic equivalent of the discovery of flight: In a practical sense, films were no longer “earthbound” in time and space. If we could make films only by assembling all the elements simultaneously, as in the theater, the range of possible subjects would be comparatively narrow. Instead, Discontinuity is King: It is the central fact during the production phase of filmmaking, and almost all decisions are directly related to it in one way or another. (2001, p. 7)

The fact that the revealing of these rigs and structures of cinema carry the possibility to be comical is probably already explained by Bergson (1913) on more than one occasion – he says that the “deflection of life towards the mechanical is [...] the real cause of laughter” (1913, p. 34) and that it is generally funny when “something mechanical [is] encrusted upon the living” (Ibid., p.49). Bergson was not writing about cinema, but if we understand this *life* he is referring to as some kind of *smoothness* or naturality of film (again, an illusion; but, nevertheless, one that is interpreted or accepted as “real”), the connection can be made. When this apparent naturality is broken or fractured and the mechanics that make it work become apparent, comicality can arise. Bergson’s conclusion that “we laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing” (Ibid., p. 58) may also be applied – although more indecisively – to the disruption of film form if we consider that *person* can also mean some kind of *life* or *naturality*. The film as a unified thing (a “person”) can become funny when its mechanisms become apparent.

There is an argument to be made that validates such deconstructing efforts as real traits of artistry. The fact that there is a craft involved and that this craft must be fully aware of its instruments is what sets apart any “casual” communication from artistic constructions. As a recurrent aspect in ZAZ films, this state of hyper awareness of film form is not unlike a pun being defined as a “non-casual” speech as remembered by Attardo:

“in casual speech, the speakers are not aware of the fact that, for example, the word ‘bus’ is composed of the three phonemes /b/, /ʌ/, and /s/, in that order. In this mode of speech, speakers are only aware of the phonemic string’s meaning, namely that of a vehicle which can carry several passengers” (2024, p. 258).

He then says that “[t]here are several types of non-casual speech, for instance artistic usages of language, the most notable being poetry” (*Ibidem*). If when crafting a text, poetry, or joke, one is considerate of the many qualities of its words (phonology, homonyms, homophones, creative reinterpretations, and so on), filmmaking should not be any different. When ZAZ plays around with film grammar – whilst fully aware of it – by presenting us with an impossible point of view shot of a New York road tunnel within a prison somewhere in Germany, they are highlighting the non-casual character of filmmaking. Films are crafted and no film is “casual”, but when it is made obvious through comic intrusion it gets us with our guards down. Mackendrick (2004) again understands all this – and in line to what we were seeing about smoothness, naturality, and the fact that it is mostly an illusion that can be easily broken when its awareness is established by comedy – when he says that “[t]he phrase ‘a smooth cut’ is an obvious contradiction in terms. All cuts are, to a greater or lesser degree, a potential disorientation for the audience” (2004, p. 251). He is in line with what we were seeing about smoothness, naturality, and with the fact that these are all mostly illusions that can be easily broken when comedy intrudes and establishes an awareness of form.

I appreciate that Bergson (1913) makes the clarification that when he talks about reality, “true” reality is not really the point, but that an *appearance* of reality would be enough for the mechanical to oppose and create humor. Movies and many other storytelling media are non-casual but pose an illusion of being casual – the appearance of reality versus “true” reality. Because of that, perhaps, the following sentence applies consistently and directly to films even if not initially intended – “[t]he irreversibility of the order of phenomena, the perfect individuality of a perfectly self-contained series: such, then, are the outward characteristics – whether real or apparent is of little moment – which distinguish the living from the merely mechanical” (Bergson, 1913, p. 89). Therefore, to *appear* real (the condition of naturality in art) is real enough for comical mechanical opposition.

This “irreversibility of the order of phenomena” mentioned by Bergson is precisely one of the targets of ZAZ’s films. A break from the natural order, a play on our assumptions, the introduction of absurdity and twists and turns, the constant highlight of film form, and the visibility of the film medium – these are all put to effect through comic intrusion. This break is central for our understanding of the irradiation of pun and joke structure on gag structure and film form. Comics are often rascals, *enfants terribles*, and disrupters of the norm who have a take-no-prisoners attitude to their deeds – unrestrained and advocating for freedom even in its

most derailed variations. This condition characterizes part of the ZAZ style, which – as we could see – undoubtedly lies heavily on film form and its understanding.

6 FINAL REMARKS

“Let ‘er rip”

The tombstone of Leslie Nielsen, serious actor, former “closeted comedian”, and proud owner of a well-travelled fart machine.

What this thesis has attempted, first and foremost – its main motivation –, was to discuss the work of ZAZ, its peculiarities, their style and their humor, in an academic level that could provide a lengthy consideration of their craft and their uniqueness within film comedy. The desired approach was that of recognizing in their style a kinship to joke-telling and mechanics of wordplay reflecting in notions of craft and film form. As the title indicates, the idea was to elaborate and identify how, through their cinematic gags, ZAZ may have comprehensively written jokes in film form. The goal was not to validate them as artists (at least not in the most self-important interpretation of the word) but simply to acknowledge their authenticity within film comedy as given through a talented approach to film form employed for humorous effects. As an interdisciplinary study, it turned to the academic fields of humor (especially humor linguistics) and film studies. Additionally, it took to great consideration the knowledge of craft from comedy writers and filmmakers. The resulting investigation elaborated on identifiable aspects and mechanisms within ZAZ gags and proposed a way to categorize them, which was demonstrated through gag analyses that are present throughout the thesis and concentrated on the last chapter. This categorization does not, by any means, aim at any definitiveness – it simply provides a working, systemized template onto which hopefully other reflections may be applied and other researchers may choose to challenge.

As one can probably gather from the title of this chapter, this is not a conclusion, but simply a final remark. My work here is done – my hypothesis has been raised, my problems have been posed, my solutions have been proposed, my doubts have been put forward, and my investigation has been performed. However, it concludes nothing but this text. In fact, the work is *not* done – only the efforts of this particular thesis. As long as there is laughter there is work to be done; and this is a fool’s trade, to investigate humor. No work on humor can ever be exhaustive or conclusive. And it is not that it is a *tendency* in humor studies to be inconclusive; it seems to me, from where I stand – looking up to other studies –, that it is a *condition*.

On the comparative approach of this study, one question could be asked and I would like to try to answer it in these final remarks. Vandaele (2010), while criticizing Wright’s (2005)

proposed mechanisms for humor and narrative and deeming them as far too generalized (applying basically to all forms of communication and more), raises this important question: “since they [forms of communication] are so obviously different, why should we believe that their common mechanism is a crucial aspect of their definition?” (2010, p. 730). Indeed, if jokes and films are so clearly different things, why should any eventual mechanical similarity define them? The question is a flagrant observation, and I agree with its point. When asking myself the same question, I should say this: their common mechanism is *not* a crucial aspect of their *definition*. Films are films and, even though cinema carries a history of influences affecting and shaping its innermost qualities – theater, photography, music, literature –, they work in their own particular way, with their own intricacies and possibilities allowed by their own specific and intertwined characteristics. Films cannot be jokes and jokes cannot be films; each one will require specific analyses. That much seems evident. The point of identifying similar mechanisms in jokes and films is another – it is an attempt to better understand how funny occurrences can be crafted onto film form. Do cinematic gags have similar mechanisms as jokes while employing specific artifices of cinema? What I argue here is that yes, they do. I have attempted to show different ways in which ZAZ may have been able of bringing funny occurrences onto film form through the employment of different cinematic artifices such as staging, decoupage, camera movements, background action, dialogue, and so on. The point that was made here is not that films and jokes are somehow defined by each other, but that they *may* somehow converse.

Far from any pretention of being anything but a stepping stone for formal and structural studies on film comedy and ZAZ, I sincerely hope that (if parts of this work ever find any pair of eyes other than mine, my advisor’s, and the examiners’) this work can resonate with people who are constantly in awe with humor, who find themselves not knowing precisely how to make sense of an intuitive reaction (or even if any sense has to be made), who question if any seriousness should be devoted to humor while constantly urged – by the unsolvable mysteries of comedy – to go for the impossible and surely fall flat on their faces, and, of course, those who may actually think it would be kind of funny if, after all that, they should indeed fall flat on their faces.

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POSTFACE

[Extracted from the past thoughts of the author as a unicellular amoeba]:

... ..

...

..... bleep bloop. plok!

.... !

.. wait, what the

Well, Stubb, wise Stubb – that's my title – well, Stubb, what of it, Stubb? Here's a carcase. I know not all that may be coming, but be it what it will, I'll go to it laughing.

Stubb, *Moby Dick*, chapter 39