

LIMITS AND LAUGHTER

The Comedy of Lenny Bruce and Andy Kaufman

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Introduction

The stunning self-characterizations of both Lenny Bruce (1926-1966) and Andy Kaufman (1949-1984) show their ambivalence towards stand-up comedy in general and towards their own performances in particular. Bruce is frequently quoted as having said “I’m not a comedian, I’m Lenny Bruce”¹, and Kaufman insisted “I am not a comic, I have never told a joke in my life”² and “I’m not into comedy. I think comedy is the most unfunny thing there is.”³ Understandably, there is much debate as to whether Bruce should be considered a critic rather than a comedian, and whether Kaufman should be considered a comedian at all.⁴ In this study, based upon the implicit understanding that a comedian’s critical viewpoint depends upon the use of specific comical means, it will be proven that it is *essential* to evaluate both Bruce and Kaufman as *comedians*. Bruce and Kaufman’s main comical means, which they used to convey criticism, have to be identified first. Then, the comedians’ contemporary reception can be understood. Furthermore, the identification of comical means employed to convey criticism reveals that the work of the comedians in question remains relevant today and for decades to come. Finally, in acknowledgment of Lenny Bruce and Andy Kaufman’s achievements, they are recognized as pioneers of stand-up comedy within postmodern society.

Both comedians, who put the cat among the pigeons in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s (Bruce) and in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s (Kaufman), undermined established conventions of comedy with their new and threatening material. Both emerged from the security of underground clubs and used the public stage or the media to reach a mass audience. Bruce’s performances were radically critical and focused on social injustice, racism, and political and religious hypocrisy. He chose so-called taboo-topics as his central themes and his public use of vulgar language landed him in jail several times throughout his career. Kaufman’s entirely different material – it was neither clearly political nor obviously socio-critical – hardly fit any categorization. The

¹ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover: *The Trials of Lenny Bruce. The Fall and Rise of an American Icon*. Naperville: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2002, 23.

² *Andy Kaufman. The Midnight Special*. Sony Music Entertainment, 2000 [1981], Interview with Andy Kaufman.

³ S. Allen: *Funny People*. New York: Stein And Day, 1984, 161.

⁴ Steve Allen in the above book states that “[...] the standard concept of funny is not always relevant to Andy’s performances” (164). Even the most recent study on Kaufman by Florian Keller begins with the statement “this is not a study about how Andy Kaufman may have transcended, or undermined, the rhetoric of comedy.” F. Keller: *Andy Kaufman. Wrestling with the American Dream*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005, preface vii.

Studies on Lenny Bruce will be introduced and briefly summarized in the course of this introduction.

appearance of several different characters was typical of his act: make-believe losers like *Foreign Man*, Tony Clifton, an obnoxious and greasy lounge singer who insulted his audiences, and a misogynist wrestler.

Although obviously using entirely different approaches, both comedians subverted established conventions of the entertainment scene to a great extent and shocked American audiences to the point of disgust. The analogy pointed out by Gerald Nachman further clarifies the kinship between these seemingly so different comedians: Bruce and Kaufman share the willingness to test the audiences' patience and their moral and psychological endurance by pondering the questions "How long will they (or I) go? Will they jump through any hoop for me? What can I do that will totally alienate them?"⁵ However, it is important to understand that both comedians put their audiences to the test in order to convey social criticism.

Their early and 'tragic' deaths initiated posthumous careers which culminated in the labeling 'icons of popular culture'. The posthumous recognition and admiration of the two entertainers, who were denied performance (Bruce) or voted off television shows (Kaufman) during their lifetimes, led to popular film biographies, namely Bob Fosse's *Lenny* (1974) and Milos Forman's *Man on the Moon* (1999).⁶ One could say that the biopics formed an important – if not the most important and enduring – part of their reception. This study will show that both films contributed to the manipulated perception of the comedians. It is a simulacrum which illustrates the somewhat hypocritical posthumous esteem so entirely contrary to the problematic reception during their lifetime.⁷

Instead of trying to find new definitions for a kind of comedy which deviates from standardized material and thus attempting to join the debate on whether Bruce and Kaufman were comedians at all, this study starts with an introduction to theories of humor. The premise of this study is that a comedian's device is humor and its application, following Horace's principle of teaching through enjoyment.⁸ The comedy

⁵ G. Nachman: *Seriously Funny. The Rebel Comedians of the 1950's and 1960's*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2003, 410.

⁶ Instead of 'film-biographies', the term 'biographical picture', or 'biopic', will be used throughout this study.

⁷ The phenomenon of 'posthumous esteem' might be a typically American attempt to ideologically acculturate former 'rebels'. It is what Sacvan Bercovitch calls the 'rhetoric of dissent'. He remarks: "Ideology represses alternative or oppositional forms when these arise. But it seeks first of all to preempt them by actively *encouraging* the contrast between utopia and the status quo." S. Bercovitch: *The Rites of Assent. Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America*. New York/London: Routledge, 1993, 366. Or elsewhere he describes "radicalism as an affirmation of cultural values", S. Bercovitch: 367.

⁸ "quamquam ridentem dicere verum quid vetat? Ut pueris olim dant crustula blandi doctores, elementa velint ut discere prima –" (Horace, *Satires*, I, 1, 24-26) ["And yet what is to prevent one from telling

of Bruce and Kaufman will be analyzed with the objective of showing the lasting value of their material by revealing their strategic means to communicate the criticism they are esteemed for by those critics who tend to see them only as satirists.

This study is divided into three major parts: part A provides the theoretical basis for analysis, part B will focus on Lenny Bruce and part C will center on Andy Kaufman. Part A will introduce, explain, and exemplify the main theories of humor. No historical account of the development of different philosophical approaches to theories of humor is intended, but major approaches to the comical – superiority theories, relief theories, and incongruity theories – are introduced. Due to their general acknowledgement as somewhat timeless approaches, Henri Bergson's 1900 essay *Le rire (Laughter)* and Sigmund Freud's 1908 study *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten (Jokes and their relation to the unconscious)* will serve as starting points for the analysis of Bruce's and Kaufman's comical means. Particularly with regard to the massive popular reception of Freud's theories in the USA, his theory can be applied to American stand-up comedy. Both approaches focus on the specific mechanisms set in motion to evoke laughter and thus prove applicable in my attempt to evaluate Bruce and Kaufman's comical means used to convey criticism. Other major approaches to the comical in general are incorporated into part A of this study in order to emphasize that many of Bergson's and Freud's ideas are acknowledged or are modified in these theories. The new attempt to trace and reveal the comedians' comical means will show that with Bruce and Kaufman's use of somewhat timeless theories the power to convey criticism is preserved. As a result, their material is of lasting interest even for today's viewers, as the analyses of the biopics will show.

In Part B of this study, I will focus on Lenny Bruce's strategies of humor, on the contemporary reception of his comedy, and on the posthumous reception represented by the biopic *Lenny*.⁹ A short survey of the existing studies on Lenny Bruce proves helpful at this point to show that most of these focus on his position as a radical critic rather than as a stand-up comedian in the original sense of the word. To Will Kaufman, Bruce was the "healer with the avowed mission of cutting away the cancer of hypocrisy in a sick society [...] for in the end he was – as he himself declared 'not a comedian.'"¹⁰ Sanford Pinsker introduces Bruce as the "prophet, as guru, as rabbi, as satirist, as stand-

the truth as he laughs, even as teachers sometimes give cookies to children to coax them into learning their ABC?"

⁹ The terms 'strategies of humor' and 'comical means' will be used as synonyms in this study.

¹⁰ W. Kaufman: *The comedian as confidence man. Studies in irony fatigue*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997, 71.

up comic, but, most of all, as martyr”¹¹, with the order of enumeration emphasizing how Bruce as the stand-up comedian almost seems to fall into oblivion.¹² Generally, most writers on Bruce do recognize that “[...] just how funny Bruce actually was has been fuzzed over by the mixture of sentiment, hype, and politics that turned him into a radical folk hero [...]”.¹³ But although most studies on Bruce seem to agree that most of his material was definitely funny his impact as a critic turning the conventions of what was allowed to be said in public upside down is clearly emphasized. Frank Kofsky sums up the general consensus on Bruce as follows: “he would synthesize the vocation of nightclub comedian with the point of view of a radical social critic”.¹⁴ Andrew Ross even describes Lenny Bruce’s career as having shifted “[...] from the low-culture status of the comic to the legitimate status of the public satirist [...]”.¹⁵

Neil Shaeffer is one of the few authors who focused on the comical means of Bruce instead of the satirical content of his performances only. In his book *The Art of Laughter*, he offers an interesting point stating that as “humor requires no other justification or defense than laughter”¹⁶ Bruce needed to find a self-definition other than ‘comedian’ to convey his criticism. The artificially attached label ‘satirist’ allowed him to do so, and, moreover, scholars writing posthumously about him were given an opportunity to recognize his material as significant art. As none of the above studies intends to question why attacks on sacred values and the status quo generate laughs at all and how this concept can carry a socio-critical message, Shaeffer’s approach at least offers an attempt to focus on Bruce’s strategic comical means. Offering his general approach to the comical in a chapter preceding the chapter on Lenny Bruce, he strictly argues according to his idea of the importance of the context of comedy.¹⁷ According to him, comedy induces

acceptance of others and ourselves through identification and empathy. The direction of satire is the opposite, towards rejection of others and ourselves. Both genres share the same content: human weaknesses. [...] Both dramatize the discrepancy between what is and what ought to be. But the satirist rejects what is, and the humorist accepts it. Bruce shows us how characteristically human it is for us to raise ideals we cannot meet, and to hate, or at least subvert those ideals. His comedy trains us to accept our faults, our humanness.¹⁸

¹¹ S. Pinsker: “Shpritzing the *Goyim*/Shocking the Jews”, in: S. Blacher Cohen: *Jewish Wry*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987, 89.

¹² Nick Gillespie in his 2003 review of Collins’ and Skover’s *The Trials Of Lenny Bruce* even chooses the revealing title “Lenny Bruce’s Real Legacy: He wasn’t funny, just important”. See <http://reason.com/0301/cr.ng.lenny.shtml>.

¹³ G. Nachman, 390.

¹⁴ F. Kofsky: *Lenny Bruce. The Comedian as Social Critic and Secular Moralist*. New York: Monad Press, 1974, 24.

¹⁵ A. Ross: *No Respect. Individuals and Popular Culture*. New York/ London: Routledge, 1989, 90.

¹⁶ N. Schaeffer: *The Art of Laughter*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981, 72.

¹⁷ This approach to the comic will be introduced in my chapter on theories of humor.

¹⁸ N. Schaeffer, 78.

Using several examples of Bruce's wide range of material, Schaeffer seeks to prove how the audience in the safety of the ludicrous context recognizes the humanity in, for instance, the priests in Bruce's 'Religions Inc.' performance, who worry about their financial interests rather than about religious questions. Especially concerning the field of religion, Schaeffer argues, people in the audience are relieved that they can turn their attention away from difficult questions about life, death, and morality. They happily laugh when they find out how their own human weakness equals that of religious leaders, whose humanity is revealed in Bruce's performance. This kind of relieved laughter is only made possible within the ludicrous context, as Schaeffer points out.¹⁹

John Limon, who analyzes Bruce's comedy in ways influenced by Kristeva and Lacan, argues that besides being an "attention-grabber"²⁰, Bruce's use of vulgarities (and he exemplifies this using Bruce's threat to 'piss on the audience') in fact shows how "the abject gets erected and mobilized in the place of the phallus."²¹ To him, Bruce appears "[...] as punishing father and naughty son in rapid oscillation."²² This tension between looking down onto the audience, lecturing them, and depending on their reaction ("[...] they make his jokes into jokes, or refuse to, by a reaction that is more final, less appealable, than a judgment"²³) symbolizes that "stand-up is the resurrection of your father as your child."²⁴

Both of these approaches to the comedy of Lenny Bruce comprise some useful ideas. Schaeffer's idea that by displaying human weaknesses the performer makes the audience realize their own weaknesses, and Limon's idea using psychoanalysis to understand why vulgar and threatening humor is funny can be found in my approach to the comedy of Bruce.

Following an introductory chapter on Bruce sketching the stages of his career (chapter 1 of part B), his strategies of humor will be analyzed in chapter 2 of part B. Taking original material available on Audio CDs as primary sources for analysis, it will be explained how Bruce seems to use psychological methods to have the audience experience a confrontation with suppressed aggressive or sexual urges.²⁵ His excessive use of vile and supposedly vulgar language is revealed as an instrument used to shake up

¹⁹ See N. Schaeffer, 75-80.

²⁰ J. Limon: *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*. Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 2000, 15.

²¹ J. Limon, 4.

²² J. Limon, 4.

²³ J. Limon, 27.

²⁴ J. Limon, 27.

²⁵ Bruce is said to have known Freudian psychoanalysis. However, I do not want to speculate whether Bruce *used* Freud's theory to cause laughter. In fact, my objective is to *apply* Freud's theory to Bruce's stand-up comedy.

complacent audiences and to provoke and increase attention and tension for what will follow. Bruce uses logical argumentation to question former norms and values, to reveal them as invalid and therefore enable a self-reflexive rethinking of previous moral and societal restrictions. I will show how Bruce achieved an act of catharsis on the part of the members of his audiences – an initially cruel confrontation with internalized restrictions followed by a true convincing and overcoming of the censorship through the stunning logic of Bruce’s argumentation and the final release of repressions by laughter. Performances covering a range of topics – sexuality, racism, and organized religion – will be analyzed in detail in order to clarify the application of Freud’s approach to the comedy of Lenny Bruce.

Chapter 3 of part B focuses on the contemporary reception of the comedian Lenny Bruce. The media’s reactions will be evaluated and the contemporary society and popular culture of the corresponding era will be characterized. Thus, it can be shown how Bruce’s humor was perceived but also in how far the public perception was shaped by the media. Whereas in his earlier performances Bruce’s significance was widely recognized, later on in his career the attention shifted only to his legal battles, as press coverage of the 1960’s vividly illustrates. After his death Bruce was converted into a cultural hero and his material was used for financial gain. This development is documented in detail, leading to the most impressive and long-lasting ‘piece of reception’ – the biopic *Lenny*.

Consequently, chapter 4 of part B offers an analysis of the biopic *Lenny*. Its division into a romantic and very emotional love story and a make-believe documentary will be analyzed in some detail. The love story is used as a frame to achieve an emotional attachment of the viewer and to distract the viewer’s attention from Bruce’s darker side (his drug addiction). As a consequence, a romanticized and whitewashed version of Lenny Bruce is presented. His weaknesses fall into oblivion because all guilt is blamed onto his stripper-wife Honey and he dies a somewhat surprising death from an overdose in the end. This manipulated depiction is analyzed in the context of Bob Fosse’s work, as well as in the context of the 1970’s film industry and popular culture in general in chapter 5 of part B. I will show that despite the developments of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, which made possible a less restricted version of a 1960’s topic, the reduced version of an important pioneer paving the way for his followers illustrates that still no real comprehension of Bruce’s message – the criticism of hypocrisy – was achieved.

Chapter 6 of part B emphasizes the legacy of Lenny Bruce. A comparison to today's censorship in popular culture will reveal that the film *Lenny*, despite its reduction and omission of ugly details, might be of relevance to today's viewers, because it reveals how highly topical Bruce's material still is. The biopic proves that the application of well-known strategies of humor noticeable in Bruce's comedy enables a preservation of his strategy of teaching through enjoyment. All attempts to recognize Bruce as the satirist only prevent an evaluation of his lasting relevance within different time contexts. In fact, the content of his performances was typically 1960's material – 'the bomb', Eisenhower, or Kennedy, for instance. By revealing how somewhat well-trying Freudian strategies of humor can be found in Bruce's material, it will be shown that although times have changed, his material is of lasting relevance. By evoking identical psychological reactions, he is still able to teach us the same lesson he taught original audiences. Even if his topics are not as urgently relevant today, the message Bruce conveys by provoking us to confront internalized restrictions remains useful and is easily applied to current topics.²⁶ Thus, the biopic serves as evidence that by having implemented strategies of humor with enduring applicability, Bruce's material turns out to be of lasting relevance.

Part C of this study introduces Andy Kaufman, whose comedy is impressively introduced by Steve Allen's statement "A comedian, quite simply, wants laughs. Andy demands more."²⁷ Allen's words seem like an echo of the debate on Bruce's comedy. Can Andy Kaufman's performances be called typical stand-up comedian humor? They certainly cannot. In the course of his turbulent career, Kaufman's material became less and less typical concerning established forms of stand-up comedy. Nevertheless, Kaufman started his career in typical stand-up venues and he was introduced as a stand-up comedian. He stood on a stage and delivered material in a surrounding in which humor was expected – in a ludicrous context, as Neil Schaeffer would call it. The mere fact that Kaufman refused to deliver standard material in an otherwise typical stand-up context, however, does not automatically mean that Kaufman is no comedian, as I will show.

Following a short introductory chapter on Kaufman (chapter 1 of part C) his strategies of humor are analyzed in chapter 2 of part C. Kaufman's performances set in those typical stand-up surroundings will be analyzed with regard to his specific strategies of humor. Kaufman's most famous '*Foreign Man* turns into Elvis Presley' performance

²⁶ The unfair treatment of homosexuals or discrimination against African Americans, however, never seems to lose relevance.

²⁷ S. Allen, 165.

shows how Kaufman willingly turned established standards of stand-up comedy upside down by satirically interpreting its rules in an over-conformist way. Thus, he ostensibly offered the audience the simple and shallow kind of entertainment concerned with ordinary daily problems that a 1980's audience demanded. His at first sight outlandish *Foreign Man* talked gibberish with confidence resembling an old-hand in show business. *Foreign Man*, who completely refrained from following conventions, managed to make the audiences feel insecure and out of place, thus reversing the rules of the game. Derision towards the strange comedian, actually expected to be felt by the people in the audience, was thus projected onto themselves. The shifting of derision could be described as a reversal of superiority theorists' approach to the comical – laughter deriving from a feeling of superiority in the face of someone else's failing. Kaufman's method to achieve this projection by offering audiences a moment of revelation (for instance the sudden transformation of *Foreign Man* into Elvis Presley) and thus making re-consideration and self-reflexive rethinking of previous misperceptions possible is put across in selected performances based on original material available on DVD. His apparently standard material – impressions and jokes about marriage and the traffic – ridiculed standardized rules of stand-up comedy. They were presented in a way that made people feel embarrassment and pity for the poor performer who in reality made fun of their own naïve demand for shallow entertainment. Instead of solely talking about marital problems or the like, as fellow comedians of that time did, Kaufman also performed childhood sing-alongs, talked with puppets and danced in order to intensify his attempt. In general, Kaufman's comedy incorporates many of Bergson's ideas of the mechanical encrusted on the living. Especially the *Mighty Mouse* performance in which Kaufman lip-synched only one crucial line of the theme song and remained silent and still for the rest of the time closely corresponds to this theory. Moreover, incongruity is found in almost every one of Kaufman's performances. Playing with the audiences' expectation of standard material and presenting the opposite, or offering what is demanded in an over-conformist way is typical of Kaufman's performances.

The media's reaction to Kaufman's performances illustrated in the daily press is discussed in chapter 3 of part C. The contemporary reception of Kaufman shows the audiences' desire to appreciate and love the unusual comedian and how this affection resulted in his crusade of escapes starting with the introduction of his alter ego Tony Clifton and ending with his complete escape into the world of wrestling. In the early stages, his series of transformations and the coexistence of different characters comprised moments of revelation. Thus, the audiences understood Kaufman's critical

message – a subversion of the naïve demand for shallow standard entertainment easy to understand and categorize, reflecting the ignorance of social and economical problems of that era. However, the final turning away from comedy represents a brilliant concept of criticism visible for later generations but one that was incomprehensible for contemporary audiences. In particular, Florian Keller’s interpretation of Kaufman as literally living the American Dream²⁸ might be applicable to Kaufman posthumously, but seems weak when considering contemporary audiences. Thus, in this study Kaufman’s humor and its effects are analyzed with regard to their immediate perception. As a consequence, his escapist stunts in the later part of his career are interpreted as a desire to escape categorization for his strategies of humor to remain operative. Every time audiences were on the verge of accepting his rules as newly established forms of comedy, Kaufman needed to destroy this perception in the most radical manner possible. The play with the audiences’ desire to comprehend the game by confusing them over and over again made sense in the beginning. However, the final escape into the world of wrestling was pointless for contemporary audiences. As a result, the target of Kaufman’s attacks, the media-dominated society, was stronger than Kaufman because they had the opportunity to vote him off shows (*Saturday Night Live*) and to finally withdraw the interest and attention so necessary for a comedian. Once he completely refused to deliver funny material and exaggerated his disputes with professional wrestler Jerry Lawler, his once brilliant ‘concept of criticism’ turned out to be annoying.

Chapter 4 of part C offers an analysis of the biopic *Man on the Moon*. The biopic, released in 1999, finally revealed that the wrestling dispute with Jerry Lawler was a well-planned hoax with Lawler as Kaufman’s accomplice from the very beginning. Enlarging the gap between the contemporary audiences and the viewers of the film, a distorted depiction of Kaufman is presented in the biopic. The final revelation the contemporary audiences would have needed to prevent their withdrawal of interest is communicated to the viewers of the film in an all-too-casual and obvious way. On the other hand, the large amount of backstage revelations that form part of the film destroys the subversive nature of Kaufman’s comedy contemporary audiences had to deal with. The filmmakers’ ambiguous wish to finally present all information available and to have the viewer experience Kaufman’s comedy at the same time is doomed to failure, because the one excludes the other. Each and every time Kaufman’s act is

²⁸ He understands the American Dream as representing the opportunity to re-create oneself in order to pursue happiness or until the final rise to fame and thus a status of immortality is achieved.

presented as confusing, mysterious and threatening as it was originally perceived, an offstage scene following immediately calms down the viewer and offers bite-sized pieces of explanation. Thus, the subversive potential of Kaufman's comedy is almost completely lost for the viewer of the film.

Chapter 5 of part C will show how *Man on the Moon* was perceived by audiences of the late 1990's and will re-position Kaufman as a pioneer of stand-up comedy, which will again be pointed out in chapter 6 of part C. In this chapter Kaufman's legacy as a pioneer of comedy is emphasized and it will be shown how the fallen star was turned into a posthumous icon – a process initiated by the release of the biopic. Instead of having risen to fame and thus having reached a status of immortality – corresponding to Keller's suggestion of Kaufman as the fundamentalist American Dreamer – Kaufman reached a dead-end (the escape into the world of wrestling). In other words, he was forced to remain there trapped in one of his personalities and in a way 'undead' instead of immortal.²⁹ Unlike Lenny Bruce, who rose to immortal fame immediately after his tragic death, Kaufman needed the biopic *Man on the Moon* as the catalyst necessary to finally be acknowledged as one of the pioneers of comedy. With the revelation concerning the wrestling, his last escape eventually makes sense and the somewhat 'undead' person is put to rest and can be resurrected as that revolutionary forerunner exploring new territory and opening doors for generations of new comedians.

After all, Lenny Bruce and Andy Kaufman are pioneers of stand-up comedy. Both comedians entered the mainstream and thus explored new territory by crossing invisible moral limits. By subverting established conventions of stand-up comedy they repeatedly exceeded limits. Interestingly, they used somewhat well-tried strategies to establish new standards of stand-up comedy. However, the recognition of their use of traditional comical means does not contradict their status as pioneers. On the contrary, the recognition of these means shows how, on the one hand, the comedians' criticism can be prolonged and, on the other hand, it proves the applicability of traditional theories to modern material. Both comedians used humor as their instrument to convey a critical message to a society avoiding the confrontation with obvious problems. The attempt to use language to galvanize apathetic audiences is present in both performers' programs. Whether it is Bruce's vulgar vocabulary or Kaufman's at first sight incomprehensible accents or unconventional actions, the method of creating tension can be observed in both performers' material. The emotional journey leading to a final rethinking of former misperceptions and a reconsideration of values is also clearly

²⁹ See F. Keller, 160-162. Keller's interpretation is discussed in a later chapter.

recognizable in the work of both comedians. Both performers were faced with rejection during their lifetime resulting in the decline of their careers. The coincidental analogy of their early and ‘tragic’ deaths following the decline of their careers appears like a foreshadowing of the posthumous esteem both performers share. Lenny Bruce is definitely the performer recognized for having sacrificed his life to the freedom of speech and thus as having paved the way for generations of performers.³⁰ The recognition of Kaufman as a pioneer remains comparably weak. Although after the release of the biopic *Man on the Moon*, scholars finally began to acknowledge Kaufman’s relevance as another pioneer of American stand-up comedy, this study will hopefully be able to show that Andy Kaufman’s humor – and in particular his comical means to convey criticism – is worth as much attention as that of Bruce. In addition, Bruce’s position as a stand-up comedian who used humor as his instrument to be the satirist scholars merely seem to see in him will finally be emphasized.

The evaluation of the biopics and the related analysis of the films’ reception will emphasize that despite their obvious weaknesses, the biopics prolong both comedians’ positions as pioneers of stand-up comedy. Their strategies of humor and, moreover, their critical messages prove to be enduring and are thus highly relevant for today’s society. Eventually, this study will show that it is worthwhile to understand a comedian’s strategies of humor in order to reveal the individual psychological effects set in motion by certain comical means. This enables an appreciation of the underlying criticism directed against the collective of a society. The revelation of the enduring nature of Bruce and Kaufman’s strategies of humor used to convey criticism of a media-dominated society will furthermore help to clarify the comedians’ position as important pioneers of stand-up comedy within the entertainment scene of post modernity.

³⁰ “[...] Lenny Bruce served as a pioneer of free comedic speech, opening doors for the current plethora of young performers [...]” See P. Krassner: “The man who said too much”, in *Los Angeles Times*, August 4, 1996.

“As a pioneer of the free expression that Americans can now take for granted, Bruce went boldly where no man had gone before [...]” See N. Gillespie.

A Theories of Humor

Why do we laugh at a stand-up comedian? Finding an answer to this question seems to be an easy task: we laugh because we are prepared to laugh; we expect and wish to laugh. People usually pay for their ticket to see a comedian perform in a nightclub or they choose a certain channel to see a comedian's performance on TV. The audience, whether it is a live-audience or viewers sitting in front of a TV screen, expects to be entertained by something intended to be funny. "[...] our laughter depends upon a ludicrous context which cues us to the nature of the experience we are about to enjoy and prepares us to receive it and react to it in a responsive manner."³¹

It might at first seem justified to attach less importance to 'naturally' funny situations of everyday life and to understand a comedian's act as an imitation of these.

After all, how many times each day do the materials of reality naturally arrange themselves in just the exact juxtaposition and with just the right timing of manner necessary to stimulate laughter? [...] Artful humor is an imitation of and an improvement upon natural laughter [...]³²

Linking artful humor to 'naturally' funny situations by using Bergson's idea of 'naturally' funny situations which appear like an intended act³³, Rainer Warning also points out that artful humor constitutes itself in 'intended acts' – actions which intentionally stage failure.³⁴

If we attempt to focus on the comic that is intentionally created just for the purpose of being funny only, i.e. the comical stories and jokes told by a comedian, we are forced to come to the conclusion that we are still confronted with the same difficult question: what makes a comical story or a joke work? Why do we find something funny and as a result burst out laughing? The desire to be entertained, the perfect surrounding (a nightclub) and circumstances (a cheerful mood) are not sufficient to guarantee that a comical effect or a joke works. Indeed, one has to return to the beginning: what is *the comic* and how does humor work and operate? A large number of studies on theories of the comic are available. As this study provides an attempt to understand the program of a stand-up comedian as building upon the successful implementation of comical means, one is in need of a theory providing the theoretical background to analyze these. Many

³¹ N. Schaeffer, 17.

³² N. Schaeffer, 6.

³³ Bergson's theory will be introduced in detail in the course of this chapter.

³⁴ "Komische Handlungen [...] sind, so lässt sich generell sagen, gelingende, zumindest als gelingend intendierte Handlungen, die ihrerseits scheiternde Handlungen zum Thema haben können." See R. Warning: "Vom Scheitern und vom Gelingen komischer Handlungen", in: W. Preisendanz/ R. Warning (eds.): *Das Komische* (Poetik und Hermeneutik VII) München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1976, 377.

theoretical approaches to the comic focus extensively on the distinction between the ludicrousness of ‘reality’ and the comical within the theatrical world of comedy and understand the latter as a sublimation of the former.³⁵ Comical conflicts between the ‘real world’ (i.e. everyday life) and the fictional world of comedy result in laughter because the comical action onstage displays the trivial things in life, which in the context of the everyday life often need to be excluded. The audience is thus enabled to enjoy pleasurable laughter from a certain distance.³⁶ The assumptions suitable for theatrical comedy can certainly not be directly applied to stand-up comedy. The program of a stand-up comedian consists of single bits and pieces not necessarily contributing to a complete artful piece of work with a resonating critical message. Single components create single comical effects. Sometimes there are links between the different parts and sometimes a whole stream of thoughts resembles a complete story. Nevertheless, the creation of a whole world parallel to ‘everyday life’ is not intended. However, the idea of displaying the trivial aspects of human existence to emphasize how the trivial is occasionally suppressed in everyday life is certainly recognizable in some stand-up comedians’ programs. A stunning example is Andy Kaufman’s stand-up comedy. Stand-up comedians depend on their comical means to be able to convey a critical message (after all, they have no partners onstage and no storyline as the protagonists in a theatrical comedy do). We need to refer to theories which reveal the psychological mechanisms set in motion by comical means. Thus, the three main theories concerning the comic will be introduced in the following, starting with Bergson’s famous essay *Le rire*, which focuses on *superiority* as the essential trigger for the comic. Many of Bergson’s ideas have been acknowledged, modified, and used as a basis for theories of the comic focusing on theatrical comedy. As a consequence, individual modifications are mentioned in the course of the following introduction to Bergson’s theory, but no detailed account of these theories is intended.³⁷ The second current of thought focuses

³⁵ Hans Robert Jaus refers to both E. Souriau and J. Ritter in his essay “Zum Problem der Grenzziehung zwischen dem Lächerlichen und dem Komischen”, in: W. Preisendanz/ R. Warning, 369.

³⁶ “Denn im Unterschied zum lebensweltlichen Lächerlichen erspart das im Spiel dargestellte Komische dem lachenden Zuschauer ja gerade das Risiko und den Aufwand einer Grenz- oder Katastrophenreaktion: das Spiel auf der Bühne hat die komische Positivierung des Nichtigen, das der normative Ernst unterdrückte, bereits hergestellt und eben damit jene ‘heitere Grundstimmung’ gesichert, die sich der mitspielende Zuschauer einer ‘Lachgemeinde’ erwarten darf.” See H. R. Jaus : “Zum Problem der Grenzziehung zwischen dem Lächerlichen und dem Komischen”, in: W. Preisendanz/ R. Warning, 363.

³⁷ J. Ritter, for instance, calls Bergson’s theory one of the few theories which attempted to philosophically find the secret to laughter. “Bergson hat das Lachen in einer sehr spiritualisierten Weise verstanden, wie es überhaupt kaum eine Untersuchung gibt, die mit ähnlich geistreichen Blick in das nuancierte und verschlungene Spiel des Lachens eingedrungen ist.” See Ritter’s essay “Über das Lachen”, in: J. Ritter: *Subjektivität*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974, 68 f.

on incongruity as the essential catalyst for a comical effect. The idea of incongruity as a trigger for a comical effect can already be found in superiority theories and will be introduced only briefly in a separate paragraph. However, some scholars equate incongruity with strained expectations and see these, and not degradation, as the central feature of humor. The different views on the matter will thus be discussed in the course of this chapter. Sigmund Freud established *relief theories* in *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*. The confrontation between the trivial – i. e. suppressed aggressive and sexual urges – and moral standards resembles widely accepted theories of the comic in theatrical comedies. Thus, it seems justified to use Freud's theory as a solid and somewhat technical device and starting point to analyze the subversive stand-up comedy of Lenny Bruce and Andy Kaufman and specifically their means to convey their socio-critical messages. Moreover, Freud differentiates between the joke and the comic, providing both another interesting approach to the comic *and* a detailed analysis of jokes. The examination of jokes is extensive and clearly at the center of his theory. As jokes are the main device of a comedian, Freud's analysis of jokes will also be evaluated in the following.

After the detailed introduction of the three main theories, one can come back to the question of the importance of the ludicrous context, since a basic understanding of the comic and how it operates will then have been achieved. In order to make the following easier to understand and to avoid ambiguities, a number of terms need to be explained: As *comic* is an ambiguous term, I will use *comedian* instead of *comic* when talking about the person performing. The *stand-up comedian* is understood as a person telling a succession of jokes or comical stories in front of an audience. In this study, *comedian* always means *stand-up comedian*. *Stand-up comedy* is referred to in an analogous way. *Entertainment* includes all elements that amuse and pass the time and is understood as a part of popular culture referring to the entertainment scene. *Humor* is commonly defined as “that quality which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous; the mental faculty of discovering, expressing, or appreciating the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous; something that is or is designed to be comical or amusing.”³⁸ It “implies a faculty of the mind and a set of mental operations as well as a set of formal properties [...]”³⁹; it therefore comprises *wit* being the cognitive experience, *mirth* being the emotional experience, and *laughter* being the physiological experience. However, *humor*, cannot, as it is often done, be equated with *laughter*, as there are definitely instances of

³⁸ Merriam Webster, <http://www.m-w.com>.

³⁹ S. Neale/ F. Krutnik: *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. London/ New York: Routledge, 1995, 66.

humor that do not result in laughter (e.g. a person making a funny remark intended to arouse laughter but resulting in an insult if the recipient is not in a humorous mood) and instances of laughter where no humor is involved (tickling or nervousness).

We know now that the staged comical act works if the recipient is in a humorous mood, if he or she is willing and able to perceive something as funny. *Humor* is needed to understand a comical act. The following approaches explaining humor are based on psychological mechanisms which enable us to perceive the comic. In general, however, it is very important to understand that there is no definite answer to the question ‘What is *the comic*?’ All theories provide useful information and can help to analyze different strategies of humor.

1.1 Superiority Theories

The main premise of this approach is that all humor is derisive.⁴⁰ We laugh at someone or something we look down on. The feeling of superiority implies that the comical object⁴¹ is inferior in some way. The comical object, which is judged as inferior, may also be our former self or things we did in the past. We can laugh at past actions because we are now aware that we have surmounted them.⁴² Even if the comical object is a thing (for instance odd clothes or an animal) it should be noted that the thing itself is not comical. “[...] a single object in nature cannot be the sole cause of laughter”.⁴³ Ludicrousness is always in the eye of the beholder. We might, for example, laugh at an animal because we sense something human-like in the behavior or facial expression of the animal and immediately associate it with human patterns of behavior. The observation that humor is human is one of three premises on which the French philosopher Henri Bergson based his approach to humor: “[...] the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*.”⁴⁴ Concerning this premise Bergson agrees with Jean Paul, who states that nothing can be ludicrous except through

⁴⁰ The assumption that humor derives from a feeling of superiority can be traced back to Plato, Aristotle or Thomas Hobbes, for instance.

⁴¹ The person, thing, or instance that arouses laughter.

⁴² Jean Paul also remarks that whereas we cannot laugh about our own behaviour in action, we certainly can once time has passed and we project our newly achieved insight onto our former self. “Daher kann niemand sich selber lächerlich im Handeln vorkommen, es müßte dann eine Stunde später sein, wo er schon sein zweites Ich geworden und dem ersten die Einsichten des zweiten andichten kann.” See Jean Paul: *Vorschule der Ästhetik*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1990, 113 (first published 1804, second enlarged publication 1813).

⁴³ N. Schaeffer, 5.

⁴⁴ H. Bergson: *Laughter* [1900], in: H. Bergson/ G. Meredith/ W. Sypher (ed): *Comedy*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956, 62.

personification, and later with Karlheinz Stierle, who remarks that the comical equals the experience of the person observing a comical action. In other words, the comical is in the eye of the beholder.⁴⁵ Another premise is that the comical depends on the exclusion of all emotions such as hate, anger, sadness or pity: “[...] the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple.”⁴⁶ We can only laugh at another person’s stumbling, if we are in a neutral mood. Otherwise the stumbling person would evoke feelings of pity or sympathy.⁴⁷ The involvement of another person is the third premise Bergson suggests. As laughter has a social function we need some recipient we can share our laughter with.⁴⁸

After stating these three premises, Bergson divides his study into three parts examining first ‘The comic elements in forms and movements’, then ‘The comic element in situations and the comic element in words’; and finally ‘The comic in character’. Bergson points out that clumsiness, involuntariness and absent-mindedness evoke laughter. Every time we expect physical or mental agility and an ability to adjust to the flow of life, the failure to do so seems comical. If a person walking down a street falls on his or her head, we laugh because he or she was unable to adjust to a sudden change in the flow of events (a hazard in the way, for example). Inelasticity prevents a spontaneous adjustment to changes and the resulting clumsiness is comical. This applies to involuntary instances and artificially created situations. If someone pulls away the chair some other person is about to sit on, we laugh due to the very same clumsy inability to adjust to new circumstances. Apart from these instances, where the comical effect is caused by an external factor, we can also observe situations in which we could talk about a ‘mental clumsiness’. A person who is absent-minded and whose responses never seem to fit the actual context represents the same involuntary disability to adjust to a new situation due to inelasticity. Inelasticity and automatisms contradict the natural flow of human life. According to Bergson, the natural flow of human life is characterized by an alertness to recognize a new situation and by elasticity which

⁴⁵ “[...] nichts Sinnliches allein [kann] lächerlich sein – d. h. nichts Lebloses, ausgenommen durch Personifikation [...]” See Jean Paul, 109.

“Das Komische ist wie das Lächerliche die Erfahrung nicht eines Handelnden, sondern eines Betrachters.” See K. Stierle: “Komik der Lebenswelt und Komik der Komödie”, in: W. Preisendanz/R. Warning, 372.

⁴⁶ H. Bergson, 63 f.

⁴⁷ A similar description is found in Jean Paul’s chapter “Über das Lächerliche” in his *Vorschule der Ästhetik*: “[...] das Komische gleitet ohne Friktionen (Reibungen) der Vernunft und des Herzens vorüber [...]” See Jean Paul, 122.

⁴⁸ J. Ritter’s modification of Bergson’s theory – according to Ritter the contrasts that evoke laughter are an existing and therefore necessary factor in human life, and thus laughter legitimizes their existence – will further enlighten the social function of laughter and will be discussed at a later point. Additionally, Freud’s ideas concerning the social function of laughter will be discussed later on in this chapter.

designates the ability to adjust. Instances of inelasticity of movements and character are suspicious to a society and the resulting laughter functions as a social correction of something ‘not fitting’. Bergson understands a comical physiognomy as the representation of a habit a person stuck to. As a conclusion, the comical physiognomy is perceived as reflecting the character or even the soul of that person. A face that seems to be crying constantly is a convincing example of this: frowning and sad-looking eyes make a person seem trapped in a sad mood forever, unable to adjust his or her mood to changing situations. It is the inelasticity, precisely the inelasticity of the facial expression and the underlying inelasticity of character, which makes this or any other physiognomy appear comical.

‘Comic elements in movements’ can be observed when movements are rigid and resemble a mechanism. A movement that is repeated again and again always runs the risk of being very funny. Bergson offers a good example which illustrates this: a public speaker using the same gesture over and over again can appear funny, because the audience expects the repetition of the gesture before it occurs. Life is understood as flowing and constantly changing, just as thoughts and utterances normally develop during a speech. The repetition of gestures contradicts this perception as it symbolizes inelasticity: a mechanism forced upon vitality. In this case, we can speak of a mechanism working automatically, “This is no longer life, it is automatism established in life and imitating it.”⁴⁹ Imitations of gestures work very much alike. Our own gestures – were they exact representations of our thoughts and feelings – cannot occur more than once in the same way, because our thoughts and feelings always adjust to new situations. Since such a perfect adjustment is, of course, impossible to maintain in reality, it is our monotony that can be ridiculed by others. “To imitate any one is to bring out the element of automatism he has allowed to creep into his person. And this is the very essence of the ludicrous [...]”⁵⁰

Bergson develops the idea of “*Something mechanical encrusted on the living [...]*”⁵¹ (Italics in original) as the catalyst for the comic in three different ways. First of all, something mechanical taking the place of the ‘natural’ – whether it is a costume or social conventions or rituals – is comical as soon as it is seen separately. A costume is comical because we judge it separated from the person wearing it; it is something unnatural covering something natural. A ceremony seems comical as soon as we look plainly at the conventional automatisms and ignore the meaning behind them. Secondly, ‘something

⁴⁹ H. Bergson, 81.

⁵⁰ H. Bergson, 81.

⁵¹ H. Bergson, 84.

mechanical encrusted on the living' accounts for circumstances in which physical appearance or bodily reactions detract from what a person is saying or doing. The body is – in analogy to a costume – seen as covering the natural, the soul of the person. “*Any incident is comic that calls our attention to the physical in a person, when it is the moral side that is concerned*”⁵² (Italics in original). In these instances, a person appears comical when he or she seems trapped in or disturbed by his or her own body. Distractions like sneezing in the middle of a speech or a person with a big belly draw off the attention from the actual content, an utterance for example, to the physical appearance of the person speaking. Whenever form is more important than content, automatism develop. This especially holds true for typical physical features or rituals of a certain profession by which that profession can be ridiculed. Lastly, ‘something mechanical encrusted on the living’ occurs each time a person resembles a thing: a person moving in a monotonous way (bouncing like a ball, for example), someone speaking about a person as if they were speaking about a thing, or equating a person with a thing.

Comical situations are, just like comical physiognomy and movements, characterized by something mechanical contradicting the flow of life. It is, most importantly, *repetition* that hinders the natural flow of life. The repetition of events is very likely to evoke a comical situation, whether it is the repetition of the very same sentence over and over again or the repetition of an encounter between two people. Repetition opposes vitality, change, and adjustment to new situations; it represents a rigid mechanism and therefore deviation from the ‘natural flow of life’.

A slightly less important clue which can create a comical situation is called *inversion*. It includes all instances in which roles have been switched, whether it is a child instructing its parents or a thief getting robbed. *Reciprocal interference of series* is the third effect explaining a comical situation. A typical confusion-story in a comedy, for instance. A certain situation (the confusion) results in the development of two different chains of events. The characters involved only recognize one chain of events. The viewers, on the other hand, realize that there are two possible ways of interpretation: one identical to what the characters experience and the other, the ‘real sense’ behind it. The tension between these two ways creates the comical effect. Repetition, inversion, and ‘reciprocal interference of series’ have one characteristic feature in common: “[...] *mechanization* of life. You take a set of actions and relations and repeat it as it is, or turn it

⁵² H. Bergson, 93.

upside down, or transfer it bodily to another set with which it partially coincides [...]"⁵³ (Italics in original).

Language and its comical effects are explained and exemplified in Bergson's 'The comic in words'. Language itself, the character of words and utterances regardless of the speaker, creates comical effects. As a consequence, these comical effects are rather unique in a language and rarely translatable. Bergson distinguishes between a comical word, which means that we laugh about the person uttering it, and a witty word, which makes us laugh about ourselves or some third person. Bergson understands *wit* as "[...] a gift for dashing off comic scenes in a few strokes – dashing them off, however, so subtly, delicately and rapidly, that all is over as soon as we begin to notice them."⁵⁴ A witty person is someone who is able to use language to create the comic. He or she can do this in several ways: use something familiar in an unfamiliar way and create a contradiction or use something absurd in a context where something familiar is expected. Language should represent the vivid flow of life, the elasticity to adjust to new circumstances. It should be as vivid as the thoughts it represents. As soon as language is in some sense absent-minded, a comical effect is created. The principles inversion, interference of series, and repetition can be applied to language, too. Inversion is a common method for creating a comical effect: parts of a sentence are inverted to create a new sentence that still makes sense. We can speak of 'interference of series' every time a sentence seems to have two meanings at the same time, where it is actually an artificial blending of two different sentences in which words in their actual and literal meaning are used. Analogous to repetition, Bergson introduces *transposition* as the third principle of comical effects in a language: a sentence is repeated in a different style or a different tone. This technique works in two ways: something familiar can be described in a pompous way (exaggeration) or something pompous is described in terms of everyday language. Most of the time, transposition confronts 'reality' and 'ideal'. 'Reality' (i.e. everyday life) can be described as if it were 'ideal' already. In this case, the good features are emphasized and we can speak of irony. Bergson understands humor as 'reality' described exactly the way it is and in a manner showing that it should be this and only this way. According to him, the humorist observes 'reality' and describes it with technical and specific terms. Consequently, the humorist moralizes by deterring us from 'reality' in its pure sense. Bergson concludes that language is vivid but always in danger

⁵³ H. Bergson, 126.

⁵⁴ H. Bergson, 130.

of stiffening due to habits. It is therefore possible to attack language in moments of inelasticity and inflexibility with the help of methods such as inversion or transposition.

Last but not least, Bergson introduces his ideas concerning the comical character. As he now talks about the typical character in a comedy, many of his observations that have already been introduced are repeated: the comical character is always a person who is rigid in a certain way (repetition of gestures, comical outward appearance, repetition of a particular phrase) and unable to adjust to changing circumstances and the vivid flow of life. The responsive laughter functions as a social correction of the 'outsider' who does not fit in and it enables a return to the group. The typical character of a comedy possesses a flaw that is seen separately from all other characteristics, which are of minor importance. Unlike the tragic character, which possesses several traits and moves the audience emotionally, the comical character is never profound. The flaw of a comical character might reflect immorality, but not necessarily. It may be just a minor flaw, but it has to be unsociable and, very importantly, a flaw that does not evoke emotional commitment. Emotional commitment would result in the dissolution of the comical effect. In order to avoid commitment, the flaw has to be isolated. Seen separately it appears even more rigid, and should be supported by gestures emphasizing automatisms. Comical characters always represent types. Unlike a hero in a tragedy, they are not unique, but can be copied and, moreover, their eccentricity can be corrected with the help of laughter. As a result, most comical characters (since they are types) represent collective flaws or eccentricities and the corrective laughter functions as a collective correction of a society not as an individual correction.

Bergson's main point is that laughter serves as the correction of something socially unacceptable. He states that

[...] a person is never ridiculous except through some mental attribute resembling absentmindedness, through something that lives upon him without forming part of his organism [...] But, on the other hand, just because laughter aims at correcting, it is expedient that the correction should reach as great a number of persons as possible.⁵⁵

In other words: laughter serves as a general correction trying to aim at the collective but nevertheless putting up with individual insults. It is in the nature of laughter that it cannot always be fair and, moreover, it is not even supposed to be fair in any way as its main purpose is to intimidate. The purpose of intimidation should be viewed critically: a generalized punishment of anything that does not immediately fit in is quite a radical concept. Bergson does not explain who sets the rules about what is viewed as eccentric

⁵⁵ H. Bergson, 170.

in a society. We can only suppose that something like an inherited or traditional understanding of what is eccentric exists and that we, in some way, have learned that there is a connection between the violation of a norm and laughter.⁵⁶ Neither does Bergson offer an explanation in how far the individual is able to perceive the derisive laughter as a kind request to correct oneself and adjust. It should be assumed that each human being possesses a personal limitation, which he or she does not wish to see crossed. In other words, if the personal limit is crossed, derision will not result in adjustment but will probably result in aggressive opposition. The derisive laughter only serves its social function if it is directed towards a person who is confident and able to laugh at him- or herself and who shares the same basic understanding of ‘reality’ like the rest of a social group. At this point Ritter’s objections to Bergson’s theory might prove helpful. Criticizing that Bergson’s approach is solely based on reason and that the recognition of ‘unfitting’ contrast is thus bound to a certain reasonable state of mind, Ritter suggests an incorporation of those contrasts into human existence in order to explain laughter and its social (its ‘correcting’) function. According to him, the ‘otherness’, i. e. life’s contrasts accounting for the comical, form an important part of human existence and are defined depending on the general understanding of ‘reality’ with all its constituents.⁵⁷ Thus, every contrast is perceived as such and, moreover, as necessarily belonging to the totality of life at the same time. Laughter then accepts and illuminates how ‘otherness’ and contrasts belong to human existence.⁵⁸ As a consequence and with this opinion kept in mind, it becomes evident how laughter serves the social function of inviting a supposed ‘outsider’ who has deviated from the social group to join back in. The premise to this is, of course, that all members of a social group share the same view and accept contrasts as necessarily belonging to human existence. If this premise is not fulfilled, laughter evoked by the misfortune of a certain person will automatically result in some kind of defensive mechanism on the part of that unfortunate person.

Summing up Bergson’s theory of humor, one can conclude that despite possible modifications as the one mentioned above, internal psychological processes are not explained. As laughter is a sudden and uncontrolled reaction, there must be an underlying meaning behind the pleasure in laughing at somebody’s misfortune. We do

⁵⁶ Authors like Plessner and Heinrich view this aspect of Bergson’s theory as dangerous and even see their fears confirmed by Bergson’s questionable remark about colored people (see Bergson, 86).

⁵⁷ “Was sich als das Entgegenstehende kundtut, das Dingliche oder das Geistige, das Materielle oder das Lebendige, entscheidet allein der Begriff des Wirklichen selbst.” See J. Ritter, 71.

⁵⁸ “Was mit dem Lachen ausgespielt und ergriffen wird, ist diese geheime Zugehörigkeit des Nichtigen zum Dasein; sie wird ergriffen [...] so, dass es in der es ausgrenzenden Ordnung selbst gleichsam als zu ihr gehörig sichtbar und lautbar wird.” See J. Ritter, 76.

not consciously reflect upon automatisms, view them as a life-contradicting eccentricity and socially unacceptable and then deliberately choose to laugh in order to help the ‘outsider’ to get back to the group. Freud, whose approach will be introduced later, was able to offer yet another approach to the question why we enjoy laughing at others. Preceding an introduction to Freud’s notions, however, incongruity theories are explained because their main idea – the juxtaposition of two dissimilar things – is included in the previous and in the following approach.

1.2 Incongruity Theories

An incongruity is defined as a sudden juxtaposition of things that are apparently unrelated. The two elements in the juxtaposition are compared in order to determine whether there is anything to be found that binds them together. According to this approach, every image we observe initiates trains of associations. When we find even the slightest congruity between the two contradictory things, we reject the predominant incongruity (because we suspect it to have some hidden meaning) and feel satisfaction in the face of the newly discovered congruity.

The concept of incongruity explaining the comical is already recognizable in superiority theories. Bergson uses the tension between two contrasting things to explain why we laugh at something simple which is explained in an exaggerated way or at a person responding in any kind of inappropriate way or at a person wearing a strange costume. According to him, the main feature of the comic is degradation and its social function of correcting the eccentric who refuses to adjust to social requirements. Bergson does not see the contrast between something high and something low or something appropriate and something inappropriate as the main cause of a comical effect. Those who do see incongruity as the central feature of the comic identify it with “strained expectations”. Immanuel Kant stated that laughter results from strained expectations dissolving into nothing.⁵⁹ It should be noted that several writers, among them Jean Paul, argue that the comical cannot be reduced to the sudden transformation of sense into ‘nothing’ or non-sense. Jean Paul suggests that especially in situations in which we expect nonsense, the comical effect derives from the appearance of something

⁵⁹ “Das Lachen ist ein Affekt aus der plötzlichen Verwandlung einer gespannten Erwartung in nichts.” See I. Kant/ K. Vorländer (ed.): *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. Hamburg: Verlag von Felix Meiner, 1968, 190.

creating a new sense.⁶⁰ Jurij Striedter, to give another example, proposes a change of terminology in that sense suddenly turns into ‘absurdity’ rather than into nonsense.⁶¹

As has already been mentioned, the comical develops every time something mismatching intrudes a certain state of mind and results in the sudden dissolution of this disposition. It is even likely that one element of the two contrasting ideas might be degraded, but this is not essential. It is the degree of contrast and the elegance used to fuse the two elements that determine the impact of a comical effect. According to Jean Paul, for instance, the comical appears when we project our view on something we are observing (we claim to know what the object we are observing has in mind), which means that our imagination creates the contrast between what we think is supposed to happen and what we observe. Often, the impact of a comical effect increases when a real connection between two opposing things is brought to light and consequently some kind of moral criticism is possible, for instance in witty plays on words. In general, however, it should be critically noted that if humor arises when we do not obtain what we expected or when we seem to be left with nothing, we are very close to the explanations suggested by Bergson: we laugh at our former self, our former expectations, and consequently the humor is derisive. Freud incorporated the incongruity principle too. He observes ludicrous incongruity in many techniques of jokes but rejects incongruity as the main feature of the comical. Instead, he develops an analysis of the techniques of jokes in general and emphasizes how these techniques work as triggers to economize repressive energy.

1.3 Relief Theories

Taking an analysis of the techniques of jokes as a starting point, Freud realizes that analogies between the techniques of jokes and what he called ‘dream work’ exists, leading him to the final assumption that a “comparison between jokes and dream may help to throw light on jokes.”⁶² Consequently, his study builds up to a chapter on ‘The relation of jokes to dreams and to the unconscious’. On his way to a psychoanalytical examination of jokes, Freud makes interesting observations that should be briefly

⁶⁰ “[...] wenn die Erwartung des Nichts sich in ein Etwas auflöst.” See Jean Paul, 102.

⁶¹ See J. Striedter “Der Clown und die Hürde”, in: W. Preisendanz/ R. Warning, 394.

⁶² S. Freud: *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious* [1905], in: *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud assisted by Alix Strachey; Alan Tyson, editorial assistance by Angela Richards. London: Hogarth Press, 1962, 29.

sketched. Freud's first observation is that the linguistic technique of jokes must be of vast importance since a reformulation of a joke results in the loss of the comical effect.

He terms the most common techniques:

I. Condensation: (*a*) with formation of composite word, (*b*) with modification. II. Multiple use of the same material: (*c*) as a whole and in parts, (*d*) in a different order, (*e*) with slight modification, (*f*) of the same words full and empty. III. Double meaning: (*g*) meaning as a name and as a thing, (*h*) metaphorical and literal meanings, (*i*) double meaning proper (play upon words), (*j*) double entendre, (*k*) double meaning with an allusion.⁶³

All these techniques have one feature in common: for reasons of economy, they seem to show the tendency to shorten what otherwise would have been explained in a more complicated way. It is of course not only the linguistic compression that accounts for the success of a joke. As Freud notes: "There must therefore be some peculiar kind of abbreviation and economy on which the characteristics of being a joke depends [...]".⁶⁴

In trying to find an exact description of the phenomenon, Freud comes across the technique of jokes he terms *displacement*. Displacement occurs in those kinds of jokes that shift the emphasis from the original train of thought to another one.⁶⁵ The ambiguity of a word often causes the diversion from the expected reply. The diversion of the train of thought is, nevertheless, the feature that creates the comical effect. Apart from the use of ambiguous terms, Freud enumerates a number of other joke techniques. Among these are nonsensical replies revealing something else that is stupid and does not make sense; representation by the opposite, commonly known as irony; and omission. All of these allude to something that is not said directly.

Now we have already got two hints: firstly, joke techniques show the tendency to shorten what otherwise would have been explained in a much more complicated way. Secondly, we know now that we can say something by means of allusions that by some restraint we do not want to directly articulate. Allusion in its various 'technical' ways can be aimless or tendentious. Jokes that serve no particular aim are called innocent jokes, as opposed to jokes that have a further purpose (tendency). However, an innocent joke is not completely aimless, as it may allude to a thought with great substance. In fact, Freud later characterizes innocent jokes as follows:

"Jokes, even if the thought contained in them is non-tendentious and thus only serves theoretical intellectual interests, are in fact never non-tendentious. They [...] promote the thought by augmenting it and guarding it against criticism."⁶⁶

⁶³ See S. Freud, 41 f.

⁶⁴ S. Freud, 44.

⁶⁵ For instance if the verb 'to take' is used in the sense of 'taking a bath' and understood as 'taking away' as in the following joke: "Two Jews met in the neighbourhood of the bath-house. 'Have you taken a bath?' asked one of them. 'What?' asked the other in return, 'is there one missing?'" see S. Freud, 49.

⁶⁶ S. Freud, 133.

Freud's earliest observation was that the rephrasing of a joke resulted in the loss of its comical effect. Thus, the joke techniques "[...] possess the power of evoking a feeling of pleasure in the hearer [...]".⁶⁷ We already know that the tendency to economize is of some importance, but the exact source of this pleasure is yet unknown. For the moment Freud leaves us with the observation that "[...] tendentious jokes, by virtue of their purpose, must have sources of pleasure at their disposal to which innocent jokes have no access."⁶⁸ It is the analysis of the *purpose* of tendentious jokes which finally enables Freud to generally explain the reason for the enjoyment in the technique of jokes.

The class of tendentious jokes is divided into hostile jokes and obscene jokes. Especially in the case of an obscene joke, it is important to note that it calls for three participants: the joke teller, the object, and the recipient. Due to a society in which things that used to be tolerated are now seen as unacceptable⁶⁹, the primary source of pleasure – the "[...] desire to see the organs peculiar to each sex exposed is one of the original components of our libido"⁷⁰ – are repressed. A tendentious joke uncovers and brings back what seems to have been lost. The joke teller may find his repressed libidinal impulses inhibited by a certain object. He then develops hostility towards this object and gives way to the repressed sexual urge by joking. The release of repressed urges results in a pleasurable moment for the joke teller. In addition, the inactive hearer also experiences a moment of pleasure, because he or she enjoys the exposure of the object. Generally speaking, the joke (softening the threatening power of the content with its 'playfulness') is used as a device to circumvent the obstacle that makes the access to a source of pleasure impossible. The repressed instinct can finally be satisfied.⁷¹ As a result, as Manfred Geier puts it in his philosophy of humor, the joke is a gift for both the hearer and the joke-teller. The former easily grasps the opportunity to discharge energy and so does the latter, who might derive additional pleasure from the 'feedback' – the laughter of his recipient – that tells him that his joke-work was successful.⁷² The same rule applies to hostile jokes: just like sexual urges our hostility

⁶⁷ S. Freud, 95.

⁶⁸ S. Freud, 96.

⁶⁹ Freud refers to society at the beginning of the 20th century.

⁷⁰ S. Freud, 98.

⁷¹ Stierle comments on the relieving function of 'playfulness' in his suggestions to the comic in theatrical comedy: "Gewöhnlich ist aber das Erschrecken über die Möglichkeit der Identifikation nur ein Motiv mehr, im Lachen diese Identifikation abzuweisen [...] Das Bewusstsein, dass es bloß Spiel ist, was hier die Identifikation nahe legt, wirkt befreiend." See K. Stierle: "Das Lachen als Antwort", in: W. Preisendanz/ R. Warning, 375.

⁷² "Für die lachenden Dritten ist jeder gute Witz ein Geschenk. [...] sie können sich der Lust der Spannungsabfuhr überlassen, wenn der Witz zündet [...] Aber noch wichtiger ist, dass auch die erste Person sich über die Wirkung ihres Geschenks in den lustvollen Zustand einer lachenden

towards other people is expected to be repressed. By making the object of our hostility appear small or in any other way inferior, the joke allows us to evade restrictions: we can say what we want to say and derive pleasure from a source that used to be inaccessible.

Institutions and morals can be the object of a tendentious joke, too. Freud calls these tendentious jokes *cynical jokes*, because the need to repress individual desires due to certain social norms and morals is never really rewarded. Consequently, as “[...] the wishes and desires of men have a right to make themselves acceptable alongside of exacting and ruthless morality”⁷³, jokes cynically allude to this imbalance and enable people to say what they want. A fourth group of tendentious jokes concludes Freud’s examination of the purpose and technique of jokes: the category of *sceptical* jokes. Using the technical method of representation by the opposite and absurdity (earlier explained as nonsense), they attack the certainty of our knowledge.⁷⁴

As the technique of jokes and their purposes are now revealed as the sources of pleasure, the precise mechanisms accounting for the pleasurable effect are to be determined. External obstacles (a person in a powerful position) or internal obstacles keep us from discharging our immediate urges. The most important form of an internal obstacle is certainly ‘repression’. Examples of this are a repressed sexual urges, aggressiveness, and criticism of social values that cannot be directly stated. The maintenance of an internal resistance requires a certain amount of psychical expenditure. As a consequence, a tendentious joke enables us to obtain pleasure due to saving of psychical expenditure.

Focusing on innocent jokes, Freud emphasizes that the technique of jokes has a pleasurable effect itself as the different techniques of jokes are able to bring about a relief in psychical work. Every time something familiar is rediscovered (as in jokes using similarity of sounds, multiple uses of words or modification of familiar phrases), the pleasure derives from recognition. Techniques like displacement, absurdity, representation by the opposite and faulty thinking provide pleasure in nonsense, which is explained as follows: experimenting with language as a child finally results in the ability to combine words in a significant and socially appreciated way. This originally playful pleasure is repressed in the adult life due to the pressure of critical reason. Thus, techniques using nonsense are a source of pleasure which “[...] arises from an economy

Abfuhrmpfindung versetzt.” See M. Geier: *Worüber kluge Menschen lachen. Kleine Philosophie des Humors*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 2006, 205.

⁷³ S. Freud, 110.

⁷⁴ An example is given in S. Freud, 115.

in psychological expenditure or a relief from the compulsion of criticism.”⁷⁵ We can resort to liberties we had as children and escape from the socially expected intellectual behavior for a moment.

Whether it is repressed pleasure in play, repressed sexual urges or aggressiveness towards external obstacles, one can speak of an impulse that would be released were it allowed to. But the impulse or urge that seeks to be released must fight against internal censorship, i.e. the force that suppresses the impulse or urge. Internal censorship is normally stronger than the suppressed notion, but “the suppressed purpose can, with the assistance of the pleasure from the joke, gain sufficient strength to overcome the inhibition [...]”.⁷⁶ The pleasure in the joke itself (the joke technique) is used as a ‘fore-pleasure’ to produce a new pleasure by lifting repressions. Freud does not put emphasis on the fact that this way of releasing repressions could at the same time be seen as resignation in the face of the rules of morality. If joking is the only way to safely criticize something, we obey the rules of morality at the same time. Still, it should be worthwhile to examine in how far jokes can be used as means (or weapons) to criticize the rules of society. Freud’s analysis does not develop this obvious idea any further.

Referring to the process of outwitting censorship Freud coined the term ‘dream-work’. “The dream-work is the name for the whole sum of transforming processes which have converted the dream-thoughts into the manifest dream.”⁷⁷ According to Freud, the day’s events bring up wishes – usually repressed wishes. The actual thoughts resulting from the day’s events undergo modifications during the process of dreaming. The reduction of thoughts to sensory images is called regression, and during this process further alterations occur. Former logical links between the thoughts get lost along the way. In addition to regression thoughts undergo a process of compression and condensation in which links between distinct thoughts or concepts are artificially created. Moreover, things that were less important in the original thoughts can be central in the manifest dream and vice versa. It is *displacement* that often makes a dream seem incomprehensible to the waking person. The formation of a dream consists of

[...] the transplanting of the preconscious day’s residue into the unconscious, in which the conditions governing the state of sleep must play a part; then, the dream-work proper in the unconscious; and thirdly, the regression of the dream-material, thus revised, to perception, in which form the dream becomes conscious.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ S. Freud, 127.

⁷⁶ S. Freud, 136.

⁷⁷ S. Freud, 160.

⁷⁸ S. Freud, 165.

The main concern of dream formation is to trick internal censorship and to circumvent inhibitions with the help of *displacement*. An analogy can be drawn to the process of outwitting censorship with the help of pleasure derived from a joke technique and the resulting pleasure in finally releasing what has been suppressed for so long. At this point it could be critically noted that it is quite surprising that the superego, usually seen as so strong and all-superior, is so easily tricked by jokes. Compared to dreams, jokes – even if their source is unconscious – are made in a conscious, i.e. waking state of mind. Consequently, the urge for a release of suppressed energy must be very strong and in the case of jokes overrule censorship. Even if the state of mind is different in dreams as opposed to the waking state of mind in which a joke takes place – there is an additional analogy between dreams and jokes and it lies in the identical mental ‘place’. In both the dream and the joke, a preconscious thought is revised in the unconscious. The main difference between dream-work and joke-work is that in dreams any opportunity to pass by censorship is taken. Any kind of indirect representation is suitable because “Under the pressure of the censorship, any sort of connection is good enough to serve as a substitute by allusions and displacement [...]”.⁷⁹ Jokes do use methods of displacement, but in a less exaggerated way and adapted to the conditions of conscious thinking, i.e. fitting the social context and involving a second (object) and, more importantly, a third person (hearer). As jokes require another person, they are in this respect different from the asocial dreams, which are completely uncommunicative.

It is precisely the social aspect of jokes that should be examined further, as Freud not only understands it as the feature that distinguishes it from dreams, but also as the main characteristic to distinguish jokes from the comic in general. “If one comes across something comic, one can enjoy it by oneself. A joke, on the contrary, must be told to someone else.”⁸⁰ The comical takes place between the self and some kind of object, a third person is not essential. It is essential, though, to the teller of a joke that a third person is present who serves as proof as to whether the joke-work has succeeded. This person must be in a neutral mood concerning the object of the joke; otherwise he or she would have feelings contradicting the purpose of the joke. Additionally, the allusions must be of comprehensible and obvious nature and the joke should focus attention on the topic. A lengthy joke is in danger of losing the hearer’s attention, and for a similar reason the joke must be new to the third person. These requirements are a lot easier to fulfill than the following: the third person must possess the same inhibitions

⁷⁹ S. Freud, 172.

⁸⁰ S. Freud, 143.

as the joke teller so that the hearing of the joke can result in a release of repressed energy and in pleasure due to the saving of psychological expenditure. Freud supposes that a joke is always designed to serve the purpose of granting the saving of psychological expenditure to the first and to the third person as well and that the techniques of jokes are determined by the fulfillment of these two purposes. Another distinguishing feature between jokes and the comic in general has already been mentioned: a joke is made, whereas the comical is found. Examining the comic in movements first, Freud discovers that movements are comical when they seem exaggerated and inexpedient in a certain situation. This judgment derives from a comparison between the movement of another person and the evaluation of what we would have done in that instance.⁸¹ Observing a comical movement does not motivate the third party to carry out of the very same movement in order to be able to make a comparison. In fact, we presuppose the possession of a “[...] standard for this movement in [our] innervatory sensations”⁸² acquired by our own experience with this particular movement. In other words, the recollection of our own idea of this movement costs some psychological expenditure. We put ourselves into the position of the other person and compare our own experience (the expenditure needed) with the movement that we have just observed. If the movement of the other person is evaluated as exaggerated, our “[...] innervatory expenditure which has become an unusable surplus [...]”⁸³ can be discharged. If we find the comic in a person’s mental or intellectual characteristic traits, the comical effect derives from a difference in expenditure, too. In that case, it is funny if the other person uses too little expenditure whereas we expected more. The comical effect results from the difference between our psychological expenditure and the other person’s expenditure that we have estimated by empathy. This perception of the comic can also be applied to instances in which no other person is directly involved: expectations of any kind require a certain psychological expenditure; one could also speak of “preparatory expenditure”.⁸⁴ For instance when we try to catch a ball that is much heavier than we expected, the result is a jerky movement due to the contrast between the expected expenditure and the expenditure that was actually needed.⁸⁵ The comparison between the two might result in disappointment but it will definitely lead to an evaluation of whether the interest we attached to an expectation was worthwhile. It was said before that the joke is made,

⁸¹ This assumption resembles Jean Paul’s idea of lending the person we observe our knowledge, as was explained earlier.

⁸² S. Freud, 191.

⁸³ S. Freud, 194.

⁸⁴ S. Freud, 198.

⁸⁵ S. Freud, 198.

whereas the comic is found. Nevertheless, the comic can be created, too. The comic can be produced in two ways: firstly, a person can make him or herself comical, e.g. by being clumsy. “In that way one produces a comical effect exactly as though one really were these things, by fulfilling the condition of the comparison which leads to the difference in expenditure.”⁸⁶ Secondly, another person can be made comical. According to Freud, we do not ridicule characteristics of that person but put him or her in a comical situation, for instance by making the other person fall to make him or her look clumsy.⁸⁷ Putting a person into a comical situation can also be achieved through speech. At this point the comical and the joke seem almost inseparable. Comparing the results of the examination of jokes and of the comical we can, nevertheless, state the major difference between jokes and the comical: the pleasure of jokes derives from the unconscious, whereas the comparison between two expenditures is to be located in the conscious. “[...] *the joke, it may be said, is the contribution made to the comic from the realm of the unconscious*”⁸⁸ (Italics in original).

Apart from the difference in expenditure, other conditions lead to comical pleasure: a cheerful mood, indifference (for other affects disturb or even rule out the comic pleasure), the absence of other intellectual work, which might occupy the mind, and the ‘comic surrounding’. The comic surrounding, i.e. the context of the comic, is further examined in the following.

1.4 The Context of the Comic

“Audiences go out to see nightclub comedians, not nightclub tragedians.”⁸⁹ Thus, people enter the nightclub in a cheerful and excited mood expecting to experience some entertainment. The same applies to comical TV-shows: our expectations are strained, we expect to laugh. It is the particular context that puts us into good humor and alerts us to respond in the expected way (i.e. with laughter). The ludicrous context makes us feel secure about laughing. When we are in doubt if laughter is expected or not we usually hesitate and carefully choose the adequate reaction. Consequently, a ludicrous context allows us to escape from our normal life to “suspend the [...]”

⁸⁶ S. Freud, 199.

⁸⁷ Freud’s explanations of comic pleasure deriving from a comparison between childhood pleasures and the present – whether it is a comparison to our own memories or the actions of someone else reminding us of a child-like image – are not sufficiently developed and are to be rejected for the purpose of this study.

⁸⁸ S. Freud, 208.

⁸⁹ N. Schaeffer, 17.

restrictions of morality, the sequences of logical thought, the demand of rationality – in short, we are encouraged to suspend the internal law of gravity, our seriousness.”⁹⁰ These assumptions correspond to Bergson and Freud. Both claim that we have to be in an indifferent mood to perceive the comical. The exclusion of rationality and morality explains the possibility of bringing to light repressed thoughts from the unconscious. “Freud thought that all laughter at jokes arises from the sheer pleasure of subverting the rules of morality.”⁹¹ The question is, nevertheless, why internal censorship is outwitted and moral constraints are circumvented so easily. Schaeffer suggests that the ludicrous context makes us resort to a private mental context of laughter, “a locus in the mind”⁹² that is particularly reserved for pure pleasure and completely excludes any doubts, morality, reason, and the expenditure of work. The internal censorship tolerates this pleasant state of mind, because it is “[...] flattered by our faith in its authority.”⁹³ Its function is on ‘stand-by’; morality and reason can ‘come running’ as soon as they are needed. Even if we are in a cheerful mood and allow ourselves a break from the normal restraints in life, if we are endangered by external circumstances⁹⁴, reason will flash into action. If a comedian’s words are perceived as insults, morality or pride will take over. In general, the mental context of laughter that we resort to after we have perceived cues (a nightclub surrounding, supporting laughter on TV or the simple remark “Here’s a joke”) is a place of purely private pleasure. According to Schaeffer, it is less important why we laugh at something, but that we laugh at all, and the reasons for laughter might be different in each person in the audience.

Each of the examined basic approaches to the comic corresponds to this suggestion. In the ludicrous context, for instance, during the performance of a comedian, the process involved in producing laughter is “[...] so swift and so unconscious that its exact mechanism is beyond explanation. It is only the effect, the laughter, which is important.”⁹⁵ Whether we observe some kind of mechanism contradicting the flow of life (in a repetitive sentence or gesture for instance) or whether we find two mismatching things which reveal a hidden congruity, the moment of pleasurable enjoyment is a purely individual one, for it was triggered by individual associations. The relief from restraints due to the release of inhibitions actually calls for similar inhibitions in all participants – the comedian *and* his entire audience. It could,

⁹⁰ N. Schaeffer, 19.

⁹¹ N. Schaeffer, 28.

⁹² N. Schaeffer, 24.

⁹³ N. Schaeffer, 30.

⁹⁴ Schaeffer uses the example of smoke entering the auditorium during a performance, see: N. Schaeffer, 30.

⁹⁵ N. Schaeffer, 28.

nevertheless, be supposed that the comedian stirs up collective inhibitions – such as generally suppressed sexual desires or aggressiveness – that each member of the audience associates with personal experiences. Individual reasons make someone discharge repressed energy but those individual reasons might correspond to one collective inhibition.

B 1. Lenny Bruce – An Introduction

“There are few comedians to whom I would apply the word *genius*, but Lenny Bruce is one such.”⁹⁶ This is how the comedian Steve Allen, first host of *The Tonight Show*⁹⁷, despite his aversion to “off-color humor”⁹⁸, acknowledges and applauds the importance and impact of Bruce in his collection of *Funny People*. Allen emphasizes how Bruce managed to make a philosophical point by strategically using obscenity. He characterizes Bruce’s strategies of humor, which go beyond the limited formulas that were established in the entertainment-scene, as “[...] so different as to be a separate art form”.⁹⁹ Woody Allen is quoted as having said about Bruce that, although he was not his favorite, “[...] he’s been the big influence”.¹⁰⁰ Joan Rivers states that “Lenny Bruce was the breakthrough for everybody”¹⁰¹ and Gerald Nachman writes that “[...] even the more publicly prudish comedians of his era – [...], Bob Newhart, Bill Cosby – became Bruce diehards.”¹⁰² Larry Gelbart enumerates Redd Foxx, Dick Gregory, Lily Tomlin, George Carlin, Godfrey Cambridge and Richard Pryor as comedians who have been inspired by Lenny Bruce.¹⁰³

As Bruce was a source of inspiration to so many renowned comedians of the 20th century, this chapter is designed to provide an insight into the world of Bruce, briefly sketching his social background, his development as an entertainer, the course of his career, including his achievements, his failings and set-backs, and, most importantly, his impact on stand-up comedy. Nevertheless, the following can only serve as an introduction and will not include all biographical details, nor can it include every existing opinion about Bruce.

Lenny Bruce was born Leonard Alfred Schneider on October 13th, 1925 in Mineola, Long Island. His parents split up before he was born, and he was raised by his mother, Sally Marr, during the first years, but spent a large part of his childhood with his father and relatives, when his mother relinquished custody. When he was twelve, Sally Marr, a comedienne herself, started taking her son to burlesque houses which could probably be seen as the origin of his later career as an entertainer. After having

⁹⁶ S. Allen, 75.

⁹⁷ The title of this show has changed over time. It is today known as *The Tonight Show*, but was called *Tonight* when Steve Allen was its host. See: L. Gelbart, 93.

⁹⁸ S. Allen, 75.

⁹⁹ S. Allen, 77.

¹⁰⁰ W. Allen cited in G. Nachman, 434.

¹⁰¹ J. Rivers cited in G. Nachman, 432.

¹⁰² G. Nachman, 391.

¹⁰³ See: L. Gelbart: *Stand-up comedians on television*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 1996, 92.

lived with a surrogate family he had met by coincidence (“At 16 I ran away from home and found it.”¹⁰⁴), and having served in the army at the age of seventeen, Bruce started to work in small night-clubs. In those clubs, his mother worked as the talent scout introducing new comedians to the audience. In general, Sally Marr was a big influence on Bruce, as she encouraged him to go on stage, and her comic style with her characteristic use of Yiddish words was a source of inspiration to him. At the same time she was more of a companion than a caring mother. “She was his pal, his older sister, playmate. Far from being the Jewish mother with the chicken soup [...] Sally was the furthest thing in the world from a Jewish – or a gentile – mother.”¹⁰⁵ Her most important influence on him, nevertheless, was the awareness of a Jewish tradition and language, which later on so strongly characterized Bruce’s performance. But before Bruce became a comedian who was “[...] comedically, aesthetically, intellectually, ethnically, and politically [...] out of step with the cultural mainstream that dictated what might be said [...]”¹⁰⁶ due to his affinity to the hip jazz world and his Jewish comic tradition, he was a conformist average comedian rather unsuccessfully doing average impressions. At about this time, he met Honey Harlowe, a stripper, and fell in love with her. Their stormy relationship ended up in a stormy marriage characterized by drug-abuse, several split-ups, a child, the struggle for custody of the child and finally the divorce. After a vain attempt to go onstage as a couple at the beginning of their relationship – he did impressions and she sang – Bruce slowly began to develop his performances. His first experiences with the use of foul language onstage may date back to his time as an announcer of girls in strip circuits, when “He was forced to dirty up his act to compete with the strippers [...]”¹⁰⁷ The boredom in the strip circuits and his first taste of hostility directed towards him inspired him to experiment onstage, to just try out everything that came to his mind. Bruce started to comment on things he had read in the paper or observed during the day:

When I talk on the stage, people often have the impression that I make up things as I go along. [...] I know a lot of things I want to say; I’m just not sure exactly when I will say them. This process of allowing one subject spontaneously to associate itself with another is equivalent to James Joyce’s stream of consciousness.¹⁰⁸

The average comedian had emerged from its cocoon and began to explore unknown territory. Bruce saw jazz musicians as people who “[...] appreciate art forms that are

¹⁰⁴ L. Bruce, 12.

¹⁰⁵ A. Goldman: *Ladies and gentlemen: Lenny Bruce!!!* New York: Ballantine Books, 1971, 130.

¹⁰⁶ W. Kaufman, 71 f.

¹⁰⁷ G. Nachman, 400 f.

¹⁰⁸ L. Bruce, 44.

extensions of realism [...]”¹⁰⁹ and matched his performance with their musical style, using their rhythm to support his trains of thought. The hip jazz world became his inspiration linguistically and aesthetically. He used a “[...] bohemian, underground language based on black jazz parlance [...]”¹¹⁰ and mixed it with Yiddish words, both linguistic tools separating him from the mainstream conventions of comedy. It was the language of a subculture that worked on his early underground audiences dominated by jazz musicians and strippers. However, Bruce was longing for wider recognition. He craved for acceptance by the mainstream audience.¹¹¹ Bruce used the same form of expression on these audiences and confronted the American society of the 1950’s and 1960’s with things that people knew about but never before dared express on a stage. “[...] the *truth* was: everyone knew about politicians, everyone talked about them, and everyone hated them – except in public.”¹¹²

Before talking about the ‘truths’ he confronted his audiences with, a few words about his linguistic tools should be said. His language, full of Yiddish terms, was alien to the mainstream audience. Consequently, besides having the truth thrown at their faces, people had to cope with a partly incomprehensible language. Why did Bruce use Yiddish as a linguistic and stylistic device onstage? He was obviously aware of his Jewish ancestry. He recognized Jewish humor as the result of a history of suppression and Yiddish as a language developed due to “[...] the comic sensibility of the oppressed [...]”¹¹³ Nevertheless, he seems to have felt ambivalence towards his Jewish heritage. On the one hand, he changed his name from Schneider to Bruce, but on the other hand he used Yiddish onstage. Will Kaufman argues that Bruce even violated conventions of Jewish humor – such as Jewish humor being a private humor pointing at allegedly Jewish characteristics – and stood onstage pointing at supposedly Jewish characteristics of someone else, but never himself.¹¹⁴ Thus, Bruce even offended people who were able to understand his linguistic style: he was always in danger of provoking other Jews and organized Judaism. He ridiculed Jews who in the process of assimilation to the American culture neglected their roots and “[...] overcompensated for the insecurity they

¹⁰⁹ L. Bruce, 34.

¹¹⁰ W. Kaufman, 74.

¹¹¹ As Kaufman notes, Bruce can thus not really be considered a hipster, since the hipster avoids integration. See: W. Kaufman, 74.

¹¹² W. Kaufman, 78.

Paul Krassner, editor and friend of Bruce, remarks: “He wanted only to talk on stage with the same freedom he exercised in his living room.” See P. Krassner: “The man who said too much”.

¹¹³ W. Kaufman, 88.

¹¹⁴ W. Kaufman, 92.

felt in the midst of an intolerant Christian majority [...]”.¹¹⁵ However, even if Bruce violated traditional conventions of Jewish humor, he did not hide his Jewish background; he even cherished tradition by using Yiddish onstage. Thus, besides using Yiddish as a weapon to attack, he used it as a shield at the same time. In other words, he used Yiddish in order to “mark a boundary of inclusion/exclusion”.¹¹⁶ The confession that he belonged to an oppressed group himself justified his attacks on others. As Ioan Davies points out: “The Yiddish is used not to make Bruce’s humor ‘Jewish’, but rather to validate Bruce’s claim to be ironic about Jews [...]”.¹¹⁷

His attacks on others were of various kinds: apart from criticizing other Jews, Bruce attacked middle-class American Christianity, Catholicism, organized religion in general, social and political hypocrisy and racism. His performance consisted of comments on topics including married life and sexuality (“To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb”¹¹⁸), organized religion (“Religions, Inc.”¹¹⁹), homosexuality and racism.¹²⁰ Bruce was eager to tell what he saw as the truth, and if this demanded of him the use of ‘forbidden words’, he exceeded all limits. He mentioned taboo subjects in public and thus tried to show American society that the suppression of certain topics and their related terms gave them even more power.¹²¹ Bruce used these taboo words to shock the audience at first, but in reality, as Kenneth Tynan points out “[...] he wants us to be shocked, but by the right things: not by four-letter words, which violate only convention, but by want and deprivation, which violate human dignity.”¹²² He did not choose to use blasphemy or obscenity just to make the audience laugh, he chose to use taboo words if they fit the context and supported the point he was trying to make.

A comedian who dared say things in public which so explicitly criticized America’s hypocritical values could not be charged for blasphemy or any other offensive content of his performances due to the first Amendment guaranteeing freedom of speech. However, he could be sued for the use of obscene words. It was Bruce’s use of

¹¹⁵ W. Kaufman, 90.

¹¹⁶ M. Damon: “The Jewish Entertainer as Cultural Lightning Rod: The Case of Lenny Bruce”, *Postmodern Culture* 7: 2, 1997.

See <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.197/damon.197>.

¹¹⁷ I. Davies: “Lenny Bruce: Hyperrealism and the Death of Jewish Tragic Humor”, 1988. See <http://www.yorku.ca/caitlin/ioan/personal/bruce.htm>.

¹¹⁸ Audio CD: *The Trials of Lenny Bruce. The Fall and Rise of an American Icon*. Sourcebooks Inc. 2002, track 12.

¹¹⁹ *The Trials of Lenny Bruce*, track 24.

¹²⁰ A more detailed examination of Bruce’s performances can be found in my chapter on his strategies of humor.

¹²¹ The word ‘nigger’, for instance, is marked as a taboo-word. Its suppression turns it into an insult, as Bruce impressively showed in his performance ‘Are There Any Niggers Here Tonight?’ which will be analyzed in detail in a following chapter.

¹²² K. Tynan: “Foreword”, in: L. Bruce, xii.

words which were considered verbally offensive that made him end up in jail. The philosophical point behind the vulgarity was not considered by the judges; for them it was “[...] vulgarity divorced from any redeeming social value.”¹²³ The struggle for his right to be heard by the judges, to explain his strategies of humor to them, to show them how socially valuable his performances were when seen in the right context, soon turned into a desperate crusade of an increasingly nervous and obsessed Bruce against the law. He started to replace his biting sharp and brilliant humor with boring lectures of his court-transcripts. His physical decline due to his excessive drug-abuse additionally turned the once brilliant entertainer into a desperate figure driven into “[...] poverty and bankruptcy [...]”¹²⁴ by his prosecutors. He died of an overdose in 1966.

Lenny Bruce, who had once characterized himself as “[...] a craftsman, [who] could just about structure anything into humor”¹²⁵ was labeled ‘sick comic’ and died claiming “I’m not a comedian, I’m Lenny Bruce.”¹²⁶ Deprived of his most important tool as a comedian – his brilliant linguistic abilities and his talent to make a point with them –, he died having lost his comic identity and is remembered as a martyr widening the space of possibilities for his followers. As Will Kaufman puts it:

Rather than focusing his attention on the delivery of playful untruths from the cabaret stage, his final energies were devoted to the anti-ironic, deadly literal discourse of the courtroom. Lenny Bruce died a spoil-sport; but in doing so he paved the way for a rewriting of the rules of play.¹²⁷

It is indisputable that Bruce had lost his comic abilities towards the end of his life. Furthermore, the sanctified image which was attached to him after his death led to a perception of Bruce as a social critic and pioneer only. Although the importance and impact of Bruce is clearly outstanding, it should be interesting to see how Bruce’s strategies of humor worked when he was at the height of his career. After all, before he started his fight against the law, Bruce was a comedian: he stood on a stage and made people laugh. The following chapter is meant to explain how the so-called ‘sick humor’ worked. Why do people laugh at insults? What exactly is funny about Bruce’s humor? An analysis of his strategies of humor should provide a more substantiated starting point to evaluate Bruce’s social value and impact on the American comedy scene and society than does the romanticized hero-worship practiced after his death.

¹²³ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 14.

¹²⁴ W. Kaufman, 104.

¹²⁵ L. Bruce, 93.

¹²⁶ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 23.

¹²⁷ W. Kaufman, 112.

**B 2. “He didn’t step over the line just to step over the line. There was method to his madness.”¹²⁸
– Lenny Bruce’s Strategies of Humor**

Towards the end of his life, marked by his exhausting struggle against the courts, Bruce claimed desperately that he did not consider himself a comedian anymore. Interestingly, his definition of his art was quite different a few years earlier. In a radio interview in 1959, he defined a comedian as “[...] an individual who creates his own material, a guy who’s got a funny bone”¹²⁹ and separates the comedian from “comedy actors”¹³⁰ whose performances are not exclusively bound to a certain person, but can be performed by any kind of good comedy actor. Furthermore, Bruce described himself as a comedian who creates his own material using “the facets of theater”¹³¹ in order to be able to comment on things. Bruce often slipped into different characters and endowed them with distinctive voices. Thus, Bruce was able to be much more than an observer commenting “[...] from the outside looking in”.¹³² Instead, he became an active participant, adding vitality to his performance. As Paul Krassner states in his review of Collins and Skover’s *The Trials of Lenny Bruce*, it is the creation of “mini-theatrical dialogues – about racism, sexuality, nuclear testing, teacher’s salaries, drug laws, abortion rights, organized religion – peppered with improvised spoken-jazz riffs”¹³³ that is so typical of Bruce’s unique style. It is, nevertheless, important to understand that Bruce did not consider himself politically dedicated, nor was social criticism his main objective. “[...] when I do a satire, it’ll just be fun for fun’s sake. The only things that I feel very strongly about – and I’ll attack them through satire – are some principles of American heritage.”¹³⁴

The above statement aptly summarizes the objectives of the following analysis: what is the pure source (‘fun for fun’s sake’) which makes Lenny Bruce’s performances comical and how does critical commentary (satire on principles of American heritage) evoke laughter?

The structure of this chapter proceeds ‘from the outside to the inside’, meaning that a first examination of the visible (gestures, facial expressions) and audible (language,

¹²⁸ P. Keepnews: ‘There Was Thought in His Rage’”, in: *New York Times*, August 8, 1999.

¹²⁹ K. Bruce: *The almost unpublished Lenny Bruce*. Philadelphia: Running Press, 1984, 15.

¹³⁰ K. Bruce, 15.

¹³¹ K. Bruce, 16.

¹³² K. Bruce, 16.

¹³³ “P. Krassner reviews ‘The Trials of Lenny Bruce. The Fall and Rise of an American Icon’”. See <http://www.deepleafproductions.com/wilsonlibrary/texts/krassner-lenny.html>.

¹³⁴ K. Bruce, 17.

articulation, tone) is followed by a thorough examination of content. The analysis of the former – Lenny Bruce on first impression – is based mainly on Bergson’s ‘mechanization of the living’ as well as incongruity theory. Thus, Bruce’s repetitive use of words, his singsong, and his habit of accompanying himself on drums will be explained by analyzing selected performances. In the following analysis of the psychological content of Bruce’s performances the very same performances will be analyzed with regard to their *content* using Freud’s psychoanalytical approach to the comic.

2.1 Lenny Bruce on First Impression

Bruce’s outward appearance onstage is not a spectacular one. He does not wear any kind of costume and he does not use any other props.¹³⁵ The first impression is a rather plain one, the audience can immediately focus on the words he is uttering and is not distracted by anything else. It was Bergson’s suggestion that besides a costume covering the ‘true’ and vivid nature of a person, it may be the repetition of gestures or facial expressions that can create the impression of a rigidness hiding and contradicting the vital flow of life and distracting from the content of an utterance. But we cannot find any distracting repetitive gestures in Bruce’s performances.¹³⁶ His performances work by means of his use of language and even though there are gestures, they are not used in an exaggerated way. It is purely his use of language that characterizes his performance. At this point already, one can note that it is the *content* of Bruce’s words that really gets him laughs. However, his linguistic style, his mixture of jazz idiom and Yiddish, his habit of speaking in a rap-like, rhythm-based tone often accompanied by drums and cymbal should be analyzed concerning possible comical effects before the content of his words is evaluated.

One of his most controversial, yet famous performances is the one called ‘To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb’.¹³⁷ Bruce accompanies himself on drums and starts off in

¹³⁵ Only in his very early performances, when he was still doing average impressions, he used a false nose, beard or a hat.

¹³⁶ See Fred Baker’s documentary *Lenny Bruce Without Tears*. New York, NY: Fred Baker Film & Video Co., 1992.

¹³⁷ This important performance will be analyzed regarding its content in a later part of this chapter again. For a transcript of this performance see: L. Bruce/J. Cohen (ed.): *The Essential Lenny Bruce*. London: Open Gate Books, 1973, 137-140 or consult the Audio CD: *The Trials of Lenny Bruce*, track 12. The version used for analysis throughout this study is taken from the Audio CD *To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb*. Douglas Music, 1969, track 1. For a transcript see the appendix of this study or consult <http://www.freenetpages.co.uk/hp/lennybruce/jazzworkshop.txt>

singsong. The entire routine is characterized by repetition. The crucial word ‘come’ is repeated approximately 30 times, which is considerable in a performance of only about 2 minutes and 20 seconds. The initial sentence ‘To is a preposition, come is a verb’ is repeated four times, accelerating in speech each time it is uttered. The same applies to the sentences ‘Didja come good?’ and ‘Don’t come in me’. Interrupting the repetitive sentences Bruce inserts short explanatory paragraphs, which are muttered in an extremely fast manner.

Can the use of repetition in this case illustrate a mechanization of the living and can it be seen as the cause of laughter as a consequence? The repetition, the rhythm, the staccato obviously resemble a mechanism; and, according to Bergson, it is the mechanical encrusted on the living that creates the comic. One might argue that the kind of mechanization we recognize in this instance is a mechanism symbolizing life: the repetitive and regular utterance immediately conjures up associations with the sexual act. And if the sexual act is seen as the source of the living, it is the most vivid process we can imagine.¹³⁸ Hence, an action which is meant to create life cannot be called a contradiction to life. However, if we approach the issue differently, we may have quite the opposite impression: is it not precisely the resemblance to a mechanism that makes us laugh when we are reminded of a sexual act? Isn’t the sexual act the most obvious instance in which humans resemble machines? We laugh because we sense something non-human in this kind of regular repetition, something mechanical despite its vivid nature. It is indeed “something mechanical encrusted on the living”¹³⁹ which makes us laugh, but which might embarrass us, too.¹⁴⁰ As a consequence, our laughter, in accordance with Bergson, functions as an attempt to reprimand the individual which is not following our social and moral norms.

We remember that Bergson, when he examined the comic in words, suggested that the usage of familiar words in an unfamiliar context, or vice versa, can create a comical effect. The combination of two familiar words (‘to’ and ‘come’) in an unfamiliar context (in combination *and* in public) creates a comical effect in Bruce’s famous performance. Two perfectly harmless and extremely frequent words become an explosive threat to ‘good taste’ when combined. The habitual way of using these words

¹³⁸ Only sometimes did Bruce end this performance with “Cos that’s the purpose of life – to recreate it.” Consult <http://www.freenetpages.co.uk/hp/lennybruce/jazzworkshop.txt> to see a transcript. Unfortunately, Bruce omitted this last sentence in many of his performances of ‘To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb’. On Audio CD’s like *The Trials of Lenny Bruce* and *To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb* the performance ends with “you probably can’t come”.

¹³⁹ H. Bergson, 84.

¹⁴⁰ The sexual repressions underlying this will be part of the psychoanalytical evaluation of humor later on.

is attacked in a moment of inelasticity – inflexibility due to habitual and moral constraints concerning the use of words in public. As a consequence, hesitation or maybe even shocked astonishment is provoked because of the violation of these internalized linguistic habits and morals. It is interesting that the first laughter in ‘To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb’ is heard after as much as approximately 35 seconds. This may lead to the assumption that it takes the audience quite a while to reflect upon what they have heard. The initial four repetitions of the sentence ‘To is a preposition, come is verb’ already hint at their following direct combination. But neither does the audience laugh after the first four sentences, despite the obvious allusion to what might follow, nor does the publicly unusual combination of ‘to’ and ‘come’ provoke laughter. Astonishment and hesitation seem to dominate, laughter is not yet heard. It seems to be the use of the past tense in ‘Didja come good’, following the inserted biographical explanation that also alludes to the sexual implications, which provokes the audience’s direct associations with a sexual act and finally arouses laughter. Reservations concerning the sense of violating linguistic conventions in public seem to fade. But, as Bergson argues, language is always in danger of stiffening up due to habits and so Bruce needs to modify his technique. He does so by adding other words to the now ‘familiar’ combination ‘to come’. ‘Did ja come *good*’ and ‘*Don’t* come *in me*’ and finally ‘*I can’t* come’ [all my italics] add new moments of surprise to the routine just as people have gotten used to the previous utterances.¹⁴¹

There are various other instances of routines in which Bruce accompanies himself with drums creating a very unique rhythmic style. It is also a habit of Bruce’s to speak extremely quickly. He has a tendency to mumble and to blend words and his routines are full of Yiddish terms. All in all, he creates a unique, but to some people partly incomprehensible or even foreign style. “Lenny’s finger-snapping punctuations along with the rhetorical flourish of his constant “Dig!” and Yiddish interjections (“emmis!”) set him apart.”¹⁴² Not even taking the meaning of the Yiddish terminology into account, these words add an almost exotic notion to his language. Audiences familiar with the habitualized use of language can be shaken up with the help of unfamiliar and creative use of language. It is precisely in these moments of surprise and shock, when people recognize something deviating from habitualized norms, that they are perfectly able to reflect on something and rethink it.

¹⁴¹ The very same performance will be analyzed due to its psychological methods later on.

¹⁴² J. Garelick: “A tale of two saints. Albert Ayler and Lenny Bruce get boxed”
http://www.portlandphoenix.com/music/other_stories/documents/04316791.asp.

Bruce's performance 'Are There Any Niggers Here Tonight?' illustrates the observations made so far even better.¹⁴³ In this routine, Bruce starts off with the utterance of the above sentence. It is obvious that the use of the word 'nigger' violates a moral taboo. The use of a 'forbidden' term can be seen as an instance of using an unfamiliar word in a familiar context, according to Bergson's approach to the comic of words. The question itself reminds one of any comedian's opening line, as for example 'Are there any New Yorkers here tonight?' In such an instance, people normally expect some joke about New Yorkers and the ridiculing of allegedly typical New Yorker habits. But Bruce takes this typical opening line and turns it into a threat before he even starts to develop the joke, let alone reaches the climax. It is the combination of a standard line and a term with an explosive potential that increases the audience's attention and causes people to freeze in shock. It is, according to Bergson, an attack in a moment of inelasticity. Due to habitualization, people are not able to adjust to a new situation. A standard line is offered and some standard term is expected. The surprising employment of something unfitting, something unfamiliar concerning conventional use is utilized as a device to create a certain effect.

It is important to understand that in this instance Bergson's theory needs to be modified. Bergson's theory can be used as one way of explaining how words are used to arouse attention. However, we must note that at this point of the performance, no laughter is provoked, and we definitely do not recognize a comical effect yet. We could just as well use incongruity theory to explain the astonishment – not yet the comical effect – of the crucial sentence 'Are there any niggers here tonight?'¹⁴⁴ It works very much alike: we do not expect a word like 'nigger' in a standard sentence nor do we expect it to be used on a stage. In this case it is the juxtaposition of two contrasting notions. Our expectation, which could actually be called inelasticity because we are expecting something we are used to, is not satisfied when we are confronted with something unexpected. Nevertheless, our strained expectations are not discharged with laughter when we realize that they have dissolved into nothing. In this particular instance, our expectations do not actually dissolve into nothing, but build up new tension due to the moral limit that has suddenly been crossed. The audience's resulting anger is the real trigger for the comical effect in this performance. The anger about the violation of certain moral restrictions is ridiculed when Bruce starts to enumerate every ethnic group imaginably using insulting labels such as greaseballs, kikes, spics, etc. As

¹⁴³ See Appendix 3 for a transcript or consult L. Bruce/ J. Cohen, 78 f.

¹⁴⁴ Bergson's theory does not actually differ very much from incongruity theory concerning the use of unfamiliar words in a familiar context, and vice versa.

Richard F. Taflinger states “[...] the words lost their connotative, emotional meaning as insulting terms and turned into just noises.”¹⁴⁵

We are now very close to an evaluation of the content of Bruce’s performances. It was nevertheless necessary to touch this field of analysis already in order to be able to explain how the use of language and tone work in this performance. Bruce imitates some kind of auction when he starts to shout any insulting label he can think of, pointing at the corresponding members of the audience, counting the members of each ethnic group aloud, and accelerating in speech each time to create the said effect of producing just noises instead of insults. As we can see, his habit of using language as a device is a very important component in this performance. It is additionally needed to make his point: the suppression of words gives them their power. If, as he demonstrates linguistically, words are just words, they lose their power to insult. Consequently, Bruce utters the word ‘nigger’ a few more times, increasing more and more until “[...] nigger didn’t mean anything anymore, till nigger lost its meaning.”¹⁴⁶

Finally, the comical effect is created: it is a mixture of several things. It is the comic in words, especially the rapid uttering of ‘nigger’ that reminds one of a mechanism and therefore creates a comical effect of its own. Apart from that, it is the use of words as means to attack inelasticity and to arouse surprise and increase attention and tension. It is this tension that accounts for the strongest comical effect: people in the audience laugh at their former surprise and anger once they have understood Bruce’s point. According to Bergson, all humor is derisive and laughter corrects the ‘outsider’ who differs from conventions and who is looked down upon. In any case, the object that we look down on is judged as inferior. This also includes our former self we judge as inferior. In both performances we laugh at our former surprise and misjudgment. First, we expected something familiar and were instead confronted with something shocking. Afterwards, we laugh at our previous naive and false shocked astonishment.

Bergson’s theory provided an appropriate starting point for analysis. The recognition of those instances in which words are used in an unfamiliar way or unfamiliar words are used to interrupt habits characterized by inflexibility helps very much to understand Bruce’s humor. It must be acknowledged that in most of Bruce’s routines laughter is derisive. However, it must be added that most of the times we look down upon our own former self instead of someone else’s. Interestingly, admirers of

¹⁴⁵ R. F. Taflinger: “Sitcom: What It Is, How It Works. A Theory of Comedy”.
See <http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~taflinge/theory.html>.

¹⁴⁶ L. Bruce/J. Cohen, 79.

Bruce were actually demanding to be offended, to be shocked and insulted. This is a kind of humor resulting in self-reflexive and self-conscious laughter and it needs to be examined with respect to psychological content. We recognize that we might be confronted with instances of laughter as a release. It is now time to look at the content of Bruce's performances to evaluate whether our idea is correct and Bruce's strategies of humor provoke a release of repressed energy.

2.2 The Psychological Content of Lenny Bruce's Humor

At first sight, most of Bruce's humor seems aggressive and insulting. Many of his opening lines provoked reactions of shock or at least surprised disbelief in the audience. On the other hand, most people who came to see Bruce were wondering how far he would go and demanded to be offended, to be taught a lesson. The following analysis will ponder the question how controversial humor works, using Freud's psychoanalytical approach to the comic. It seems justified to apply Freud's theory, because as Kenneth Tynan states in the documentary *Lenny Bruce Without Tears*:

He goes out to do a rush job of psychoanalysis on the audience. He ... root[s] out their deepest inhibitions, their deepest repressions, all the things they're scared of, the things that are never talked about. And [he] holds them up to the most relentless scrutiny, analyzes them, tries to force the audience to come to terms with reality, actual, unspeakable reality.¹⁴⁷

My objective is to analyze this psychoanalytical act of digging up repressions because it seems to be the key to Bruce's strategies of humor.

Three sub-strategies are taken into consideration as they all contribute their part to the psychological act of releasing repressed energy. The first of these – summarized here as 'the use of language to arouse attention and create tension' – has already been explained. The results from this analysis will be reinforced as they are now evaluated concerning the psychological sources and resulting effects associated with the surprising use of certain words. Words which are considered obscene or racist immediately provoke a feeling of uneasiness, even fear of what might come next. Why such restrictions exist in a society is not subject of this study; instead it focuses on the psychological mechanisms going on in an audience which is confronted with so-called taboo terms. Why do we feel uneasy or anxious when we hear a taboo word in public? Why does a taboo term evoke such a threatening atmosphere? Apart from the second strategy (the use of taboo words) the third strategy – the use of logical argumentation –

¹⁴⁷ Kenneth Tynan, in *Lenny Bruce Without Tears*.

will be introduced as a major key to an understanding of Bruce's strategy of humor. His desire to tell the 'plain truth' plays an important part here.

For reasons of organization several performances of Bruce will be analyzed in the following. In each of these, we will see how taboo words are used to shock complacent audiences. It will be explained how Bruce arranges a routine with the help of logical argumentation and how he leads the audience from shock to comprehension and self-reflection. Then, it should be possible to define in how far Freud's theory is applicable or if it needs to be modified. The chosen performances cover different controversial topics ranging from 'obscenity' ('To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb' and 'Las Vegas Tits and Ass') to 'racism' ('Are There Any Niggers Here Tonight?') and 'religion' ('Religions Inc.').

2.2.1 Obscenity

a.) 'To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb'¹⁴⁸

As has already been evaluated earlier, Bruce's opening line in this performance combines the preposition 'to' and the verb 'come'. 'To come' is not even used in direct combination at the beginning. His simple linguistic classification, nevertheless, immediately alludes to some sexual connotation. Neither in the first four repetitions of 'To is a preposition, come is a verb' nor in the following 'to come', which is repeated once, do we for one second think about the harmless infinitive 'to come' in its meaning of "to move toward something"¹⁴⁹. We have just explained that the repetition resembling a mechanism has the effect of alluding to the sexual act. The associated sexual act itself resembles a mechanism and accounts for the comical effect.

Besides repetition and tone, are there any other explanations why we immediately associate 'to have an orgasm' when Bruce utters his initial sentences? One might argue that in this case context plays an important role. Audiences expected Bruce to be obscene or in some other way controversial. Consequently, an innocent perception of the crucial utterances is improbable. Likewise, we can think of instances

¹⁴⁸ The following refers to the version of 'To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb' taken from the Audio CD *To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb*, track 1, a transcript of this version can be found in Appendix 1 of this study.

¹⁴⁹ Merriam Webster, <http://www.m-w.com>.

when teenagers are in a silly mood and understand every utterance that comprises any grammatical variant of ‘to come’ sexually even if it was meant to be harmless.¹⁵⁰

Can we, apart from context, find any other explanation for this phenomenon of understanding something in its sexual meaning instead of its literal meaning? This seems to be important since Freud enumerates “double meaning with an allusion”¹⁵¹ as one of the most frequent joke techniques. His explanation of why this technique is used is that it is a method to save expenditure. Something can be said that otherwise would have had to be said in a more complex and possibly in a socially unacceptable way. Freud, however, refers to examples in which the word that has a double meaning and alludes to some sexual content is embedded in a complete joke. Thus, the joke can be understood in an innocent or in an allusive way, both of which can be funny.¹⁵² In our Bruce example we are left with the double meaning of a simple utterance for the moment. It is noteworthy that the sole mentioning of ‘To is a preposition, come is a verb’ and ‘to come’ does not immediately evoke laughter.¹⁵³ Nevertheless, the allusive potential is obvious and paves the way for what is about to come.

One could suppose that a certain repertoire of words exists and that it is suppressed by societal restrictions. Every member of a society accepts not to use these words that are considered morally unacceptable in public, because their use would lead to an exclusion from society. According to Freud, in a society which is bound to certain morals and values, aggression and natural sexual urges – the “[...] desire to see the organs peculiar to each sex exposed is one of the original components of our libido”¹⁵⁴ – have to be oppressed. By means of joking it is possible to give way to these suppressed urges. However, Freud’s theory has to be modified at this point. His suggestion is that the technique of a joke is the device to circumvent internal censorship. The pleasure one can gain from the joke-technique tricks the censorship which forbids inhibitions to be released. In other words, with the help of a joke the censorship is outwitted and a release of inhibitions is made possible. In Bruce’s performance we cannot find a witty joke-technique allowing the superego to give way to the repressed pleasure. There is no sublimation whatsoever – if we understand a cunning joke-technique as a method of being able to say things we otherwise would not have been

¹⁵⁰ For example in a sentence like “When did she come yesterday?”

¹⁵¹ S. Freud, 42.

¹⁵² Freud cites the following joke: “Some people think that the husband has earned a lot and so has been able to lay by a bit [*sich etwas zurückgelegt*]; others again think that the wife has lain back a bit [*sich etwas zurückgelegt*] and so has been able to earn a lot”, see S. Freud, 33.

¹⁵³ Provided that the recordings at hand (Audio CD’s *The Trials of Lenny Bruce*, track 12 and *To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb*, track 1) are representative.

¹⁵⁴ S. Freud, 98.

able to say. Still, the expression ‘To is a preposition, come is a verb’ seems to dig up some kind of sexual urge. Otherwise the audience would understand ‘to come’ in its harmless meaning. A sexual association is clearly noticeable, but no inhibition is discharged yet. On the contrary, it makes us feel uncomfortable because we know that a societal norm has been violated and this creates tension. Our censorship seems to be alert and unwilling to lose the ‘battle’ this time. The uneasiness we feel is actually a cry for help. Provided that ‘To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb’ is presented in front of a voluntary and intellectual audience which expects to discover a philosophical point and does not only take pleasure in the senseless uttering of foul or at least suggestive language, this kind of audience needs assistance now. Our senses are on alert and we expect Bruce to offer a solution. The superego forbids pleasure in senseless violations of ‘good taste’ and our senses are in a state of strained expectation. There are two possible solutions to overcome this state of being: the first one would be a reasonable explanation that we have misunderstood the crucial utterances and ‘to come’ was meant in its harmless way. This possibility will definitely not result in any pleasure. It will calm down the internal censorship but possible sexual repressions are not released and remain in the unconscious. The second solution is more satisfying and will result in a discharge of inhibitions. It is the solution Bruce offers his audience. It is a reasonable explanation, using the method of logical argumentation, which enables the audience to reflect on their previous uneasiness and makes them understand Bruce’s point: it is societal restrictions that give power to words.¹⁵⁵

A closer look at Bruce’s method of developing this performance should help to illustrate the above. The uttering of ‘To is a preposition, come is a verb’ and ‘to come’ is followed by the insertion: “I’ve heard these two words my whole adult life, and as a child when I thought I was sleeping. To come. To come.”¹⁵⁶ This insertion offers an explanation to the previous allusions that had put our senses on alert. By now we know that we have understood Bruce correctly. Still, the superego is on alert and does not allow any discharge of energy yet. This observation seems to be correct, because no laughter is heard at this point. The audience still expects a solution; the simple assurance that the sexual context has been understood does not release tension. The first wave of laughter occurs after the four repetitions of ‘Didja come good’. Here, our former examination of the importance of language must be mentioned again. It is the most obvious allusion to the sexual act in the entire routine. Bruce conjures up an image of a

¹⁵⁵ This ‘formula’ is more prominent in performances that take racism as their topic. However, this performance functions in accordance with the very same ‘formula’.

¹⁵⁶ See Appendix 1.

child having to ear-witness his parents in bed. The repeated utterances ‘Didja come good’, each of them blended into the next one, is equated with the sexual act itself. Bruce manages to create this impression by the pure use of language. This direct impression serves as the ultimate assurance that the content of this routine is a sexual one; a first part of the supposed inhibitions can be released. It is important to notice that we hear some laughter, but there is definitely no outburst of laughter. A sense of uneasiness is still in the air, we are not sure whether our idea of ‘good taste’ is threatened. The laughter which is heard is probably a release of tension rather than a release of sexual inhibitions. And indeed, Bruce increases tension once more by inserting another explanatory part culminating in ‘Don’t come in me’:

I come better with you sweetheart than with anyone in the whole goddamn world. I really came so good. I really came so good ‘cause I love you. Really came so good. I come better with you sweetheart, than anyone in the whole wide world, I really came so good. So good. BUT. Don’t come in me.

For the first time, people in the audience begin to realize that the performance is about some kind of marriage or at least male-female-relationship problem. Consequently, the first outburst of laughter is heard after the first uttering of ‘Don’t come in me’. Not only is the performance about issues concerning relationships or marriage but, moreover, it is about cliché problems in a relationship. The repetitive singing of ‘Don’t come in me’ is intensified in ‘Don’t come in me, mimme, mimme’ and serves as a preparation for the most intense outburst of laughter when we hear ‘I CAN’T COME’. The entire performance has symbolized the sexual act and this utterance symbolically ends the sexual act. Typical clichés are brought up with the purpose of giving the audience the chance to identify with what they have heard so far (the woman’s “Cause you don’t love me, that’s why you can’t come.” and the man’s “What has that got to do with loving you? I just can’t come, that’s all.”).

It is important to understand that this routine does not focus on problems between the sexes. Bruce is using this issue to make a far more important point: the classifying of words as ‘obscene’ is an act of repression itself. The by far most ‘natural thing in the world’ is considered ‘obscene’ by societal norms and values. Those who allow themselves to remember and acknowledge the naturalness (which they normally are forced to suppress) by identifying with the couple in the routine are able to release inhibitions and laugh. As a consequence, those who find “[...] those two words decadent, obscene, immoral, amoral, asexual [...] probably can’t come”, as Bruce states. “Can’t come” at this point also symbolizes unwillingness or even a disability to laugh – disability to take the chance to release repressed urges. The plain logic in Bruce’s

arrangement of the performance, the way he assures his audience that it is something natural and very common he is talking about, paves the way for an uncensored discharge of laughter. The costume of a joke is not necessary. It is intelligent reasoning that enables the release of inhibitions. The astonishing revelation, that logical argumentation ridicules the classification ‘obscene’, allows us to circumvent the strict rule of the superego. The superego does not have to be tricked to be able to release repressions. The simplicity of Bruce’s reasoning is sufficient to convince internal censorship. If the societal restrictions are revealed as senseless, a more natural way of dealing with sexual urges is made possible. Of course, a great part of our natural sexual urges has to be repressed instead of acted out immediately. Nevertheless, the method of confronting taboos with the help of logical argumentation might be a more direct way to handle sexuality, because the amount of taboos diminishes and the repressions that have to be dealt with become less pressing.

b.) ‘Las Vegas Tits and Ass’¹⁵⁷

Lenny Bruce always claimed that he did not consider himself just a standard stand-up comedian who simply goes up on the stage and reels off a previously rehearsed program. Nevertheless, many of his famous routines were performed quite frequently and exist on records in similar but never identical versions. The performance at hand, ‘Las Vegas Tits and Ass’, offers one of the best explanations to the issue of dirty humor given by Bruce himself. The crucial part of the routine is almost identical in all recorded versions and will be analyzed in the following.¹⁵⁸

The routine starts off as a small-talk conversation about the attractions in America’s center of entertainment, Las Vegas. The first comical effect is prepared by enumerating different cultural attractions, for example the Monet exhibition or the New York City Ballet. This enumeration provides the necessary contrast to the following ‘tits and ass’, which Bruce introduces as the *major* attraction of Las Vegas. It is the first laugh in this performance. The contrast to the cultural attractions is the one reason why laughter is provoked. The other reason is that taboo words come into play. In this routine, the audience does not seem to feel uncomfortable when the taboo words are

¹⁵⁷ The following refers to the version on the Audio CD *To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb*, track 5. Other, slightly different versions can be found on the Audio CDs *Lenny Bruce Live at the Curran Theater*, Fantasy Records, 1999, Disc II, track 2 and on *Lenny Bruce. The Carnegie Hall Concert*, Capitol Records, 1995, Disc II, track 1. A transcript is provided in L. Bruce/J. Cohen, 43-45.

¹⁵⁸ See Appendix 2 for a transcript of the excerpt used in this chapter.

uttered. On the contrary, they are the first cause of laughter. Bruce seems to be able to evoke comprehension a lot earlier than in the ‘To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb’ performance. One possible explanation might be that the performance is much more transparent from the very beginning. A direct link between ‘asking for attractions’ and ‘tits and ass’ can be noticed as soon as ‘tits and ass’ are mentioned. It is the immediate answer to the repeated question about the biggest attraction. With the help of two little terms the entire Las Vegas entertainment industry is reduced to the essential.¹⁵⁹ This reduction to the essential seems to be understood and approved of by the audience within seconds. The whole process of reflection is achieved much faster than in the previous performance. The moment of surprise when the taboo words are heard is followed by immediate approval, because the linkage to a ‘truth’ Bruce is stating is obvious. Hesitation is replaced by an immediate release of supposed repressions. Bruce’s ability to reduce a complex topic to its simple and essential core allows the discharge of energy. The superego has to succumb to the disarming persuasiveness of logic. The classification of ‘tits and ass’ as taboo terms becomes irrelevant because of the overwhelming force of logical argumentation that is linked to it. The psychological mechanism one could dare suggest here is that the repressed sexual urges of every human being are given permission to be released from the superego as soon as the superego is convinced that its restrictions are irrelevant.

Bruce repeats the words ‘tits and ass’ and blends them into another. The comical effect is thus intensified. Here, the comical effect is explainable due to a ‘mechanization’ of language: repetition and blending, the reduction of words to pure sounds resembles something mechanical and thus account for the comical effect.

The following development of the routine is not crucial and we can skip some lines and proceed to the crux of this performance. Talking about the problem that ‘tits and ass’ cannot be put up on a marquee gives Bruce the chance to explain his “Dirty-Word Concept”¹⁶⁰. By ridiculing his imaginary opponent speaker, who is fine with putting up the Yiddish, Latin or French version of ‘tits and ass’ up on the marquee, Bruce is able to state once again that it is the stigmatization of words that gives them power to insult. Of course, his remark that ‘glutius maximus’ [sic] and ‘pectoralis majors’ [sic] are clean to the speakers of English but ‘dirty to the Latins’ gains him laughs. In addition, his ironic observation that the rejection of ‘tits and ass’ is anti-Anglo-Saxon

¹⁵⁹ The fact that Bruce asked for “the attraction *purists* support” intensifies the correctness of this observation in a piquant way. Nevertheless, the performance works even if this allusion to the hypocrisy of authorities goes unnoticed.

¹⁶⁰ This expression is used as a headline of chapter 2 in L. Bruce/J. Cohen, 31.

and the approval of the Yiddish version is at least and laudably not anti-Semitic evokes laughter once more.¹⁶¹ These additional punch-lines serve the function of reinforcing what has already been achieved: an understanding of the absurdity of classifying words as ‘obscene’ in the first place. The crucial release of inhibitions is probably achieved when ‘tits and ass’ is uttered for the first time and when it is thus linked to the entire entertainment industry, as was explained above. The repetition of the very same philosophical point enhances the newly accomplished comprehension and enables a relieving laughter at our former self. We laugh at and look down upon our former selves. We laugh at how we used to obey restrictions and we take much pleasure in recognizing our now relieved state of mind. Bruce’s extension of the same point evokes extended pleasure in a new point of view less bound to restrictions.

2.2.2 Racism

‘Are there any Niggers here tonight?’ was Lenny Bruce’s opening line in a performance which is rarely found on recordings.¹⁶² The audience’s supposed reaction probably reflected incomprehensive shock and extreme uneasiness. Bruce echoes his audience’s presumable reactions by whispering “What did he say? [...] Is that cruel. Does he have to go that low for laughs?”¹⁶³ With this echo he already signals that “[...] it was all part of a comic campaign to bleed racist words of their poisonous meaning.”¹⁶⁴

Similar to the restricted vocabulary concerning sexuality, we obey certain societal restrictions when it comes to ethnic classifications. Talking about the use and effects of racist words, we definitely have to distinguish between people who are directly threatened (African Americans) and those who indirectly feel the threat (all other ethnic groups). In the following analysis, the latter will be discussed first.

American society with its history of slavery, segregation and today’s problems of discrimination against African American people, has for a long time been eager to establish a socially acceptable vocabulary to avoid racism. Instead of honestly confronting problems of racism, the suppression or moral prohibition of certain words was supposed to be a sufficient tool to solve problems of this kind. As a consequence, these internalized restrictions or even prohibitions to use certain words seem to be

¹⁶¹ Wrong spelling in this sentence corresponds with wrong spelling in original transcript in L. Bruce/ J. Cohen.

¹⁶² The following examination is based on L. Bruce/J. Cohen, 78 f., also see Appendix 3 for a transcript.

¹⁶³ L. Bruce/J. Cohen, 78.

¹⁶⁴ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 19.

accepted without further reflection by every member of the 'white' American society.¹⁶⁵ It seems to be an internalized habit and rule that the use of racist taboo words will result in an exclusion from society. Bruce's cruel and sudden violation of a socially accepted restriction immediately evokes reactions of shock. People feel that some limit has been crossed, and without thinking about Bruce's motives, they want the taboo word to be taken back. The very utterance is equated with an insult. It is almost as if the context does not count at all. People's first reaction is probably that they do not even want explanations. Instead, the first and foremost wish is to rewind the past minutes. In the case of obscenity, people just felt uneasy at first but were willing to wait for a conclusion, a chance to comprehend why conventions had been violated. It was almost as if people were sitting on top of a volcano and Bruce paved the way to finally let it erupt. In the case of racist content, people do not seem to be longing for a final eruption. The suppression of sexual urges is common to all people no matter which ethnic background they belong to. Every member of the audience can probably relate to the topic of sexuality and take their chance to release inhibitions. In the case of racist issues things are different. Each member of the audience might belong to a different ethnic group. This alone might produce an effect of segregation. Each member might show different individual reactions. Thus, the already uncomfortable situation becomes even worse. Although it was Bruce alone who uttered the 'forbidden' words, all 'white' members in the contemporary audience probably felt uneasy and guilty facing the African American members in the audience sitting right next to them. This explains their supposed wish to have the words taken back that are equated with a direct insult. The prohibition to use a word like 'nigger' seems to be deeply rooted. Its oppression is like a traditional inherited guilt, which is passed on from generation to generation. Thus, things which are said to be surmounted can be kept in a hidden place and never let out again. If a word like 'nigger' is uttered, as in the Bruce performance, fear dominates logical reasoning. It is almost as if the long acquired achievement to keep the evil under control is spoiled within seconds. This should explain why one part of the audience feels uneasy.

The African American members of the audience feel a different kind of threat when they hear Bruce say the word 'nigger' onstage. However, racist words are 'prohibited' in the American society for the same reasons. But from the point of view of the 'oppressed', Bruce's crucial opening line has another effect. African Americans

¹⁶⁵ In this instance 'white' means all other ethnic groups except those that would be directly insulted: African Americans.

perceive the words as a direct and excluding insult. If it is said by a Non-African American, all African Americans are marked as different from the rest and thrown into one category.¹⁶⁶ A repressed aggression might be stirred up, an inherited and maybe traditional aggression resulting from a long history of oppression. Interestingly, one could suppose that the African American members of the audience do not wish to rewind the performance and make the words unsaid. On the contrary, they might be ready to take the challenge and demand explanations. Enormous tension is created and the smoldering aggression needs to be released in some way.

How does Bruce solve this risky situation? He starts to count every member of every ethnic group in the audience he can see and think of. And as a result “[...] there was no one left to single out.”¹⁶⁷ The categorizing of African Americans that was perceived as a threat is compensated for and ridiculed. African Americans get their chance to release tension because their aggression dissolves into nothing after the presentation of such an astonishing piece of logical argumentation. As soon as it is clear that the word ‘nigger’ has lost its meaning in the midst of dozens of other ethnic classifications, it loses its threatening connotation. The arrangement of the performance as an auction enhances the absurdity of exclusion and ridicules the idea that one ethnic classification is more ‘valuable’ than the other. A potential release of aggression due to a long traditional *and* personal history of having to suppress aggression against racists is converted into laughter and can be satisfyingly released. The superego that fights against the urge to release pent-up rage is convinced by logical reasoning and the release of inhibitions is made possible.

The Non-African American members of the audience are able to release their trained traditional guilt once they have realized that the prohibition of words is senseless and even dangerous. People come to this conclusion as soon as Bruce starts to enumerate the many other ethnic classifications. His final explanation, which summarizes the significance of his routine, is not even needed to understand his crucial point. People recognize the point he made much earlier. Again, it is logical reasoning that convinces the superego to give way to the release of inhibitions. The explanation given at the end of the routine just serves as a final assurance that everyone got the point: “The point? That the word’s suppression gives it the power, the violence the

¹⁶⁶ The phenomenon that some groups of African Americans may use ‘nigger’ when they are within their ethnic group is known but will not be examined here.

¹⁶⁷ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 19.

viciousness.”¹⁶⁸ Now people can finally look back and laugh at themselves and their former fear of breaking a rule that now seems so out-dated and wrong.

As was explained earlier, Bruce’s use of language, his exaggerated play with words, his morphing them into just noises, enhances the comical effects in his performance. Not only does the impression of something mechanical have its very own comical effects but, moreover, it emphasizes the philosophical point in this performance: words lose their dangerous meaning when they are turned into just noises. “One mick, one spic, one hick, thick, funky, spunky boogey”¹⁶⁹ and “niggernigger niggerniggerniggerniggernigger”¹⁷⁰ should serve as impressive examples.

2.2.3. Religion

Every day people are straying away from the church and going back to God. Really. But I know that Christ and Moses are in heaven, and they’re saying “What the hell are they doing with The Book? They’re shoving it in motel drawers? Let’s make Earth!”¹⁷¹

Bruce’s comment impressively summarizes his attitude towards organized religion. The Jewish entertainer Bruce pointed his finger at “the whole of western organized religion [...]”¹⁷², including Judaism, Catholicism, and Protestantism. In his famous performance ‘Religions Incorporated’¹⁷³ he describes religious leaders of all kinds. They are all part of one huge conspiracy and are more interested in financial profit than in religious or social issues. The routine starts with a telephone call interrupting the meeting in which – just like in a business meeting – a graph is interpreted. Catholicism, due to the recent election of the new Pope, is leading the competition. Throughout the entire performance, references to economic interests of the religious leaders are made. Billy Graham, for instance, asks the Pope if he could arrange for him to get an Italian sports car. From the very beginning, the atmosphere in this performance is that of unscrupulous businessmen meeting like ‘buddies’. Considering the recording at hand, which starts with the long distance-call from the Pope, this atmosphere comes up when Oral Roberts addresses the Pope with “HELLO JOHNNY! WHAT’S SHAKING BABY?” right after having agreed to take the charges of the long distance call. This obviously ridicules the reverent attitude which could be expected in a situation such as

¹⁶⁸ L. Bruce/J. Cohen, 79.

¹⁶⁹ L. Bruce/J. Cohen, 79.

¹⁷⁰ L. Bruce/J. Cohen, 79.

¹⁷¹ L. Bruce/J. Cohen, 15.

¹⁷² W. Kaufman, 96.

¹⁷³ See Appendix 4 for a transcript relevant for this analysis or consult the Audio CD *The Trials of Lenny Bruce*, track 24. For a complete version see L. Bruce/J. Cohen, 18-23.

this. From the very beginning, the rituals of organized religion are displayed as irrelevant and ridiculous. Religious leaders are sitting together, talking to each other like business-buddies and discussing business matters instead of religious and social issues concerning their parishes. A deeply faithful audience, which does not wish to call into question the integrity and honesty of religious leaders, probably finds this portrayal offensive. This routine does not start off with an uncomfortable beginning until a crucial moment of revelation is reached and people start to rethink previous attitudes (and in this respect it is different from the previous ones that have already been discussed in this study). 'Religions Inc.' starts with a rebellious attitude and remains like that until the end. It even culminates in the claim that the Pope is Jewish. People who are deeply faithful and convinced of the infallibility of the church will either leave right at the beginning of the performance or be outraged throughout the performance. We should, as a consequence, take it as a premise that the audience is willing to perceive criticism of organized religion. The previous performances may also have resulted in walk-outs of those who do not wish to have certain limits crossed and who are not interested in experiencing a process of self-reflection. On the other hand, we must suppose that people in a typical Lenny Bruce audience knew what they would have to expect, and therefore a certain amount of intellectualism, curiosity and a willingness to reconsider things should be taken for granted. Nevertheless, even people who possess the above characteristics and would not be offended in performances about sexuality or racism might be offended in the routine on religion. It becomes obvious that in 'Religions Inc.' with its critical and ironic atmosphere from the very beginning, the violation of rules and rituals is not used as a device to invert attitudes later on. Instead, a critical attitude towards organized religion or a very flexible sense of humor is needed to start with. In this performance, the first shock, i.e. the creation of a certain atmosphere, only serves as an introduction to a performance in which this atmosphere is enhanced and which serves as a reflection of a highly critical attitude towards organized religion in general.

Taking as a premise that the members of the audience are willing to laugh about a performance criticizing organized religion, we can now try to find out why exactly they laugh. A critical audience, this we can suppose, normally has to suppress possible criticism of any kind of organized religion. It is the American creed that freedom of religion is granted. Freedom of religion itself might be called hypocritical as well, because many religions do not really allow critical questioning of values, their churches or leaders. Without further investigations into the nature of the problem and its underlying reasons, we can nevertheless suppose that in American society criticism very

often has to be suppressed. An exaggerated criticism as that by Bruce is a welcome way to release suppressed doubts about the church and criticism of religious values. Doing away with reverent rituals enables the release of inhibitions concerning organized religion. Bruce's initial sentences make the release possible. The whole process of going through shock first, having to re-consider established standards next, and then experiencing the succumbing of the superego in order to finally release inhibitions via laughter is not necessary. The suppressions we are talking about in this performance do not seem to be as deeply rooted as those concerning sexuality or racism. Bruce just says what people have already tacitly agreed: the doubtfulness of the infallibility of the churches. No deeply rooted repressed urges are brought to the surface. Instead, these might even be issues people frankly talk about at home.

However, the way Bruce presents the issue exceeds people's own criticism. People need Bruce's exaggerated and daring performance to allow themselves to finally release their suppressed criticism. In a hilarious way Bruce develops the phone call to the Pope. Since Bruce only plays the part of Roberts in this phone call, what the Pope is saying has to be guessed. But of course this becomes obvious from Roberts' reactions. In a few seconds Bruce creates the impression that the election of the Pope was a strategic campaign to boost the popularity of the Catholic Church ("That puff of white smoke was a genius stroke. Was in the papuhs faw six days heah"). Moreover, he suspects the Pope to have a girl-friend ("How's your Old Lady? No, nobody's ona phone"). Finally, he moves on to the crucial part of this performance: the problem of integration and the responsibility of the churches concerning this problem. Soon, we have the impression that this is an annoying question for the religious leaders ("they're buggin us again with that dumb integration...NO, AH DUNNO why the hell they wanna go to school eithuh...yeah that school bus scene"). It seems to be a problem they would like to solve 'by magic' rather than by active interference ("make the religious leaduhs tawk about it...No...Yes...No they donwannany quaatations from the Bahble. They wannus to come out an *say* things [...] Ah did em awl ah'm telling yew...BUT THEY'RE BUGGIN US!). In the end, the Pope is accused of shirking responsibility ("SURE, THAT'S EASY FAW YEW TO SAY, YOU'RE OVUH THEAH!") and when he finally agrees to come to America, it is just for reasons of publicity ("I can get the Steve Allen Show the nineteenth [...]...Jus wave, thass awl. Wear the big ring"). The final and fatal attack symbolizes the doubts cast on organized religions, the falseness and the hypocrisy of the church: "NO, NOBODY KNOWS YOU'RE JEWISH!" is the assuring remark that ends the phone call. Against the background of the Catholic

Church's dark history of persecuting Jews, the head of the Catholic Church is said to be Jewish. This sensational turn of events symbolizes the dubiousness of the power and integrity of all organized religions in general.

2.3 Conclusion: Lenny Bruce's Strategies of Humor

The preceding analysis has shown that Bruce's humor makes use of three sub-strategies. First, his use of language not only sets him apart but accounts for comical effects. Second, the use of taboo-words provokes and increases attention and tension and prepares for the third: logical argumentation. Logical argumentation is used to question former norms and values, reveal them as invalid and hence enable reflection of previous moral and societal restrictions.

Bruce made people experience an individual act of catharsis – the 'cruel' confrontation with internalized restrictions, the following process of convincing and overcoming the censorship, and the final release of repressions. He also made people realize that there was a need for a general catharsis in American society. Bruce was always eager to cover a wide range of topics thus depicting American society in a radical yet hopeful way. Lenny Bruce did not just point a finger but was wholeheartedly convinced of his "[...] determination to tell the truth as he saw it, whether about society or about himself."¹⁷⁴ His goal was not to find out how far he could go, or how mean he could be. He did not use taboo-words to make his listeners feel uncomfortable. Bruce did not break taboos without compelling reasons: "He didn't step over the line just to step over the line. There was method to his madness."¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ P. Keepnews.

¹⁷⁵ P. Keepnews.

B 3. “Alive Lenny was a problem. Dead he’s a property.”¹⁷⁶ – The Early Reception of Lenny Bruce

3.1 The Early Years

In May 1959 the *New York Times* described Lenny Bruce as “the [...] most scarifyingly funny proponent of significance, all social and some political, to be found in a nightclub [...]”.¹⁷⁷ Only seven years later this talented and promising stand-up comedian and social critic was dead.

The press coverage between 1959 and 1966, the year of Bruce’s death, offers interesting insights into the career of the person Lenny Bruce and shows the decline of his reputation. In the *New York Times* article cited above, written by Gilbert Millstein, Bruce is introduced as an “abstract expressionist stand-up comedian [...] imbued with a fidgety sense of moral indignation.”¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, large parts of his act are quoted. Bruce characterizes himself and his act as follows: “certain areas of society make me unhappy, and satirizing them – aside from being lucrative – provides a release for me.”¹⁷⁹ The article proceeds with a short vita of Bruce and concludes with neutral remarks on his first TV appearance a few weeks earlier and the number of albums published so far. Any suspected ‘dangerous’ potential in his acts and albums is not mentioned in this early article. It is in general quite noteworthy that Bruce’s social and cultural importance was clearly recognized in early articles and after his first appearance on national television, on *The Steve Allen Show*. However, for the show his act was trimmed to fit the family medium television, which as the *Washington Post* emphasizes “didn’t offer him full range and if you wanted the whole impact, then you had better rush out and buy his latest record album.”¹⁸⁰ Bruce’s performance on the *Steve Allen Show*¹⁸¹, indeed, was far from being the bitingly sharp, yet linguistically and logically brilliant act Bruce was capable of. Nevertheless, his routine was “daring for his late ‘50s

¹⁷⁶ A. Goldman cited in “Bruce Boomlet”, in: *TIME*, May 31, 1971.

¹⁷⁷ G. Millstein: “Man, It’s Like Satire”, in: *New York Times*, May 3, 1959.

¹⁷⁸ G. Millstein.

¹⁷⁹ G. Millstein.

¹⁸⁰ L. Laurent: “Comedian Lenny Bruce Fell Short of the Fable”, in: *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, May 12, 1959.

Interestingly, Bruce’s first arrest marks the beginning of a period in which the majority of all articles on him are limited to neutral accounts of his arrests and convictions in and outside the US; a period that lasted until 1966, the year of Bruce’s death. Cf. “Lenny Bruce sentenced”, in: *New York Times*, March 15, 1963 or T. Buckley: “Lenny Bruce and 2 Café Owners Go on Trial in Obscenity Case”, in: *New York Times*, June 17, 1964. Afterwards a large number of articles applaud the importance of Lenny Bruce, some of the latest ones dating from 2003, the year of Bruce’s posthumous pardon, and 2004.

¹⁸¹ See *Lenny Bruce Without Tears*.

TV audience”.¹⁸² He spoke about such topics as drug abuse – a teenager who coincidentally finds out how to get high on airplane glue, which comes along as a silly story but actually ridicules the mentality of panic and prohibition concerning drug abuse. Bruce’s opinion that he does not understand “the moral condemnation of marijuana, not only because of its nontoxic, nonaddicting effects as contrasted with those of alcohol [...] caffeine in coffee, amphetamine [...]”¹⁸³ as well as typical dialogues such as the following illustrate the criticism which really lies below the surface of the harmless story about the effects of airplane glue:

“Well, maybe marijuana’s not *bad* for you, but it’s a stepping stone. It leads to heavier drugs – heroin, etc.”

Well, that syllogism has to work out this way, though: The heroin addict, the bust-out junkie that started out smoking pot says to his cell mate: “I’m a bust-out junkie. Started out smoking pot, look at me now. By the way, cell mate, what happened to you? There’s blood on your hands. How’d you get to murder those kids in that crap game? Where did it all start?”

“Started with bingo in the Catholic Church.”

“I see.”¹⁸⁴

The softened act on the *Steve Allen Show*, possibly because of this underlying tendency to talk about topics never before uttered on entertainment TV, however, gave the network officials an “[...] uneasy feeling of anything-can-happen”¹⁸⁵ and ended Lenny Bruce’s TV career. For today’s viewers, the TV-performance seems rather unspectacular – especially compared to Bruce’s nightclub act taking place in a territory less bound to restrictions. Steve Allen’s announcement that America was about to see “the most shocking comedian of our time”¹⁸⁶ seems inappropriate today. The American audiences of the late 1950’s, however, were used to TV programs reflecting the post-World-War-II mentality of idyllic family life and American prosperity. Hence, Bruce’s remarks on drug abuse and his enumeration of things that offended him (segregation, for instance¹⁸⁷) were perceived as aggressive criticism of American society’s mentality. Larry Gelbart, who describes comedy as a mirror of the nation’s state of mind, argues that American humor reflects “a series of seismic shifts set in motion by overwhelming forces of change”¹⁸⁸, one of these having been World War II. In contrast to mainstream comedians who supported the fragile scenario of a prosperous and safe American idyll, Bruce reflected the fears underlying the ideal image. He confronted American audiences with such issues as the then present danger of a nuclear war. Bruce uncomfortably

¹⁸² R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 16.

¹⁸³ L. Bruce, 47.

¹⁸⁴ L. Bruce/ J. Cohen, 68 f.

¹⁸⁵ A. Goldman: *Ladies and gentlemen*, 327.

¹⁸⁶ *Lenny Bruce Without Tears*.

¹⁸⁷ *Lenny Bruce Without Tears*.

¹⁸⁸ L. Gelbart, 35.

reminded them that they “shouldn’t sit around in a kind of euphoric state believing that everything is right in the world, that America is entirely without fault [...]”.¹⁸⁹

A few more words have to be said about the typical 1950’s and early 1960’s American society and mentality in order to explain how even the mild criticism of Bruce’s 1959 appearance on the *Steve Allen Show* could have the effect of a bomb dropped on the idyllic scenery of the United States. In addition, a contextualization will help to explain why his ‘scandalous’ performances on public stages turned into a hunt for obscene content with the objective of silencing the rebel who might have had a cause.

The post-World-War-II-period in America was a prosperous time, economically and culturally. World War II “provided the decisive catalyst for postwar growth, first by ensuring adequate purchasing power at the end of the war, and second by offering veterans benefits that helped create the foundation for sustained postwar prosperity [...]”.¹⁹⁰ Most Americans could hardly wait to spend their savings on products symbolizing American wealth and luxury. The flight from the big cities’ congestion and criminality resulted in a rapid development of suburbs. The construction of highways, and the importance of owning a car and TV symbolized the perfection of the American Dream for most Americans. The negative aspects, such as dependency on the automobile, the resulting breakdown of mass transportation, pollution and social consequences of a life organized around television – by the middle of the decade Americans were spending more hours in front of their TV than at work¹⁹¹ – “[...] were accepted as the price of progress.”¹⁹² At the same time, this era was characterized by a constantly smoldering danger. The postwar confrontation of the late 1940’s between the Soviet Union and the USA was “[...] deeply rooted in differences of values, economic systems, or historical experiences [...]”¹⁹³ The fear of an extended Soviet rule over Europe and a resulting “polarization of power”¹⁹⁴ – communists against ‘the free people’ – resulted in the Cold War.¹⁹⁵ The affluent American society was deliberately trying to prove that people were safe. Television, the number one symbol of wealth, was meant to reassure safety. The longing for idyllic TV programs reflecting and reassuring that the

¹⁸⁹ L. Gelbart, 37.

¹⁹⁰ W. H. Chafe: *The Unfinished Journey. America since World War II*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, 107.

¹⁹¹ See D. T. Miller/ M. Nowak: *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*. New York: Double Day and Company, 1977, 7.

¹⁹² D. T. Miller/ M. Nowak, 8.

¹⁹³ W. H. Chafe, 69.

¹⁹⁴ W. H. Chafe, 31.

¹⁹⁵ No detailed historical account is intended at this point.

Americans were doing right and that they were as free and safe as they thought they were becomes obvious against the background of the Cold War. The perfect American scenario was to be maintained and strengthened; consequently “Nonconformists and rebels were subject to harsh conformists’ pressures.”¹⁹⁶

To what extent was Bruce a rebel and was his act a threat to the American idyll? First of all, it is important to remember Bruce’s position as an entertainer. He was definitely not the conformist comedian who appeared on family TV shows. But neither did he remain the underground comedian who offered his opinion in places where “[...] a certain amount of dissent is tolerated, protected, perhaps even cultivated, provided only that it never reach a mass audience or become effectual.”¹⁹⁷ Bruce was longing for recognition from the mass audience. TV was not Bruce’s medium, because he was requested to reveal everything he was planning to say on the show. He reached the masses in nightclubs and with his well-selling albums. Bruce’s biographer Albert Goldman comments on Bruce’s problems with the medium TV as follows:

Once again, he’d had a shot at the media and missed. Never did he seem to learn the obvious lesson that the kind of cool, calculating temperament that is suitable to films and TV is something you don’t cultivate by being a hopped-up, off-the-top nightclub comic accustomed to doing everything with your mouth.¹⁹⁸

Although it was Bruce’s ambition to reach a wide range of people and to shake up complacent audiences, he did not want to do that at all costs. TV restrictions were not to be changed so easily and Bruce was forced to accept that his “only proper medium was the small, dark, intimate nightclub, where he could take complete possession of the audience’s mind [...] making it laugh and think [...]”.¹⁹⁹

In the nightclubs, which were gaining more and more popularity in the 1960’s, he was able to look below the surface of the happy American life and he ripped into the heart of American society. However, it is important to realize that Bruce was not Anti-American. He truly believed in American values; as Kofsky states, Bruce had a “[...] touching, if rather naive faith in the U.S. system of ‘justice’ – that led him to speak out”.²⁰⁰ Until his death he believed that if only the judges let him demonstrate his points of view in court, they would understand him. However, Bruce’s relation and struggles with the courts will be analyzed later. At first, his position as an entertainer and social critic in times of the Cold War should be described further. Frank Kofsky’s interesting opinion proves quite helpful: “The key to understanding Lenny Bruce’s position on all

¹⁹⁶ D. T. Miller/M. Nowak, 11.

¹⁹⁷ F. Kofsky, 24.

¹⁹⁸ A. Goldman: *Ladies and gentlemen*, 332.

¹⁹⁹ A. Goldman: *Ladies and gentlemen*, 332.

²⁰⁰ A. Goldman: *Ladies and gentlemen*, 20.

political issues, the cold war most unequivocally included, is the realization that he was not in any sense a liberal.”²⁰¹ Bruce’s understanding of the world was that the primary duty for everyone was to protect human life, rather than believing in any kind of ideology whatsoever. “Lenny, like Whitman and D. H. Lawrence, was basically moved by a strange but sincere vision of the sacredness of life, and like them he used obscenity to express it.”²⁰² He did not aim at one particular ideology, political party or religious group; instead he was brilliantly able to get to the heart of any kind of matter by unmasking illogical and hypocritical argumentation. His comedy was a comedy of telling the ‘truth’; Bruce “[...] stalked reality, and then staged it. He invented comic realism.”²⁰³

A *New York Times* article of December 1960 seems to foreshadow what was about to happen. Although Bruce is characterized as an “intimidating panther [...] who prowls softly and bites sharply”²⁰⁴ and as someone who is able to carry “his theories to their naked and personal conclusions”²⁰⁵, someone who is “intense and defensive and vital”²⁰⁶, he is also described as follows:

Although he seems at times to be doing his utmost to antagonize his audience, Mr. Bruce displays such a patent air of morality beneath his brashness that his lapses in taste are often forgivable.²⁰⁷

The readers are warned that they might be confronted with vulgar language and that Bruce does not have respect for sanctified topics. The label ‘sick’ is mentioned, and his act is classified ‘for adults only’. It concludes with the realization that a Bruce act requires concentration and is “not for your Aunt Lydia from Peoria or your Uncle Phil from Oshkosh – so leave them home and take Tallulah Bankhead or Brendan Behan.”²⁰⁸ All in all, the article seems to reflect the systematic misjudgment of Bruce that was about to become the tragic story of his life. An essential understanding of Bruce’s comedy cannot be found anymore at this early point in his career, even though this article is far from being radically against Bruce. In general, his use of vulgar language as a means to get a certain point across was too much of a challenge even for the nightclub – the “free speech podium”²⁰⁹. In particular, his demand for conversational freedom was far beyond the tolerable limits of constitutional freedom of speech and led to the fatal confrontation with the law.

²⁰¹ A. Goldman: *Ladies and gentlemen*, 37.

²⁰² “Lenny Bruce, R. I. P.,” in *National Review*, September 6, 1966.

²⁰³ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 19.

²⁰⁴ A. Gelb: “Comic Gives Shocks With Moral”, in: *New York Times*, Dec. 8, 1960.

²⁰⁵ A. Gelb.

²⁰⁶ A. Gelb.

²⁰⁷ A. Gelb.

²⁰⁸ A. Gelb.

²⁰⁹ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 23.

3.2 Lenny Bruce and the Law²¹⁰

Bruce's first arrest on obscenity charges in San Francisco eventually 'unleashed the avalanche'. Only a few days before, Bruce had been arrested for the first time for suspected possession of drugs. He made fun of this arrest during his next performance and played down the reasons for it. He proceeded with material on organized religion, sex and political hypocrisy and apathy. His "rough language in the presence of men and women"²¹¹ and the meddling of some narrow-minded officers who did not care whether the use of vulgarities in the context of Bruce's routine was of any value, resulted in a first arrest on obscenity charges. Bruce himself describes the circumstances of his first arrest in his autobiography *How to Talk Dirty And Influence People* by stating "I used a ten-letter word onstage. Just a word in passing."²¹² This short statement sums up the absurdity of the 'fight against obscenity'. Bruce was convicted, because his words were evaluated without regard to the context in which they were used. Those police officers eager to arrest Bruce never bothered to have the sense behind the use of a 'vulgar' word explained. The use of obscene language – a stylistic comic device to arouse attention in order to communicate a message – was completely reversed and deprived of its usefulness by his opponents. Since America guarantees freedom of speech in the 1st Amendment, Bruce could not be arrested for criticizing morals, opinions, or the mentality of the American society. Instead, the prohibition of obscenity was converted into an antidote to fight what was perceived as poisonous material to the 'innocent ears and minds' of the American society of the 1950's and 1960's.

The famous trial *Roth vs. United States* of the year 1957 – New York publisher Sam Roth had been accused of distributing lewd literature – had resulted in definitions of 'obscenity'. These were "hailed as a sweet victory by the proponents of censorship and regarded as a disaster by libertarians."²¹³ Justice William J. Brennan Jr. arrived at the following formula for the evaluation of potential obscenity in a public performance:

[1] Whether to the average person, [2] applying contemporary community standards, [3] the dominant theme of the material taken as a whole [4] appeals to prurient interest.²¹⁴

The problems resulting from this formula seem evident: who is 'the average person' and how are 'contemporary community standards' defined? The third part of the formula

²¹⁰ The following is designed to describe the most important trials of Lenny Bruce, for a complete account consult R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover or <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/trials/bruce/bruce.html>.

²¹¹ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 50.

²¹² L. Bruce, 104.

²¹³ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 31.

²¹⁴ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 32.

was of some value to the case *People vs. Bruce* as it was supposed to guarantee him that his act was not misjudged due to certain words taken out of context. However, problematic decisions as to whether ‘whole’ meant the entire performance or just the essential context were to trouble the entertainer and his defenders over and over again in later cases. The ‘appeal to prurient interest’ was bound to additional restrictions defining prurient not simply as ‘arousing sexual feelings’ but as including “a shameful or morbid interest in nudity, sex, or excretion described in a manner going substantially beyond customary limits of candor.”²¹⁵ Theoretically, the wish to protect the freedom of speech (concerning obscenity) did exist. Depending on the interpretation of the above formula, obscenity could be tolerated if only there was any ‘socially important value’ to be found in a routine. Consequently, “messages about sex were no longer categorically obscene”²¹⁶, a statement that proved true in the famous trial *People vs. Ferlinghetti*. In this trial the publisher of Beat Poet Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* was confronted with charges against him due to suspected obscenity in the long poem, which was in fact enthusiastically received by many critics. A majority vote *against* the obscenity charges was possible, because the case was decided in consideration of whether “in the first instance [...] a work is utterly without social importance, *before* it permits the test of obscenity to be applied.”²¹⁷ This procedure was unfortunately not applied to Bruce’s routines. His performances were evaluated after the test of obscenity had been applied and thus the social relevance of his act was eclipsed. Whereas the social importance and value of the offensive poetry of authors of the Beat Generation was recognized, their trials did not establish standards concerning ‘free speech in practice’.

Bruce’s first arrest was mainly based on his use of the word ‘cocksucker’ and parts of ‘To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb’. In his first trial, Bruce’s lawyer put emphasis on the fact that words were taken out of context and could therefore not be evaluated at all. Judge Albert A. Axelrod was known for having “little tolerance for foul-mouthed comics”²¹⁸ and did not care about the context as long as certain obscene words were used at all. In the end, Bruce was warned never to use obscene language again and had to return to the courts a few weeks later. In between, Bruce developed his brilliant way of saying ‘cocksucker’ without saying it.²¹⁹ Substituting the crucial word by saying ‘blah blah blah’ was a clear statement which ridiculed the absurdity of the accusations.

²¹⁵ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 33.

²¹⁶ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 32.

²¹⁷ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 45.

²¹⁸ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 53.

²¹⁹ *The Trials of Lenny Bruce*, track 15.

Bruce's use of 'blah blah blah' shows that in general the prohibition of certain words does not result in a 'cleaner' world. He was eager to prove that he could get his message across even when he was forced to shut his 'dirty mouth'. Both the mere utterance 'blah blah blah' and its application were an ingenious way to ridicule his prosecutors' opinions on obscenity. This strategy is, moreover, a brilliant comic strategy, because it plays with the audience's expectations and is exaggerated by the repetitive uttering of 'blah blah blah'. It offers an easy way to release repressed energy as its simplicity symbolizes the stupidity of demonizing the use of 'vulgar' words. Additionally, Bruce's logical reasoning enables a release of energy. He explains that it is illogical, or, to be more precise, unrealistic to relate 'cocksucker' exclusively to homosexuals as "it relates to any contemporary chick I know, or would know, or would love, or would marry."²²⁰ Thus, he emphasizes his point and makes it easier to release energy by laughter.

Bruce's habit of incorporating his life's reality into his act had already gained him credibility and was approved of as an honesty rarely to be found in an entertainer of his time. On the other hand, the discussion of his trials onstage may have marked the beginning of his obsession with the law and his desperate struggle for conversational freedom. However, in 1961 Bruce was at the height of his career and the incorporation of his struggles against the law enriched his performances, as was demonstrated above.

The first trial in San Francisco seemed to lead to a conviction. Bruce was nevertheless convinced that the publicity from the trials would help his career as an entertainer. Thus, he sought legal assistance from someone who was a little more 'hip' and who could help him gain recognition and achieve conversational freedom. Albert Bendich, Lawrence Ferlinghetti's lawyer in the *Howl* case was chosen. Bendich tactically guaranteed Bruce a new trial, because he found out that Bruce had not been informed in the earlier trial that he had a right to have counsel. In this second trial, under the chairmanship of Judge Clayton Horn – known from the *People vs. Lawrence Ferlinghetti* case he had presided over – Bruce's desire for conversational freedom was within reach. Horn's far more liberal interpretation of *Roth vs. United States* resulted in the verdict 'not guilty' although the members of the jury did not like their own verdict. Judge Horn's advice to the jury reflected the *Roth* case and, as a result, none of the conditions covered by the crucial obscenity formula had been applicable to Bruce's trial.

Throughout the following years Bruce kept performing although various charges were pressed on him. His arrests usually ended up in a night in jail until his mother Sally Marr bailed him out. In the year 1962, he was arrested twice after performing at the

²²⁰ L. Bruce, 104.

Troubadour in West Hollywood and once in Chicago. In addition, Sydney, Australia, banned Bruce from the stage in September 1962 stating that “Sydney has never seen a public performance of such blasphemy and obscenity.”²²¹ Similar reactions could be observed in April 1963 in Great Britain, where Bruce was refused permission to perform because his act “would not have been in the public interest.”²²² This article reports that members of the British government and critics spoke out against those who chose to prohibit entrance to Lenny Bruce. His opponents did not want to see him perform in Britain, because he had been arrested for possession of narcotics in Los Angeles earlier. His supporters were said to regret that this important comedian was not allowed to perform since he was “highly provocative and he has something important to say.”²²³

The Troubadour Trial, which opened in December of 1962, marked the beginning of a less fortunate series of trials. The triumph in the first San Francisco trial was overshadowed by a deadlocked jury in the Troubadour Trial. Although the majority had favored Bruce’s act, Bruce was not content as he “wanted a finale [...] a San Francisco-styled victory.”²²⁴ Bruce’s bust on narcotics charges in Los Angeles made it impossible for him to attend his Chicago Trial, and the verdict ‘guilty’ did not come as a surprise. Bruce commented the Chicago fugitive warrant sent out to him with a bitter “I’d rather get the gas chamber in Los Angeles than spend a day in jail in Chicago.”²²⁵

It is interesting that the press coverage during the years in which Bruce was going back and forth between performing, arrests, performing, trials and performing is not biased. Plain accounts of arrests or verdicts had replaced critical and analytical evaluations of his acts and his value as an entertainer. Only few articles, for instance a *New York Times* article of June 1964, speak in favor of Bruce. This article gives an account of the petition for Lenny Bruce, which was signed by a number of celebrities, among them Allen Ginsberg, Norman Mailer and Bob Dylan. He is praised as a comedian “[...] in the tradition of Swift, Rabelais, and Twain”²²⁶, and the police are criticized for deciding over “[...] what adult private citizens may or may not hear.”²²⁷ Another exception from the neutral articles on Bruce’s various arrests and trials can be found in a *Newsweek* article of July 1964. It rips into the heart of the matter by stating that the whole issue “[...] was developing into an arena for broad, complex, and

²²¹ “Lenny Bruce Show Closed Amid Criticism in Sydney”, in: *New York Times*, September 8, 1962.

²²² S. Gruson: “Britain Bars Lenny Bruce in the Public Interest”, in: *New York Times*, April 9, 1963.

²²³ S. Gruson.

²²⁴ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 133.

²²⁵ “Lenny Bruce surrenders under Chicago Warrant”, in: *New York Times*, March 27, 1963.

²²⁶ T. Buckley: “100 Fight Arrest Of Lenny Bruce”, in: *New York Times*, June 14, 1964.

²²⁷ T. Buckley.

traditionally befogged social issues.”²²⁸ In this article Bruce’s humor, a “probing, jaundiced, irreverent look at the way we live”²²⁹ is compared to the technique of modern writers. He provokes self-reflexive thinking in his audiences via shock and agony, which results in reconsideration, “[...] in some ways helpful, and even healing.”²³⁰ All in all, this is an article completely unlike the majority of articles of this period. Collins and Skover, authors of *The Trials of Lenny Bruce*, report:

Admittedly, Lenny was still garnishing notice in some big-name publications. But now those publications, if and when they covered Bruce, reported on how the police were after him, how club owners didn’t want him, and how his future looked far less rosy than it once had.²³¹

The *Newsweek* article ends with the sad prediction that Bruce might be driven into bankruptcy soon. He was so concerned with proving that his performances were of value, that he spent large amounts of money for his trials and was unable to have an income due to the refusal of permission to perform. To make matters worse, many nightclub owners did not book Bruce anymore, as their licenses were in danger if they did so. A dilemma Bruce commented on in early 1966 by stating “Every time I open in a club the police are there to arrest me and close the club [...] Now no one is willing to hire me anymore because they don’t want to be closed down.”²³²

Bruce’s battles with the police and judges continued and, along with his deteriorating health due to his excessive addiction to narcotics, led to his decline as a comedian and as a human being. Desperate, he dismissed his lawyers in October 1964 saying that “he could not ‘communicate with them’”.²³³ Bruce’s biographer Albert Goldman recognizes in an article published in *The New Republic* that the tape recordings of Bruce’s late trials

[...] were the signs of unavailing comprise: in the mumbled obscenities, the elaborate but incoherent self-justifications, the obsessional narratives of persecution, and above all, in the total absence of the nihilistic rage and savagery that once had left his audiences shaken but grateful for a magical release [...]²³⁴

His naive faith in the US constitution had turned into an obsession to prove that his act was not obscene and of ‘value’ if only the judges listened to him. As late as November 1964, almost three years after the acquittal in San Francisco, Bruce lost the New York Cafe Au Go Go trial.²³⁵ He lost without counsel and like a desperate “cultural

²²⁸ “Bruce’s Trial”, in: *Newsweek*, July 20, 1964.

²²⁹ “Bruce’s Trial”.

²³⁰ “Bruce’s Trial”.

²³¹ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 136.

²³² P. Bart: “Lenny Bruce sets return to stage”, in: *New York Times*, January 26, 1966.

²³³ “Bruce Dismisses Lawyers, Asks Reopening of Trial”, in: *New York Times*, October 6, 1964.

²³⁴ A. Goldman: “The Trial Of Lenny Bruce”, in: *The New Republic*, September 12, 1964.

²³⁵ He had been arrested in April 1964 at the Cafe Au Go Go in New York on obscenity charges, along with the club’s owner, Howard Solomon.

kamikaze²³⁶ who saw his last chance of convincing the judges by provoking arrests to perform in courts. Judge J. Randall Creel was overruled by his two colleagues, his dissent unable to change matters:

‘In a total absence of any guideposts or other directives from higher courts, I fear we have proceeded not unlike an explorer plunged into a vast uncharted virgin area in pursuit of a mirage or some fabled lost golden city’ [...] He suggested that trial courts needed some definition of just what the phrase “community standards” really meant.²³⁷

It was not until after Bruce’s death that criticism like the above was taken into consideration. After his death, voices grew louder saying that Bruce’s conviction was unfair and unconstitutional “in an age of almost complete frankness in plays, novels and movies [...]”²³⁸ Eventually, criticism such as this resulted in a final posthumous pardon as late as December 2003.²³⁹

In the year of his death, Bruce the “40-year-old one time king of the ‘sick’ comedians who is now virtually penniless [...]”²⁴⁰ planned a return to the stage – a “legal counter attack”²⁴¹ in order to finally get his “day in court”.²⁴² The show at *The Music Box Theater* marked the low point of his career, because his act was “[...] far more disjointed than it had ever been.”²⁴³ Without coherence Lenny Bruce skipped from one thought to the other, commenting on his trials in between and thus bored the confused audience.

3.3 The Posthumous Rise to Fame

Lenny Bruce was found dead on August 3rd, 1966. He was lying naked on the floor with a needle in his arm – it was “[...] Lenny’s final performance – the spectacle of his death.”²⁴⁴ Newspapers announced his death with long articles, describing the career of this “most radically relevant of all contemporary social satirists.”²⁴⁵ The fact that the comedian was dead seemed to finally open all doors for a release of repressed recognition. A *Washington Post* article on Bruce’s funeral describes how his friends and family were surprised to hear him “[...] eulogized as a significant social satirist.”²⁴⁶ But

²³⁶ “Lenny Bruce’s Conviction”, in: *Washington Post*, November 13, 1964.

²³⁷ J. Roth: “Lenny Bruce Act Is Ruled Obscene”, in: *New York Times*, November 5, 1964.

²³⁸ “Profane Comedy”, in: *TIME*, November 13, 1964.

²³⁹ On December 23, 2003, the New York Governor granted a posthumous pardon to Lenny Bruce.

²⁴⁰ P. Bart.

²⁴¹ P. Bart.

²⁴² P. Bart.

²⁴³ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 334.

²⁴⁴ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 339.

²⁴⁵ “Lenny Bruce, Uninhibited Comic Found Dead in Hollywood Home”, in: *New York Times*, August 4, 1966.

²⁴⁶ “Bruce Eulogized in New York as Social Satirist”, in: *Washington Post*, August 13, 1966.

critical voices suddenly emerged, too: a *Washington Post* reporter asks “what use he might finally have made of his talents, if he had not been bedevilled by his private congerie of hang-ups.”²⁴⁷ It is one of the few times that Bruce’s weaknesses, his inability to adjust at least for tactical reasons, his banging his head against brick walls, his unwillingness to compromise, maybe even his “inability to cope with the responsibilities of maturity”²⁴⁸ are recognized instead of just labeling him ‘sick’ or ‘crazy drug-addict’. The sadness of a talent wasted, nevertheless, dominates this article on Bruce as it ends with the statement: “He leaves, at 40, only a sense of waste and incompleteness.”²⁴⁹

It is probably one of the last times that Bruce was critically viewed, as he was soon lifted to stardom and was celebrated as a free speech martyr and icon. This was named ‘The phenomenon of Lenny Bruce’ by Frank Kofsky²⁵⁰, who notices that in the years after Bruce’s death a couple of plays on Lenny Bruce were about to be staged in New York (one of those cities in which Bruce’s act had been ruled obscene earlier). In his opinion, “the malicious irony in this, of course, would probably have appealed strongly to Lenny, who could always be relied upon to find a touch of bizarre humor in virtually everything [...]”.²⁵¹ The promising “market for Brucian memorabilia”²⁵² had its origin in the republishing of one of his earlier record albums, which was renamed *The Story of Lenny Bruce: What I Was Arrested For*. This title already hinted at the posthumous perception of Lenny Bruce’s importance: “Where the law once had prosecuted him, the culture now hailed him.”²⁵³ In death, the challenging, nonconformist entertainer had lost his status as a menace to society. His importance was finally recognized and appreciated. The exploitation of Bruce, who had died bankrupt and sick, rapidly exceeded all limits. In 1967 the first film on Lenny Bruce appeared, announced by the *New York Times* as a benefit film “[...] to aid independent film producers.”²⁵⁴ The film showed one of Bruce’s last performances and was received as “the act (or parts of it) that Lenny would have done in open court, had the triers of his fate allowed it.”²⁵⁵ The film did not yet allow people to finally recognize Bruce’s impact on the American entertainment scene, as it merely showed Bruce at the low point of his career, reading out trial transcripts most of the time. The reversal of Cafe Au Go Go-owner Howard Solomon’s conviction could

²⁴⁷ C. Champlin: “Two Final Four-Letter Words for Lenny Bruce: Lost Gift”, in: *Washington Post*, August 8, 1966.

²⁴⁸ C. Champlin.

²⁴⁹ C. Champlin.

²⁵⁰ The first part of Kofsky’s book is titled ‘The phenomenon of Lenny Bruce’. See Kofsky, 18.

²⁵¹ F. Kofsky, 19.

²⁵² F. Kofsky, 9.

²⁵³ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 5.

²⁵⁴ “Lenny Bruce Show Is Made Into Movie for a Benefit”, in: *New York Times*, February 2, 1967.

²⁵⁵ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 358.

be seen as the starting point for a reconsideration of the whole topic of obscenity. In this 1968 appeal trial, those parts of Bruce's performance which were judged as fulfilling all criteria for obscenity earlier, were now evaluated as including "[...] comments on the problems of contemporary society, religious hypocrisy, racial prejudices, and human tensions."²⁵⁶ Sadly, this overturning of the conviction came too late for Lenny Bruce. However, "[...] the reversal of Solomon's conviction served to vindicate Bruce as well."²⁵⁷ Comments like those of one of the attorneys in the New York obscenity Trials might have paved the way for the enormous celebration of Bruce after his death: "We drove him into poverty and bankruptcy and then murdered him.... We used the law to kill him."²⁵⁸ This confession certainly reflected the flaws of the American legal system especially concerning the interpretation of the First Amendment (In Bruce's opinion "In freedom of speech, the accent is on freedom, not on speech."²⁵⁹). Moreover, it helped to initiate an entirely different attitude towards the story of Lenny Bruce. Now that it was officially okay to 'dig' Bruce, to use typically 'Brucian' vocabulary, articles on Bruce became more and more enthusiastic and the commercialization of Lenny Bruce exceeded all expectations.²⁶⁰ A *Washington Post* journalist announcing the play *Lenny* and the movie *Dirtymouth* writes that actually the commercialization of Bruce "[...] began the day after he was buried [...]"²⁶¹ and that the play formed just one part of the Bruce revival. However, the play *Lenny*, written by Julian Barry, was a major success "as a result of the triangulated talent: the real Lenny Bruce's savage eloquence, the dynamism of Actor Cliff Gorman in the title role, the high theatrical imagination of Director Tom O'Horgan."²⁶² The very same article suggests that the standing ovations at the premier could also be interpreted as "[...] applauding for Bruce, whose time has come – belatedly."²⁶³

John Cohen's *The Essential Lenny Bruce*, the best collection of transcripts available, provided a glimpse into the world of Bruce for those who had not seen him alive and for new generations. Biographies such as that of Albert Goldman, titled *Ladies*

²⁵⁶ "Redeeming Social Value", in: *TIME*, March 1, 1968.

²⁵⁷ "Redeeming Social Value".

²⁵⁸ J. R. Waltz: "Using the law to change society", in: *Washington Post*, August 29, 1971.

²⁵⁹ "Lenny Bruce. A Child Before His Time", Interview for Canadian TV, February 1966.

²⁶⁰ A few exceptions exist, for instance the movie *Dirtymouth*, written, produced and directed by Herbert S. Altman. The film is hardly mentioned today and historical newspaper articles judge it as "[...] a very bad movie that can't quite make up its mind whether Bruce, played by Bernie Travis, who vaguely resembles the star, was a young Tom Edison, ahead of his time, or the sort of mad doctor who must be punished for tampering with the secrets of the universe." Cited from V. Canby: "Dirtymouth' Traces Bruce On Screen", in: *New York Times*, May 20, 1971.

²⁶¹ T. Grubisich: "It Began the Day After He Was Buried", in: *Washington Post and Times Herald*, June 23, 1971.

²⁶² D. Auchincloss: "The Broken Taboo Breaker", in: *TIME*, June 7, 1971.

²⁶³ D. Auchincloss.

and Gentlemen: Lenny Bruce!!! reveal the more personal side of the entertainer Lenny Bruce, for instance by including chapters on his wife Honey Harlowe and their troubled relationship. It is noteworthy that this biography takes as an opening chapter ‘A day in the Life: A Reconstruction’²⁶⁴, thus creating a rather dismal atmosphere. Bruce’s hopeless drug-addiction, his ruthless need for a next fix and his rude behavior towards other people is vividly described. No romanticized depiction is presented, because from the very beginning the reader is confronted with the sometimes ugly truth, at least as far as drug abuse and its results are concerned. Bruce’s autobiography – parts of it had appeared in *Playboy* as early as 1963 – offers a quite different view. It was a “campus bestseller”²⁶⁵ despite the change of tone and attitude at about the middle of the book. At that point Bruce discontinues the telling of anecdotes from his childhood, adolescence and early years as an entertainer and starts to complain about his problems with the law and refuses to admit that his possession and use of narcotics was abusive rather than solely due to illness.

However, by far the most successful account of Bruce’s life and achievements was definitely the play *Lenny*. The following criticism of the play is interesting:

We don’t see much of his drug-taking, or drinking. We don’t see the body wasting, the talent eroding, the slack jaw, the forgotten lines, the lost control. [...] this play doesn’t show us the real Lenny Bruce either; it takes Lenny as a symbol of free speech [...] it whitewashes aspects of his career.²⁶⁶

It seems quite ironic and bitter that the story of Bruce, who died bankrupt and desperate, was turned into a huge cultural and financial success. In addition, the attempt to ‘whitewash’ and romanticize the comedian leaves a bitter aftertaste, because it applies to an even greater economic success taking Bruce as its topic, too: the Hollywood film *Lenny*.²⁶⁷ The film – Bruce was played by the young Dustin Hoffman – was directed by Bob Fosse and came to the movie theaters in 1974. Nominated for six Academy Awards, it proved to be a successful Hollywood production. Opinions on the movie include enthusiastic praise such as “A brilliantly conceived and executed film”²⁶⁸ and “By far the most important film of 1974. It is a beautifully acted movie – with Dustin Hoffman and Valerie Perrine – certain to be frontrunners for Best Actor and

²⁶⁴ A. Goldman: *Ladies and gentlemen*, 1-77.

²⁶⁵ “Bruce Boomlet”.

²⁶⁶ C. Barnes: “Theater: ‘Lenny’ Evokes Memory of an Angry Man”, in: *New York Times*, May 27, 1971. Also see W. Kerr: “‘Lenny’ Lost His Cool”, in: *New York Times*, June 6, 1971. Kerr complains that playwright and director decided “[...] to offer him as culture-hero, to deify him as a humorist wrecked by other people, by social pressures.”

²⁶⁷ The film’s script was written by Julian Barry and is based on the play.

²⁶⁸ J. Christ, *New York Magazine*, quotation taken from <http://www.reslife.com/publicity/Synopsis/0011096.html>.

Best Actress Academy Awards”.²⁶⁹ Criticism as the following, voiced by Vincent Canby, also appeared: “LENNY is probably the perfect popular movie for this time and place.”²⁷⁰ The American public, according to this rather ironic view, was still not ready to see the naked and potentially ugly truth since, as Canby notices “in some ways times have changed radically since Lenny’s obscenity trials in the early sixties and in other ways not at all.”²⁷¹ He observes that many of the words that were considered offensive then are now (i.e. 1974) heard in public and in movies rated PG. However, he goes on to characterize the American audience as longing for a film in which “the language and subject matter of Lenny’s routines are just raunchy enough to titillate without inspiring real fury”.²⁷² Thus, he offers an explanation for the whitewashed depiction of Bruce which avoids “Lenny’s drug problems so delicately that one might get the idea he died solely because of his obscenity busts.”²⁷³ Nevertheless, it is pointed out, that “Hoffman is superb in these “on-stage” sections of the film”²⁷⁴, which Canby calls “important and timely”²⁷⁵ and which we, as today’s viewers, might as well call ‘timeless’ now. Especially Dustin Hoffman’s acting, as well as Valerie Perrine’s, is often pointed out: “Dustin Hoffman quite possibly will earn an Academy Award nomination for his performance, Valerie Perrine is stunning”²⁷⁶ or as *TIME* predicts “Dustin Hoffman, in the title role, again asserting his claim of being today’s great character leading man.”²⁷⁷

The aspect of showing a romanticized version of Bruce can be found elsewhere in complaints coming from Bruce admirers who had loved and appreciated Lenny Bruce when he was still alive. Gary Arnold, in a *Washington Post* article of December 1974, criticizes “Fosse’s watered-down, toned-down diminution of Lenny Bruce”²⁷⁸ and complains about “[...] the way Hollywood has tailored him in its own sentimental image tidying up his life and character, if not his vocabulary, while messing up his act.”²⁷⁹ Especially Arnold’s observation that “[...] the customers who respond most favorably to

²⁶⁹ D. Sheehan on CBS-TV, quotation taken from <http://www.reslife.com/publicity/Synopsis/0011096.html>.

²⁷⁰ V. Canby: “Who Ever Thought Lenny Would Be Respectable?”, in: *New York Times*, December 1, 1974.

²⁷¹ V. Canby: “Who Ever Thought”.

²⁷² V. Canby: “Who Ever Thought”.

²⁷³ V. Canby: “Who Ever Thought”, also see V. Canby: “‘Lenny’, with Dustin Hoffman, Is One-Fourth Brilliant”, in: *New York Times*, November 11, 1974.

²⁷⁴ V. Canby: “Who Ever Thought”.

²⁷⁵ V. Canby: “Who Ever Thought”.

²⁷⁶ *Rolling Stone*, quotation taken from <http://www.online.swank.com/publicity/Synopsis/011096.htm>.

²⁷⁷ R. Schickel: “Black-and-Blue Comic”, in *TIME*, November 25, 1974.

²⁷⁸ G. Arnold: “Lenny Bruce, With Tears”, in: *Washington Post*, December 12, 1974.

²⁷⁹ G. Arnold.

Lenny are those who have never seen or listened to the original Lenny²⁸⁰ is noteworthy. The immediate reception right after the film had come to the movie theaters is therefore indispensable for my analysis and will be considered following the evaluation of the biographical picture.

Despite the disappointment heard from fans of Bruce, the film has become the single ‘Bruce memento’ which shaped the public perception until today and certainly the by far most easily accessible account of Bruce for today’s viewers. It is therefore important to evaluate this most long-lasting portrait in detail, taking different aspects into account. How is the movie organized? How is Bruce portrayed, and does the film show a romanticized depiction? A detailed analysis of the film – forming an important part of the reception of Bruce – is intended in the following chapter of this study, seeking answers to several questions. Do Bruce’s comic strategies as depicted in the movie still work today? To what extent is his comedy of social and cultural relevance to today’s viewers? This question is particularly interesting with regard to a generation which still restricts the freedom of speech concerning the use of certain vocabulary on TV and in popular music²⁸¹, no matter how socially valuable the intended message might be.²⁸²

²⁸⁰ G. Arnold.

²⁸¹ Today’s method for silencing the artist is mostly the annoying ‘beep’, which is a far less elegant way than saying ‘blah blah blah’. However, it has the same effect – an effect which is unintended though by the officials responsible for restrictions.

²⁸² Current examples might be the music of popular artists such as *Eminem*, or the humor in Cartoon series such as *South Park*.

B 4. *Lenny* - A Film Analysis

A biographical picture, in the following referred to as *biopic*, is defined in several – slightly different – ways. To George F. Custen “a biographical film is one that depicts the life of a historical person, past or present.”²⁸³ In the introduction to her filmography of biographical films, Eileen Karsten states that early forms of biopics are such films as those about Abraham Lincoln or Thomas Edison. She quotes the following corresponding definition: “a motion picture based on the life of a public figure, most commonly an individual struggling to achieve goals against considerable odds or to recover from a major setback which threatens an already successful career.”²⁸⁴ Karsten describes that since the 1940’s the emphasis has shifted from a famous and appreciated person’s struggle against all odds to the depicted person’s personal life, including interpersonal relationships and flaws such as the hero’s drinking or drug abuse.²⁸⁵ Her findings will be important for the following film analysis.

The biopic *Lenny*, a film based on a play written by Julian Barry and directed by Bob Fosse, tells the story of the controversial entertainer Lenny Bruce.²⁸⁶ Live performances of Bruce have already been analyzed and it has become quite evident that his humor is based on the use of vulgar language as a tool to shake up complacent audiences. Thus, he is able to stir up repressed inhibitions which can be released due to his method of offering logically argued explanations. These work as a helping device to convince one’s superego to give free reign to repressed urges. In preceding chapters his development as an entertainer, his conflicts with the law when he was already successful, and his personal hardships, mostly concerning his drug abuse and the struggles with his wife Honey Harlowe, have already been sketched.

One of the first things one recognizes when watching the movie *Lenny* is that it focuses on the love affair of Lenny Bruce and Honey Harlowe. Karsten’s observation mentioned above definitely proves true in this biopic. Although we get to see a large number of performances – mostly flash-forward performances of the later Bruce used as a device to comment upon the action – the personal side is stressed in this account of

²⁸³ G. F. Custen: *Bio/Pics: how Hollywood constructed public history*. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992, 5.

²⁸⁴ F. E. Beaver: *Dictionary of Film Terms*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983, 34, quoted in E. Karsten: *From Real Life To Reel Life. A Filmography of Biographical Films*. Metuchen, N. J., & London: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1993, vii.

²⁸⁵ See E. Karsten, vii.

²⁸⁶ See Appendices 5 and 6 for a sequence graph and sequence description of *Lenny*.

Bruce's life. The love story forms the framework for the telling of his story.²⁸⁷ It is quite noteworthy that the love between Lenny and Honey is told in such a detailed manner because the viewer's attention is thus successfully distracted from Lenny's impending problems not only with the police but also with his own self-destructive drug abuse. As was mentioned before, many critics complain that Bruce is 'whitewashed' in this biopic. Furthermore, the viewer is somewhat surprised that in the end he dies with a needle in his arm. And indeed, most of the time, the topic of drug abuse is only associated with Honey. She is pushed into the role of a scapegoat concerning drug abuse, thus romanticizing Bruce who is left as the single dad having to cope with unfair treatment from the courts and problems with custody at the same time.

The other obvious observation one makes when watching the biopic *Lenny* is that it is meant to appear as a documentary rather than as a feature film. Stylistic devices such as black and white film stock, inserted interviews with 'eye-witnesses'²⁸⁸, and flash-forwards to performances of the later Lenny Bruce are used to make this movie appear as close to original sources as possible and contrast sharply with the romantic frame story of Lenny and Honey's love.²⁸⁹

Both of these aspects, the narration of the love story as framework and the techniques that create a documentary-style narration will be analyzed in detail in the following. The tension between the two contrasting but at the same time complementary narrative styles might have had a significant influence on the reception of this biopic. In the chapter following the film analysis, potential manipulative effects these narrative styles might have had on the contemporary audiences will be evaluated. Articles reflecting the immediate reception of the biopic will provide the basis for analysis. The reactions of contemporary audiences will be analyzed and the socio-historical background to the film will be sketched. This should help to explain the reason for its production in the first place. Apart from that, its position in film-culture of that time and its intertextual relations with other cultural products of the mid-1970's will be described.

²⁸⁷ 'Forms the framework' does not mean that the love story can be referred to as 'marginal'. On the contrary, the narration of the love story could even be called the central frame, as it is *the* factor that holds the story together.

²⁸⁸ Honey Harlowe, Sally Marr and Lenny Bruce's manager, all played by the corresponding actors known from the rest of the film's action.

²⁸⁹ The love affair is actually in typical Hollywood style, including romantic aspects as well as sexual tension and an endless series of breaking up and getting back together.

4.1 *Lenny* – The Love Story

The biopic's first take shows a close-up on Honey Harlowe's lips.²⁹⁰ For a few seconds she remains silent, then clears her throat and starts to speak. Although the facts she starts to enumerate – the number of times Lenny got arrested – seem to be of little importance²⁹¹, this very first action of the film is significant for a number of reasons. First, the detail-shot of Honey's lips symbolizes her importance as an 'eye-witness'. As she is the first to share her memories, her reminiscences are clearly introduced as the most 'valuable' ones.²⁹² Secondly, and more importantly, the close-up on her lips – the choice of this distance having some erotic effect – introduces the love story between her and Lenny Bruce as the central story of this biopic.

While we still see Honey's lips, the man she just spoke about is introduced with the help of a sound bridge (we already hear him speaking onstage). Then he is shown onstage. It is the later Bruce talking about how the existence of sexually transmitted diseases is repressed in American society. It is the already successful Bruce who is introduced to the viewer. We will recognize this kind of performance during various flash-forwards throughout the movie.²⁹³ Honey's first memories chronologically take place at the end of the story which is about to be told (she is looking back on the events). Bruce's performance works as both a flashback to a man who is already dead and a flash-forward to the man he is about to become in the course of the story which, after Honey's introductory memories, is now about to begin. Bruce is introduced as the *comedian*. The first performance is typically Bruce-style. It incorporates taboo-words and offensive topics and offers some astonishing logical argumentation. However, the first five minutes of *Lenny* are overwhelmingly dominated by Honey. The emphasis on the love story between Bruce and Harlowe is obvious at this early point of the film already. This impression is enhanced when sequence three shows Honey Harlowe being interviewed by a ghost interviewer whose voice is only heard from the off. She still remains somewhat mysterious, as she is then filmed from behind. Diffused illumination

²⁹⁰ Sequence 1. See appendix 5 for a sequence graph and appendix 6 for a sequence description.

²⁹¹ The fact that she speaks in the past tense and with a worried voice indicates that the story that is about to be told might not have resulted in a happy ending and hints at Bruce's death. This observation will be of vast importance in my chapter "Conclusion: Love story and pseudo-documentary – manipulation of sympathy and possible effects".

²⁹² Or so it seems in the beginning. Later on, this first impression is turned upside down as all guilt is always blamed on her. The contrast between these two points of view is striking.

²⁹³ The later Bruce wears a beard. This is the most prominent feature used to indicate that a performance is a flash-forward. Apart from that, his posture (he is leaning on the microphone) designates a flash-forward. In most flash-forwards he is shown from behind with illumination coming from a spotlight in front of him. The famous comedian is illuminated, which indicates that it is Bruce at the height of his career.

coming from a window in front of her shows her silhouette and only her long and wavy hair is illuminated. She gestures with strikingly long and fake fingernails. Her gestures and the impressive mass of hair are silhouetted against the light and that creates the image of a beautiful yet mysterious and erotic woman. These observations are now proven true as a lengthy strip performance of Honey is shown. The strip performance is longer than most of Bruce's performances throughout the film. A typical picture of the entertainment scene of the early sixties is created, when an entertainer starts singing "Oh, when the saints go marching in" in a Louis Armstrong voice and continues to play the song on his trumpet. Afterwards he introduces "Hot Honey Harlowe" to the audience as the act that "you've all been waiting for".²⁹⁴ Accompanied by seductive music, Honey slowly starts to take off her glittery clothes in the midst of a nightclub audience (the small stage seems to be round so that the viewers in the background seem to sit in something like an arena). All attention is on her. Cuts to men in the audience, who are obviously enjoying the performance, alternate with long shots of Honey. Occasional medium shots or close-ups of her face illustrate how she seems to be enjoying the attention. Since the film at hand is a biopic about Lenny Bruce, it is quite revealing that by now the viewer knows more about Honey – in the literal sense – than about the film's hero. The intention is quite obvious: Honey, at least in this film, is an obsession for Bruce. This is a fact which might be needed later on to put all blame on his wife, the seductive and wild woman, who just too easily fell for drugs or other women. Honey is introduced as the stripper – a profession associated with fickleness – and this stigmatization paves the way for blaming her for everything that went wrong in Bruce's life. His obsession with Honey is already alluded to in the very next sequence following the strip performance. She is waving her pantyhose, accompanied by the crowd's cheers. Then, there is a cut to a close-up of the young Lenny's face showing a rapt expression when he sees Honey for the first time in a cafeteria. Shots of Honey and Lenny's faces alternate and the link between them is reinforced: this is a magical moment leading to a special relationship. And although he is introduced to her as a "lousy comic" by her company and she is devalued by his company with the remark "fake hair", the viewer already knows that these two have fallen in love.²⁹⁵ In the

²⁹⁴ Sequence 3.

²⁹⁵ Sequence 4.

While the story of Lenny Bruce as a comedian unfolds in passing, the development of the love story is documented in a detailed way. At this point, only the precision in documenting the romance between Bruce and Harlowe is of importance. The depiction of the comedian Bruce – a development often only alluded to and one the viewers have to interpret for themselves – and its purpose as well as its manipulative effects is of interest in my following chapter "Pseudo-documentary aspects in the biopic Lenny".

following interview sequence, she confirms that she just thought he was “huggable” despite his lack of ability as a comedian. It is the first interview sequence showing her in medium shot, sitting on a sofa and looking into the camera when answering the questions. Bruce’s first performance which chronologically fits into the plot seems to function as proof of how “huggable” he was more than as documentation of a comedian in his early years.²⁹⁶ The viewer is relieved when this early and indeed very boring performance ends and Lenny and Honey’s next encounter at a party is shown. As we can see once again, the viewer’s attention is distracted from the comedian Bruce and led to focus on the romantic love story. Mid-tempo Jazz music illustrates the next dialogue-free sequence. People are sitting on chairs, sofas and on the floor, sipping on long drinks and smoking joints. Every once in a while, Lenny and Honey exchange a look while they are chatting with others and as the music switches to some mellow jazz, the mood in the room becomes more relaxed. People are just sitting around, lost in their thoughts, some of them are asleep. Lenny finally encourages Honey to leave the party with him. A long-shot along the narrow entrance hall of a motel is shown. In the distance, shot from a slightly low angle, Bruce and Honey appear as tiny figures and approach the camera appearing to grow in size until they ‘outgrow the screen’ and only their feet are shown. The camera pans along their moving feet until they reach the reception desk, then they are shown full size from the back. Their walk through the entrance hall, all the while chatting, could be interpreted as a walk into a life together as both end up in the same hotel room and from then on they are a couple.²⁹⁷ Once again, the following flash-forward to a performance of Bruce illustrates what is going on behind the hotel room’s door – Bruce talks about the matter of “doing it” – rather than explicitly showing Bruce’s abilities as an entertainer.²⁹⁸ Of course, the attentive viewer assumes that Bruce must have gone through some great development and that these foreshadowing performances inserted into the plot demonstrate this development. Nevertheless, it is once again noteworthy that the acknowledgment of the development and final impact of the comedian Bruce is left to the viewer, whereas the development of the love story is directly expressed and documented in a very detailed way. In the scene following the last performance Honey is shown still naked in bed and Lenny is shaving in front of a mirror. It simply embellishes the romantic love affair.²⁹⁹ The senseless echoing of sentences without real content does not carry any other meaning

²⁹⁶ Sequence 5.

²⁹⁷ Sequence 6.

²⁹⁸ Sequence 7.

²⁹⁹ Sequence 8.

than emphasizing the very special relationship between them. They talk about how happy they are that they have met and about how extremely shy Lenny was and how he might be able to solve this problem. In this sequence, the pictures alone would have worked, but the created impression is enhanced by an interview sequence with Honey telling us that “it was quite a week” and how they missed each other when they could not be together.

The exaggeration of the happy love affair culminates in Lenny’s visit to Miami. He decorates a hotel room with hundreds of flowers. This inspires Honey to pose naked in the midst of the sea of flowers as though on an “album cover”, as Lenny remarks when he enters the room. This romantic and also erotic episode sharply contrasts with the interrupting flash-forward to a performance of Bruce talking about the issue of “you don’t touch it anymore.”³⁰⁰ For the first time, the flash-forwards serve a direct purpose in *commenting* on the current part of the plot.³⁰¹ While we still see a young and excited Bruce, being silly with the girl of his dreams, the mature Bruce overshadows this look at the way of life by talking about ‘cliché problems’ between men and women.

The impression that Honey plays a key part in the organization of this biopic seems to be confirmed. Emphasis has been put on the love affair much more than on the fact that this is a film about the comedian Bruce. But things are about to change when Bruce’s manager and his mother start to intervene. The detailed development of the love story up to this point was needed in order to be able to whitewash Bruce later on. From now on, Honey is blamed for everything. She was introduced as a vamp with a dubious profession from the very beginning and is now openly put into question. Bruce has been depicted as the “huggable” guy – at least up to this point. He hopelessly fell in love with Honey and now she is suddenly revealed as the girl with a reputation. This does not really surprise the viewer who got to know her naked before anything else. The first interview with Bruce’s manager, Artie Silver, is about the problem to what extent a manager is allowed to tamper with his client’s personal life.³⁰² The manager claims to have been personally involved with Bruce’s career and emphasizes how much he was concerned about his friend, how much he loved Bruce. His emotional words contrast with his rather indifferent intonation and posture. He is shown from the side and in front of him the tape recorder is running. He rarely looks straight into the camera. Indirect illumination is coming from a window behind him, bathing the scene in

³⁰⁰ Sequence 10.

³⁰¹ The issue of ‘doing it’ and the use of ‘fuck you’ as a positive greeting (sequence 7) is an illustration of the plot rather than a satirical performance in its own right.

³⁰² Sequence 11.

dim light. We can see people playing tennis in the background, which seems to distract Silver from the interview from time to time. His huge glasses and moustache hide most of his facial expressions and make him appear indifferent towards the memories he is offering. The viewer immediately wonders why this man is being interviewed as an eye-witness. It is hard to believe that he was a friend of Bruce's. This impression seems to be proven true throughout the film, as he never plays a key role concerning Bruce's personal happiness. The sequence following the first interview with the manager enhances the unpleasant impression: the only role the manager plays is that of a mouthpiece for Lenny's mother Sally Marr, who is introduced in the very same sequence. This sequence marks a first turning point in the plot.³⁰³ The love story had reached its climax in the flower scene; Lenny and Honey seemed inseparable. A first sign that things are about to change can be found in the inserted performance of Bruce talking about marital problems. The manager and Sally's involvement finally marks the turning point in the light-hearted love story. The telephone call between Bruce and the manager symbolizes the opposition between the two parties – Lenny and Honey against Sally and Artie Silver. The phone call is actually initiated by Sally Marr who is sitting in the background in the manager's office during the call. Shots of Silver talking on the phone with Sally in the background alternate with Bruce on the phone and Honey in the background. On both sides, the stronger influence is in the background holding the reins. This is especially obvious when Honey gets up and whispers "I love you" in Bruce's ear while he is listening to the manager's words. A first crack in Bruce and Harlowe's relationship is revealed in this sequence. It is a slight discord which is caused by the influence of others. This impression is symbolically enhanced by the wilted flowers that are still left in the room.

Although first signs of oncoming problems seem obvious to the viewer, Bruce defiantly fights for his happiness. It appears like an act of defiance following Sally's intervention when, right after the crucial phone call, he asks Honey to marry him. In the following interview sequence, Honey melancholically recalls her wedding. This piece of information is rather bland and of no importance for the plot and the story of the comedian Bruce. Nevertheless, the focus on the relationship between Lenny and Honey is continuously maintained. The curious viewer might wonder why of all supposedly available bits of information it is memories about Honey's wedding gown that are narrated. In fact, these memories do serve a purpose: the viewer has already been convinced that Honey might not be good for Bruce. In the film, the idea of getting

³⁰³ Sequence 11.

married is depicted as a defiant reaction to the interference of others. Honey has successfully been depicted as a somewhat dubious girl and her statements in the interviews seem to stress naive and romantically blurred memories instead of offering more essential information. So far *Lenny* focuses the viewer's attention on the love story first and then devaluates Honey and has the viewer worry about Lenny's personal life. We can already see that this technique of narration paves the way for the most innocent depiction of the comedian Bruce possible. The above observations all come into play again in the scene in which Bruce and his wife visit Sally and Bruce's aunt Mema for the first time.³⁰⁴ It seems as if Aunt Mema is the only person doubting Honey – the only sentence she utters is the question “How long had the two of you known each other before you got married?” Despite Sally's request to “give the girl a chance”, while the young couple is still in the car, her friendly behavior during dinner is put into question by an inserted interview scene close to the beginning of the entire sequence in which she states that she “knew all about her.” Sally's intonation as an ‘eye-witness’ is always a bit brusque and arrogant. Her posture, gestures and facial expressions emphasize this impression. She is sitting in front of a microphone, behind her the leaves of a huge plant are swaying in the wind that is coming through an open window behind her. The movement of the plant's leaves intensifies the impression that she seems to be on the jump. Her entire appearance symbolizes her opinion: Honey is not worth more than a few words and Bruce, her only son, is not to be blamed for anything. Even though she insists that she thought it was his choice and none of her business as long as it made him happy, her devastating remark at the beginning reveals her true opinion. The entire dinner scene is dominated by Sally. She hysterically tries to be funny and entertaining and to be the cool buddy-like mother acquainted with show-business, drugs and vulgar language. Still, all her laughter seems fake and her remark “Lenny, she's a terrific girl” when she gives Honey a hug sounds like a lie.

Not surprisingly, considering the above observations, the scene following the visit shows a conflict between Honey and Lenny. For the first time, tension not originating from an outside force, is felt between the two.³⁰⁵ They are shown from the side as they are riding in a car. Interestingly, this scene symbolizes Bruce gaining control, because he is in the driver's seat and his face is in focus most of the time. This time he is eager to control their relationship when he asks her to stop stripping. Even though she

³⁰⁴ Sequence 12.

³⁰⁵ Sequence 13.

The problem of Lenny's jealousy is introduced by a flash-forward performance, which will be considered in “Pseudo-documentary aspects in the biopic *Lenny*”.

is amused by his jealousy (of the men in the audience watching her naked), it seems obvious that this time she is going to give in. It seems as if the doubts concerning Honey have suddenly infected Lenny, who must actually have known very well that he had married a stripper. His contradictory feelings are spoken out loud in a foreshadowing performance interrupting the car scene. He realizes – in retrospect – that it is ridiculous to admire a woman because of her amazing body and then forbid her to show that very same body after the wedding. Nevertheless, he manages to convince her to stop stripping in the end. This is an act of control which makes the viewer immediately feel uncomfortable because suspicions arouse that Honey is soon going to break out of this role. It serves as proof of how much the viewer is manipulated concerning Honey. Not even her reassurance that the double act was successful, which is revealed in the following interview sequence, calms down the viewer's fears. Especially when she says that this allowed them to spend 24 hours together, doubts arise whether this development was a good one.³⁰⁶

The famous entertainer Sherman Hart comments on the double act when he meets Bruce and his wife at a pool area. He echoes Honey's statement about their success and his superior position as an already famous star is expressed by a close-up on his face lighting a fat cigar and blowing the smoke into the camera.³⁰⁷ Bruce's defiant attitude is intensified by the dark sunglasses he is wearing and the annoyed expression on his face. We notice that some important development must have taken place, as suddenly Bruce is called "one of these young guys with good and clean humor". The film does not reveal any information as to when Bruce came to be more successful than at the beginning when his act was met with boredom. And yet we find out that he is still called 'clean', which assures us that he is still not at the height of his career. It is completely left in the dark when, how, and why Bruce suddenly is invited by a famous entertainer, who predicts Bruce a great career. We will get back to the interpretation of this lack of information later on and stay with the situation itself for a while. It is noteworthy that Bruce is depicted in a quite arrogant way, not sporting a smile even once. Hart is petting Honey's naked leg, but Bruce does nothing to stop him.³⁰⁸ He is much more concerned with defending himself and explaining the ambiguous situation which led to an outraged audience the other day. First signs of indifference towards his wife can be traced in this scene. More importantly, we observe that Bruce is suddenly mad at the world; we feel his rage and his capacity to be bitingly sharp for the very first

³⁰⁶ Sequence 13.

³⁰⁷ Sequence 14.

³⁰⁸ Hart pets her leg while he is talking about 'cleanness'.

time. However, we can only guess what factors might have initiated this change of attitude, this longing to “piss on the audience”.

From this point onwards, Bruce is depicted as an angry young man and brilliant comedian, while Honey’s star is finally waning. Parallel to Bruce’s change of attitude as a comedian, his behavior as a husband changes – a fact the viewer is unable to disapprove of. The terrible car accident they get into forces Honey to stay in hospital for weeks whereas Bruce remains uninjured.³⁰⁹ It is at this point that the inevitable occurs: Bruce is the first one who is involved in an extramarital affair. While Honey is recovering, he cheats on her with a very pretty blonde nurse. Scenes showing him approaching the nurse and flirting with her alternate with a flash-forward performance about cheating in a marriage. His philosophy of “denying it” is used as a sound bridge linking up to scenes from Honey’s discharge from hospital that show the couple and the nurse in an elevator together. Bruce’s philosophy of ‘denying it’ is immediately put into action and emphasized by his cool sunglasses and the way he casually puts his arm around Honey’s shoulders with the nurse right next to him. They even exchange some kind remarks before the couple leaves. The manipulative organization of the film *Lenny* has resulted in the viewer’s inability to blame Bruce for his unfaithfulness. It seems as if he still loves his wife, but because she is only a stripper and nothing but that it is okay for him to cheat on her. This change in attitude matches his change in attitude as an entertainer. Consequently, his personality seems consistent with his development and the affair can be played down. In an interview sequence Honey talks about her hurt feelings but describes how finally she tolerated his unfaithfulness. This is certainly meant to reassure the viewer that Bruce is not to blame.³¹⁰ And since he buys her a new car and takes her to California – all things that make her happy – the viewer does not blame him for anything anymore.

While the Cadillac is shown driving off with an enthusiastic Honey inside yelling “I love you, Lenny”, a sound bridge is used to link up to another turning point in the story. We already hear Honey telling us in an interview sequence “Well, we’re off to California. The new life, you know?”, but the statement’s positive content is reversed and its real meaning is revealed soon. Honey is shown in close-up at first, then in a medium-shot from the side sitting on a sofa, afterwards a close-up from the other side only showing her profile is followed by another close-up on her face. These changes of the camera angle and -distance illustrate Honey’s hesitation in telling the truth about the

³⁰⁹ Sequence 16.

³¹⁰ Sequence 17.

new life in California. She nervously pets the Chihuahua sitting on her lap, which indicates her sudden unease. She hesitantly admits having tried liquid heroin. A first sign of Honey's severe problems with narcotics can be traced when she starts telling the interviewer that all this experimenting was 'kinda fun' and that she 'sort of went bananas'. To follow chronological order, their arrival in California is documented, too. The car approaches a lookout point, this time moving towards the camera, and as the two get out they take a look across the illuminated city they are planning to conquer. The approaching head-lights of the car symbolize a new beginning as opposed to the departing rear-lights in the scene after Honey's discharge from hospital. The arrival on a hill looking down onto a sparkling city is obviously highly symbolic. The enthusiastic couple is eager to explore new territory and to leave the old life behind. On the other hand, the glittering lights of the city indicate possible temptations they might not be able to overcome. It is a symbolic scene that foreshadows the problems they are about to get into. The clash between hopeful new plans and harsh reality is illustrated when the house they have bought is shown and a nostalgic Honey tells the interviewer how they first tried to settle down. The uneasiness of the preceding interview returns when Honey talks about their life in California (she has some pictures at hand to illustrate her memories). Suddenly, she stops mid-sentence and tries to distract the interviewer by offering to show a picture of Lenny. She sighs, continues the narration and admits that after the double act did not turn out to be successful both of them started hanging out with a group of show-people experimenting with drugs.³¹¹

The following scenes create a mysterious atmosphere, which is loaded with sexual tension and the thrill of the 'forbidden'.³¹² A detail shot of a man's hand holding a straw initiates a sequence of different impressions; they are accompanied by mellow Jazz music. First the camera follows the man's hand. He is then shown with a medium-shot from the side. He is at least half-naked and uses the straw to sniff heroin or cocaine. The camera pans across a room showing a small table – a candle on top bathes the scenery in dim light, some empty bottles are lying around – and then a woman chilling on a sofa is shown. She is obviously drowsy due to drug-abuse. Cut to another scene, the camera moves along a dark hallway and then approaches a lighted room (the light is coming from a window on the opposite side illuminating the scene) in which some people have just finished some 'in-bed action'. In the next scene, close-ups on two people's faces are shown. They are lying on their backs on the floor, smoking. The rising

³¹¹ Sequence 17.

³¹² Sequence 17.

smoke accompanies the camera's pan upwards and we see a woman sitting next to the couple on the floor. She is sniffing something. Cut to the next scene, a woman wearing only a towel pulls away a bathtub's curtain revealing two naked men kissing each other. One of them is Lenny Bruce. Cut to a medium-shot of Honey who lets some unknown man take a drag on her cigarette (or joint). The camera focuses on her face when she snuggles up to the man's chest. The whole set of impressions shows the mysterious atmosphere of a sixties' crowd experimenting with everything from drugs to sex. All people are very relaxed, partly dizzy and lost in their thoughts. Even the allusions to some sexual actions are characterized by slowness. There are no hasty movements at all in this dialogue- and comment-free set of impressions and the mellow music enhances this atmosphere. Bruce and Honey are part of this crowd, although this fact might even go unnoticed. The viewer might at first sight miss that it is Bruce kissing a man in the bathtub; even Honey being close to another man might escape the viewer's attention. As we can see, Bruce's homosexual interests are included in this film in passing.³¹³ At no other point are they explicitly mentioned or at least alluded to. This observation is a very interesting one, for Honey's interest in other women is blown out of proportion. Honey's remark in the next interview telling us that "You do things on dope that normally wouldn't come into your mind to do" comments on the preceding events as well as on what is about to come.

In a lengthy scene, Bruce and Honey are shown lying in bed together talking about a threesome.³¹⁴ First, the camera focuses on a radio up on a shelf above the bed. While they are talking, the camera very slowly pans downwards until Honey's hair is visible. Then her forehead, the curve of her eyebrow, her right eye and finally her full face can be seen, thus emphasizing the slow development of the argument. Honey's refusal to give in and Lenny's pushing her again and again is thus illustrated. Interestingly, his question whether she loves him is right away answered with a 'Yeah', whereas the question whether she knows that he loves her is answered after a long while of hesitation with the final 'Yeah'. This is one of the rare moments in *Lenny* in which the viewer's sympathy is directed towards Honey. We feel pity for her when Bruce pushes her into things that are considered 'hip'.

The lengthy scene of the threesome is not illustrated by music or dialogue. Tension is created, because the viewer does not know whether Honey is doing something she did not want to do. Neither do we know why exactly she did not want to

³¹³ They are mentioned in, for instance, A. Goldman's biography of Lenny Bruce.

³¹⁴ Sequence 18.

participate at first. The scene begins with a close-up on the other woman's face. She is dark-haired and pretty and Honey's finger very slowly touches her lips for a few seconds. The camera moves around the other woman and now we see Honey's face in close-up facing the other woman who is touching Honey's neck and hair. The look on Honey's face is at first difficult to interpret. It could either express dislike or shyness, but also sexual tension or annoyance. Before she gives in and starts to kiss the woman, she gives Bruce a strange look. He is watching them with a stern and probing stare (a cut to his face interrupts the focus on Honey's face). Her look expresses that she is longing for his final assurance that he really wants her to participate but at the same time there is a defiant expression on her face. The developments following the threesome scene explain Honey's strange behavior: Bruce accuses his wife of having had an interest in women long before. His behavior reflects an attempt to test Honey while her behavior shows that she knows that she is being tested. During the silent scene between Honey and the woman, Honey keeps throwing glances at Bruce, who with a sad and worried expression on his face watches them and only hesitantly starts to participate. It is left in the dark whether he ever got to enjoy the whole thing, as the scene ends with a still worried and restrained Bruce shying back from kissing both the other girl and Honey. Thus, it is emphasized that he is the one who is out of place in this situation. He is not needed. The cuts to his worried face enhance the impression that is created in this scene: he is left out, it is not his fault that sexual experiments are about to ruin the marriage. It is Honey who has always been the one with bisexual interests. Given this emphasis, the viewer tends to forget that it was Bruce who initiated the threesome and that, only a few moments before, we saw him kissing another man and cheating on Honey while she was in hospital. Honey's defiance as a desperate reaction to his cruel way of testing her is turned into a victory for poor Lenny, who has to come to terms with a lesbian wife. His inserted performance emphasizes this topic: the routine is about a man who finds out that his wife is a lesbian. The performance alternates with a scene showing a conflict of Bruce and Harlowe (it might take place immediately after the threesome, as Honey is shown sitting in bed). Honey is desperately crying, because Bruce accuses her of spoiling their relationship due to her latent bisexual interests. Furthermore, he reveals that he had always suspected these inclinations. He is very cruel in this argument, because he tells her how many 'chicks' he betrayed her with. Although his argumentation is quite illogical – he questions her love because of her bisexuality and admits his affairs at the same time – the viewer tends to sympathize with him. He is depicted as the disappointed and hurt husband who loves his wife so much. Especially

Honey's desperate cry asking him why he did not tell her to stop although he knew of her bisexual affairs points out that it is Honey who is to be blamed. Despite the unfair operating with double standards *Lenny* manages to whitewash Bruce's behavior and thus paves the way for further developments.

Honey announces these developments in the next interview: a child was supposed to save the marriage. The fact that it is Honey who introduces the topic 'Kitty', their daughter born in 1955, again shifts the focus on Honey as the bad influence. And, indeed, she melancholically chats about the attempt to lead a happy family life but soon she has to admit that when she had to go back to work "things didn't work out".³¹⁵

Lenny omits a documentation of the early years as parents and from now on Bruce is depicted as the single dad taking care of Kitty while Honey keeps 'messing around'. In the sequence following Honey's statements in the preceding interview, Kitty is already about a year old.³¹⁶ She and her dad are sitting in a Chinese restaurant waiting for Honey to return. Bruce is portrayed as a caring dad always sporting a sad smile. Cuts to Honey sitting in a car with another man, reveal why Lenny is alone and worried. Honey's decline due to drug abuse is vividly illustrated when she finally enters the restaurant – dressed pompously – and starts babbling. She is unable to focus on anything, giggles and misbehaves by imitating her daughter's baby-sounds. The scene makes the viewer feel very uncomfortable and arouses feelings of pity for Bruce. A close-up on his face is used to make a leap in time. Honey's last giggles fade and while we still see Bruce's face, a Chinese waiter calls "Mr. Bruce, Mr. Bruce, your order ready" [sic]. After a cut to a close-up of the waiter's face, Bruce is shown from a medium distance sitting at a table all by himself. Then, he gets up to fetch the order. The assumption that some time must have passed is confirmed when the Chinese waiter asks where Bruce's pretty wife is. Bruce tells him that they are already divorced. The waiter's "You're better off, Mr. Bruce" confirms the impression that has been created in this scene.

The inserted performance of Bruce begins with a silly story about lonely divorced men meeting lonely divorced women who want their poodles to remain in the bedroom while they are having sex. As a matter of fact, the performance is a serious one as it moves on to the issue of divorce and the longing for revenge. Again, *Lenny* puts all emphasis on the innocence of its hero. His wife hurt him so badly that he now wants to

³¹⁵ Sequence 19.

³¹⁶ Sequence 20.

take the child away from her. In an interview, Honey confirms that she was just no longer able to take care of the child. At first she is outraged when she tells the interviewer that Bruce stole the kid from her. After a moment of reconsideration – the interviewer has to change the tape and asks her to repeat her statement – she reverses what she has just said and admits her inability to care for the child. Thus, the viewer is finally assured that everything was her fault. And, indeed, in the course of Bruce’s performance his feelings of revenge seem to diminish. He moves on to state “custody doesn’t mean get even.” Again, his hurt feelings and serious dues as a divorced man left with a kid are emphasized. His abilities as a single dad are illustrated in the next scene. He appears as a caring and charming father. The way he feeds Kitty sharply contrasts with Honey’s present state of being. She calls him while she is high on drugs. Honey’s decline is illustrated by the close-up on her puffy face and uncombed hair; she is hardly able to focus on anything and often repeats herself in a weak and whining voice. Bruce, by contrast, is sober and patiently waits for her to finish her sentences. He pays for the collect call and offers to bail her out again. Most of the times, both are shown with close-ups on their faces, thus enhancing the contrast between ‘wasted’ and ‘sober’. Some shots of Lenny in the background, focus is on Kitty sitting in the front, emphasize who is good (Lenny) and who is bad (Honey) in this scene. The very interesting performance used to illustrate that Bruce is in fact hurt by the fact that “people don’t stay” will be analyzed later.³¹⁷ We can, nevertheless, assume that the conclusion of this performance is used to blend Bruce’s political and social commentary and his personal concerns. “People don’t stay” actually criticizes the conclusions drawn from the pictures of the Kennedy assassination.³¹⁸ While we see Honey lying in a cell in a devastated state, we hear Bruce repeat this conclusion over and over.

Now that Honey is out of the way – she is sentenced to 24 months in jail – his career suddenly develops. First signs of his capacity to be sharp and critical were to be observed when he threatened to ‘piss on the audience’ for the first time.³¹⁹ Now, the development of his career is documented with the help of Sally’s memories displayed in a series of interview sequences.³²⁰ Evidently due to the absence of Honey and the support of Sally, Bruce is now free to concentrate on his career and starts to improvise onstage. He works as an announcer of strippers in a nightclub, saying whatever comes

³¹⁷ Sequence 21.

³¹⁸ See sequence 21.

³¹⁹ Sequence 14.

³²⁰ Sally’s influence is analyzed in detail in “Pseudo-Documentary Aspects in the Biopic Lenny”.

to his mind.³²¹ Not until he is successful and already selling record albums do we see Honey again. Bruce visits her in prison and shows her pictures of Kitty and his first album. Despite the fact that he is involved with other girls, as Honey soon finds out, she is excited to see him and happily announces that she will be released from prison sooner than she had thought. However, she is still depicted as the weak person not having learned from her mistakes. She still sounds naive and trapped in her relationship with Lenny. In an inserted interview sequence she says that he wrote to her a lot, came to visit whenever he could, and that she never felt that she was divorced from him. One of his visits to prison is shown. During their conversation, the viewer observes that Bruce is worried when he realizes that she seems to repress that they are divorced. When she asks him to show her his latest album through the bars we can see him shaking his head behind the album. Bruce is depicted as the strong one in this situation. He is in control of his life and his ex-wife's persistent weakness contrasts with and emphasizes his position.

The next fifteen minutes of *Lenny* focus on the development of the 'sick comic' Lenny Bruce.³²² He is at the height of his career; performances in which he is at his best are shown. The events leading to his first arrest due to obscenity and the resulting trials are documented in detail.³²³ Bruce is depicted as the brilliant entertainer and then as the heroic fighter for free speech in court. Only the inserted performances in which he reads out from his trial records in front of a nightclub audience – they also serve the purpose of illustrating the events in court – foreshadow that it is not only Honey's fault that Bruce lost his popularity in the end. These foreshadowing performances, however, are not meant to make us forget Honey's bad influence. It is again emphasized that it is the return of Honey which marks another turning point. In the next interview, she is shown desperately crying. She admits that she kept relapsing and just was not able to stay sober. When her release from prison is shown, she is the one who alludes to the difficulties an ex-junkie has to face when he or she is "dropped off on the sidewalk" after the release. Apart from that, she mentions that she had gotten into some trouble and had to serve full time in prison. Thus, the viewer can assume that Honey is not fully rehabilitated when she gets back together with Bruce after her release. The way is paved for another depiction of how bad an influence Honey was on Bruce, the successful and heroic star.

³²¹ As sequences 22 and 23 exclude the relationship of Bruce and Harlowe, they will be topic in "Pseudo-Documentary Aspects in the Biopic *Lenny*", where they are of vast importance.

³²² Sequences 25-27.

³²³ All of this is topic in "Pseudo-Documentary Aspects in the Biopic *Lenny*".

Only once can the viewer assume that Bruce was heavily addicted to drugs, too.³²⁴ The crucial scene begins with a detail-shot of Honey's left arm, which is covered with puncture marks. She foolishly screeches "Follow the dots" as in a 'paint by numbers kit' and does exactly that with a pen. Sally's voice interrupts; she yells that it is Honey's fault that Lenny is addicted. Her accusation that "he was just fine until you had to be shlepped into it again" obviously alludes to some former drug-problems of Lenny's. However, this is the first time that we see him high on drugs.³²⁵ The inserted interview with Honey also alludes to Bruce's suspected drug-addiction, because the interviewer brings into play that "Lenny was deep into drugs himself." Interestingly, Honey responds with an annoyed "You're really cute, aren't you. You want me to say it." This is another proof that Bruce and Harlowe's love story is used to manipulate the viewer's perception. Even long after his death, Honey is willing to blame herself for his decline. The interviewer's question is a rare attempt to include some information about Bruce's drug-addiction. It is another proof that the filmmakers are willing to mention some ugly 'facts' but are at the same time eager to immediately hush them up.³²⁶ All the bad things are blamed on someone else. In most of the cases it is Honey – *the* number one influence on Bruce. One can come to the conclusion that the biopic is in fact an attempt to inconspicuously diverge from other historical sources.

Bruce tries to get himself back on his feet, all the while encouraging himself to straighten up and get ready for the crowd waiting for him outside. At the same time, Honey keeps being foolish. At first they seem to be having fun together. They hysterically laugh at the worried Sally. However, later on Honey seems to be hopelessly lost in a hallucinatory world. All attempts made by Sally to keep Bruce from appearing onstage fail and the next performance we see is a shockingly unfunny and confused one. He enters the stage barefooted, after he has realized that he is being watched by various police officers, but with his coat on as if he were ready for his next arrest. He loses track of his thoughts and thus unintentionally makes the audience laugh. His speech is slurred like that of a drunkard and he gets angry at people starting to leave. In the end he states his famous words "I'm sorry, I'm not funny. I'm not a comedian" and leaves the stage. Behind the stage he enters a bathroom and vomits. He is arrested on the spot.

His performance is interrupted by constant coughing, a first hint at another attempt to whitewash him later. This time it is Sally who attempts to rewrite his story

³²⁴ Sequence 28.

³²⁵ Apart from that, there is one other instance (sequence 23), which leads one to suspect that Bruce might have been involved with drugs. During the negotiations behind the stage, we hear Sally ask Lenny about the pills he was taking. An inquiry answered by "M&M's, mom."

³²⁶ 'facts' here refers to Bruce's drug addiction which is mentioned in the majority of sources on Bruce.

and to justify her son's decline by emphasizing his beginning illness. The filmmakers even insert a picture of Bruce's scar across his back in order to illustrate Sally's memories of how his lung had to be peeled three times. This is an impressive shot that makes the viewer forget that just moments before, Bruce had been shown high on drugs. The manager Artie Silver also talks about Bruce's health problems in one of the last interviews. Even though the viewer has just realized that Bruce himself was a drug-addict, *Lenny* manages to distract the viewers again by putting emphasis on the pleurisy he had to fight in his last years. In the final interviews, Honey admits that she finally lost control and wound up in psychiatry. Although Honey refrains from talking about Bruce's last months and talks about her own problems instead, her words have an effect. The inserted interview sequences with Honey are meant to remind the viewers that it had always been Honey who was the unsteady one, the bad influence, the one hopelessly lost. As a consequence, all of this can only lead to the conclusion that it cannot possibly be Bruce's own fault that he dies with a needle in his arm. There are numerous clues to Bruce's inevitable end: the manager wearily speaks about how Bruce had to answer to the courts for possession of narcotics and how his health problems worsened. Silver seems to be finished with his narration about Bruce as he sighs, drones his last memories and interrupts himself by ordering his secretary to postpone a barber's appointment. Indifference and resignation can be felt and herald the end of the story. Interview sequences with Sally, the manager and Honey alternate. All of them point in the same direction: Lenny Bruce died without flaws. He was haunted to death by the courts, his illness weakened him and the trouble with Honey put pressure on him. The "poor guy", as the manager says, died broke for he had to pay lawyer's and doctor's bills and just could not handle the pressure.

A long court scene is the very last one in which we see Bruce alive. He desperately argues with his lawyers and fires them in the end, because they try to use tactics instead of having him explain and perform his routines in court. To make matters worse, he has to argue with the judge, too. The judge coldly orders Bruce to refrain from arguing and get proper counsel. A desperate Bruce begging "Please don't take away my words" is led away by officers. In the next scene, he is dead. He is shown lying naked on the floor in his house. We hear police radio and see a man feeling Bruce's pulse. The corpse is filmed from behind Bruce's head – his head is turned to the left and we can only see his nose and forehead. His white chest appears illuminated and stands out against the otherwise dim scenery. His bright nudity seems to symbolize his innocence. People mill about; another official gets off a car outside and enters the

house. The whole scene is shakily filmed like original (paparazzi) press material. Bruce's belongings, piles of court-papers, bills and letters are shown. An inserted interview sequence with an angry Sally interrupts the shots from the place of events. She is shown in a close-up; her facial expression is stern and almost stony. In a forced voice she gives monosyllabic answers to the interviewer's inquiries. He wants to know whether her son had been afraid to go to jail and if he had been bankrupt before he died. Thus, he hints at a possible suicide. A flashback to scenes shortly before his death shows how her son had promised to go on a diet and how happily he waved goodbye to his mother and kid after a visit. According to her, a suicide seems unimaginable. The loving mother harshly rules this possibility out at first. Her determinateness fades, though, and seems desperate in the end, as if she was not sure herself and needed assurance from others.

Honey's final memories are uttered in a trembling voice; her eyes are filled with tears. She is shown from a medium distance and asked whether it does not surprise her that Bruce got into trouble for things that now (time of the interview) would be considered harmless. When the camera moves towards her face her answer "He was just so damn funny" reveals something very important. On the surface it seems as if Honey does not care and is lost in her own world. After all she is depicted as a naive and maybe even simple person throughout the film. If we have a closer look at the scene we realize that her naive lack of an opinion symbolically emphasizes the senselessness of the entire topic of restricting a comedian's act. Thus, she coincidentally rips into the heart of the matter: Lenny Bruce was a very funny comedian, which is something that tends to be forgotten. Although she seems to ignore the entire struggle for freedom of speech and even though she is depicted as the bad influence throughout the film, she is the only one capable of summing up the plain truth about Bruce.

4.2 Pseudo-Documentary Aspects in the Biopic *Lenny*

The film's first take – the close-up on Honey's lips – is not only used as a device to initiate the love story; it also introduces the film as a pseudo-documentary. The importance of the eye-witnesses' narration and comments is pointed out from the very beginning: Most 'eye-witnesses' are introduced in an interview first before they appear in the plot. The 'eye-witness' who could be considered most important is the one who begins the narration. Honey speaks in the past tense and with a melancholic tone to her

voice. Thus, we can assume that the person this biopic is about passed away.³²⁷ The fact that *Lenny* is filmed in black and white enhances this impression as we tend to associate the past with black and white film stock. Furthermore, the black and white film stock, in addition to the inserted interview sequences, serves the purpose of making the film appear as ‘realistic’ as possible. At first, this impression seems to sharply contrast with the narration of the romantic love story. The love story, which forms the framework, is used to manipulate the viewer’s impression, as was mentioned earlier. However, the contrast between romanticized and emphasized love story and make-believe-documentary fades if we consider the manipulative effects of those devices that are used to make the film appear ‘realistic’. Consequently, the inserted interview sequences and their function and effects should be analyzed in the following. The other important device used to make the film appear as ‘realistic’ as possible is even more important: the inserted flash-forward performances of Bruce. These are used to illustrate the film’s action, to foreshadow developments, and to enhance the impression of a ‘realistic’ account of Bruce’s life.³²⁸

The preceding part of this film analysis followed the stream of narration displayed in the film. This approach seems justified, because the love story is the main topic and is used as a device to hold the story together. The emphasis on Honey and her influence on Bruce were evaluated in detail. The inserted interviews with her were analyzed, because they were used to create a certain impression, as we have seen earlier. Now, we can consider certain aspects without regard to chronological order. The interview sequences with Bruce’s mother Sally Marr should be analyzed first. In order to be able to understand her depiction in the interviews, her appearances in the plot have to be considered, too. Afterwards, the manager’s memories and his role in the film are evaluated in a similar manner. The emphasis, nevertheless, will be on the analysis of Bruce’s flash-forward performances and their positioning in the film.

Sally Mar is the only ‘eye-witness’ that appears in the narration before she is shown in an interview. Her influence on Bruce is very strong, as she is depicted as the worried mother holding the reins in the background. When Lenny and Honey’s relationship becomes more serious, Sally uses the manager Artie Silver to influence Bruce in his decisions. While we see Silver sitting behind a huge desk – a cup of coffee in front of him, talking to Bruce on the phone – Sally is already depicted as the person who is in control of things. The sequence is filmed over Sally’s shoulder. We can only

³²⁷ The importance of the hints at the death of Lenny Bruce from the very beginning of the film will be considered later.

³²⁸ ‘realistic’ here means reflecting the majority of sources on Bruce’s life and career.

see her left shoulder and the silhouette of her head. She is wearing a huge hat. Although the focus is on the manager in this scene, the immense influence she has on her son is alluded to already. Silver appears small behind his desk, whereas Sally's silhouette appears huge. She seems to be watching over the situation. After a few alternating takes of Bruce on the phone and Silver in medium shot, Lenny's question whether his mother "had anything to do with this"³²⁹ is answered by the visual revelation that it is Sally whose back we have seen all the time. Now Sally is filmed from behind the manager. She is in focus and her outward appearance resembles that of an old lady. She is hunched in a chair, her shoulders are leaning forwards, and she is wearing a pearl necklace and a hat. Her whole appearance can hardly be associated with the tough and influential mother she actually is in the film. She is depicted as the innocent and caring mother rather than as the strong character who always blames Honey for everything that goes wrong. Her influence had been symbolically alluded to earlier, when only her silhouette was shown. However, now that we see her in person, she is depicted as a rather innocent lady who only wants the very best for her son. Thus, her real character is not yet revealed. Using the manager as a mouthpiece, she has her actual opinion expressed via someone else. Thus, her apparent innocence and good-will are put into question. From the very beginning she seems dishonest – no matter how caring, funny or companionable she is depicted at other points of time in the film. She does not tell her son in a straightforward way what she thinks about Honey and this dishonest behavior is maintained throughout the film. The next time she appears in the film, she is shown in the kitchen, preparing the meal for her son and his fiancée, who are expected to come for a first visit after their wedding. This time, Aunt Mema functions as a mouthpiece for Sally's thoughts. Mema, a hilarious old lady with a screechy voice, looks out of the kitchen window while Sally is cooking and asks why "she [Honey] doesn't let him come up".³³⁰ This is another small hint at the doubts cast on Honey and a useful utterance to whitewash Sally. She responds with "Give her a chance. She's probably a very lovely girl". Sally is thus depicted as the liberal mother not wanting to influence, whereas Mema is the only one representing the distrust directed towards Honey in this scene. In Sally's very first interview appearance, she arrogantly tells the interviewer that she "knew all about her". This remark contradicts her liberality and, moreover, her loyalty. We know now that in reality Mema *does* represent Sally's opinion. Though she pretends to be on the young couple's side, we know now that she actually drives the

³²⁹ Sequence 11.

³³⁰ Sequence 12.

suspicions directed towards Honey. Sally's dishonesty is emphasized, and the attentive viewer might assume that some manipulation of the audience's impression is going on again. Sally's doubts and her choice not to directly express them make clear that Bruce, his family *and* the viewer eventually have to succumb to Honey's bad influence. Sally's exaggerated behavior in the following dinner-scene seems fake and dishonest. Her pretended friendliness culminates in the hug she gives Honey and in her remark that she is a terrific girl. In fact, this situation already symbolizes the surrender to Harlowe's influence. The doubts concerning Honey are reinforced and can be utilized later when a scapegoat is needed.

For quite a while do we not see Sally again, but all her fears seem to have come true by now: her son and Honey are divorced, Honey is in trouble and Lenny is forced to care for the little kid. We watch Honey hitting rock bottom and inserted performances of Bruce emphasize his difficulties with being a divorced single dad. Finally, it is Sally who selflessly reappears as a helper in the nick of time. Showing a chummy attitude in the interview, she emphasizes that she thought it natural to come help her son, but her arrogant undertone shows that she had always known this would happen.³³¹ She now functions as the commentator for the final development of Bruce's career. Sally Marr is *the* 'eye witness' who provides those pieces of information that the film leaves in the dark. It is her, for instance, who announces in the interview that Bruce started to work as an announcer for strippers. She is the one who provides the information that he finally began to improvise on stage. This is the information the viewer has been waiting for all the time. After all, it was never really clear what exactly initiated Bruce's rage onstage and when he started to be the comedian we got to know from the flash-forwards. Sally mentions this information in passing, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. She puts much more effort into correcting the interviewer's wrong pronunciation of 'schtick' than in explaining the events. This is just another situation that makes her appear arrogant and distant. What she is actually hinting at with her casual way of talking in the interview is that (according to her opinion) as soon as Honey was out of the way and she entered the scene again, her son was eventually and most naturally able to develop his talent. Thus, Sally echoes what the film had been hinting at all the time. In the following negotiations with Artie Silver behind the stage, Sally is also present. She supports Lenny, her son now being what she had always dreamt of. Even his obvious swallowing of some pills is more or less tolerated by her and played down in the course of events. She accepts his lame excuse

³³¹ Sequence 22.

that the pills are M&M's, which demonstrates that she is willing to ignore the flaws and weaknesses of her son. All in all, one could say that Sally represents the impression that is created and maintained throughout the movie: Bruce is innocent and without flaws, and not to be blamed.

Even when his drug-abuse is openly displayed in the crucial incident with Honey behind the scenes, Sally keeps blaming Lenny's problems on Honey and her return.³³² Of course, she appears as a worried and caring mother when she watches the couple fooling around while they are high on drugs and later tries to prevent her son from having to go on stage. She desperately mills around the nightclub and this seems to be an attempt to hide his real problem – he is an addict – rather than an act that shows her worries about him or even about the club-owner's license. It is a first indication that Sally does not want to accept Bruce's weakness and his beginning decline. In the final interviews the look on her face is icy, she is caught up in pain but trying to hide it and insists on Bruce's innocence. For her, Lenny died due to other people's faults. She harshly rejects the possibility of suicide, forgetting that drug-abuse in Lenny's case was a step by step suicide. Instead, she points out that his physical decline was solely due to pleurisy. Her facial expression in the last interview at least shows uncertainty, as has already been explained earlier. She is angry at the interviewer for accusing her son of having committed suicide first, but only seconds later she hesitates. A close-up on her sad face emphasizes her pain and she almost desperately tries to assure herself that suicide can be ruled out. Sally Marr, at least as she is depicted in this film, definitely ignores Bruce's severe drug problems until the end. It seems obvious that the '*eye-witness*' Sally Marr is used as a mouthpiece for the message the biopic *Lenny* carries (her interview appearances are much more important than her appearances during the course of events in the film). Bruce died, because he was influenced and haunted by others. His drug-addiction and unwillingness to compromise is played down.

Artie Silver, Bruce's manager, is introduced to the viewers in an interview.³³³ In order to distinguish him from his younger self in the movie, he now wears a moustache and huge glasses. Certainly, both the moustache and the glasses hide most of his facial expressions and enhance his indifferent behavior. From the very first time we see Silver in the interview, he seems indifferent or annoyed by the interviewer. He uses a bored tone of voice; his posture – while sitting behind a desk in a huge chair – is relaxed if not even bored as well. The tennis players behind the window in the background might even

³³² Sequence 28.

³³³ Sequence 11.

hint at what Silver would prefer doing instead of giving an interview. He is shown from the side and consequently does not look right into the camera. We can conclude that he does not look the interviewer in the eye, either. Without a flicker of emotion he insist on how much he cared for his friend Bruce and how difficult it was for him to find a balance between manager and friend. From the very beginning his whole attitude is questionable and we are not surprised when we find out that Sally uses him as a mouthpiece. In the scene with Sally in his office, the impression of the rather unpleasant and indifferent person we got to know during the interviews is reinforced. His disloyalty prevails over his worries. The manager only sometimes seems to really be Bruce's friend: when, for instance, further engagements are discussed behind the stage of a nightclub or on the phone.³³⁴ In these scenes, Silver is as silly as Bruce and not at all a dominant businessman only interested in profit. However, his behavior during the interviews is characterized by coolness and indifference. In fact, he does not serve any other purpose than to comment on things we already know from the plot or from some other witness. His annoyed attitude dominates the interviews and every time he enumerates facts in a bored tone the viewer finds it hard to believe that his love for Bruce has outlived time. In the last interviews he even loses track of his thoughts or interrupts himself to make other appointments, as has already been mentioned earlier. Even his statement about Bruce's last months seems distant and unemotional. He only rattles off facts about Lenny's illness, bankruptcy, and remarks how Bruce was put under pressure by the problem with Honey. The fact that he calls Bruce "the poor guy" reinforces this impression of distance. It does not really come as a surprise when he finally tells the interviewer that he is happy that Bruce's records are selling again – obviously not for Lenny's benefit– and that he is planning to make a biopic about him. It seems as if his caring attitude reflects the appreciation of Bruce's talent, which could obviously be turned into profit, rather than reflecting the emotional attachment to Lenny Bruce, his friend.

The fact that the manager announces his intention to make a biopic about Bruce serves yet another purpose: it makes the film appear like a 'true' documentary and the figure of the manager seems to be the most 'real' 'eye-witness'. The announcement of his plans to make a film about Lenny Bruce on the one hand concludes the biopic *Lenny*. On the other hand, it at the same time provides the starting point for the story. It is meant to create the illusion that a 'true' documentary with original material and no actors and actresses has just been shown.

³³⁴ Sequence 22.

In the interviews with Honey, the personal and emotional side was emphasized and the interviews with Sally were dominated by the mixture of playing down facts and, eventually, desperation. The interviews with the manager, on the other hand, are characterized by an atmosphere of indifference, distance from Bruce, and interest in profit. Although all three ‘eye-witnesses’ show quite a different attitude in the interviews, all three ways of behavior almost make the viewer forget that they are played by actors. However, the impression which is created does not necessarily reflect the information offered by the majority of studies on Lenny Bruce. The interviewer, who stays in the dark throughout the film, is the only one who cautiously yet insistently tries to reveal some of Bruce’s weaknesses.³³⁵ In contrast to this, his interview partners represent the act of playing down or covering up ugly ‘facts’. The eye-witnesses’ importance is emphasized in the film, whereas the interviewer is kept in the off and remains both nameless and faceless. Although he represents important information, he is marginalized in the film. We can now suppose that the attempt to whitewash Bruce in this film is not an attempt to completely rewrite his story. For the first time – and admittedly only after a close reading – we realize that *Lenny* offers at least some aspects reflecting the prevailing opinion about Bruce. One might wonder why those ugly bits of information about Bruce were mentioned at all. His death due to an overdose is a simple fact which certainly cannot be ignored and has to be included in the biopic. Therefore, the topic of drug abuse must at least be mentioned in the film to achieve ‘credibility’. Nevertheless, the fact that the interviewer remains in the dark indicates that certain facts are marginalized and that the viewers are supposed to believe the story the eye-witnesses have to tell.

By far the most important devices used to make the film appear like a documentary are the inserted flash-forward performances of Bruce. Their content is very similar to the live performances we have become acquainted with in the course of this study. As a consequence, a thorough analysis of each performance is not intended at this point. What we do want to consider is how and with which effects they are incorporated into the stream of narration. How are the flash-forwards used to illustrate the action or to even comment upon the action? How do they influence our perception of Bruce and the other characters? Additionally, it should be interesting to find out how Bruce’s stage character and the interaction with his audiences are depicted in the film. Is

³³⁵ For instance, when he tries to put pressure on Honey and wants her to admit that Bruce was also heavily into drugs, or when he insists on Bruce’s hopeless situation towards the end and suspects a possible suicide.

his development as an entertainer noticeable in his performances? Which filmic devices are used to achieve this?

It is again the first take of the movie which is very important. Honey states that Lenny “was at least busted nine or ten times. Twice for possession of narcotics, and three, four times for obscenity.”³³⁶ It is the very first information given in the film and consequently serves its own purpose: the biopic is about a controversial entertainer who obviously got into difficulties.³³⁷ After a few seconds the viewer finds out that it is not just some funny comedian whose story is about to be told. Although Honey’s words hint at Lenny’s weaknesses (“possession of narcotics”), her statement creates an atmosphere of mystery and tension. An entertainer who got into difficulties immediately arouses interest. This curious tension is increased via a sound bridge: we hear an announcer say “Ladies and Gentlemen: Lenny Bruce” while we still see Honey’s lips. The tension hits its peak in the next take, an impressive shot of Bruce onstage. He is leaning on his microphone, at first still half in the dark. We can only guess his silhouette until a spot light coming from behind the audience suddenly illuminates the scene. Bruce is shown from behind. He towers above his audience and leans on the microphone in a relaxed and cool manner. There is an immense contrast between Bruce in the spotlight onstage and the audience in the auditorium in the dark. All of that makes him seem superior. Especially the bright spotlight makes Bruce appear like a shining star. The visual effect is quite impressive. Moreover, one could even identify an allusion to his ‘posthumous sainthood’. Thus, the first impression of Bruce is definitely that of a confident, appreciated, and successful comedian at the height of his career. We do not know yet that this is only a foreshadowing performance of Bruce. We might assume that it must be one, though, because Honey spoke in the past and with a worried voice. Bruce’s first performance illustrates his strategies of humor quite well. The introductory take showing him in the spotlight is followed by a medium shot of Lenny from the side. The background is completely dark, his face is in focus. He is a bearded comedian, dressed in a casual way, and he utters his first words with his chin leaning towards his chest all the while looking down. This posture emphasizes that the words he is about to say are expressions that were not supposed to be said in public at that time. At the same time, his posture shows that he is about to ridicule these restrictions. He begins with the simple question “Did you know that Eleanor Roosevelt

³³⁶ Sequence 1.

³³⁷ This act of stigmatizing Bruce from the very beginning will be considered in the following chapter “Conclusion: Love Story and Pseudo-Documentary – Manipulation of Sympathy and Possible Effects”.

gave Lou Gehrig the clap?” This is an impressive example of how Bruce shocked the audience and shook them up. Next, we have a front view, still in medium shot. Bruce looks up responding to the audience’s laughter. His considerations about whether he has to go that low for laughs are supposed to echo possible reactions in the audience. They are integrated into this performance to illustrate Bruce’s strategies of humor and, moreover, his ability to fully comprehend and explain his methods from the very beginning. He even goes on to explain his concept of how the suppression of words and certain topics gives them power and makes them turn into problems (in this case the spreading of sexually transmitted diseases). After so much information has already been offered, there is no chance left for the viewers to decipher Bruce’s strategies of humor and learn something. Considering that this biopic is about a *comedian*, this observation is a disappointing and also revealing one. *Lenny* is not as much about Bruce the entertainer as it is about Bruce the private person. His brilliance as a comedian is clearly recognized and definitely not put into question. His development as a comedian, however, does not seem to deserve detailed explanations. His life story and personal fortune, on the contrary, does. It has already been explained, that from the very beginning, the love story and Honey’s importance are reinforced after this first performance of Bruce. In the course of the action we soon find out that this performance was a flash-forward. We also find out that the device used to distinguish between the person in the plot and the person in the flash-forwards is a beard. The very bad performance following Lenny and Honey’s first encounter is used to illustrate the contrast between the early years and the height of Bruce’s career. In this performance, he is shown as a tiny figure appearing lost on a large stage. The camera is behind the audience this time making him appear small and clumsy in the back. He is wearing a seemingly uncomfortable suit, which emphasizes his rigidity and uncertainty. Even when he is shown in medium shot, people are milling around in front of him and some shots of bored people in the audience illustrate how he is not able to inspire the audience. The contrast between the flash-forward and the amateur performance, nevertheless, creates tension and certain expectations. The viewer is anxious to find out how he started to develop as an entertainer. Unfortunately, this question will never be satisfactorily answered in the film. As the story unfolds, the viewer is so much concerned with Bruce’s personal struggles that it is sometimes hardly possible to realize that the person in the action and the smart entertainer in the flash-forwards are the very same person. The idea of using the comedian in the flash-forwards as an acute commentator upon the action loses some of its magic, because throughout the film we never really get to know the person we know

from the flash-forwards. When Bruce actually is at exactly this point of his career, we are so caught up pitying him as a single dad and divorced husband with a crazy ex-wife that the performances seem like a chain of randomly strung-together illustrations of how great Lenny Bruce was.³³⁸ And shortly after, when his trials begin, only his decline as a comedian and his obsession with the law is documented in the performances. As a consequence, we are forced to pay attention to those inserted performances that are offered until Honey leaves the scene. We should thus consider their role in the course of the action, first.³³⁹ Afterwards, one can consider the documentation of the trials and the performances associated with this part of Bruce's career.

The first of the flash-forwards illustrates the action, but it does not comment upon the events as those that follow do. This performance about the issue of "doing it" and the utterance "fuck you"³⁴⁰ serves a double purpose: first, it illustrates what is about to go on behind the hotel room door that Bruce has just closed behind him and Honey.³⁴¹ Second, it is another exemplification of how Bruce's humor works: after shocking the audience first, he explains how the restricted use of so called taboo-words is actually illogical when their actual meaning is considered instead of only taking their negative and restricted associations into account. In contrast to all following performances, this one does not comment upon the action or allude to possible developments. The performance vividly exemplifies Bruce's strategies of humor. The viewer is thus able to immediately and directly become acquainted with Bruce's magic and brilliance. The routine may also increase our expectations since Bruce was introduced as a person who was arrested for obscenity and now we get a first clue why this might have happened. The stunning logic behind the initially alarming use of "fuck you" probably makes the viewer appreciate this brilliant entertainer immediately. The viewer's desire to find out more about Bruce's development is initiated at this point. The viewer longs to find out what really motivated Bruce to become socially and politically involved in his routines. However, we must also accept that this question will never be completely answered. Nevertheless, our curiosity has been piqued and the biopic starts to hold our attention, not only because of the romantic developments but also due to Bruce's abilities as a very funny social critic.

³³⁸ Sequence 23.

³³⁹ All inserted performances from sequences 7 to 21 are used to illustrate or comment upon the action.

³⁴⁰ Sequence 7.

³⁴¹ In a close-up Lenny asks his audience "How do you people really feel about doing it?"

The two performances which interrupt the romantic development of Bruce's love affair with Honey go beyond the simple illustration of the action.³⁴² In both cases they sharply contrast with the action in the film. While Bruce is enthusiastically decorating Honey's hotel room with hundreds of flower bouquets, the older Bruce talks to his audience about how every man "got that chick who really busted up our ass". Thus, Harlowe's bad influence on Bruce and his dependency on her, which is about to develop throughout the film, are already alluded to. His casual and almost intimate way of talking to the audience – an audience who is now cheerfully laughing – emphasizes that he is looking back on the mistakes he has made in his life. This is an important clue for the viewer. We can assume that the romantic involvements that are shown in the plot are not going to last. In most of his foreshadowing performances Bruce is depicted as a comedian who is very close to his audience. He looks some people directly in the eye or even talks to them in an almost intimate way.³⁴³ He often changes his posture, steps up to the front of the stage and leans towards his audience. Bruce winks at them, nods to one or another individual or sits on a stool as if he were sitting among friends. Thus it is made clear that these performances take place before Bruce's legal problems began. He is not angry, nor desperate, but a very warm, friendly and caring person. He smiles most of the time and laughs at his own program in a likeable manner. In most of his performances he is wearing light colored casual street wear, which clearly emphasizes his friendly attitude.

When Bruce enters Honey's hotel room in which she is sitting naked in the midst of dozens of flower bouquets, another performance interrupts the plot. It is about another delicate issue: "you don't touch it anymore". Although sexual dissatisfaction between the two never seems to be a problem, this performance anticipates the end of the romantic love and the beginning of hardships in Bruce's life. The contrast between the excited young Lenny, who is about to see his "shiksa goddess" posing nude for him, and the crucial performance illustrates the beginning of hardships rather than actual sexual frustration.³⁴⁴ Apart from illustrating his abilities and achievements as a successful entertainer, Bruce's friendly and intimate manner of talking to the audience about such a delicate topic might symbolize that after he had discarded Honey he was finally able to reach his audiences. Now that he was able to relate to them he could really move them emotionally. The willingness to share intimacies is further developed in the film.

³⁴² Sequence 10.

³⁴³ The 'Are There Any Niggers Here Tonight' performance shows the importance of the interaction with his audience. The routine will be analyzed at a later point.

³⁴⁴ The only period of sexual frustration might have resulted from too much sexual experimenting (in the threesome) and not from a lack of sexuality.

Moreover, it is developed in a very likeable way. When Bruce asks Honey to stop stripping; a flash-forward comments upon the problem of jealousy.³⁴⁵ Lenny's attitude in the performance demonstrates that he clearly realizes that his jealousy is illogical. He develops a dialogue between two men watching a beautiful woman they like and would marry because of her prominent physical characteristics. Hilariously and with matching imitations of the different voices – one of the men speaks as if foaming at the mouth – Bruce soon rips into the heart of the matter. He states that men would like to marry attractive women but as soon as they are their wives they want them to veil their beauty. Bruce's self-knowledge evokes even greater intimacy between Bruce and his audience and makes him appear likeable for the viewer of the film, too. This is a very important step, because his innocence, which is emphasized so strongly in the film, is established. The viewer excuses his illogical jealousy for two reasons: first, because he is able to admit it to himself and second, because the doubts cast upon Honey prevail over Bruce's possible flaws. From now on, Bruce can get away with almost everything in his personal life. We even understand him when flash-forwards to a performance on 'how to deal with an affair' interrupt Bruce's obvious cheating on Honey with the nurse.³⁴⁶ His explanation that the need to "do it" lies in the nature of a man and that "they would do it to mud" or a chicken confesses so much self-mockery and self-knowledge that the viewer tends to understand and excuse Bruce's unfaithfulness and his operating with double standards later.

It can be summed up that the flash-forwards serve a very important purpose apart from solely illustrating Bruce's abilities as a comedian. They are inserted to establish a certain impression of Bruce, just as the overemphasized love story does. And interestingly, we should not forget that all performances except one (the one about what is dirty and what is clean following the conflict with entertainer Sherman Hart) are associated with his personal problems, in fact, they are all associated with Honey.³⁴⁷

A good example of this is the performance on 'dykes', which interrupts the argument between Bruce and Honey after the threesome.³⁴⁸ Although he mistreats his wife in this argument, as has already been mentioned earlier, his performance on lesbians is an almost cute and funny one. Bruce comes up with the rhyme "I like dykes" and accompanies himself on drums, thus exaggerating the silly adaptation of the rhyme "I like Ike". As the performance unfolds, we repeatedly see takes of Honey, who is sick

³⁴⁵ Sequence 13.

³⁴⁶ Sequence 16.

³⁴⁷ All performances from sequences 7-21.

³⁴⁸ Sequence 18.

at heart over the argument and cannot stop crying. These impressions sharply contrast with the foolish mood Bruce exhibits in this performance before he goes on to speak about this issue more seriously. He remarks that comedians do not do jokes about dykes, but tell many ‘fag jokes’, because lesbians “would really punch the shit out of ya”. This statement contrasts with the takes of his very womanly wife. As if he were trying to prove that the public’s cliché perception of lesbians is false, this – coincidentally or not – marks the turning point in the argument and in the performance as well. Bruce returns and tells his wife that he loves her; we then see the flash-forward performance of Bruce telling his audience that it is really hard to spot dykes, because “sometimes we’re married to them.” He sounds quite frustrated and even sad. His unfaithfulness is forgotten. The viewer tends to forget that Bruce in fact measured with double standards just moments before and really did not bother to fairly settle the argument with Honey. The weary expression on his face during the performance whitewashes the sinner and makes the viewer sympathize with Bruce once again. We sympathize with the poor guy who so bravely recognizes and deals with all his problems caused by others.

The very last performance directly associated with the problems with Honey is the one about custody. In the meantime, Kitty was born and the couple got divorced. Bruce is depicted as the caring single dad, as has already been analyzed earlier. Scenes from this kind of life alternate with the flash-forward about custody. The performance is typical of the appreciated and famous Bruce who we have become acquainted with in the film. He is shown sitting on a chair as if in the midst of the audience. He talks to the audience as if they were friends, and leans towards some people and directly addresses them as if attempting to persuade them that he is right. Whereas his thoughts about hurt pride after a divorce and the problems of meeting someone new still have a silly side to them (for instance about the poodle who must stay in the bedroom), his remarks about his hardships as a single dad become more serious. And this is exactly the point when he is again shown from the back with illumination coming from a spotlight behind the audience. While he is enumerating “what custody really means” (“I raise, I get up in the morning, I shlep the kid, I clean, I love”) the spotlight illuminates Bruce like a saint. And for those people who have not yet been convinced that he is guiltless, he is soon shown feeding the child while its mother is in a devastating state.³⁴⁹

One last performance should serve as a link between those associated with Honey and the following ones that are either about various controversial topics and

³⁴⁹ The phone call between Honey and Lenny in which she asks her ex-husband to help her out again and the resulting contrast between saint and sinner, good and evil, clean and addicted was analyzed earlier.

illustrate his success or are used to illustrate Bruce's trials later. It is the one about the pictures of the Kennedy assassination. We still see Honey after the phone call and then Bruce returning from the telephone to feed the kid. We hear him say "We live in a happy ending culture." His personal unhappy ending has just been shown and now we see the first performance that is completely serious. It is quite noteworthy that in this performance hardly any movement can be noticed. Neither does Lenny walk around as much or communicate with his audience nor does the camera show him from various angles. Most of the time, he is shown in medium shot or close-up. The significance of his message is thus emphasized. He describes the problem that the conclusions drawn by *TIME* are hypocritical ("never for an instant did she [Jackie Kennedy when the president and governor got shot] think about flight"). False ethical values are thus taught (making people feel bad if they did the natural thing in a situation like this: flee). His statements resemble that of a politician in an important speech. No responding laughter can be heard and the viewer is stunned by Bruce's brilliant method of deducing what *is* taught and what *should be* taught. The routine symbolizes an important turning point in the biopic: Lenny is now without Honey, and so the inserted flash-forwards no longer focus on private matters concerned with her.³⁵⁰ His last statement about Jackie Kennedy's behavior is "People don't stay." We know that it also accounts for Bruce's personal situation, especially when we see Honey lying in a cell or cheap hotel room and Bruce's words are echoed once more. This emphasizes the fact that from now on, Bruce is without Honey and the film has successfully persuaded the viewer that it is better this way.

Sally enters the scene, and from now on Bruce is depicted as the successful comedian we have become acquainted with in the flash-forwards. The only difference in style is that the performances' topics do not directly correspond with the plot. Instead, they cover a wide range of topics. Some of them portray Bruce's most famous performances, for instance the routine on Christ and Moses. As has already been mentioned, Sally is the one who provides the information that Bruce started to improvise. The first of the many performances on all sorts of topics is introduced by Bruce himself. He asks the audience "what else can we talk about".³⁵¹ He does not wear a beard yet. Thus, we definitely know that this performance is no flash-forward – but it is the first performance resembling the flash-forwards in style. Although Bruce seems to

³⁵⁰ It should be remarked at this point that the flash-forwards, although thematically fitting into the plot, do not directly correspond to it. Nevertheless, the filmmakers seem to have well considered where to place the flash-forwards in order to create a certain impression of Bruce.

³⁵¹ Sequence 23.

be much younger, his behavior and appearance tell the viewer that this is the brilliant Lenny Bruce we know from the flash-forwards. This performance marks the turning point for the comedian in the film. As if inspired by a sudden mood, he begins to casually chat with the audience in a friendly and likeable way. The film leaves the viewers in the dark as to what kept Bruce from improvising before, but now that Honey is out of the way and Sally has come to support him, he is able to develop his abilities to the full.³⁵² The viewer has to accept the fact that it was bad influence on the one hand and a matter of time on the other that kept Bruce from developing his skills.

In all following performances Bruce seems very close to his audience. He creates an intimate atmosphere, he winks and nods, smiles and laughs. Bruce often draws inspiration from people's acclamations ("What else can we talk about?" "Eisenhower!") and from up-to date headlines (the suspension of two homosexual schoolteachers). His program seems to be freely associated and completely improvised. At first the performances are less serious but still socially critical ('Eisenhower and the bomb', 'Homosexuals in prison'). Then, topics that are more serious and controversial are shown. The controversial topics are not all discussed on the very same occasion, but the performances are all shown in a row. The most impressive routine in the film – unfortunately one rarely to be found on original recordings – is titled 'Are There Any Niggers Here Tonight?'³⁵³ Bruce is now wearing a shirt in an innocent light shade; a spotlight is constantly illuminating the comedian. Behind him, the members of the all-white band are wearing dark sunglasses. Bruce begins the performance with the crucial question and the band members immediately stop smiling and have a serious expression on their faces. Cuts to close-ups of two African-American men in the audience further increase the tension that has just been created by the sudden popping up of the 'dangerous' question. By the look on their faces one can tell that both men experience a mixture of different feeling. They seem angry, insulted, and also anxious. Bruce's opening line seems to have strained expectations. They want Bruce to explain himself. The look on their faces seems to tell the viewer that they demand reasonable explanations. Otherwise they will not put up with the insult. Tension increases when Bruce first tells the employees to stop serving and then orders them to turn on the houselights and turn off the spotlight. But then, Bruce is finally responsive to the

³⁵² Only once does he state that he used to not be allowed to say the things he is now appreciated for. But this is uttered in passing and not documented in the plot

³⁵³ The performance has already been analyzed with regard to the applied strategies of humor in a preceding chapter. As no original material revealing the audiences' reactions to this performance exists, a close reading of the scene seems promising at this point in order to emphasize the results of the preceding analysis once more.

audience's silent pleas. He eventually announce that he is now going to explain himself ("Now what did he say? Are there any *Niggers* here tonight?"). This reformulation of the crucial line signals his willingness to explain his insult. The offended members of the audience, on the other hand, receive this signal and are willing to at least listen to his justifications. He approaches the audience and starts counting and pointing at all the African Americans he can see. He goes on to count all other ethnic groups by using the colloquial derogatory expressions, such as 'spics', 'kikes', and 'guineas'. He leaves the stage, enters the auditorium and approaches the people he has just pointed at. This results in an uncomfortable atmosphere since most of them flinch from looking him in the eye or turn away from him. The process of counting and milling around culminates when Bruce approaches one of the African Americans who had been shown at the beginning of the performance. They are now face to face, close-ups on their faces alternate when Bruce calls the man a "hip, thick, funky Boogie". The man's facial expression seems to reflect hurt feelings. Anger or aggression is not noticeable. The viewer automatically fears that Bruce has gone too far in this performance. Tension increases when the two men are shown from the side facing each other. People's nerves are all on edge. Eventually, Bruce turns around all of a sudden and starts yelling like an auctioneer. His improvised and exaggerated auction includes all ethnic groups he can think of and, finally, tension, aggressiveness, anxiety, resentment, and feelings of insult dissolve. Bruce's point is summed up in the auction's final "Sold American". The absurdity of labeling and thus degrading one ethnic group by the use of an insulting expression is displayed and ridiculed here. Bruce simply reminds his audience that the 'melting pot' America includes all ethnic groups anyway. Bruce's further explanations echo what he had explained in the very first performance in the biopic: it is the suppression of words that gives them the power to insult. His summary of the problem and the final repeated uttering of 'nigger' ("till nigger didn't mean anything anymore") are filmed without any change of camera angles. He is shown in medium shot, illuminated. Thus, the importance of his message is emphasized. This scene is one of the most impressive and significant ones in the film. We finally get to know Bruce at his best, without the obtrusively symbolic association with his private life.

That he is at the height of his career is pointed out to the viewer in those scenes following the variety of performances. We can watch him negotiating contracts on the phone and giving an interview to *TIME*. Bruce is depicted as the successful comedian enjoying his final fame. He almost foolishly and maybe even arrogantly plays with both the person he is negotiating contracts with and the interviewer of *TIME*. In the

interview with the journalist from *TIME*, Bruce consistently denies that he is trying to voice social criticism in his show. Instead he insists that he is doing his job to make money. Two conclusions can be drawn from this scene: first, Bruce is able to emphasize that for him the freedom to tell the truth about things is a natural right and not worth mentioning at that time.³⁵⁴ Second, it alludes to incipient problems. The interviewer seems quite annoyed at Bruce's behavior and his denial of any social criticism. We are not surprised that in the next performance Bruce quotes *TIME*'s article about the "sick comic Lenny Bruce".³⁵⁵ The very same performance proceeds in typical Bruce-style. He brings up the topic of unequal payment among different professions and links it to the article about himself ("And that's the kind of 'sick' I wish they would have written about"). During the entire performance some police officers are amongst the people in the audience and their attitude seems to foreshadow problems.

Bruce's legal problems commence when he talks about the unfair treatment of two homosexual teachers who were suspended because of their sexual orientation. Of course, the police officers, who are more than eager to arrest him, do not appreciate Bruce's brilliant way of ridiculing the absurdity of the topic. Bruce narrates how the two teachers "were busted for what they were doing fifteen miles away from school [...]" and that "There wasn't one incident reported where a kid came home and said 'Today in school we had five minutes of geography and ten minutes of cocksucking.'"³⁵⁶ The performance is depicted in a way similar to the one about 'Niggers'. There are some cuts to supposedly homosexual men in the audience. They seem quite uncomfortable, scared, and offended. These takes alternate with Bruce. He is in focus now; there are no further changes of camera angles. Bruce's rage – as he is now talking about subjects he is upset about – is also highlighted by his wet shirt, which is soaked with sweat. He is not as calm anymore and no longer chatting with the audience in a playful mood. Now it seems to be very important to him to make a point and to have the audience understand and learn from him. His casual way of saying that he only does his job for the money seems less convincing now. Consequently, we should not believe all he said in the

³⁵⁴ I. e. before he was forbidden to act out his freedom of speech onstage.

Sequence 23 offers some more explanations about how Bruce understood his position as an entertainer. In these performances his honesty and capability to analyze himself and his own hypocritical behavior („I'm a hustler“) are emphasized. His point is that his humor cannot be equated with social criticism because he does not see himself in a position to criticize (or else he would donate his money to the school teachers in prison, as he says). These performances – illustrated by scenes from his life as a successful comedian enjoying life (girls, cars, etc.) – are not to be considered further. It is, nevertheless, important to keep his opinion in mind, because it is needed to understand Bruce's fight for the freedom of speech, which is stressed in the film.

³⁵⁵ Sequence 23.

³⁵⁶ Sequence 25.

preceding interviews with *TIME*. Instead, we have to extract his underlying message. Back then, at the time of the interview, it was a natural right for Bruce to speak out loudly what was on his mind. Now he is forced to realize that his desire to act out the freedom of speech only existed in his mind. His self-knowledge and ability to analyze current problems and situations enable him to understand that the content of his programs cannot actually be called remarkably different. To him, the things he wants to say and he already has said are naturally granted. Bruce does not want to be in the position of a social critic, because this position would be as hypocritical as the world he is commenting upon. The problems with the law, nevertheless, make the fighter and unfortunately even the preacher in Bruce come to light.

Bruce's first arrest is depicted in a somewhat exaggerated way. Surrounded by several police officers he is slammed up against a police car. The contrast between the black uniforms of the policemen and Bruce's all-white suit symbolizes who is good and who is bad in this film. His suit clearly emphasizes his innocence. Moreover, his intellectual superiority is further emphasized when we recognize the contrast between the police officer sitting next to Bruce in the car which is taking him away. This officer ('Mickey') symbolizes the narrow-mindedness of the representatives of the law and we will see him again throughout the trials. His Southern accent, the slow articulation, and latent aggressiveness (he threatens to punch Bruce if he were allowed to) points out this parochial attitude. At first, Bruce is depicted as sensing a bit of irony and fun in his arrests. He grins at the officer searching him thoroughly, thus suspecting the officer to enjoy touching a man.³⁵⁷ Silver and Harlowe, in inserted interviews, assure the viewer that Bruce liked the attention at first because it granted him publicity.³⁵⁸ Silver's remark, however, foreshadows what the enjoyable attention led to: he mentions Bruce's obsession with the law, and inserted flash-forwards of the later Bruce reading out from the transcripts of his trials illustrate this. These performances are of course not characterized by wit and a friendly atmosphere but seem boring and out of place. Moreover, they serve another purpose: the foreshadowing performances illustrate the action in the film's course of events. The difference is, though, that they do not ironically or humorously comment upon the action. In fact, they only illustrate how Bruce tried to prove his rights like a maniac. In these performances the focus is on Bruce only. The audience does not play any role. We do not hear laughter or see their reactions. Bruce seems to be a lone wolf. He is lost in his own world and seems to

³⁵⁷ Sequence 25.

³⁵⁸ Sequence 26.

ignore that he is supposed to entertain the audience. These images contrast with Bruce's first appearances in court. At first, he seems to be friendly and hopeful; he seems to have faith in the US legal system. It hits him as a surprise when the judge does not appreciate his wit and forbids him to use obscenity in the future. Consequently, Bruce deals with this first trial in his very own and unique manner. The next performance is no flash-forward this time. The atmosphere (Jazz music, relaxed atmosphere, an encouraging crowd) contrasts with that of the flash-forwards we have just seen. He talks about his first trial. He opens his performance by welcoming the police officers who are there to watch his act. The spotlight that was on him first pans along the crowd and then illuminates the grumpy officers standing in line "like Mount Rushmore", as Lenny jokes. Then, Bruce proceeds to narrate how he got arrested some nights before and that it all happened because he had used a word that is associated with a certain homosexual practice. So far, Bruce sticks to the rules that have been imposed on him and avoids the mentioning of any obscene words. Nevertheless, by welcoming the officers and by merely mentioning the issue, he is back on thin ice. His brilliant manner of circumventing the word 'cocksucker' by saying 'blah blah blah' instead, makes people laugh and emphasizes his genius. However, it also points out that Bruce is without a chance and will be arrested for words he does not even explicitly say anyway. It is quite enjoyable and amazing to see how Bruce is able to make a point without the crucial words and is able to emphasize them even more by avoiding them. The failure of this brilliant method, on the other hand, shows that the whole obscenity issue is not so much about Bruce's words but about getting rid of someone who says things that officials do not want to hear in a public place or in *any* place, to be precise. When Bruce goes on to ask the audience how many of them have ever 'blahed a blah', most officers have to hide a grin. Thus, it is emphasized that the arrests and trials were not about whether Bruce was funny or socially 'valuable' but only about getting rid of him; something these officers had to do whether or not they liked him. For the last time in the film, we see Bruce enjoying what he is doing onstage. He lets the audience participate (he asks them intimate questions about 'blah blah blah'), enjoys the attention and appreciation and eagerly communicates his important and brilliantly argued message.

The following performances are again flash-forwards and sharply contrast with the last one mentioned. They are rather boring, there is no audience participation. The inserted flash-forwards illustrate the depiction of the trials in the film. It is a lengthy documentation characterized by narrow-mindedness, rather unconvincing witnesses (the

reverend who supports Bruce's social importance but does not even manage to raise his voice) and an endless repetition of the same questions over and over again. We meet the police officer 'Mickey' again, who hesitantly admits that a police station is no sacred place and that the word 'cocksucker' "was heard used", but who insists on Bruce's obscenity and almost chokes on the word 'copulation'. The camera slowly pans across the court room while tape recordings of Bruce are played. Thus, the tenacity and the questionable sense of the trials are illustrated. It is, moreover, quite noteworthy that the audience and most members of the jury actually do laugh when they hear the performances. Even though these scenes ridicule the whole absurdity of the trial, they only delay what is inevitable: the trials will cost Bruce his fame and eventually his life. Some of Bruce's justifications in court are echoed or finished after a cut to the later Bruce in a foreshadowing performance (he still wears a beard in the flash-forward and does not in the action, however, the time lapse is narrowing). We now have to observe how people dislike the program and walk out. Bruce wins the first trial, but when he picks up Honey from prison he complains that he "wanted to win it on the first amendment". This is the crucial point in the film that leads to Bruce's decline. Artie Silver tells the interviewer that at first the trial gained Bruce popularity and everyone wanted to book him, but suddenly he started to preach. These memories are documented by a performance of Bruce, which is no flash-forward this time. He is shown from behind and a spotlight coming from the auditorium illuminates him like a preacher. Fittingly, he tells the audience that he is "not Anti-Christ, nor anti-religion" all the while holding up his right hand as if under oath. This scene might perhaps illustrate that the charming and hopeful young comedian Bruce is long gone. The preacher has already revealed himself and this is the first step towards his decline and death. The illumination also conjures up associations to a saint. We could see this as a first sign anticipating the posthumous esteem of Bruce, which this film so strongly encourages.

The last minutes of the film show Bruce as a man obsessed with the law, and as a desperate fighter running against brick walls. Unfortunately, he has completely lost his wit and even refuses to respond to the audiences' commands for something funny. At the same time he relapses to drug-abuse, which supposedly happens when Honey returns. These sad developments finally lead to his sad confession "I'm not funny. I'm not a comedian" in the devastating and unbearably stretched final performance.³⁵⁹ After this performance he is in a wretched condition and vomits in a restroom. Then, he is arrested on the spot. In the last scenes of his trials Bruce dismisses his lawyers because

³⁵⁹ Sequence 29.

he does not accept their strategy of using tactics. He only slowly begins to lose his faith in the US legal system, because he is convinced that if only the judges let him perform, they would finally understand him. Nevertheless, Bruce resigns himself to his fate in the end. When he is shown in an empty court room in front of the judge and requests his punishment he is depicted as a desperate and small figure, his rage finally turning into resignation. The depiction of Bruce in this last court scene symbolizes that he has already given his case and himself up. There are some other details which illustrate that Bruce is a lost case: the tape recorder is put away and a file is closed. And so the next take shows his dead body lying naked on the floor.

4.3 Conclusion: Love Story and Pseudo-Documentary – Manipulation of Sympathy and Possible Effects

So far various clues which might hint at an attempt to influence the viewer of the biopic *Lenny* have been considered. An example is the emotional captivation of the viewer which is achieved by focusing on the love story between Bruce and Honey Harlowe, who is made a scapegoat, and the parallel emphasizing of Bruce's innocence. Apart from that, the downplaying of Bruce's drug addiction and his unwillingness to cope with the difficulties of life played an important part in the depiction of Bruce. The devices used to make the film appear like an original source and as documentary-like as possible have been analyzed in detail, too. Taking all these considerations into account one should now pose the question why such a biased depiction of Lenny Bruce was chosen. Moreover, one should try to answer the questions to what extent the viewer's opinion is thus influenced.

The most important observation – it was hinted at this earlier – is that from the very beginning the attentive viewer can guess that the person whose life is about to be told is dead. The black and white film stock indicates 'the past'. The use of 'eye-witnesses' in general and the widow's first memories uttered in the past tense actually reveal that Lenny Bruce must be dead. From the very beginning it is clearly stated that the controversial entertainer has already passed away. Now that he is gone and his uncomfortable insistence on (what was to him) the 'plain truth' of controversial issues is all memories, his story can be told. It must be recognized that we are confronted with a strategy of containment. The irony is that the biopic is about one of the most subversive entertainers ever known. By stating right from the start that the 'menace to society' is dead and can no longer do any harm to the American dream of an idyllic society, the

biopic points out that the threat is under control. In an era of growing freedom concerning Hollywood films, such a strategy of containment seems quite surprising. Consequently, one should consider the changes that determined the development of the genre film from the mid-1960's until the 1970's. Back then, the Production Code was already history and the depiction of some more 'sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll' in films should be expected. And indeed, *Lenny* does show a lot of it. However, the strategy of containment diminishes the film's importance of belonging to a new era of brave and controversial films compared to those films restricted to the Production Code. It should be interesting to see how, and if at all, the film is a typical Hollywood production of the 1970's and whether the socio-political and cultural state of art of the 1970's played any role in the construction of the biopic. I will try to answer these questions in the next chapter, which focuses on the reception of the biopic.

Summing up the above, one can say that the intertwining of an emotionally captivating love story and a pseudo-documentary does have important effects on the viewer's opinion. The viewer is so concerned with Bruce's personal fortunes and so easily convinced that Honey is a bad influence that his flaws – although they are alluded to – are forgiven or even ignored. Although some less heroic details about Bruce are frequently mentioned, the viewer gratefully grasps the explanations and excuses offered by the 'eye-witnesses'.

The following chapter aims to understand why such a tendentious depiction of Lenny Bruce was chosen and how this possibly reflects or contradicts the production style of the 1970's. A characterization of Hollywood films and audiences of the 1970's should provide a basis. Furthermore, the biopic's organization will be evaluated in the context of Bruce's posthumous fame, which so much opposed his life-time hardships. Taking both of the above aspects into account, the film's reception will be evaluated with the help of newspaper and magazine articles from the early 1970's.

B 5. “Moviemakers prefer myth-making to truth-telling”³⁶⁰ – The Reception of the Biopic *Lenny*

“Powerful. Gripping. Hard-Hitting. Predictably, movie award nominations – Academy Award, Golden Globes, New York Film Critics Circle – followed [...] Within five months of its release, *Lenny* had grossed over \$11 million from engagements in 316 theaters.”³⁶¹ This is how Collins and Skover in their 2002 publication *The Trials of Lenny Bruce* acknowledge the success of Bob Fosse’s biopic *Lenny* before they move on to complain that the film only shows a “[...] trendy, liberal, middle-class, genteel translation of a life and art that was perverse, radical, lower-class, and unassimilatedly Jewish.”³⁶² Devoting only three pages of their roughly 450 pages thick book to the biopic *Lenny*, Collins and Skover seem to almost completely reject the impact of the film. Without offering any considerable examples, they nevertheless remark that the story is told from Honey’s point of view and that much emphasis is put on Honey’s memories. As Collins and Skover put it, *Lenny* is much rather “[...] an imaginary biographical profile of Lenny and Honey as told from the perspective of his *shiksa* goddess”³⁶³ than a film about the comedian Bruce. This rather intuitive evaluation corresponds with my detailed analysis of the film. However, the resulting manipulated perception of Bruce is not evaluated in the context of the 1970’s³⁶⁴, nor is the film’s remaining significance for later generations deduced from the lasting effect of Bruce’s strategies of humor. Even though the outstanding performances of Dustin Hoffman and Valerie Perrine are acknowledged by most critics (“[...] he [Hoffman] gives a complex and mercurial performance. He alone makes *Lenny* worth seeing”³⁶⁵) just as some scenes, though purely fictitious, seem to have made an impression (“Great scene, pure fiction”³⁶⁶), the prevalent criticism is that the viewers are not offered an honest impression of the controversial comedian Bruce. Contemporary critics say that the act of whitewashing Bruce is an attempt to reinforce “[...] the mistaken belief that Fosse’s account is the full truth about *Lenny*”.³⁶⁷ The film’s make-believe documentary-style is achieved by the black and white film stock. Apart from that, the inserted interviews of ‘contemporary eye-witnesses’, all

³⁶⁰ R. Schickel: “Black and Blue Comic”.

³⁶¹ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 399.

³⁶² R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 399.

³⁶³ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 398.

³⁶⁴ The only statement alluding to this topic is found in the remark “However make-believe the movie, Worth and Fosse did take their chances, even in the 70’s, when they ventured into such sensitive areas.” However, no further elaboration of the topic is offered. See R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 398.

³⁶⁵ R. Schickel: “Black and Blue Comic”.

³⁶⁶ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 398.

³⁶⁷ R. Schickel: “Black and Blue Comic”.

played by the film's actors, obviously contribute to this manipulated perception. It is precisely this "conception itself that one wants to quarrel with, because Fosse operates on some principles of exclusion and reduction [...] blurring the nature of his work and career."³⁶⁸ The good acting of Hoffman enables the viewer to receive an impression of the routines and Bruce's underlying strategies of humor: "Dustin Hoffman is superb in these "on-stage" sections of the film [...]"³⁶⁹ or elsewhere: "Hoffman lived and breathed the persona of Lenny Bruce".³⁷⁰ However, the emphasis on the love story and the omission of the development of Bruce as a critical entertainer disturb and distract the viewer and probably disappoint the Bruce-fan.³⁷¹ As a consequence, it is not surprising that, as *Washington Post* journalist Gary Arnolds writes, "according to hearsay the customers who respond most favorably to *Lenny* are those who have never seen or listened to the original Lenny."³⁷²

The movie proved quite successful despite the criticism coming from those fans of Bruce who had seen him live. Thus, one should consider that it was especially the 'neutral' group of movie goers that favored the film. This tendency illustrates the commercialization of Bruce, as well as it may even enable us to understand how today's viewers might perceive the biopic. However, before we talk about today's viewers, the contemporary audiences should be characterized. An overview of the so-called *New Hollywood* of the 1970's, characterized by films no longer restricted to the Production Code, should help to understand the success of the biopic and its appreciation by those people who had not seen Bruce when he was still alive. Apart from that, it should be interesting to consider Bruce's posthumous metamorphosis from unappreciated menace to society into a beloved hero. Particularly those people who had hated Bruce when he was still alive showed a tendency to recognize his importance after his death. Thus, the phenomenon of posthumously turning Bruce into an icon and beloved hero of free speech and the following commercialization – *Lenny* being a part of it – will then be explained in a satisfactory way.³⁷³

It was the year after Lenny Bruce's death in 1966 that marked a new era of films called *New Hollywood*. Films of this era were both thematically and stylistically different

³⁶⁸ G. Arnold.

³⁶⁹ V. Canby: "Who Ever Thought".

³⁷⁰ L. Keyser: *Hollywood in the Seventies*. New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, Inc., 124.

³⁷¹ G. Arnold, for instance, complains that "[...] it never shows us how Bruce did develop as an opinionated, satirical comic [...]"³⁷¹

It is especially the director's style – mostly because Bob Fosse became widely known after *Cabaret* – which must be considered in order to understand the conception of the film, but we will come to that later

³⁷² G. Arnold.

³⁷³ This phenomenon is further elaborated in the following chapter on the legacy of Lenny Bruce.

from those films that had dominated Hollywood for so long. They were characterized by social commentary, involved a large amount of brutality or sex and violated the usual conventions of a certain genre. *Bonnie and Clyde*, for instance, a 1967 production and therefore recognized as *the* film that marked the end of the Production Code, was the first film to show the violent and bloody death of the two protagonists. It also mentioned sexual frustrations. How could films like this develop after decades of restrictions due to the Production Code? The Code forbade a large amount of morally disturbing topics and even slight allusions to these topics so that “[...] no one be incited by movies to either sexual or criminal behavior [...]”³⁷⁴ Nevertheless, films restricted to the Production Code provided an escape from reality. Furthermore, they were the source of entertainment that granted the Hollywood industry a Golden Age, before films could be comfortably watched at home in front of a TV set.³⁷⁵ By the late 1950’s, however, the Golden Age had come to an end and Hollywood experienced a severe crisis (especially in the early 1960’s) because established strategies did not prove successful anymore. Most film stars of the Golden Age had died and then famous producers like Hitchcock and Ford had quit making films. Vain attempts to save the industry were made by the elderly heads of the big studios, but the resulting films – epics and musicals imitating major successes like *The Sound of Music* – were weak imitations and failed expectations.³⁷⁶ The most challenging rival was, of course, television and the “consolidation of its position as *the* mass medium, a situation which by the end of the sixties had led to truly alarming declines in the box office receipts of American movies.”³⁷⁷ The comfort of TV entertainment and a general discontent of the new generation, a generation “[...] breaking free of outmoded social and attitudinal restrictions [...]”³⁷⁸ called for a new era in Hollywood. Apart from those factors, independent foreign films, especially from France, challenged the American Dream Factory.

Hollywood met this crisis with new formats – like wide-screen CinemaScope and 3-D – with spectacular epics and with relaxed censorship, hoping to lure audiences back into theaters by offering commodities unavailable on the small screen.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁴ H. Powdermaker: *Hollywood the Dream Factory*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1950, 58.

³⁷⁵ The Golden Age started with the era of silent films in the 1920’s and lasted until the late 1950’s. A complete account of Hollywood’s history is not intended at this point.

³⁷⁶ See P. Figlestahler: “Zwischen Krise und Boom. Der wirtschaftliche Aufschwung Hollywoods”, in: Blumenberg, H. C. (ed.): *New Hollywood*. München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1976, 12 f.

³⁷⁷ J. Bernardoni: *The New Hollywood. What the Movies Did with the New Freedoms of the Seventies*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 1991, 1.

³⁷⁸ J. Bernardoni, 1.

³⁷⁹ S. Cagin/ P. Dray: *Hollywood films of the Seventies. Sex, Drugs, Violence, Rock ‘n’ Roll & Politics*. New York: Harper & Row, 1984, prologue, xii.

The new generation's needs and demands eventually 'saved' Hollywood. Subversive films which addressed social problems and did not hide potentially disturbing issues such as drug abuse, violence, or sex attracted people to visit the movie theaters. Back in the days of the studio system, actors, writers, producers, and directors were under contract to the studios and although "[...] financial rewards from such arrangements were great, so were the limitations on freedom to pursue independent projects [...]"³⁸⁰ The changed industry now allowed for the production of subversive films and enabled actors such as Jack Nicholson, Robert De Niro, Al Pacino, and Dustin Hoffman to pursue successful careers. Particularly the youth market demanded films that challenged American values and even though it was only a narrow market it initiated a political Hollywood. The corresponding films "[...] are among the best chroniclers of the age, charting the shifting values of the counterculture as it emerged, matured and finally disintegrated, tracking even its immense and persistent influence on the mainstream."³⁸¹

The audiences we are talking about now are those peace-loving young people, who favored alternative ways of living as a reaction to US politics and the war in Vietnam. Experiments with hallucinogenic drugs and a very liberal interpretation of sexual relationships were very common among that generation. In addition, they symbolically expressed their lifestyle by wearing hippie clothes and long hair and they listened to music by, for instance, Bob Dylan or The Beatles. Such New Hollywood films as *Easy Rider* or *The Graduate* "[...] presented a picture of the counterculture from within."³⁸² The few films of this era "addressed themselves to the issues of greatest meaning to the college-age youth who by then comprised a major part of the movie-going public."³⁸³ However, as Cagin and Dray state, by the end of the 1970's most films "bear all the earmarks of dissipation" and "[...] only by deliberately avoiding strong viewpoints, by devaluing their work [...] filmmakers could erect a tent large enough to embrace an audience big enough to pay for it."³⁸⁴

Only few sources on New Hollywood cinema mention *Lenny* as one of the important films of this era. Nonetheless, it was a successful production which won several award-nominations. As a consequence, we have to think about the biopic's place in that important era. With the film analysis complete, one immediately recognizes that the film depicts the counterculture generation in a manner that seems drawn from life.

³⁸⁰ A. Loss: *Pop Dreams. Music, Movies, and the Media in the 1960s*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999, 36.

³⁸¹ S. Cagin/ P. Dray, prologue, xiii.

³⁸² A. Loss, 127.

³⁸³ A. Loss, 124.

³⁸⁴ S. Cagin/ P. Dray, prologue, xiv.

Taking *the* number one controversial entertainer as a topic, the film automatically includes social and political issues. *Lenny* seems to be a typical New Hollywood movie: the issues of drug abuse and sexual freedom are brought up and characterized as normal habits of a generation, and colloquial and even vulgar language is frequently heard. Apart from that, the protagonist fails to integrate into a repressive society and dies in the end. A German online film-criticism of *Lenny* states that less than a decade after Bruce's death and although the topic was still highly relevant, the Hippie movement and New Hollywood cinema had already changed the conservative and prudish philosophy of life still prevalent in Bruce's days so that a completely different look at the topic was possible.³⁸⁵ No longer forced to obey the restrictions of censorship, the filmmakers managed to create a counterculture scenario and depict a young generation and its needs and problems. *Lenny* presents a generally satisfying portrait of a 1960's generation's lifestyle – and Bruce's performances and record albums formed part of this lifestyle. However, Bruce himself is depicted in an unsatisfying manner that diverges from the majority of sources on Bruce's life. The excellent performance scenes manage to capture the magic of Bruce as an entertainer, but their incorporation into the plot must be critically observed. Too often the flash-forwards only serve the purpose of excusing and justifying the film's hero. The lack of explanation concerning Bruce's development as a comedian additionally distorts the otherwise impressive depiction of the entertainer in the performance scenes. The main point of criticism must be repeated again: the film omits ugly details and depicts Bruce as a person hunted to death by the police and judges while his drug abuse is entirely played down.³⁸⁶ His unwillingness to adjust to society is also played down just as well as his stubbornness and his constant running against brick walls. Bruce's shady moral ideas concerning his interpersonal relationships are ignored or excused thus making the viewer forget Bruce's flaws. Every opportunity is seized to turn Bruce into a martyr and to propel him to posthumous stardom.

The viewers are emotionally captured– especially by putting emphasis on the love story – and thus their perception is severely manipulated. The focus on Honey throughout the movie is not only a topical one but a stylistic one, too. The lengthy introductory strip performance is a good example of this. Director Bob Fosse (1927-1987) originally came from the musical stage where he worked as a dancer and

³⁸⁵ “Obwohl die Thematik zu diesem Zeitpunkt immer noch hochaktuell war, hatte sich nach der Hippie-Bewegung und dem New Hollywood Kino die biedere, prüde Weltanschauung, die zu Lenny Bruces Lebzeiten noch vorherrschend war, bereits grundlegend geändert, wodurch eine ganz andere Betrachtungsweise möglich wurde.”

See <http://www.filmstarts.de/kritiken/Lenny.html>

³⁸⁶ See, for instance, V. Canby: “Lenny”, with Dustin Hoffman”.

choreographer. He is mostly known for directing Musical films such as *Sweet Charity*, *All That Jazz*, and *Cabaret*. The long and detailed strip performance reveals Fosse's roots, just as the excellent performances of Dustin Hoffman as Lenny Bruce reveal Fosse's ability to capture stage action. Nevertheless, *Lenny* remained Fosse's only non-musical film and one can suppose that viewers did not go to the movie theaters to see a music-film that was typically Fosse-style. Then, why exactly was *Lenny* a successful film, despite its obvious manipulation?

The viewers who had seen Bruce live onstage or had at least listened to his records were – only eight years after his death – still to be considered an educated youth-audience as that described above. They certainly expected a critical portrait of a man who mirrored a generation's fight against prudish and conservative lifestyles. It seems obvious why these viewers can at best acknowledge the film's excellent performance scenes with a brilliant Dustin Hoffman playing Bruce. The story's weaknesses are so overwhelming that the natural reaction can only be disappointment. Neutral viewers who had never seen or listened to Bruce when he was alive were confronted with a nice and innocent person whose edgy personality and troubles throughout his career are played down or excused. An imperfect depiction is not necessary anyway, because the comedian is dead and all viewers need to remember is the importance of this martyr for free speech. The same accounts for those viewers who had disliked Bruce when he was perceived as a real danger to American society. Now that the threatening entertainer was dead, it was safe to explicitly appreciate Bruce in public. In fact, one could say that *Lenny* commercialized Bruce to such an extent that most viewers seemed to forget that Bruce had once been considered a menace to society. Instead of turning away from him, they turned their fear into worship. Thus, the manipulated depiction of Bruce as the flawless hero was appreciated by those viewers who either disliked Bruce when he was alive or by those who had never seen him before. "Alive, Lenny was a clear and present danger; dead, he is socially redeeming value"³⁸⁷, as Collins and Skover comment regarding the posthumous worship and commercialization of Bruce. Shockingly, the only thing Bruce had to do was die to be appreciated as an important critic of American society. *Lenny* alluded to Bruce's death from the very beginning of the film and this strategy of containment ironically contradicts the achievements of the brilliantly subversive entertainer.

³⁸⁷ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 8.

Thus, the reception of the biopic *Lenny* could be understood as a mirror of a society that “[...] was no longer offended by his attacks on traditional values”³⁸⁸ but still has not learned to honestly confront and handle a problem. Collins and Skover call the contradiction of not being able to appreciate Bruce alive but of loving him after his death “cultural schizophrenia.”³⁸⁹ This brilliant statement regarding the general posthumous reception of Bruce can be applied to the reception of the biopic, too. Although no longer restricted to censorship and with all the freedom society owes to the liberal youngsters of the hippie generation, the biopic reflects American society’s problems with facing and learning from challenges when they are still prevalent. As a consequence, the biopic’s organization is perfectly suitable for the typical hypocritical American society – a society Bruce had so desperately tried to teach. The film *Lenny* almost encourages society to be satisfied with the comfortable yet hypocritical misrepresentation. It does not really represent an attempt to teach people to do better in the future. One might conclude that “Posthumous sainthood [...] comes only to those whom the living could not face”³⁹⁰ and even when Bruce is dead, society can only face a defused version. The conclusion Bruce’s biographer Albert Goldman came to as early as 1971, also proves true for the reception of the biopic: “just because the public is ready to accept the *idea* of Lenny Bruce, however, it should not be assumed that it is prepared for the reality of the man or the performer”³⁹¹ (*Italics in original*).

³⁸⁸ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 8.

³⁸⁹ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 8.

³⁹⁰ G. Marine: “Lenny, you Meshugginah, You Can’t Play the Hero!”, in: *Ramparts*, June 1972, vol. 10, 60, cited in R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 8.

³⁹¹ A. Goldman: “What Lenny Bruce Was All About”, in: *New York Times*, June 27, 1971.

**B 6. “Lenny set the all-time high standard for an entertainer observing and dissecting his own society and culture”³⁹²
– The Legacy of Lenny Bruce**

“My dad had so much to say and so little time to say it. This is what America is all about”³⁹³ This is how Kitty Bruce, Lenny Bruce’s daughter, responded to the posthumous pardon granted to Bruce 37 years after his death. The statement reflects Lenny Bruce’s position in American society. He was silenced when his words were considered ‘too true’ to be listened to, but lifted to stardom when honest confrontation was no longer possible after his death. Bruce’s fate mirrors both American society’s hypocrisy and the hypocritical way of dealing with hypocrisy afterwards.

Throughout this study we have observed how Bruce’s messages touched the American society of the 1950’s and 1960’s to the quick. Consequently, people felt the need to turn away from the mirror Bruce held up to their pseudo-idyllic way of life. His method of brilliantly pinpointing the problems and hypocrisy of society and his likeable and intelligent way of communicating his ideas were probably too explicit to be bearable.³⁹⁴ His explicitness contrasted too sharply with the superficial reality of Cold War America. Thus, officials chose not to think about potential social value and gratefully seized the opportunity to ban Bruce from public places because of his vulgar language. In other words, as *New York Times* journalist Judy Stone puts it: “The Establishment said to themselves, ‘Here’s a guy who’s saying it the way it really is. Let’s see if we can tone him down.’”³⁹⁵ Bruce’s psychological abilities to have the audiences take the emotional rollercoaster went unnoticed once the question of vulgarity came into play. The psychological methods recognizable in Bruce’s strategies of humor would have required the willingness to question America’s status quo and its role in the world. Thus, people preferred idyllic superficiality to critical and self-reflexive reconsideration of certain topics. And, consequently, the use of vulgar language was taken out of context. Repressed energies, such as anxiety and sexual or aggressive urges, which represented vital problems existing in American society, had to remain in the dark. The public image of a perfectly idyllic American society was thus maintained.

³⁹² E. Bogosian: “Introduction”, in: L. Bruce, ix.

³⁹³ K. Bruce cited in “No Joke! 37 Years After Death Lenny Bruce Receives Pardon”, in: *New York Times*, December 24, 2003.

³⁹⁴ Nat Hentoff neatly describes the performer as “[...] a prodigiously skillful juggler of images, fantasies, flashbacks, jump cuts – all fused into a constantly surprising stripping of personal and social history to the antic bones of American way of life.” See N. Hentoff: “Lenny: Redeeming the Memory of a Heretic”, in *New York Times*, July 2, 1972.

³⁹⁵ J. Stone: “Carlin: Lenny Bruce Was His Idol”, in: *New York Times*, May 28, 1967.

Kitty Bruce's comment cited at the beginning of this chapter illustrated that Bruce had too little time to provoke a profound reconsideration of certain topics. Perhaps he was ahead of his time, or perhaps he was the last one to be silenced. A new generation that questioned America's values and position in the world during the rebellious years of the 1960's was about to emerge. Bruce's topics (fair treatment of African Americans, of homosexuals, and the issue of 'the bomb' to name only a few) are identical with those that are associated with the entire 1960's generation. Young people who were trying to escape conformity had to put up with the constant fear of nuclear warfare. Standardized family-models in suburban homes as a result of the prosperity of Post-War America led to the new generation's questioning of authority as a "[...] response to the repression such conformity required."³⁹⁶ Their alternative ways of living contrasted with mainstream America's ideals and goals in life. The civil rights movement and anti-war mentality as a reaction to American troops in Vietnam characterize the American 1960's. Nevertheless, one must recognize that Bruce was in his late thirties and nearly uneducated, whereas the typical sixties youth were college-age at that time. Thus, one might agree that Bruce was neither completely ahead of his time, nor a representative of or a role model for a whole generation when he was alive. Bruce announced changes that were inevitably about to develop. Whereas this early rebel was successfully silenced, his death finally cleared the way for a reconsideration of certain restrictions. The hunt for Bruce was a last attempt to silence non-conformity. In a way, he was made a scapegoat. He represented a developing generation of young adults willing to face America's problems and determined to achieve changes. Bruce's unwillingness to trim his act until it was 'officially clean', his persistent fight for his freedom of speech represents the general desire to bring about changes in American society that characterizes the activists of the 1960's. But because the public stage was his territory, he was an easy target for officials who did not want to be reminded of flaws in American society. Bruce's belief in the US legal system and his insistent wish to be accepted and understood reflects the counterculture's desire "[...] to bring about meaningful, positive change."³⁹⁷ Yet, his growing anger and obstinacy displayed in public places sealed his fate. Once he was forced to realize that he was without a chance, he tried to 'fight tooth and nail' instead of choosing to drop out of society like, for example, the hippies chose to do.

³⁹⁶ A. Loss, 13.

³⁹⁷ A. Loss, 100.

Lenny Bruce's death initiated the final rise to stardom of the formerly disliked entertainer. As was explained in the previous chapter, one could speak of a cultural phenomenon bearing some schizophrenic aspects. The menace to society was turned into a beloved hero, a martyr for free speech and a 'cultural possession'. Moreover, the process reflects the society's hypocrisy once more, as it shows another attempt to hypocritically obfuscate previous hypocrisy. It is only the result that counts, the obstacles that had been in the way tend to be forgotten. The previous misjudgment, unfair treatment and hypocrisy are swept under the rug. One could say that *at least* Bruce's importance is recognized and appreciated *at all* after his death. But an honest reflection of what really went wrong yields the far easier method of dealing with Bruce: the making of an appreciated icon. The general commercialization of Bruce more than vividly illustrates the hypocritical way of dealing with the problem. As Collins and Skover put it: "Yesterday's comic prophet became today's commercial profit"³⁹⁸. The biopic *Lenny* is not an exception. The romanticized and reduced version of Bruce once again shows that the story of Bruce is still not completely honestly dealt with. Although the developments of the late 1960's and early 1970's enabled a less restricted version of a 1960's topic, the protagonist remains almost flawless. These methods of reducing a topic and omitting important details show no real comprehension of what Bruce's message really was: the criticism of hypocrisy.

The biopic *Lenny* was analyzed in detail, because it forms the most impressive part of Bruce's reception on the one hand and is probably *the* most important piece of memorabilia available today on the other. As the biopic's reception has already been evaluated, its relevance for today's viewers concludes this chapter on the legacy of Lenny Bruce. Both Dustin Hoffman in the lead role and several award-nominations might convince today's viewers to see the movie. If we suppose that most viewers do not know much about Bruce – if anything at all – and are most probably not familiar with original material, one has to wonder whether this biopic is of any relevance for today's viewers. They will probably not notice the obvious manipulation that was noted by contemporaries and Bruce-fans. On the other hand, the fact that was appreciated by most fans and critics is that the onstage sections of the film are quite close to the original. Consequently, one might be able to find out whether the strategies of humor work on a new audience and if so whether they still carry meaning.

No empirical data is available to answer these questions in a satisfactory way. What we can do, at least, is suggest the applicability of Bruce's strategies of humor and

³⁹⁸ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 7.

their critical message when considering today's conventions concerning vulgar language and taboo-topics onstage. In a general sense of 'onstage', we immediately recognize that vulgar language is actually still not allowed onstage. If we switch into any popular award show, any piece of vulgar language is censored by a 'beep'. The same happens in afternoon talk shows. Records are sold warning of 'explicit content', and music videos are aurally and visually censored. It is nevertheless true that vulgar language is often heard in TV series and films and that "Lenny was sentenced to jail for what you see nightly on HBO and the comedy Channel [...]".³⁹⁹ Of course, nobody now goes to jail anymore for using vulgar language in a public place, but the censorship in the above media makes us wonder whether times have changed at all. Still certain words are taboo in the media without regard to their possible context, for instance as characteristics of a certain subculture. Especially in popular music, we notice a similar kind of censorship like the one imposed on Bruce. Musicians are labeled as offering 'explicit lyrics' and often forbidden to use those onstage. It is not important whether the vulgar language serves a purpose (like for example provocation as to shake up complacent audiences). The 'beep' itself does nothing other than to actually ridicule the censorship, although it is not intended to do so. In fact, the annoying 'beep' reminds one of the 'blah blah blah' so impressively used by Bruce. It simply makes us add the particular word in our minds. Thus, one could say that such pioneers as Bruce helped to bring about a climate in which the use of vulgar language is no longer a crime and can still characterize a certain subculture and even carry meaning.⁴⁰⁰

Since we are so used to hearing vulgar language – whether explicitly or implicitly when it is replaced by a 'beep' – how do we react when we watch a movie like *Lenny* and hear Bruce say the things he got arrested for? First of all, we certainly cannot imagine that the pure use of certain words may land us in jail. But still, are we not surprised when we hear him say 'cocksucker'? As the following cannot be proven empirically, one can only guess at this point. But are we really mistaken when we recognize that a word like 'cocksucker' or the topic 'to come' in a performance loaded with sexual content and socially still controversial material arouses ambiguous feelings? Is it not true that talk about sex without taboos still evokes uncomfortable feelings and we feel relieved when we hear Bruce dissolve the tension and understand his point? The topic of sex is neither forbidden, nor officially considered taboo. However, when specific sexual practices are mentioned as openly as Bruce did in the famous 'cocksucking' performance the issue

³⁹⁹ J. Feiffer quoted in: "No Joke! 37 Years After Death Lenny Bruce Receives Pardon".

⁴⁰⁰ Popular rap music as that of artists such as *Eminem* should serve as examples here.

remains controversial. Some traditional hesitation still seems to struggle with our otherwise free and open minds in a free and open-minded culture. The performance 'Are There Any Niggers Here Tonight?' is also very interesting. Although about forty years have passed, does it not send shivers down our spines when we hear Dustin Hoffman as Bruce ask this crucial question and observe the African Americans' reactions in the audience? And are we not relieved when Bruce starts his auction and we realize what a brilliant point he has made? Do we not laugh at our previous feelings of shock and are relieved when we are enabled to release repressed energies? Can we say that our behavior is still restricted to certain conventions and that it therefore forces us to repress certain aggressive or sexual urges? Is it not right that Bruce after forty years of history still enables us to discharge repressed energy because his performances are still up-to-the-minute relevant?

As a consequence, one might assume that the onstage sections of the biopic *Lenny* are important for today's viewers. They provide an insight into an important era of the past with alarming relevance for today. Moreover, the film hopefully arouses interest in the viewers to get to know the 'real' Lenny Bruce, and to buy some original material and experience the brilliance of a funny comedian still able to teach us a lesson forty years after his death.

C 1. Andy Kaufman – An Introduction

On ‘The Andy Kaufman Homepage’ numerous famous and renowned comedians and show business people of the 20th and 21st century acknowledge the importance and influence of Andy Kaufman. Talk show host Jay Leno, for instance, is reported to have felt that “Andy Kaufman was by far the most innovative comedian at that time [...]”, Tony Danza stated that “[...] he was one of the most brilliant comedians ever” and David Letterman wishes “if we could have one guest like Andy – to me that’s worth six months of new material.”⁴⁰¹ Like Lenny Bruce, Andy Kaufman is another comedian who seems to have had an impressive impact on the conventions of stand-up comedy. He ventured into uncharted terrain by “exploring the borderline between reality and imagination.”⁴⁰² In fact, as Steve Allen correctly recognizes, he was not only exploring that borderline, he lived there.⁴⁰³ This last observation captures what Florian Keller attempted to emphasize in his recent study on Andy Kaufman. According to him, Kaufman not only blurred the line between reality and imagination⁴⁰⁴, but moreover, Kaufman can be interpreted as having understood the possibility of re-creating or re-inventing one’s self in order to achieve the ‘pursuit of happiness’ in its literal meaning:

[...] the predominant cultural “metaphor” that informs America’s public discourses is the “makeover” of the self, that is, the notion that the subject has the opportunity to endlessly recreate himself. Kaufman performed this ideological imperative of his culture (the American Dream) up to its too literal extreme and in effect, its “seemingly” healthy promise of finding happiness by way of a “protean” self-enactment took the form of a disease – pushed to its turning point, the offer of permanent self-invention shows its uncanny flipside, namely, an unstoppable, virus-like proliferation of American identities.⁴⁰⁵

By interpreting Kaufman as literally living the American Dream and not standing aside from the material he presents, Kaufman’s position as a satirical comedian is misjudged. In my opinion, Keller’s interpretation is only applicable to Kaufman posthumously, because it implies criticism that was hardly visible for contemporary audiences. Those audiences did not have the possibility to evaluate Kaufman and his series of re-creations as the ‘end-product’ – as a final concept of criticism. My interpretation of Kaufman’s comedy reveals, in fact, that he *does* stand aside from his material and conveys his

⁴⁰¹ Quotations taken from: www.andykaufman.jvlnet.com. Most of the quotations can be heard in the interview bits on the DVD *The Midnight Special*.

⁴⁰² S. Allen, 156.

⁴⁰³ See S. Allen, 156.

⁴⁰⁴ In fact, it is a moot question whether there was a real, a private Andy Kaufman who could be distinguished from his range of stage and real-life characters, whose existence, as Keller states, „called into question the very notion of an original self.” F. Keller, 97.

⁴⁰⁵ F. Keller, 101 f.

criticism of society tongue-in-cheek. In contrast to Keller, who at the beginning of his study states that “This is not a book about comedy”⁴⁰⁶, this study focuses on the strategies of humor that characterize the performances of an entertainer. The strategies of humor of a comedian are understood as his means used to communicate a critical message. Instead of focusing on the final concept, or the ‘end-product’ only, the very methods used to provoke laughter (or possibly a range of different emotions finally resulting in laughter) are to be evaluated in a detailed manner. Only then the ‘concept of criticism’ of a comedian can finally be put across. It should again be noted that in this study the role of a stand-up comedian is understood as the attempt to move people in order to teach them something. Thus, one should refrain from seeing the critic in Kaufman only, because it is almost impossible to ignore that Kaufman remains a comedian. Although one could object that standard concepts of stand-up comedy may not apply to Kaufman, he definitely fulfilled the minimum criteria of using a public stage and of communicating some kind of entertaining program in order to make people laugh. Keller’s interpretation of Kaufman is one suitable way of describing Kaufman’s ‘concept of criticism’. However, it should be considered important that it is the experience of a comical effect and a resulting laughter which serve as Kaufman’s means to criticize American society. Hence, each and every one of Kaufman’s characters needs to be analyzed. How are comical effects created and how are they perceived? Then, one is able to see to what extent Kaufman makes use of the principle of teaching by emotionally moving the audiences. It can be assumed that in each stage of Kaufman’s career he was perceived differently. His underlying critical concept, as Keller understood it, is only applicable at the very end of his career. Sad to say, the end of Kaufman’s career coincides with his early death.

In my chapter on the contemporary reception of Kaufman, I will show to what extent the different characters were perceived as either comical or solely offensive on the one hand and how the reactions of the press influenced and shaped the development of Kaufman on the other. Assuming that the wish to categorize a comedian is typical of a late 1970’s/early 1980’s society demanding shallow entertainment, I can anticipate the results of a later chapter: Kaufman’s series of re-creations can be understood as escapes from categorization. Thus, his re-creations are revealed as detached criticism of a superficial society. After the evaluation of the contemporary and posthumous reception – the biopic is part of this –, an analysis of Kaufman’s strategies of humor and its effects reflecting and being reflected by the

⁴⁰⁶ F. Keller, 1.

reactions of the contemporary audiences and the media will be completed. A contextualized and less abstract interpretation of a comedian whose permanent aim was to “give the audiences a good time”⁴⁰⁷ will then be accomplished. New emphasis will be put on Kaufman’s willingness to entertain his audiences. Especially those critics who are not comfortable with understanding Kaufman as a comedian and who tend to evaluate the ‘final (posthumous) concept Kaufman’ only, seem to disregard how funny Kaufman actually was.

My analysis of Andy Kaufman takes the evaluation of his strategies of humor as a starting point. First, the development from the loveable *Foreign Man* to the villainous wrestler is analyzed. In addition, the co-existence of likeable and boring, funny and offensive characters is taken into consideration. Furthermore, the confusion the co-existence caused will be explained and evaluated. A thorough analysis of Kaufman’s original performances available on DVD offers an insight into Andy Kaufman’s world of comedy. How did Kaufman come to develop his manner of playing his roles to the extreme, of manipulating the audiences in order to evoke honest reactions? Some biographical information about Andy Kaufman should provide a first insight, although no detailed biographical account of his life is intended at this point. Nevertheless, Kaufman’s childhood seems to be quite interesting, because as Steve Allen writes “True comedians – as distinguished from those who are merely joke tellers – discover fairly early in childhood that they are funny”.⁴⁰⁸ In fact, Andy Kaufman is reported to have been involved with show business ever since – except that “the network Andy controlled was entirely in his head.”⁴⁰⁹

Andy Kaufman was born on January 17th, 1949 in New York City and raised in Great Neck, Long Island. In his biography of Andy Kaufman⁴¹⁰, Bill Zehme reveals how Kaufman enjoyed entertaining people as a child and that he was reported to possess several selves to do so. It is important to keep in mind that even though Kaufman reportedly began at a very early age, he deliberately *chose* to switch characters, because he discovered that it attracted people’s attention. The episode which has become widely known – it is also shown in the biopic – should suffice to characterize Kaufman as a child. After the death of his grandfather, Kaufman became a very introverted person. He stayed in his room instead of playing with other kids outside, since he “[...] really thought there was a camera in the wall and that there were millions of people watching

⁴⁰⁷ See Kaufman on, for instance, *The Real Andy Kaufman*. Eclectic DVD Distribution, 2001[1979].

⁴⁰⁸ S. Allen, 155.

⁴⁰⁹ S. Allen, 155.

⁴¹⁰ B. Zehme: *Lost in the funhouse. The Life and Mind of Andy Kaufman*. New York: Delta, 1999.

[him] out there in TVland.”⁴¹¹ Nevertheless, his attitude of turning inwards and only coming out when he was alone soon ended and turned into a desire to entertain others, because he liked the attention.⁴¹² His different characters are often interpreted as a multi-personality disorder. However, according to Zehme’s interpretation “he was crazy like everyone never knew. But he just knew precisely how to be crazy. He knew everything he wanted to know”.⁴¹³

Bob Zmuda, Kaufman’s companion, show-business partner, and friend recalls Kaufman’s life during adolescence and talks about a period of partying and experimenting. These wild times resulted in a paternity that gave

[...] Andy pause, and he abandoned the parties in the park for the coffeehouse in Greenwich village, an environment that stimulated his wildly active mind. [...] More importantly, Andy found the inspiration to begin serious contemplation of his future, the role he might play in the drama of life.⁴¹⁴

His affinity to the world of transcendental meditation, which developed in the following years, not only allowed him to perform in front of real adult audiences but, moreover, it marked a point in his life in which meditation helped him to “[...] turn inside out and see outside reality as no more dangerous than had been his make-believe world as a child. Andy Kaufman had reinvented himself.”⁴¹⁵

The chapters on Kaufman’s strategies of humor and that on the resulting contemporary reception will offer a detailed analysis of Kaufman’s different characters, their development, and their co-existence. Thus, the stages of Kaufman’s short life and career will only be briefly sketched now. Andy Kaufman’s career as an entertainer gradually developed. At first he did some shows for the college’s radio station (Andy had enrolled in Boston’s Graham Junior College to study TV in 1968). Later on, he did several performances in different coffeehouses and small clubs, where he established his ‘*Foreign Man becomes Elvis Presley*’ routine in the early 1970’s. Kaufman was recognized nationwide around 1974. In that year he was discovered at *Friedman’s Improvisation* in New York and then booked to appear on national television in a show called *Dean Martin’s Comedy World*. The *Foreign Man* character was a poor figure at first sight, a stranger from a fictional island in the Caspian Sea. Struggling in the unfamiliar world of American show business, he tried to live the American Dream of coming from ‘rags to riches’. He told unfunny jokes and frequently missed the punch line or confused punch

⁴¹¹ B. Zehme, 18.

⁴¹² When he was only nine years old, Kaufman advertised his talents as an entertainer at birthday parties.

⁴¹³ B. Zehme, 3.

⁴¹⁴ B. Zmuda: *Andy Kaufman revealed. Best friend tells all*. Back Bay Books, 2001 (originally published by Little, Brown, 1999), 15.

⁴¹⁵ B. Zmuda, 16.

lines from different jokes. All of this was performed with a heavy accent. To increase the strange and uncomfortable atmosphere in his audiences, *Foreign Man* kept offering more and more jokes and at the point when people were secretly hoping for him to stop embarrassing himself he announced that he was going to do impressions of famous people. Several lousy impressions (all the while keeping his foreign accent) strained people's nerves once more so that his announcement to do an Elvis Presley imitation almost appeared as a threat. However, Kaufman's impression of Elvis Presley made people realize that they had been fooled and it finally enabled them to enjoy the performance. In fact, Kaufman was capable of doing a brilliant live imitation of Elvis Presley. The final repetition of *Foreign Man*'s "Tenk you veddy much" – again with the foreign accent – eventually pointed out that the entire performance was intended to evoke a range of different emotions. In Kaufman's words: "I like the kind of humor where nobody knows what's going on."⁴¹⁶ The lovable character of *Foreign Man* was later turned into 'Latka Gravas', a role in the sitcom *TAXI* which Kaufman played for a few years (1978-1983). Although a huge success, Kaufman disliked his role in the show. To him it was "[...] *Foreign Man* reborn according to the whim of others who had relieved him of the character's creative custody and who would dictate the character's inner life and motivation and destiny."⁴¹⁷ Kaufman's dislike of losing creative control over a character is best documented in his various attempts to create confusion with the co-existence of other, more offensive characters. His insistence on two guest appearances by Tony Clifton – supposedly an imitation of a real life Las Vegas lounge singer – in the sitcom *TAXI* resulted in the final dismissal of Clifton. Clifton's appearances furthermore contributed to the confusion concerning the question who this figure actually was and why Kaufman sometimes chose to appear as Clifton. The character Tony Clifton was a rude and untalented singer, who mostly wore a tacky costume, fake moustache and huge sunglasses and who always smoked a fat cigar. It was the least likeable of Kaufman's characters. According to Keller, Clifton could be interpreted as "[...] this obscene incarnation of the never-quite-risen star who embodies a disconcerting byproduct of the American myth of success, the "abject" of the star system."⁴¹⁸ In general, Kaufman was always little reliable when it came to the specific roles he was expected to play. He so much merged with his roles that once when he appeared as Latka Gravas and audiences asked for an Elvis-imitation, he did Elvis with

⁴¹⁶ S. Allen, 161.

⁴¹⁷ B. Zehme, 217.

⁴¹⁸ F. Keller, 113.

the foreign accent and “Andy was nowhere to be found.”⁴¹⁹ Fooling audiences’ expectations was a role Kaufman very much enjoyed to play. After having bored an audience with a lecture of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s entire novel *The Great Gatsby*, he repeated the performance and read the novel at a *Saturday Night Live* performance. This time he added a heavy British accent to the routine. He responded to the audience’s boredom by offering them to listen to a record instead. This inquiry was enthusiastically received, because Andy’s lip-synching of the *Mighty Mouse* theme had already become famous. In fact, the record offered just another lecture of *The Great Gatsby* recited by Kaufman. The performance, as Zmuda reports, “got a huge laugh [and] was a perfect out-cue for the bit [...]”.⁴²⁰

Finally, wrestling came into play. Kaufman’s affinity to this kind of spectacle began quite early. ‘The Andy Kaufman Homepage’ claims that Andy began to “dream of a career in professional wrestling”⁴²¹ as early as 1963, after he had visited a wrestling match at Madison Square Garden. Around 1979, Kaufman started to challenge women to wrestle him and he offered them money to do so. Wrestling “[...] so appealed to Andy because of the black-and-white nature of its conflict: it was good versus bad [...] pure versus profane, star versus has-been, Andy versus women, success versus failure [...] life versus death”⁴²², as Bob Zmuda writes. The wrestling was a perfect spectacle to push limits further and further. After he had insulted so many women, Kaufman eventually set the entire wrestling community against himself. In the end, the wrestling was another perfect method to “make them think they knew what was coming, then purposely self-destruct in front of them just to show them who was in control.”⁴²³ At the same time, the wrestling was also risky, because it tested his audiences’ patience and made the ‘loveable’ side of Andy Kaufman fall into oblivion. And indeed, the year of 1983 marked a series of backlashes for Kaufman. His wrestling and the tiring desire for revenge against the star-wrestler Jerry Lawler began to annoy his audiences and his behavior eventually resulted in a dismissal from *Saturday Night Live*. The canceling of *TAXI* and the failure to gain guest appearances on almost all popular TV shows virtually meant the end of his career.

After some futile attempts to find cure, Andy Kaufman died from a rare kind of lung cancer on May 16th, 1984. His remarkable gift to reinvent himself over and over

⁴¹⁹ B. Zehme, 218.

⁴²⁰ B. Zmuda, 89.

⁴²¹ www.andykaufman.jvl.net.com

⁴²² B. Zmuda, 56.

⁴²³ B. Zmuda, 57.

again nevertheless has made him famous. Until today, there are rumors that Andy Kaufman's death was just another fake and that he is still alive.

After an analysis of Kaufman's strategies of humor and an evaluation of the resulting contemporary reception, the biopic *Man on the Moon* will be analyzed in detail. It is organized in a manner resembling Kaufman's conceptual series of re-inventions and will help to understand and explain the legacy of Andy Kaufman.

C 2. “He wanted to make audiences work – to rethink the obvious”⁴²⁴ – Andy Kaufman’s Strategies of Humor

As was said before, it might be virtually impossible to understand the comedian Andy Kaufman on a whole. First, his different characters need to be interpreted by revealing his strategies of humor. A thorough analysis of specific characters should help to find out whether some omnipresent strategy of humor can be traced in all of Kaufman’s different characters. The effect of Kaufman’s re-creations can thus be clarified. The analysis of Kaufman’s strategies of humor should provide a starting point to explain his numerous escapes from categorization in the light of his contemporary reception.

The most loveable among Kaufman’s characters was probably the *Foreign Man* character. Since it is also the impersonation that made Kaufman famous, *Foreign Man* should be the first to be analyzed here. One has to differentiate between ‘*Foreign Man* turning into Elvis’ and *Foreign Man* emerging from a humiliated ‘Kaufman’ threatening to walk off the stage because the audience does not seem to appreciate his act.⁴²⁵ A character similarly likeable is the one performing the *Mighty Mouse* theme song.⁴²⁶ Other, less likeable characters must also be taken into consideration. Tony Clifton or the arrogant and apparently misogynic ‘intergender wrestling champion’ account for the comedian Andy Kaufman, too. All of these characters eventually contribute to the ‘concept Kaufman’ as a whole. Furthermore, I do not agree that those characters are not funny whatsoever, no matter how obnoxious they might be.⁴²⁷ I agree with Steve Allen who argues that “[...] the standard concept of ‘funny’ is not always relevant to Andy’s performances.”⁴²⁸ Kaufman’s strategies of humor are meant to have the audiences experience a variety of emotions ranging from delight and feeling deeply moved, to boredom, pity, feeling uncomfortable or embarrassed, or even angry, ashamed and insulted. As a consequence, all of his characters must be considered important and must be evaluated concerning their underlying strategies.

⁴²⁴ E. Boosler quoted from The Andy Kaufman Homepage. www.andykaufman.jvl.net.com

⁴²⁵ The former can be observed on the DVD *Andy Kaufman. The Midnight Special*, whereas the latter is found on the DVD *The Real Andy Kaufman*.

⁴²⁶ See *The Real Andy Kaufman*.

⁴²⁷ Even Tony Clifton is capable of provoking laughter – the kind of laughter evoked by uncertainty – and Andy the wrestler was able to be very funny by pretending to be the arrogant and sexist macho.

⁴²⁸ S. Allen, 164.

2.1 *Foreign Man Turns into Elvis Presley*

The performance at hand – available on DVD as *The Midnight Special* – was originally staged in June 1981. By that time, Kaufman had already become a renowned comedian and audiences were acquainted with his routines. Nevertheless, in this analysis we should attempt to take the most neutral look at the performances in order to see Kaufman through the eyes of a viewer who is not accustomed with his material. Afterwards, the audience's reactions need to be carefully observed and I will evaluate why a routine dependent on the experience of surprise does not seem to lose its funny content, once it has been staged regularly.

After introductory words uttered by the show's executive producer Burt Sugarman, Kaufman is introduced as the host for the morning and enters the stage in a suit with a light shaded jacket and a black tie. His hair is neatly combed and he is sporting a loveable smile from the very beginning. At first sight, he seems to be a nice and very friendly person. He is not all too self-confident or conceited, but he does not seem to be humble and insecure either. This first impression is surprisingly confirmed when he starts to speak. His initial words – 'Tenk you veddy much' are uttered with a foreign accent as a response to the audience's applause. These words immediately mark him as a non-standard host of the show; however, the impression achieved by his outward appearance, posture, gestures, and facial expressions is maintained. The overall impression is that the audience is in the wrong show and not that the host is in the wrong place or doing inappropriate things. He begins to casually chat with the people in the audience. Surprisingly, he talks gibberish, though, assuming that everyone is able to understand him. He completely ignores the laughter, asks incomprehensible questions, and responds to the insecure 'yes' or 'no's' as if they were appropriate answers. He walks along the stage, leans towards individual members in the audience when asking them something, and seems absolutely confident. Thus, Kaufman manages to control his audience from the very beginning. It is a complete role reversal concerning the question who is acting appropriately, and who is not.

Sure enough, one has to recognize that we are talking about a situation within a *humorous context*. The viewers of the DVD – and the people in the 1981 audience – expect entertainment of some kind. Hence, we need to consider whether Kaufman's action can be really called 'out of place', since it definitely evokes laughter. The point is that Kaufman manages to play with expectations we nevertheless have, even if we are sure that we expect nothing in particular apart from being entertained. Even if we have

no idea what kind of entertainment we can look forward to, we have a certain set of standard material in our minds that we expect when we see a comedian. A language we cannot comprehend definitely deviates from these expectations, because “there has to be a sort of tacit consensus or implicit shared understanding as to what constitutes joking ‘for us’, as to which linguistic or visual routines are recognized as joking”, as Simon Critchley proposes in his study *On Humour*.⁴²⁹ Furthermore, as Critchley states, “joking is a game that players only play successfully when they both understand and follow the rules.”⁴³⁰

However, one must acknowledge that Kaufman *does* communicate with his audience in some way. How exactly does he do that? Before this question can finally be answered, the strange situation we are confronted with should be analyzed in a more detailed manner. The audience is trapped in a very absurd situation. The absurdity is exaggerated even more when we consider the contrast between Kaufman’s standard way of dressing, gesturing and casually chatting with the audience (even his intonation seems familiar, although his words are incomprehensible) on the one hand and the childish gibberish he speaks on the other. We are confronted with an incongruity, which is defined as a sudden juxtaposition of things that are apparently unrelated. Even though we are prepared to see *anything* funny when we are in the context of the comic, we are very surprised when we do not comprehend the language used to communicate the comical. Thus, our expectations are not met and dissolve into nothing. Not even the basic requirement for communication is fulfilled and our expectations are disappointed. The resulting laughter can be traced back to both the degree of contrast between the two mismatching elements (conventional habits of conversation contrast with gibberish) and to derision, as Bergson would have seen it. We might at first think that we look down upon the stranger who does not meet conventional standards and consequently needs to be corrected by laughter in order to meet socially accepted modes of behavior. Kaufman, however, manages to swap places with the people in the audience (and the viewers of the DVD, too). He makes the viewers feel as if they were the ones unable to communicate with him. Thus, the responsive laughter *is* derisive, but in reality it is directed towards us – the viewers. We suddenly feel that we are alien, incompetent, and unable to adjust to new circumstances. Our inability to adjust to the new situation makes us feel uncomfortable and evokes an uncertain laughter. Even though *he* is not following standards, Kaufman manages to project his own inelasticity onto the audience.

⁴²⁹ S. Critchley: *On Humour*. London/New York: Routledge, 2002, 4.

⁴³⁰ S. Critchley, 4.

In the following, the way he deals with our uncertainty offers a solution for us to overcome the insecurity. He completely ignores the fact that the audience does not understand him. Instead, he perceives the audience's answers and reactions as if they were totally appropriate. Consequently, he offers a hand to overcome the feeling of alienation. We can thus laugh at our former uncertain selves. The audience has just experienced a first crash course of how Kaufman's humor works and knows how to deal with it now. Or so it seems for the moment.

Kaufman then announces that he will do imitations. He repeats the word *imitations*, stressing each syllable, so everybody understands. Hence, he admits for the first time that *he* is 'foreign'. He even makes sure that everyone understands him. The complete reversal of a set of communication rules that have just been established is typical of Kaufman. Once an audience has begun to understand a strategy of humor, Kaufman is eager to immediately create new confusion. His imitations are hilarious because they violate every standard concerning the nature of imitations. They are rather imitations of *Foreign Man* himself. *Foreign Man* proudly announces which person he is going to imitate and puts much attention on the pronunciation of the name. Then he about-faces, pauses for a moment, turns back, and then greets the audience by saying "Hello. I am Ronald Reagan. The President of the United States." He talks with his foreign accent all the time and thus violates all established conventions that someone doing imitations should stick to. The actual imitation is rather a repetition of the preceding announcement, because tone and accent do not change at all. This scene is comical for two reasons: firstly, our expectations are once again strained but dissolve into nothing when we are confronted with a repetition instead of a real imitation. Secondly, the repetition represents the incapability of *Foreign Man* to adjust to standardized rules, more precisely, to follow established concepts of American humor. We expect to hear a real imitation and must realize that we are waiting all in vain. Instead, we are confronted with a repetition of the announcement which is presented like a real imitation. *Foreign Man* ends his 'imitation' with an excited and proud expression on his face and utters the famous 'Tenk you veddy much'. In his universe, his impression was perfect. This time, the audience is invited to join him in his world and expected to understand and appreciate him. The situation is a repetition of that analyzed earlier: Communication problems are ignored, and this time it is he who expects the audience to overcome difficulties and accept him as part of the crowd and to acknowledge his routine.

The leitmotif of the entire performance and the most characteristic utterance of *Foreign Man* is definitely 'Tenk you veddy much'. The mere repetition evokes laughter as it serves as a reminder that *Foreign Man* is trapped in his role and unable and *unwilling* to adjust to changes. He utters the sentence no matter how the crowd responds and without caring too much about his actual failure as a standard comedian. The repetition of the crucial sentence represents his persistent inelasticity. It also reflects his general unwillingness to stick to his own rules. He can thus play with the audience's expectations at all times. Both the persistent inelasticity and the play with expectations account for the comical effects in this performance.

The second imitation *Foreign Man* announces to do is one of the comedian Steve Martin. Wording, gestures, and facial expressions are very similar to the preceding imitation. An extra funny moment is created when *Foreign Man* emphasizes the word *comedian* when he announces that he is about to imitate Steve Martin. He does so in the same carefully chosen tone observed before. He puts much emphasis on the pronunciation of the word *comedian* and then turns sideways to start the imitation. Why does this evoke laughter? At this moment, Kaufman reveals that his routine is a parody of comedy itself. He is onstage to fulfill the requirements of a comedian to entertain the audience and he does so by violating every standard concept of American stand-up comedy. Not only does he fail to communicate in a language comprehensible to all people. Moreover, he refuses to accept standardized modes of stand-up comedy or, to be more precise, he ignores the very nature of imitations by imitating himself rather than another person. Thus, it becomes evident that Kaufman's comedy is not restricted to any established rules at all but that it focuses on the establishment of his very own and unique rules which he can control and reverse at any time. That his routine is a parody of comedy is pointed out when *Foreign Man* comes to finish the imitation of Steve Martin ("Hello. I am Steve Martin. And I am the..."). After a moment of hesitation and a revealing chuckle, he adds "the wild and crazy man." This specification is funny in the first place because it is uttered with the voice of *Foreign Man*. Moreover, tone contradicts content, because *Foreign Man's* voice and attitude at that moment are completely non-wild and non-crazy. Kaufman's means to create a comical effect never last for very long. True to the notion that once a strategy of humor is understood and established it is necessary to completely reverse the rules of the game, he suddenly starts to exaggerate the very same line. A few moments earlier the line was funny because its pronunciation and the attitude it revealed contradicted its content. Suddenly, he starts to act out that wild and crazy attitude to extremes. At first, the exaggeration of the line "I

am the wild and crazy man” and the repeated “Woo” seem to make fun of Steve Martin’s comedy and his characteristic catch lines. At second sight, Kaufman’s parody seems more extensive. According to Keller:

He does not actually mimic his objects of ridicule, but what he imitates are the very gestures of imitations, that is, he mimics the routine of stand-up “impressions.”⁴³¹

One can say that Kaufman does not follow any rules concerning stand-up impressions. To be precise, he refuses to offer a real imitation first and presents a repetition instead. Then, he exaggerates the impression still without following the rules (like a corresponding voice, for instance). As a consequence, the entire performance not only ridicules standard impressions but it also averts an understanding of Kaufman’s strategies of humor. Kaufman changes his strategies confusingly quickly and completely unpredictably so that the viewer never knows whether *Foreign Man* is capable of or even willing to reproduce standard American humor at all. What we do know, though, is that Kaufman is the only one who knows about this and who is thus always in control. On the one hand, there is this insecure stranger desperately trying to be funny. On the other hand, there is this person who always proves that he is in control and who confronts the viewers with their misperceptions. The viewers never know who is about to appear next. Thus, the disappointment of the viewers’ expectations is what accounts for the comical effects in this performance.

In general, it can be said that many of Bergson’s ideas concerning the comic prove true in Kaufman’s performance. *Foreign Man*’s stiff posture emphasizes his attitude and represents the inability to adjust to new situations. *Foreign Man* seems to be trapped in the role of the insecure stranger. His attitude seems to contradict the cool and easy-going attitude of those stand-up comedians that the American audiences are used to. His language, whether it is gibberish or broken English, contradicts the elegant wittiness of other comedians. As a consequence, *Foreign Man* impersonates the stranger who represents inelasticity and consequently an inability to adjust to the standards of an ever-developing society. The laughter he evokes is derisive, because we look down upon the poor outsider who is unable to fit in. On the other hand, *Foreign Man* is capable of evoking a great amount of insecurity. The rules of comedy are reshaped, and then turned topsy-turvy, just to be rewritten once again so that we can never be sure whether we have understood the strategies of humor at any time. Thus, in the end we simply have to laugh at ourselves. We look down upon our former misperception and must realize that we have been fooled. Hence, it is the viewer who is not flexible enough to

⁴³¹ F. Keller, 101.

adjust to Kaufman's constant changing of the rules of the game and, consequently, the only option left is to laugh at one's own inelasticity.

The *Foreign Man* performance at hand ends with the metamorphosis into Elvis Presley. Once again, Kaufman changes the rules of the game, for he is now no longer a weak imitator. He virtually turns into Elvis Presley. *Foreign Man* introduces his next 'victim' in broken English. The attentive viewer might notice that the hesitation and pretended search for the right name (before he proudly announces 'Elvis Presley' as the next imitation) already allude to the parody that is about to follow. In fact, the seemingly uncertain search for the name of the king of Rock 'n Roll creates a great comical moment. *Foreign Man* pretends to really have forgotten the correct name of one of the most famous American entertainers of all time. And this is probably one of the most hilarious contradictions concerning show business anyone could think of. Thus, what has already been hinted at becomes evident now: *Foreign Man* turns into Elvis and Kaufman offers not only a terrific imitation, but a brilliant parody of the king of Rock 'n Roll. Whereas the initial announcement was still in broken English and, apart from that, the preceding performances actually made us expect another parody of imitations, Kaufman once again manages to reverse his approach to comedy. The exaggerated stage behavior enhances the impression that this performance is a parody of Elvis Presley. Kaufman (or *Foreign Man* or Elvis) rips off the conservative jacket and the black adhesives that hide the glittery stripes on his pants and when he turns his head towards the audience his facial expression resembles that of Presley (he "purses his lips"). In the following moments, *Foreign Man* has vanished and Elvis Presley is onstage. He lightheartedly chats with the people and thus emphasizes his superiority and fame. He calls upon the audience to just stare at him while he catches his breath or tells the viewers that – of course – all his records were big ones. Kaufman perfectly imitates Presley's voice as well as his posture, movements, gestures, and facial expressions. Sugarman reenters the stage and expresses his enthusiasm. Kaufman's hilarious answer is "Tenk you veddy much". This particular moment of the performance is interpreted as the ultimate moment revealing the put-on in Kaufman's routine by most of his colleagues or scholars writing about him. Steve Allen, for instance, recounts his experiences with Kaufman audiences:

It would occur to you about three notes into the song that you had been *had*, completely and brilliantly. And when he ends this last impression by returning to the Foreign Man character – "Tenk you veddy much" – you would probably scream, laugh, shout and call for more.⁴³²

⁴³² S. Allen, 165.

In his analysis of Andy Kaufman, Phil Auslander comes to the conclusion that “[...] the act would thus suddenly become self-reflexive, pointing out and undermining its own illusionism”.⁴³³ The audiences came to realize that *Foreign Man* was not what they had thought he was. In my opinion, there are several hints which reveal the parody and they appear much earlier throughout the entire performance, as I have just shown. The attentive observer does not have to wait until the final “Tenk you veddy much” to find out that *Foreign Man* is not what he first seemed to be. Nevertheless, it seems as if feelings of shame and pity are so prevailing when watching the ‘*Foreign Man* turns into Elvis’ performance that we mistake the creation of an illusion with the naïveté of *Foreign Man*. All those hints that show that *Foreign Man*’s insecurity and inability are illusionary might pass unnoticed. Bergson stated that, after all, the comic depends on “[...] a momentary anesthesia of the heart”.⁴³⁴ As soon as other feelings such as shame or pity prevail, we might not be able to sense something ludicrous in a situation like this. Thus, we might not understand Kaufman’s perfect illusion until Elvis Presley appears or even not until the final line is uttered.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that laughter is evoked throughout the *entire* performance.⁴³⁵ Consequently, it seems justified to argue that laughter is evoked by that sequence of comprehension and confusion. The viewers’ predominant feeling is insecurity. It is a staged insecurity of *Foreign Man* projected onto the audience. Kaufman repeatedly proves that he is in control, because the audience is unable to adjust to the unusual, unexpected, and non-standard situation. Thus, our comprehension of the former misjudgment results in derisive laughter at our former selves.

At this point, we might want to ask whether a performance based on these moments of surprise, self-reflexive comprehension, and the following confusion can work once it has been staged regularly. In Auslander’s opinion, “[...] that performance lost most of its impact and was ripe for translation [...]”⁴³⁶ once people had found out that *Foreign Man* was an illusionary character. It is definitely true that Kaufman was in desperate need of an antidote when people began to love his *Foreign Man*. As a consequence, his career “[...] is defined by his creation of performances that were ever less vulnerable to an audience’s consciousness of his intentions and presence.”⁴³⁷ Nevertheless, it was Kaufman and not his audiences who needed the antidote, or rather

⁴³³ P. Auslander: *Presence and Resistance. Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992, 143.

⁴³⁴ H. Bergson, 63 f.

⁴³⁵ This is evident from the audience response; cf. *Andy Kaufman. The Midnight Special*.

⁴³⁶ P. Auslander, 143.

⁴³⁷ P. Auslander, 143.

a mean counterpart of the lovable *Foreign Man*. Auslander's interpretation that the act lost most of its impact once people had become aware of the illusion is only applicable to Kaufman himself. As soon as his characters became predictable his concept of comedy could no longer work. People appreciated the *Foreign Man* performances even though those initial effects of surprise could not be experienced again once the concept of the act was common knowledge. In fact, as soon as Kaufman's protégé Tony Clifton was established or Kaufman began to challenge women to wrestle him, audiences demanded likeable characters such as *Foreign Man*, although their routines were perfectly known. As a response to Kaufman's permanent willingness to recreate himself in order to be least predictable, audiences demanded the exact opposite. Audiences were longing for characters they were accustomed with. This development contradicts the entire concept of Kaufman's humor and at the same time explains his desperate need to self-destroy in public over and over again in order to create something fresh and new. Moreover, it certainly disproves the premise that the same comic routine only works a limited number of times or even in one single instance only. To what extent does a routine based on the effects of unpredictability and surprise remain comic? The strategy of illusion-disillusion cannot work any longer as soon as the routine is commonly known. Hence, there must be other mechanisms which evoke laughter. We might suggest that the allusions which may slip our attention during a first *Foreign Man* performance create comic effects when we see *Foreign Man* for a second time. Kaufman's overemphasis of the word *imitations*, his chuckle before he describes Steve Martin as "the wild and crazy man", his pretended search for the right name of the king of Rock n' Roll, and his exaggerated parody of Elvis Presley's voice, gestures, and facial expressions appear in a different light when we watch the performance for a second time. Now that we know that he is playing with the audience, such details announce those comical effects that we experienced earlier when we were still totally neutral. Hence, we must conclude that now we laugh because our expectations *are met*. The allusions alert our consciousness, we are waiting to experience the sensation of a comical effect and we expect to laugh. Bergson described comical situations in which something is expected to happen when he described the comic in repeated movements. People laugh at a speaker who repeats the same gesture over and over again, because they expect the gesture before it occurs. A repeated gesture contradicts the adjustment to the developing speech and the corresponding developing thoughts. The repeated gesture thus contradicts the vivid flow of life and represents an inelasticity to adjust to an otherwise developing situation, in this case, the speech. If we apply this theory to

Kaufman's performance, the audiences accustomed with his routine laugh because they get exactly what they expected. *Foreign Man* is rigid in many ways: his posture and gestures are rigid, and the gibberish or his broken English oppose the fluent chat a stand-up comedian normally uses. Both represent the general inability to adjust to standard concepts of American humor. *Foreign Man* clearly represents the failure to adjust to the fast-living American society that is constantly waiting to be entertained. According to Bergson, this is a classic example of a comic situation in which the outsider is looked down upon and corrected by laughter. Even though it is obvious that the person onstage is no real stranger, *Foreign Man* now *represents* failure. People respond to him in a way resembling the reactions *Foreign Man* got *before* audiences realized that the character was illusionary. The emotional involvement, the experience of being fooled and then having to admit that one has been fooled, naturally does not work once the performance is known. As soon as people are no longer emotionally involved, the underlying cultural criticism in the performance comes to light. As more sly allusions become obvious (the chuckle, the hesitation, the search for names), Kaufman's critical concept becomes visible. It is the staging of failure and incompetence as "[...] an appropriate strategy of resistance in the context of a mediatized culture dominated by the glossy surface of 'professionalism'".⁴³⁸ It is also an attempt to criticize American society's naïve and superficial demands for easy entertainment.⁴³⁹ Furthermore, Kaufman criticizes and ridicules a society that always believes what is brought to them via the media.

Apart from the recognition of underlying cultural criticism, we might enjoy a comical performance for a second or third time, because we remember the pure pleasure of laughter that we have experienced earlier and we are longing to experience it again. If we know what we are about to experience and have already enjoyed it before, some of us might laugh about the very same comic moment over and over again. This mechanism is well-known from certain scenes in so-called *cult movies*, in which the very same phrase or music is enjoyed several times. Umberto Eco in "Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage" suggests that cult films "must provide a completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the fan's private sectarian world."⁴⁴⁰ Something similar occurs in comic performances. A comical effect is turned into a cult-moment of laughter and becomes a

⁴³⁸ P. Auslander, 142.

⁴³⁹ This thought will be further elaborated in the following chapter on the contemporary reception of Kaufman.

⁴⁴⁰ U. Eco: "Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage", in: D. Lodge: *Modern Criticism and theory*, Longman, Harlow, 1988, 446.

ritual. We remember the pleasant laughter that we experienced when we saw a performance for the first time and we recollect and reproduce it without further regard to previous motives and for pure pleasure only. We might speak of a strong desire to laugh again, which mostly arises within the ludicrous context. We might also laugh *in expectation* of the very same laughter we have already experienced and enjoyed at least once before. This kind of ritual laughter that is derived from a repetitive experience thus opposes the insecurity that was the original source of laughter. Ritual laughter is less spontaneous and, moreover, intended to counteract the fear of being at the mercy of emotional exposure. Kaufman's suspicious stage personality, or rather his methodical use of a range of different characters, explains the audiences' demand for the likeable *Foreign Man* as a response to the potentially unpleasant experience with meaner characters and the resulting emotions such as annoyance, shame, or anger.

Interestingly, Kaufman played a character similar to *Foreign Man* in other performances, too. A performance as such is a promising one for analysis, because the transformation works the other way round. A mean or at least strange Andy Kaufman pretends to dislike his audience and then turns into the likeable *Foreign Man*.

2.2 'Andy Kaufman' Turns into *Foreign Man*⁴⁴¹

In this performance, it is again not clear whether the person onstage can be called 'Andy Kaufman'. Even the fact that he encourages his entire family to come up and join him can tell us that he is not playing yet another character. Nevertheless, for reasons of simplification one can choose to speak of 'Andy Kaufman' at this point. In the performance at hand, Kaufman starts his program by singing a rather unprofessional version of "Oklahoma". He bops around the stage and runs back and forth between the conga drums and the microphone to such an extent that his singing is rather breathless. Next, he sings an exaggerated version of "My way", thus stressing that he very much enjoys "playing the talentless [sic] guy all the time."⁴⁴² The following version of Andy lip-synching the *Mighty Mouse* theme song will be considered at a later point in detail. For the moment, the developments onstage culminating in the transformation into *Foreign Man* are of interest. Kaufman asks his entire family to join him onstage. That alone takes some time, as all members are asked individually and need their time to approach the

⁴⁴¹ See *The Real Andy Kaufman*.

⁴⁴² Seth Schultz, quoted from *The Real Andy Kaufman*.

stage. Playing the confident entertainer, Kaufman cordially greets and introduces each member of his family to the audience. He introduces them as if they were famous stars, but at the same time the performance becomes somewhat informal and unprofessional. Kaufman's parents, for instance, laughingly refuse to say something besides greeting the audience. In general, one could say that the atmosphere is that of a supposedly professional performance that has gotten out of control due to the involuntary involvement of all-too-informal developments. The audiences probably felt confused in the presence of the entire Kaufman family onstage and did not know how to deal with the situation. In fact, the situation completely lacks ludicrous content and feelings of embarrassment and annoyance prevail. There is no laughter. Thus, it should be even more interesting to find out how Kaufman develops and employs his strategies of humor in this performance. In order to strain his audience's expectations, he has several members of his family tell jokes or sing songs. Of course, the singing is rather lousy and the jokes are not really brilliant. They only strain expectations and have the audience experience embarrassment. All members of the family slip into Kaufman's role of the incompetent amateur that he introduced at the beginning of the show.⁴⁴³ The family participation therefore only prolongs the audience's feelings of embarrassment and shame. Rare funny moments – if any – are responded to with weak laughter. The laughter might reflect a desperate attempt to invite the misbehaving performers to return to the 'group'.

Kaufman's performance seems to be out of control. People call for the Elvis-performance and at this point his friendly attitude, which was felt when he encouraged his family to be funny, turns into impatience and annoyance ("I don't do Elvis anymore"). Kaufman requests some feedback and asks the people whether they liked the performances of his family members. His request seems quite ironical, because the audience's responses have just proven the opposite. He starts to complain that people are mistaken if they expect to hear something funny instead of the variety show he is willing to offer them. The complaint and the annoyed look on his face illustrate how Kaufman manages to switch roles with his audience once again. He distances himself from any responsibility and blames the audience for the uncomfortable mood which has developed by now. By completely denying any responsibility for those developments, he manages to project *his* failure to be entertaining on the people in the audience. They are suddenly accused of being unable to appreciate his program and of having had the

⁴⁴³ Unfortunately the DVD at hand does not offer an uncut version of the show. Neither are the single performances of the family members shown in full length nor do we know whether Kaufman's call for some audience feedback immediately succeeded the performances.

wrong expectations. At this point, people in the audience are embarrassed and completely insecure. These feelings are reinforced when Kaufman suddenly starts to cry and threatens to walk off the stage. Although Kaufman most obviously plays the role of the loser who is not able to be funny, the audience is left feeling insecure and guilty as if it was their fault that the performance had to end early. Kaufman really takes his time before he finally gives the audience a clue how to deal with the situation. His desperate and hysterical crying slowly turns into a rhythm. A constantly and rhythmically repeated sob makes the audience realize their previous misperception. The exaggerated rhythmical sobbing transforms into a song which is sung in gibberish. Consequently, we can suspect that it might be *Foreign Man* who is singing. After a few seconds, he starts to accompany himself on conga drums. The repeated sobbing itself creates a comical effect. Repetition – resembling a rigid mechanism – opposes vitality, change, and adjustment to new situations and represents an aberration of the natural flow of life. The rhythmical sobbing and the conga drums enhancing the rhythm, vividly illustrate Bergson’s approach to the comic in repeated sounds. Apart from that, the singing offers a final clue for the people in the audience to understand that Kaufman’s previous behavior was staged. As a consequence, the embarrassment felt earlier was completely out of place and people are forced to reflect their previous feelings and realize that they were mistaken. In fact, they must look down upon their former selves. Previous embarrassment is judged as misplaced and the gap between the formerly misunderstood situation and the corresponding inappropriate feelings is narrowed by a correcting and self-derisive laughter.

2.3 Lip-Synching the Mighty Mouse Theme Song⁴⁴⁴

The *Mighty Mouse* performance belongs to Kaufman’s most popular ones and convinces by its simplicity. While the song is playing, Andy places himself onstage with his arms hanging down and with an indifferent facial expression. The only noticeable movement is that of his eyes scanning the audience but not gazing at anybody in particular. His stiff posture emphasizes the contrast to the vivid song and, as a consequence, to the vivid flow of life. This contrast serves as a starting point for a brilliant comical effect when he changes his behavior once the song’s crucial line “Here I come to save the day” is heard. Kaufman smilingly lip-synchs the line, does some

⁴⁴⁴ A version of this performance is available on *The Real Andy Kaufman*.

slight knee bends and acts out the content by showing an exaggerated gesture. Afterwards, he relapses into his previous rigid posture and the song proceeds. The lip-synching is repeated when the cited line resounds once more.

Bergson's theory is very well applicable to this performance. By not moving at all while a cheerful mid-tempo song is heard, Kaufman perfectly personifies inelasticity that contrasts with vitality. The vivid song generally makes the viewers expect enthusiastic action of some kind, but the contrast sensed between the cheerful song and Kaufman's stiff posture makes our expectations dissolve into nothing. A first cause of laughter is explained: personified inelasticity that contradicts vitality represented by a song. Kaufman's corresponding movements, on the other hand, appear like that of a machine igniting all of a sudden, or rather as that of a marionette suddenly coming to life. This is a perfect case of something mechanical encrusted on the living: "At its humorous edges, the human begins to blur with the machine, becoming an inhuman thing that stands over against the human beings."⁴⁴⁵ Although human, the stiff Kaufman seems to represent a non-human marionette. As if controlled by a puppeteer, he suddenly starts to move and resembles a mechanical toy which has been wound up in order to function. Again, the repetitive automatism encrusted onto the living oppose the vitality associated with human beings and the perceived contrast creates the comical effect.

2.4 Tony Clifton

Tony Clifton's performance at *The Midnight Special* is introduced by Andy Kaufman, the host of the show. For those viewers who saw the show on TV or have bought the DVD at hand, several cuts to Andy Kaufman sitting amongst people in the audience point out that the Tony Clifton onstage is *not* (or rather is not supposed to be) Andy Kaufman. Bob Zmuda, who often played Clifton later on in Kaufman's career, enters the stage as the Polish guy Bob Gorsky for some staged audience participation during the show. Thus, we can be almost certain that the Clifton onstage is not played by Zmuda. Consequently, one can draw the conclusion that the contemporary audience did not see Tony Clifton and Andy Kaufman at the same time and that the close-ups on Kaufman sitting in the audience are inserted into the show at a later point. Unfortunately, no information is available which could finally clarify this problem. *New*

⁴⁴⁵ S. Critchley, 56.

York Times critic Peter M. Nichols encountered this problem when he reviewed Kaufman videotapes such as *The Midnight Special* in 1999:

Audiences weren't sure of Kaufman [...] and never knew whether to laugh or erupt in anger [...] That was the intent, of course, and fans got no closer to their man on these tapes, which date from the early eighties.⁴⁴⁶

Since we know that it cannot be Zmuda, Clifton's performance can now be analyzed as that of Kaufman impersonating his character Tony Clifton. Nevertheless, although Clifton is understood as a character played by Kaufman, the performance will be evaluated from the point of view of neutral viewers, who do not yet know whether Clifton and Kaufman are separate characters or one and the same person.

Tony Clifton enters the stage in his usual pink jacket with a light blue frill shirt underneath. A large bow tie completes his costume.⁴⁴⁷ He is obviously wearing a toupee, fake moustache, and large glasses, so that the first impression of Tony Clifton is that he is either a parody of a lousy lounge singer or in fact a real lounge singer about to embarrass himself onstage. The characteristic walk resembles that of an old man with a stiff hip and his snarling voice is extremely loud and almost incomprehensible. He turns his head away from the microphone and mumbles so the audience cannot understand the insults he spews. In fact, this attitude is intended at this point and carried out sloppy enough to have the microphone pick up the crucial lines anyway. Thus, the first impression of Tony Clifton as that of a lousy singer and entertainer is enhanced and antipathy towards him is evoked from the very beginning.

However, we hear people laugh as soon as he enters the stage. Why does the mere appearance of Clifton create a comical effect, before he even begins to speak? As Bergson stated, a costume appears comical because we perceive it as something unnatural covering something natural (the person underneath the costume). Thus, Clifton's appearance is comical from the very beginning, because the viewer perceives the obvious wearing of a costume as something unnatural covering something natural. Moreover, the impression of Clifton as the impersonated caricature of a lousy lounge performer is enhanced. In other words, the costume that covers the person underneath has such a strong effect of its own that the performance is much more than a parody and the person transforms into a living caricature. The exaggerated facial deformation, which is achieved by the full facial make-up including moustache and huge glasses, also accounts for a comical effect. Bergson's observations concerning a comical

⁴⁴⁶ P. M. Nichols: "HOME VIDEO; Andy Kaufman Unexplained", in *New York Times*, December 31, 1999.

⁴⁴⁷ The costume and full facial make-up make it impossible for the viewer to identify the person behind the mask.

physiognomy and the characteristics of a caricature might be helpful at this point. According to him, a certain physiognomy appears comical as soon as it seems to be “cultivating a certain rigid attitude”.⁴⁴⁸ A face that seems to be constantly crying or a hunched back are illustrative examples of this. Regarding caricatures, Bergson develops the following thought:

However regular we may imagine a face to be [...] there will always be discoverable [...] some favourite distortion towards which nature seems to be particularly inclined. The art of the caricaturist consist in detecting this, at times, imperceptible tendency, and in rendering it visible to all eyes by magnifying it.⁴⁴⁹

Freud’s explanations concerning caricatures are expressed in quite a similar way. According to him, the degradation of the superior is achieved “[...] by emphasizing in the general impression given by the exalted object a single trait which is comic in itself but was bound to be overlooked so long as it was only perceivable in the general picture.”⁴⁵⁰ Tony Clifton’s obvious facial make-up and costume, as well as his exaggerated stiff walk contribute to the perception of Clifton as a caricature that has come to life. Characteristic traits of a Las Vegas lounge singer have been picked out all at once and are exaggeratedly exposed. The tacky but supposedly fashionable costumes that characterize the glittery Las Vegas show business world are ridiculed by a too tight, ill-fitting, and garish suit. The obvious toupee, fake moustache, and overly large sunglasses ridicule the desire to be more than good-looking with perfect full hair, a handsome moustache, and cool sunglasses. The stiff walk of Tony Clifton emphasizes that he used to be young and handsome. In a similar way, Clifton’s manner of speaking can be analyzed. The snarling voice as well as the arrogant intonation, multiply, exaggerate, and therefore ridicule the typical voice and intonation of an experienced and confident entertainer. Hence, the first impression of Clifton – his outward appearance and his voice and intonation – brings existing stereotypical traits of Las Vegas lounge singer out and magnifies them. The ‘superiority’ of show business people is satirically criticized by pointing out and magnifying several different characteristic traits. Thus, the superior person is degraded which, according to Freud’s theoretical assumptions, accounts for a comical effect.

Tony Clifton’s performance is also characterized by hostility towards his audience. He is unfriendly because there is no denying that he is a ‘living failure’. His intimidating attitude makes him appear as a caricature of an elderly, now failing lounge singer, who cannot accept the fact that his popularity has long since passed.

⁴⁴⁸ H. Bergson, 75.

⁴⁴⁹ H. Bergson, 77.

⁴⁵⁰ S. Freud, 201.

Clifton's hostility dominates the entire performance and many examples illustrate his attitude. To begin with, there are the supposedly unheard accusations and insults mumbled into the microphone. This behavior is comical because of the contradiction between what is intended (remaining unheard) and what actually happens (being heard) and the realization that this contrast itself was intended. Secondly, Clifton repeatedly threatens to punch those people in the audience who dared interrupt his narration. This is funny, because Clifton's make-believe professional attitude contradicts his loss of temper. In addition, he makes fun of two Polish men who – amongst other less important individuals – are chosen to come up onstage. Let us dwell on that interesting part of the performance. Clifton's hilarious way of choosing individuals from the audience is the starting point for a series of insults directed towards his audience. He wildly points at randomly chosen people and aggressively yells 'you, you, you, and you'. The mere pointing at individuals, who are hardly to be distinguished from a crowd of people sitting closely next to each other, contrast with the attempt to make a choice in the first place. Moreover, the fact that five or six people stand up and approach the stage is even funnier because the thing least likely to happen occurs. The chaotic procedure doomed to failure works perfectly well. In all of the above examples, the laughter is a result of a contrast felt between two mismatching things. Every visual impression and every action is associated with a repertoire of expectations in our minds. When we perceive a visual impression or observe an action, certain expectations lead to an increase in tension. As soon as those standard expectations are not met, the tension dissolves and comic relief is experienced.

The main issue of the 'audience interaction'-part of Tony Clifton's performance is that he accuses certain individuals of deliberately spoiling his act. One of the two Polish men is Bob Zmuda, Andy Kaufman's friend and companion. Consequently, we must be alarmed and suspect some kind of manipulation in the act. At first, both Polish men are accused of trying to be funny exclusively due to the fact that they happen to be Polish. Later on, Clifton only picks on Bob Gorsky (played by Zmuda). Nevertheless, before all attention is directed on Gorsky, Clifton makes fun of the other individuals, too. The natural response when someone is displayed onstage is an insecure laughter. This is deliberately misinterpreted by Clifton as a threat to spoil his act and be more entertaining than he is. The method of blaming others who in fact remain perfectly innocent throughout the entire routine is already known from the performance of Andy Kaufman transforming into *Foreign Man*. The entertainer chooses not to carry out his supposed duties and projects his failure onto his audience instead. Clifton's habit of

echoing every word the Polish man says is funny, because it clearly emphasizes how Clifton takes advantage of his guest's uncertainty. Furthermore, his obnoxious attitude points out the contradiction felt between what is actually happening and how Clifton is constantly manipulating the situation. In other words, the contrast between the perception of the actual situation (the Polish guy insecurely but innocently answers questions Clifton has asked) and the manipulated situation (Clifton's behavior makes the foreigner appear incompetent and guilty of not following Clifton's rules) evokes laughter. Clifton stultifies innocent individuals and this strongly contrasts with the impression of impersonated failure that was established earlier. This contrast accounts for yet another comical effect. There is this lousy entertainer who claims to be famous, who, moreover, caricatures a 'claims to have-been famous singer' and the whole Las Vegas lounge singer world in general. One could speak of a series of contradictions felt in the presence of Tony Clifton and throughout the routine. As a consequence, Clifton's entire performance is funny due to this sequel of contradictions that result in dissolution of our expectations into nothing. In fact, 'nothing' represents the 'nothingness' of Clifton.

A few more words need to be said about the almost cruel exposure of others and why we enjoy a performance such as that. First of all, and this is the crucial point in a typical Tony Clifton performance, the audience is at all times on the verge of perceiving the act as too aggressive, shocking, and obnoxious. As a consequence, the entire performance is always in danger of being taken too seriously and thus of turning into a complete disaster. As Bergson put it, as soon as we are no longer neutral and other feelings such as pity, shame, or anger intrude our state of mind, we can no longer perceive the comical. This is exactly what happened in most of Clifton's performances: at some point the audiences had enough. People felt pity for those individuals that were 'tortured' by Clifton and directed their anger towards him. Most of the times, people wanted Clifton to leave the stage. The final dismissal is intended and the entire performance is designed to have him thrown off the stage in the end. Nevertheless, one should refrain from interpreting Clifton's intentions and Kaufman's underlying concept of humor at this point – but we will come back to this later. Instead one should focus on the question of how Clifton's aggressiveness is perceived by the members of the audience. Why do we laugh when Clifton accuses people of spoiling his program, although we know perfectly well that these individuals are absolutely innocent? Why do we think it is funny that Clifton carries the humiliation to extremes? And at what point are we fed up with Clifton's attitude and refrain from finding the humiliations funny?

Clifton's humiliation of Polish members of his audience makes use of a stereotyped "comic scapegoating".⁴⁵¹ Americans typically make fun of the Poles. As Simon Critchley puts it, "much humor seeks to confirm the status quo [...] by laughing at the alleged stupidity of a social outsider. Thus, [...] the Americans laugh at the Poles [...]".⁴⁵² Clifton's performance is funny, because he uses a concept of humor well known to all societies. It is the idea that people from a foreign country are funny and, in particular, that to the Americans – without further consideration – people from Poland are funny. In fact, the two Polish men do nothing that indicates that they are foreigners. They were probably both born in the United States and have lived there all their lives. Clifton exposes their 'weak point' – derived from their foreign name – and, in terms of a *pars pro toto*, forces upon them the stigma 'foreigner'.⁴⁵³ This is a classic case of experiencing superiority. A shared sense of humor characterizes the members of a society and makes them identify with the country they live in. This leads to "[...] the belief that 'they' are inferior to 'us' or at least somehow disadvantaged *because* 'they' are not like 'us'".⁴⁵⁴ As Thomas Hobbes described it, we laugh at the inferior because we experience a sudden glory at our eminence in the presence of the other's stupidity. This idea can also be found in Bergson's approach to humor. As long as the anesthesia of the heart is maintained, we enjoy the feeling of superiority in the face of other people's inferiority. Freud's theory of humor also comes into play at this point. Repressed antipathy against people of different origin might be discharged when we experience a performance of this kind. As Critchley elaborates using the theoretical background of Freud's theory:

[...] ethnic jokes can be interpreted as symptoms of societal repression, and they can function as a return of the repressed. As such, jokes can be read in terms of what or simply who a particular society is subordinating, scapegoating, or denigrating.⁴⁵⁵

In the above citation and in Freud's theory in general, the subject is always the joke. Clifton's performance is a somewhat exaggerated implementation of a derisive joke. This explains why at some point we probably change our minds and refrain from finding Clifton's behavior funny. As soon as his behavior becomes unbearably aggressive and torturing – for instance when he empties a glass of water over Gorsky's head – feelings of pity, shame, and anger prevail and the situation is no longer funny.

⁴⁵¹ S. Critchley, 12.

⁴⁵² S. Critchley, 12.

⁴⁵³ In fact, this contrast between the actual facts and what Clifton makes of them accounts for a comic effect of its own.

⁴⁵⁴ S. Critchley, 69.

⁴⁵⁵ S. Critchley, 76 f.

The mere telling of jokes or a ‘mild’ form of performance (as the implementation of a joke) easily enables a discharge of repressions by laughter. This opportunity vanishes as soon as physical assaults prevail. Each individual probably draws the line between enjoyment and disgust at a different point. Some individuals might judge Clifton’s humiliations as too obnoxious much sooner than others. In the end, however, it is very likely that most people completely refrain from laughing and want Clifton to stop and leave the stage. Some people might really feel pity for the poor individuals Clifton humiliates. This certainly presupposes a lack of knowledge about the manipulation of the routine. Other people might be annoyed by the manipulated spectacle that lacks really funny moments towards the end when the humiliations become somewhat repetitive and ridiculous. In any case, Tony Clifton is not really appreciated. Steve Allen recounts about an audience of Kaufman-fans:

At first they greeted Clifton with yells, applause, and laughter and, although they eventually participated in the good-natured booing that is part of the routine, they were – really – finally let down by the character. [...] They were simply very ready to laugh at the cleverness of the routine but were not given enough specific moments to do so.⁴⁵⁶

As a conclusion, one could say that the performance of Tony Clifton reflects Kaufman’s ultimate goal: “I just want real reactions. I want people to laugh from the gut, be sad from the gut or get angry from the gut.”⁴⁵⁷

2.5 Andy the Wrestler

The wrestling definitely plays a different but distinct part in Kaufman’s career. It contributes to the ‘concept Andy Kaufman’ rather than offering great comical moments. Nevertheless, before we attempt to understand the ‘concept Kaufman’ as a whole later on, a few words about the rare funny moments of the wrestling need to be said. Especially at the beginning of his career as a ‘wrestler’, Kaufman’s exaggerated macho-behavior accounted for some comical effects, which will be analyzed in the following.⁴⁵⁸

First of all, it is again the outward appearance which is important when analyzing Kaufman as a wrestler. In the preceding analysis, it was stated that the costume of Tony Clifton was perceived as comical due to its blatant nature. His costume was perceived as something unnatural that was judged separately and which encrusted the natural. The

⁴⁵⁶ S. Allen, 163.

⁴⁵⁷ Quotation taken from: www.andykaufman.jvlnet.com

⁴⁵⁸ *The Midnight Special*, as well as the DVDs *The Real Andy Kaufman* and *Andy Kaufman. I’m from Hollywood* [1989] 2000, Rhino Video, offer an insight into Kaufman’s acts as a villainous wrestler.

costume even turned Clifton into a living caricature. Andy, the wrestler, wears “ridiculous wrestling attire, which consisted of full-length thermal underwear beneath a baggy black swimsuit and his father’s robe.”⁴⁵⁹ This costume opposes and thus ridicules the ostentatious tight gear worn by professional wrestlers. In fact, the clothes worn by Kaufman are not judged separately as something encrusted on the living this time. Instead, the clothes and the person merge. Kaufman’s long johns have us associate some kind of private exposedness. He appears almost as ridiculous as if he were naked. Not surprisingly, the contrast between this association and the pretentious macho-behavior displayed by Kaufman makes us laugh when we realize that our expectations are not met. Moreover, the contrast between outward appearance and his behavior contributes to Kaufman’s apparent parody of the codes of behavior in wrestling. Kaufman’s supposed superiority is pointed out – he does not need showy costumes to participate in the game.

Without going into detail, his behavior can be subsumed in Zmuda’s words: “he certainly knew that it was a societal hot button and delighted in standing at the control panel and punching it over and over to get a reaction.”⁴⁶⁰ Kaufman degraded women by classifying them as inferior to men. He emphasized that women belonged into the kitchen and, as a result, “[...] feminists everywhere decried Andy’s Neanderthal attitude and [...] cavemen in all walks of life loved Andy and mindlessly applauded his efforts to ‘keep women in their places.’”⁴⁶¹ Later on, he even verbalized his mockery of the world of wrestling. He classified people from Tennessee (with Memphis as the capital of wrestling) as less intelligent than West Coast show business people like him.⁴⁶²

As long as we are not emotionally involved personally and perceive the degradations as real insults, Kaufman’s behavior appears funny for several reasons. Firstly, his behavior contrasts with his outward appearance and what we associate with his costume. We experience comic relief when our strained expectations suddenly dissolve into nothing. Secondly, Kaufman’s act is a hilarious parody of the wrestling circuit in general – but it is a *parody* and not an attempt to simply ridicule. The display of male superiority and strength that characterizes American wrestling is certainly parodied. Kaufman parodies male strength by emphasizing the opposite: a figure that appears extremely weak and ridiculous is used to verbalize his superiority all the more. However, the display of masculinity and strength, the exaggerated shouting, and the commotion

⁴⁵⁹ B. Zmuda, 114.

⁴⁶⁰ B. Zmuda, 166.

⁴⁶¹ B. Zmuda, 165 f.

⁴⁶² See Kaufman addressing Jerry Lawler, the ‘king of wrestling’, by parodying a strong Southern accent on *The Real Andy Kaufman*.

surrounding it magnify something already existent. Considering Zmuda's recollection of talks with Kaufman about the sense or nonsense of wrestling, we must realize that there is something that goes beyond pure parody. To Kaufman wrestling was the ultimate *staging* of good against bad. Kaufman realized the

[...] dynamic between the crowd and the wrestlers and saw a childhood game: *You be the cowboy, I'll be the Indian, and I'll shoot you. Next time, you be the cowboy.* It was a mutually agreed-upon fantasy between the participants and the viewers: we'll pretend to hurt each other, and you'll pretend to believe it.⁴⁶³ (Italics in original)

It seems evident that Kaufman's intervention into the world of wrestling is not a parody of some spectacle judged as stupid and inferior or a display of his own superiority. It is rather a parody of a parody. The wrestling itself is the ultimate staging of a "spectacle of excess"⁴⁶⁴, using Roland Barthes' terminology as quoted in Keller. It is an exaggerated and choreographed display of male strength and extreme violence. Keller's opinion that "[...] Kaufman's interventions did not shatter the symbolic framework of wrestling at all"⁴⁶⁵ and that "if his wrestling performances questioned the codes of the spectacle, they did so in a way that strictly conformed to its implicit doctrine"⁴⁶⁶ concludes my analysis of Kaufman's wrestling persona. At this point we are leaving the field of the comic and thus our field of interest for the moment.

2.6 Conclusion: Andy Kaufman's Strategies of Humor

My analysis has shown that it is justified to consider every single stage persona of Andy Kaufman. All of them offer characteristic comical elements which contribute to both the establishment of the specific character and the development of 'the concept' – the multitude of different characters. The underlying strategy of humor detectable in all characters is the play with expectations. This method epitomizes the entire 'concept Andy Kaufman'. Bergson's 'something mechanical encrusted on the living' proves true in many performances. 'Lip-synching the *Mighty Mouse* theme song' is the most obvious example. The evaluation of Tony Clifton and Kaufman's wrestling persona showed that both cannot be rejected as unfunny. My analysis of all of Kaufman's characters should help to evaluate Kaufman's reception – and one probably has to say the reception of

⁴⁶³ Zmuda, 56.

⁴⁶⁴ F. Keller, 123.

For an English version of Barthes' text see R. Barthes: "The World of Wrestling", in: R. Barthes: *Mythologies*, translated by Anette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1984.

⁴⁶⁵ F. Keller, 131.

⁴⁶⁶ F. Keller, 131.

each one of his characters – in the context of the 1970's, 1980's, and in the course of time.

The following chapter will show in how far the public's perception of the different characters contributes to the perception of the entertainer as a whole and how Kaufman's series of recreations as well as the coexistence of several characters was perceived. An evaluation of the contemporary press, as well as of social, political, and cultural circumstances of the late 1970's and early 1980's should help to clarify the following questions. Was Kaufman perceived as an entertainer putting American 'norms and values' of that era into question and to what extent was his program different from his colleague's material? Apart from that, was he perceived and appreciated as this multi-faceted entertainer? Did people realize that each character had a distinct and important role that accounted for the entire concept? The backlashes towards the end of his life indicate quite the opposite, as we will see.

The biopic *Man on the Moon* impressively contributed to the posthumous fame and worship of Andy Kaufman, because it shaped the public's perception of Kaufman after his death and thus helped to emphasize his influential legacy. Thus, the film's position as the most important part of Kaufman's reception will be analyzed in order to evaluate its influence on those interpretations that acknowledge Kaufman's 'concept of criticism'.

C 3. “Andy Kaufman Fills Stage With Parade of Odd Characters”⁴⁶⁷ – The Contemporary Reception of Andy Kaufman

In a review of the biopic *Man on the Moon*, Richard Schickel begins his 1999 *TIME* article with the question:

Was he [Andy Kaufman] a self-conscious genius of the put-on, cleverly calculating his effects, which were ever poised on the thin line that separates childish innocence from transgression? Or was he just another of those sociopaths, unable to tell right from wrong, funny from unfunny [...] ⁴⁶⁸

This is exactly the question which has to be kept in mind in the following when Kaufman’s comedy is contextualized with regard to the reactions of contemporary audiences. The audiences’ reactions are extracted from articles of the daily press and evaluated in the context of a late 1970’s and early 1980’s American society and popular culture. Did Kaufman intentionally air social criticism? Did he deliberately calculate the effects of his strategies of humor? Or can we take his complaint seriously that “Critics try to intellectualize my material”⁴⁶⁹ and believe his claim that “There’s no satire involved. Satire is a concept that can only be understood by adults. My stuff is straight, for people of all ages”⁴⁷⁰

Kaufman’s remarks should certainly not be taken too seriously. One is thus confronted with the same problem contemporary audiences, critics and scholars were faced with. As a response to the final airing of ‘Andy’s fun house’, *New York Times* journalist Janet Maslin, for instance, writes that “when any of the several characters Mr. Kaufman impersonates here suddenly proclaims himself ‘the real me’, rest assured that he is lying.”⁴⁷¹ Phil Auslander goes as far as to state that “his claim to be ‘really me’ is exposed as a ploy, but the realer figure responsible for the ploy is revealed as fictional itself.”⁴⁷² Thus, it is almost impossible to find any indications that explain Kaufman’s intentions and concept and one should refrain from attempting to formulate something like Kaufman’s definite understanding of his role as a critical comedian. Instead, Auslander’s analysis of Kaufman’s comedy proves very useful, as it offers an

⁴⁶⁷ J. Maslin: “Comedy: Andy Kaufman Fills Stage With Parade of Odd Characters”, in: *New York Times*, April 28, 1979.

⁴⁶⁸ R. Schickel: “A Paean To A Pop Postmodernist”, in: *TIME*, December 31, 1999.

⁴⁶⁹ T. Clifton: “Laughter from the Toy Chest”, in: *TIME*, May, 28, 1978.

F. Keller suggests that the above article signed by Tony Clifton was written by *TIME* journalist Richard Corliss as homage to Kaufman.

⁴⁷⁰ T. Clifton: “Laughter from the Toy Chest”.

⁴⁷¹ J. Maslin: “TV: A 90-Minute Special With Andy Kaufman”, in: *New York Times*, August, 28, 1979.

⁴⁷² P. Auslander, 151.

interpretation that contextualizes Kaufman, rather than one that just evaluates the ‘end-product’:

[...] this undecidability enhances rather than negates the cultural-political impact of Kaufman’s performance by drawing attention to the juxtapositions he creates and forcing us to examine them closely. By not standing aside from the material he presents as a detached satirist, Kaufman makes his own complicity in exploitation, his use of others to promote his own image, an image that itself is repeatedly exposed as lacking integrity, the subject of his performance. In so doing, he directs the spectator’s critical attention toward the larger processes of social representation of which he is a part.⁴⁷³

The juxtapositions Kaufman creates and the evaluation of their comical effects were analyzed in detail in my preceding chapter. The results from this analysis form the starting point for an evaluation of underlying messages that carry social criticism. The analysis of Kaufman’s strategies of humor has shown what kind of reactions Kaufman provoked and how he managed to evoke them. Most of Kaufman’s humor is based on the creation of sudden incongruity – often achieved by unnatural rigidity forced onto the living – and the play with expectations. By at first claiming to stage failure (*Foreign Man*) and thus a lack of integrity into a social group, the audiences experience a range of different emotions (uncertainty, embarrassment, pity). At first sight this method seems to evoke a feeling of superiority. However, the climax of most of Kaufman’s performances is designed to reverse the situation and to project derision onto the members of the audience. Then people are forced to reconsider their misperception and, as a consequence, they experience comic relief by laughing at their former selves.

Each of his characters alone lacks integrity in some way or the other, because their appearance and behavior does not meet standards. The multitude of characters also represents a lack of integrity. The whole concept of never letting the mask slip and reveal a ‘real’ Kaufman represents his unwillingness to be categorized and thus an unwillingness to be integrated. I do not agree with Auslander, who remarks that Kaufman does not ‘stand aside from the material he presents’ and thus does not reveal that he tries to communicate social criticism. As my analysis of Kaufman’s strategies of humor has already shown, Kaufman does stand aside from his material and conveys his criticism with a twinkle in his eye. He satirizes the audiences’ superficial demand for shallow entertainment with the help of his ironic conformist performances. In order to keep up his social criticism he is forced to escape categorization. In fact, this attitude really reveals his criticism: he calls into question the dynamics of a mediatized society.

We are speaking of a society in which – by the end of the 1970’s and in the early 1980’s – television was an established medium and cable television in particular gave rise

⁴⁷³ P. Auslander, 155.

to a competitive entertainment market. The most important venues for stand-up comedians were sitcoms and talk shows. Andy Kaufman, who played Latka Gravas in the successful sitcom *TAXI*, can thus be described as a typical entertainer of that time, at least with regard to the distribution of his material. Moreover, and most noticeable, Kaufman appeared on the initial airing of *Saturday Night Live*. He lip-synched the *Mighty Mouse* theme song on the popular show with host David Letterman who “[...] has emerged as a starmaker for stand-up comedians in his own right [...]”.⁴⁷⁴ The success of *Saturday Night Live* “sanctioned television as a legitimate form of entertainment for young people [...] It also revitalized stand-up comedy, igniting an explosion of comedy clubs across the country.”⁴⁷⁵ Stand-up was therefore a popular, yet inexpensive program to help the young cable industry develop and “Cable networks began featuring stand-up comedy with full-length concerts by single performers or shorter performances by several comedians in a comedy-club setting”.⁴⁷⁶ Andy Kaufman not only appeared in clubs and on national television, but also on college campuses thus reaching a large number of people. Consequently, it can be assumed that the popularity and influence of Andy Kaufman was enforced by the dynamics of a strong entertainment market and that, in addition, the dynamics of this very same market shaped Kaufman and his material. My attempt in the following is to contextualize Kaufman and his material and to consider how a late 1970’s/early 1980’s audience perceived him. Furthermore, a characterization of the audiences of that particular time is of interest. The political and social context, and most importantly, the popular culture market of the time are of vast importance in this regard.

The late 1970’s and the early 1980’s marked a period of economic frustration. American society used to characterize itself as wealthy and as having the chance to improve its standards of living from generation to generation. As Bruce Kuhre resumes writing about the 1980’s: “[...] traditionally each generation in America has grown up with the expectation that it will be better off than the previous generation.”⁴⁷⁷ However, the transitional period between the two decades questioned this certainty for the first time. As Kuhre put it: “By the late 70’s this rosy optimism was replaced by a sense of gloom as the United States was rapidly slipping into a period of economic decline.”⁴⁷⁸ Industrialization, which had always been a determining factor of a powerful American

⁴⁷⁴ L. Gelbart, 33.

⁴⁷⁵ L. Gelbart, 47.

⁴⁷⁶ L. Gelbart, 29.

⁴⁷⁷ B. Kuhre: “The American Dream in Crisis”, in: W. Grünzweig et al: *Constructing the Eighties. Versions of an American Decade*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1992, 33.

⁴⁷⁸ B. Kuhre, 34.

nation, came to a stop when production industries were moved to developing countries. In addition, the American economy – used to its superior position as the only economic super power after World War II – was confronted with competition from Europe and Asia and importation rates increased. The inevitable consequences were low wages, the shutting down of factories, and the dismissal of workers. A general decline of the industry was the result and income among the population was hence unequally distributed. Additionally, cheap production in developing countries or technologically advanced production units making skilled workers redundant resulted in many people having to work in the service sector instead of the manufacturing sector. As a consequence, people had to cope with low-payment jobs. The certainty to exceed the standards of living of the previous generation, to be a member of the middle-class, and to be able to afford luxury products was suddenly a dream out of reach for many Americans. Thus, the transitional period between the two decades is characterized by a challenge of the American Dream of having any opportunity to become successful and affluent through hard work and despite obstacles. The “vision of the ‘good life’”⁴⁷⁹ had become blurred and difficult to perceive.

Was Andy Kaufman a comedian typical of this time? In general, it must be noted that stand-up comedy of that time was rather un-political. It mostly focused on everyday life, relationships, or the comedian’s own youth. People who were “[...] desperate to bury the anxiety and disillusionment of the sixties and early seventies, began to crave comedy that reassured rather than threatened, amused rather than provoked.”⁴⁸⁰ At first, Kaufman seems to defy the description of lightheartedly chatting about trivial things everyone can relate to (like the pains of growing up, television or relationships). What he did, however, was even less politically relevant or intellectual. In fact, Kaufman’s humor is characterized by simplicity and plainness. He sang, danced, or evoked shared childhood memories by displaying popular songs such as the *Mighty Mouse* theme song. Apart from that, all *Foreign Man* did was to offer exactly what people wanted to hear and see. He cheerfully chatted about trivial things such as relationships and the traffic, or he offered impressions. However, he did so in a disturbing way. *Foreign Man*’s desire to meet standards did not immediately result in good punch lines and laughter. Likewise, the singing and dancing was unbearably exaggerated. Before considering Kaufman’s obviously satirical approach to the standard concept of American stand-up comedy, an analogy can nevertheless be drawn between Keller’s

⁴⁷⁹ B. Kuhre, 35.

⁴⁸⁰ L. Gelbart, 48.

interpretation of Kaufman literally acting out the American Dream and my analysis of Kaufman's strategies of humor. The kernel of Kaufman's concept of entertainment is entertainment understood in its purest sense. Ironically understanding the American society's demand for shallow entertainment *literally* he offered entertainment in its purest form. He satirically criticized the audiences' desires by singing silly songs, dancing, doing impersonations, and telling simple jokes. It seems as if Kaufman sharply realized that the superficial craving for one-dimensional entertainment was not only an attempt to forget the anxiety of the past, but to ignore problems of the present, too. During the sixties, a nuclear war posed a threat to society. But although the fear constantly seethed below the idyllic surface, the sixties were nevertheless an era of economic prosperity. In the face of the economy's decline in the late 1970's and early 1980's, the demand for shallow entertainment seemed to be more than an attempt to forget the fears of the past. In fact, it was an attempt to ignore the prevailing problems which affected each individual directly: the fear of personal economic decline. Kaufman managed to satirize people's superficial demand. He took it literally and parodied the purest forms of entertainment.

Naturally, audiences perceived the disturbing manner of performing rather than the simplicity of its content. They were not yet able to grasp the underlying criticism of their own superficial demands. Early reviews show that Kaufman's unusual manner of offering naïve and pure entertainment was responded to with astonishment. As early as 1974, a *New York Times* journalist advises his readers to see the young comedian Kaufman who "defies categorization" and in whose "façade of uneasiness, marked by awkward yet eloquent gestures" he suspects a staged "manner of complete non-self-confidence."⁴⁸¹ Interestingly, this review reveals that Kaufman's humor was understood at this early point of his career, long before he headed for the involvement of more controversial characters. Thus, it can be assumed that people understood the performances as parodies as long as the literal fulfillment of the audience's demand for shallow entertainment did not go beyond moral limits. Kaufman's performances were appreciated as legitimate criticism that could lead to self-reflection concerning the naïve desire for slight fare. In the very same article, it is reported that the audience is involved in "silly group singing". Although met with surprise in the beginning, audiences liked to experience enjoyment in its purest form, and to participate in somewhat regressive group singing of childhood songs. Audiences seemed to recognize and appreciate that their demand for one-dimensional entertainment was delivered tongue in cheek. *TIME*

⁴⁸¹ R. F. Shephard: "Songs and a New Comedian Make Lively Cabaret", in: *New York Times*, July 11, 1974.

critic Richard Schickel comments on Kaufman's position as a comedian in quite a similar way:

It was his luck to come on the scene in the 70's, just as a generation that had been shaped – blighted – by the same pop materials was arriving at self-consciousness. The natural impulse of the members of that generation was to nostalgize pop culture and their own innocent response to it.⁴⁸²

In other words, Kaufman's humor was appreciated as a legitimate method to communicate social criticism to a media-dominated society. The audience's demand in fact reflects the desire to shun problems. As a consequence, the act of self-reflecting one's former misperceptions is at the same time a reconsideration of the superficiality of comedy. The turn of the decade marked a period in which "the new comics have jettisoned the topical satire of the 60's for a less political, more radical examination of the comic's relation to the society he entertains."⁴⁸³ By asking the audience "[...] to become babies again"⁴⁸⁴ and to engage in a confrontation with hidden desires, Kaufman challenged the codes of stand-up comedy and the standards of what was funny and what was not. In a *TIME* article, Richard Corliss calls this new kind of comedy "[...] an assault on the accepted notions of show-business clowning."⁴⁸⁵ Kaufman's claim that people try to intellectualize his material, because it is devoid of satire, is definitely not to be taken seriously. However, Kaufman's claim cannot be called complete nonsense either. Instead of intellectualizing his material, it must be reduced to its plain content in order to reveal the simplicity of his approach. Kaufman was indeed no satirist pointing a finger. One could say that he did the exact opposite: he pretended to accept what was demanded, understood it literally, and acted correspondingly. Thus, he satirized in a less direct way by being so extremely conformist that it could only be perceived as the opposite – non-conformist. The reduction to the plain and supposedly naïve – especially the singing and dancing – suddenly became threatening and could thus be perceived as a refusal to make the act "[...] conform to traditional show-biz standards of entertainment."⁴⁸⁶ This paradox led to the turning point in each of Kaufman's performances. He proceeded to play with the audiences' expectations over and over again. In fact, it was a play with peoples' desire to understand his comedy. If people had understood him, he would not have been able to successfully implement his concept of

⁴⁸² R. Schickel: "A Paean To A Pop Postmodernist".

⁴⁸³ R. Corliss: "Comedy's post-Funny School", in: *TIME*, May 25, 1981.

⁴⁸⁴ T. Clifton: "Laughter from the Toy Chest".

⁴⁸⁵ R. Corliss.

⁴⁸⁶ T. Clifton: "Laughter from the Toy Chest".

criticism. Instead, to finally make people understand, their expectations and nerves needed to be strained until it almost became unbearable.

The development of the character Tony Clifton and the *Intergender Wrestling Champion of the World* as manifestations of the darker side of Andy Kaufman can thus be interpreted as a refusal to stick to the established ‘rules’ of his comedy. Kaufman no longer enacted conformism in the literal sense in order to communicate criticism. Instead, he openly displayed non-conformism. Every time audiences were on the verge of accepting and appreciating his performances as newly established forms of comedy, Kaufman needed to destroy this perception in an impressive manner. The confusion around Tony Clifton is the most obvious example.

The early Tony Clifton was accepted as a character used to “flummox the viewer’s ability to distinguish between truth and fiction”⁴⁸⁷ and consequently “the masquerade was a resounding success.”⁴⁸⁸ Nevertheless, from the statements of the very same article just quoted, it can be assumed that certain bits of Kaufman’s programs were perceived as having been almost unbearably stretched, and thus Kaufman was judged as not agile enough “in sizing up and adjusting to his audiences as he might be.”⁴⁸⁹ Steve Allen complains that “it wasn’t that they disliked Tony Clifton. They were simply very ready to laugh at the cleverness of the routine but were not given enough specific moments to do so.”⁴⁹⁰

It can be suspected that it was very difficult for contemporary audiences to grasp Kaufman’s ‘concept of criticism’ as a whole (including all characters) before people had a chance to take a step back, reconsider, and understand. The playful manner of offering entertainment in its purest form provided revealing moments which helped the audiences to comprehend and draw conclusions. Once those instances began to occur in which no revealing turning point was offered, Kaufman’s routines were on the verge of having nothing to do with comedy anymore. Furthermore, once the ‘anesthesia of the heart’ was no longer granted and anger or disgust prevailed, it became impossible to playfully convey social criticism. Kaufman persistently refused to respond to the audience’s demands and he insisted that Clifton was a separate person. All of that finally resulted in people’s disinterest or even disapproval. After all, Kaufman had established himself on the comedy stage and claimed to offer entertainment of some kind. In a posthumous consideration of Kaufman’s ‘concept of criticism’, his refusal to offer the

⁴⁸⁷ J. Maslin: “Comedy: Andy Kaufman Fills Stage”.

⁴⁸⁸ J. Maslin: “Comedy: Andy Kaufman Fills Stage”.

⁴⁸⁹ J. Maslin: “Comedy: Andy Kaufman Fills Stage”.

⁴⁹⁰ S. Allen, 163.

kind of entertainment he was expected to offer, as well as his sequel of transformations seems to be a brilliant method to criticize American society. However, for a contemporary audience, his performances became more and more obnoxious and did not make any sense any longer. Kaufman's "guerilla takeover of comic consciousness"⁴⁹¹ sure enough ridiculed established standards of American humor and American society itself. In the end, however, the object of his attacks – the media-dominated society – was more powerful than Kaufman. The problem Kaufman's comedy was faced with can be subsumed in Steve Allen's words: "[...] the ultimate verdict in show business always comes from the audience [...]"⁴⁹² They had the opportunity to vote him off shows (*Saturday Night Live*) and finally withdrew their interest by simply not giving him the attention a comedian needs. Once his wrestling started to dominate his programs and he exaggerated his disputes with professional wrestler Jerry Lawler, his once brilliant 'concept of criticism' had turned out to be annoying.

In the beginning, however, the peculiar and unpredictable 'incidents' which interrupted Kaufman's programs met with curiosity on the part of the audiences and media. In 1981, for instance, *New York Times* critic Tony Schwartz asked whether this comedian "[...] with a penchant for self-consciously antagonizing his audience" was to be taken seriously when he initiated a heavy argument and fistfight during a sketch on marijuana performed on ABC's show *Friday's*. Most journalists tried to find out whether those incidents were staged or 'real' and whether anyone except Kaufman himself knew in advance what was about to happen. Network officials claimed that those sketches were always experimental (although the executives and actors were initiated) in order to "[...] break through barriers, and expand the limits of comedy"⁴⁹³ However, the unofficial version revealed by the media was that "During the live show, the studio audience, the show's crew members and several of the other actors were not aware of Mr. Kaufman's plans."⁴⁹⁴ Whereas incidents such as that reported above brilliantly work to reveal Kaufman's refusal to stick to established rules and play with expectations, first signs of the dilemma Kaufman was about to be confronted with can be traced already. Much of Kaufman's humor was exclusively funny to him and left the audiences out in the rain. As was said before, single performances of Kaufman singing or lip-synching the *Mighty Mouse* theme song or those of *Foreign Man* gave the audiences enough clues to comprehend his strategies of humor. The prolonged history of the *Intergender Wrestling*

⁴⁹¹ T. Clifton: "Laughter from the Toy Chest".

⁴⁹² S. Allen, 163.

⁴⁹³ T. Schwartz: "Was 'Fight' on TV Real or Staged? It all depends", in: *New York Times*, February 24, 1981.

⁴⁹⁴ T. Schwartz.

Champion of the World lacked revealing moments.⁴⁹⁵ Before talking about Kaufman's obsession with wrestling and the resulting dilemma, a few words need to be said about Kaufman's 'big shows'. Those shows included all of Kaufman's characters – and even some wrestling action. The multitude of different characters made perfect sense and revealed his concept of criticism.⁴⁹⁶ However, as reviews illustrate, audiences had always had problems to deal with the wrestling. "[A] couple of later routines – one in which Mr. Kaufman wrestled with audience members [...] were detectably phony."⁴⁹⁷ In fact, those parts of the shows were often judged as too extreme and provoked emotions other than enjoyment. Consequently, the wrestling-part of the 'big shows' only made sense to those people in the audience who were willing to think about their misperceptions, sense the play with expectations and understand the associated criticism of a media-dominated society. The people who did not appreciate Kaufman's wrestling-action as part of the show certainly were the target group of Kaufman's attacks. Nevertheless, those people had the power to sanction Kaufman's behavior. For most people Kaufman's comedy was so uncomfortable because it meant a confrontation with their own position in a media-dominated, or even –dictated society. Contemporary audiences took their chance to escape Kaufman's existential criticism by dismissing him. The wrestling, which dominated his later years, was an easy opportunity for doing so.

In a way, Kaufman's obsession with wrestling can be compared to Bruce's obsession with law. Both comedians refused to return to their original brilliance and chose to fight tooth and nail to make a point. Sometimes this meant running against brick walls. Both deliberately put their careers at risk, stuck to their beliefs, and refused to be conformist. They were both acknowledged after their death as having paved the way for generations of new comedians. Kaufman's obsession with wrestling and his maniac desire to do what was least expected and liked ultimately led to an egoistic yet self-destructive culmination. It was fun for him but cost him his career. Lenny Bruce was so obsessed with proving his rights that he refrained from being funny and began to preach. He lost his popularity and; as a consequence, his desperate crusade finally led to his death. Whereas Bruce's death meant that his opponents had finally won (before he was lifted to stardom afterwards), Kaufman's wrestling and his death was just the opposite – a final triumph. The endless prolonging of the quarrel with professional wrestler Jerry Lawler was funny for no one except him and those few who knew all

⁴⁹⁵ A list of these performances is provided on *The Andy Kaufman Homepage*.

⁴⁹⁶ For instance, the Carnegie Hall concert of 1979 or the TV special *Andy's Fun House* of the same year.

⁴⁹⁷ J. Maslin: "Comedy: Andy Kaufman Fills Stage".

about the illusion. For contemporary audiences, it was interesting for some time whether Kaufman's fights on TV were staged or 'real': "[...] more than 100 viewers called NBC, most of them to inquire whether the segment had been fake."⁴⁹⁸ However, after a while the whole spectacle turned out to be annoying. Kaufman's fans did not see the fun of his interference with the wrestling circuit, especially after he refused to do any other material. People were not given any clues whether his behavior could be understood as critical or even satirical. A posthumous interpretation of Kaufman's choice to interfere with the world of wrestling shows that it allowed him to be consistent concerning his own understanding of entertainment. What appeared to be a mockery of wrestling at first was actually participation strictly following the agreed-upon rules. Again, Kaufman was so extremely conformist that his act could only be perceived as non-conformist and was thus met with angry disapproval. Concerning stand-up comedy, however, the excessive wrestling made little if no sense to a contemporary audience. On the one hand, the wrestling was a chance to be consistent with his simple approach of exactly offering what was demanded in order to ridicule American society's superficial desire for shallow entertainment. On the other hand, it was a perfect opportunity to escape those people who were chasing Kaufman and who were eager to grasp his concept of comedy. Kaufman defied categorization until the end and thus triumphantly escaped those people who were desperately trying to categorize and understand him.

Andy Kaufman died of lung cancer in May 1984 at the age of 35. In the face of the assumptions just made, his death appears as the ultimate escape from an endless hunt for his 'concept of comedy'. In fact, as especially his life-long friend Zmuda recounts, Andy Kaufman had thought about death as an impressive 'hoax'. He recalls a conversation with Kaufman in which he developed the idea of faking his own death. "[...] It's perfect', he said, suddenly thrilled at the notion."⁴⁹⁹ Although Zmuda reports further instances in which Kaufman fantasized about faking his own death, the diagnosis that he had a rare kind of lung cancer came as a surprise to the non-smoking healthy-food-addict and his friends and family. Kaufman's way of dealing with his illness reveals to what extent he was aware of his position as a controversial comedian. Furthermore, it reveals that – as bitter as it sounds – the terminal illness helped to arrange his perfect exit from a world that was so eager to seize him. In other words, escaping completely was preferable to being (mis-) understood. If Tony Clifton and the

⁴⁹⁸ "Andy Kaufman in New Fray With Wrestler on TV Show", in: *New York Times*, July 30, 1982.

⁴⁹⁹ B. Zmuda, 252. Also see J. Hecht: *Was This Man a Genius? Talks with Andy Kaufman*. New York: Vintage Books, 2002, 122.

Intergender Wrestling Champion of the World had to die, then so did *Foreign Man*, Latka Gravas and other likeable characters. In Kaufman's words, in a conversation with Zmuda:

[...] I think, I peaked with *Taxi*. That's what people will remember me for [...] All the stuff I did, and you and I did, all the important things, I don't think will be remembered. Maybe me dying will make people see they blew it with me.⁵⁰⁰

Hence, Kaufman's death was his final triumph, "the perfect summarizing gesture".⁵⁰¹ His death was his opportunity to consistently bring his 'concept of comedy' to perfection. He thus managed to manifest his influence as a comedian who defied categorization. Near the end, he clearly realized his position: "I just think it's funny that if I really do die no one will believe it. [...] If I did it might make me a legend."⁵⁰²

Indeed, almost immediately after Kaufman's death rumors were afloat, as Bob Zmuda recounts in his biography of Kaufman.⁵⁰³ A year after Kaufman's death Zmuda started to impersonate Tony Clifton. This certainly helped enforce the confusion and posthumously prolonged the 'game'. The press highlighted the heights of Kaufman's career. "His first television exposure was on 'Saturday Night Live', where he was an immediate hit".⁵⁰⁴ Comments like the following also frequently appeared: "What he did was new, no one had ever done anything like it."⁵⁰⁵ The posthumous recognition of Lenny Bruce strongly contrasted with the reception during his lifetime and the biopic meant the climax of a publicly shaped and manipulated posthumous worship. By contrast, Kaufman's death did not influence his reception. The posthumous interpretation of Kaufman's comedy was similar to that during his lifetime, because not until the year 1999 (the year of the release of the biopic *Man on the Moon*) was the wrestling revealed as a hoax. As was said before, Kaufman's exaggerated wrestling career lacked funny content and without clues as to its satirical content, contemporary audience were not able to understand it. Today, against the background of this revelation, the wrestling and thus Kaufman's entire 'concept of comedy/criticism' becomes evident and reveals its brilliance.

As a result of the preceding assumptions, one can draw the conclusion that the year 1999 provided the starting point for a final interpretation of Kaufman's humor. An overdue acknowledgement was eventually made possible, because only then the escape

⁵⁰⁰ B. Zmuda, 263.

⁵⁰¹ R. Schickel: "A Paean To A Pop Postmodernist".

⁵⁰² B. Zmuda, 265.

⁵⁰³ See B. Zmuda, 285 f.

⁵⁰⁴ "Comedian Andy Kaufman Dies of Lung Cancer at 35", in: *Washington Post*, May, 17, 1984.

⁵⁰⁵ "Comedian Andy Kaufman Dies".

into the world of wrestling was fully understandable. In addition, the biopic *Man on the Moon*, which finally disclosed the secret, initiated a whole market of Kaufman memorabilia.⁵⁰⁶

In my analysis, the biopic *Man on the Moon* is understood as the most impressive, influential, and interesting part of Kaufman's reception. In the following chapter, I will analyze its organization, narrative structure, and style. I will closely observe whether manipulative effects, as those noticeable in the biopic *Lenny*, shaped the posthumous perception of Kaufman and the final understanding of his 'concept of criticism'. It is especially interesting that the biopic is organized in a way that resembles Kaufman's career and strategies of humor. The film is built upon the misperceptions and surprising revelations that so impressively characterized Kaufman's performances. My analysis will show if the initially quoted question whether Kaufman was deliberately calculating his effects or not can be applied to the organization of the film, too. *TIME* journalist Richard Schickel remarks that the "[...] film *Man on the Moon*, and Jim Carrey's performance as the artist constantly in question, don't attempt to answer that conundrum"⁵⁰⁷ I will hopefully be able to clarify whether this proves true or not.

⁵⁰⁶ The different biographies and videotapes of his shows.

⁵⁰⁷ R. Schickel: "A Paean To A Pop Postmodernist".

C 4. *Man on the Moon* – A Film Analysis

Man on the Moon, a film directed by Milos Forman and based on a screenplay written by Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski, was released in 1999 – fifteen years after the early death of the comedian Andy Kaufman. Kaufman is portrayed by actor and comedian Jim Carrey, who won a *Golden Globe* for his outstanding performance. Carrey portrays Kaufman as a multi-faceted entertainer who always surprises the audience by offering new and different aspects of his variety of personae. That consistent character audiences needed in order to understand and categorize the comedian is never revealed. Consequently, the central thesis of the biopic is that the ‘final truth’ about the comedian, announced in the initial sequence of the film⁵⁰⁸, is that the absence of a consistent self in the conventional sense is replaced by a multitude of selves which contribute to and define the comedian Andy Kaufman.⁵⁰⁹ This filmic concept turns out to be a problematical one. The film is meant to show the ‘true’ story of Andy Kaufman. That, in fact, means that all biographical details are included, even those that were unavailable to contemporary audiences. At the same time, the viewers of the film are given the chance to experience Kaufman’s comedy for themselves by virtually living through it. The honorable attempt to offer a true biography *and* present Kaufman as the enigmatic entertainer at the same time is doomed to failure, because the one excludes the other. Kaufman’s comedy loses much of its subversive character in the film because of the excess of offstage revelations. The problematic distinction between the ‘real-life’ comedian Kaufman and the ‘real-life’ private person does not make things easier.⁵¹⁰ The depiction of Kaufman behind-the-scenes creates the impression of a private Kaufman who can easily be distinguished from the entertainer. The fact that it is not at all clear whether such a differentiation was possible gives rise to the suspicion that the film’s enthusiastic attempt to offer as much information as possible and act out Kaufman’s concept of comedy at the same time must fail. Even if the depiction of the private person Kaufman might in fact come close to that ‘real-life’ private person (after all, Zmuda is one of the film’s producers), the consequences are fatal. The fact that a

⁵⁰⁸ Andy Kaufman announces to tell his true story to those people who have proven their honest interest. The importance of sequences 1 and 2 will be analyzed in detail in the course of this chapter.

⁵⁰⁹ This concept is already perceivable at the very beginning of the biopic: see sequences 1 and 2 (in the course of this chapter referred to as “The film by Andy Kaufman introducing the film about Andy Kaufman”).

⁵¹⁰ I am referring to ‘real-life’ comedian and ‘real-life’ private person as opposed to the protagonist of the film.

distinction between the comedian and the private person was nearly impossible and resulted in the lack of a coherent character thus becomes meaningless.

As a result of the filmic dilemma, the depiction of Kaufman in the biopic is problematic for both 'groups of viewers'. Those who are acquainted with his material might find that the revealing offstage scenes are redundant. To them the film does not offer an alternative to original Kaufman material. Furthermore, these viewers are suddenly confronted with a supposedly private Kaufman. This is a fact that might be perceived as undesirable demystification of that cherished enigmatic person. The somewhat far-fetched attempt to point out that Kaufman can never be trusted (illustrated for instance by Zmuda's surprise when he finds out that Kaufman is a regular guest in the brothel) might seem somewhat ridiculous or even forced to this group of viewers.⁵¹¹ The other viewers, those who are unacquainted with Kaufman, are saved the trouble of experiencing the subversive nature of Kaufman's material. The offstage scenes comfortably explain the surprising and often threatening routines and thus soften Kaufman's comedy. Those viewers grow attached to the private person and thus never get the chance to experience and learn from Kaufman's subversive comedy.

In the film, Kaufman is generally understood as representing exactly that 'concept of criticism' attached to him posthumously rather than showing a comedian whose programs were hardly comprehensible for contemporary audiences. The idea of having the viewers experience that 'concept of criticism' is certainly an honorable one. However, its implementation remains disputable, because there are way too many explanatory backstage revelations. Thus, the viewers' perception of Kaufman is very different from that of contemporary audiences.

The most influential offstage revelation is certainly the fact that the biopic exposes what was kept a secret until its publication: the collaboration with wrestler Jerry Lawler. The disclosure can be interpreted as having had a positive effect on Kaufman's posthumous perception. It finally gives meaning to Kaufman's interference with the wrestling circuit, which is something that was considered somewhat meaningless during Kaufman's lifetime. As Florian Keller states, "[...] *Man on the Moon* recovered the enigma that was Kaufman [...]" and the film "[...] 'recoded' his work in a way that made it possible to grasp Kaufman's radical agenda [...]"⁵¹² *Man on the Moon* enabled an overdue recognition of Kaufman's impact as a critical comedian, because his 'concept of criticism' could finally be acknowledged.

⁵¹¹ Nevertheless, concerning the wrestling the look behind the scenes would sometimes have been helpful. The lack of information resulted in the decline of Kaufman's career.

⁵¹² F. Keller, preface, xii

The commercial success of *Lenny* helped to reposition the controversial comedian Lenny Bruce, thus turning him into a whitewashed hero who fought for free speech. However, the biopic enhanced a process that had already started immediately after Bruce's death: the acknowledgement of his importance. The biopic helped to eternally manifest this manipulated perception. By contrast, Kaufman's death might have symbolized the final triumph – judged in retrospect – but it was not until the release of the biopic and Zmuda's biography of Kaufman in 1999 that Kaufman's importance was widely recognized. The essential information which revealed that the wrestling was just another parody had not been previously available.

There are certainly fewer obvious attempts to influence the viewers' perception in the biopic *Man on the Moon* than in *Lenny*. However, all of a sudden Kaufman's comedy is presented as a thoughtfully constructed and logically developed 'concept of criticism' that the contemporary audiences just were not able to comprehend and acknowledge. It is played down that during his lifetime much of his material was exclusively funny to himself and that the audiences were not given many clues about the sense of the wrestling. The biopic reveals much of the information that would have been essential for contemporary audiences to perceive Kaufman's underlying criticism concerning the wrestling. Naturally, too much information would have diminished Kaufman's subversive potential during his lifetime, too. However, the escape into the world of wrestling and the fact that the hoax with Lawler was kept a secret for so long, resulted in the decline of Kaufman's career rather than in the communication of a socio-critical message.

I said before that contemporary audiences often withdrew their attention as soon as Kaufman's performances became morally unbearable. Furthermore, I have already explained that the wrestling made sense in Kaufman's 'big shows' only. There, the wrestling was part of the entire concept and there were enough clues for a critical audience to perceive it as such. However, speaking of the staged fight with Jerry Lawler one had to come to the conclusion that the lack of information concerning the wrestling-parody resulted in the audiences' withdrawal of interest. At this point, one can no longer say that audiences were unable to face an extreme performance and grasp the underlying criticism. Instead, it has to be noted that Kaufman was so obsessed with being cagey about himself that the secret about the wrestling eventually did not make any sense anymore. And that is the crucial point concerning the biopic: the lacking information is finally offered but it is not explicitly mentioned that this is the revelation contemporary audiences would have needed. Thus, Kaufman's escape into the world of

wrestling is presented as if his underlying criticism had always been visible and the contemporary audiences were just too blind to see it. It is mentioned more than once in the film – and only in the film and that is the crucial point – that Kaufman's program is only entertaining to himself. Furthermore, it is emphasized that the wrestling is problematical because the audiences are not given the clue that it is a parody. Nevertheless, the final revelation is so casually presented that today's viewers of the biopic might think that all blame must be put on contemporary audiences and not on the somewhat stubborn Kaufman. Especially concerning the wrestling, the viewers of the biopic get the chance to take exactly that look behind the scenes the contemporary audiences were denied. This is quite a clever idea of the filmmakers, because Kaufman's comedy is thus presented as an ingenious concept. There are many other offstage scenes, which explain Kaufman's hoaxes right after each surprising turn in the course of the action. The effect is somewhat fatal: the threatening character of Kaufman's performances is defused and much of its subversive potential is lost. To the viewers of the film, Kaufman is no longer perceivable as a subversive entertainer. Due to the excess of behind-the-scenes material the gap between the contemporary audiences' perception and that of the viewers of the biopic is thus further enlarged with every illuminating revelation that is presented.

The viewer of the film is automatically sympathetic to this totally non-mysterious version of Kaufman, who almost completely loses his threatening character. Whereas contemporary audiences withdrew their sympathy in the end, the viewers of the film, by contrast, are not really surprised that the ill Kaufman decides to approach the audience once again. The Carnegie Hall concert – which actually took place in 1979 – is meant to reconcile Kaufman with the contemporary audience near the end of his life. In 'real-life' the ill communication between Kaufman and his audiences towards the end of his life was to be blamed on him. Thus, Kaufman's unwillingness to approach his audiences, which culminated in his triumphant final escape, is played down in the biopic. The film emphasizes that once he decided to make the first step, the audiences who had been unwilling to appreciate his program before suddenly came to terms with him and finally understood the point he had tried to emphasize all the time. Thus, the reconciliation with the audience displayed in the film, creates the impression that Kaufman's attitude had never been as hostile as it was sometimes perceived.

So far, several aspects have been noticed which need to be kept in mind when the film is analyzed in a more detailed manner. First, it is clear right from the beginning that the film is meant to introduce the 'real' Kaufman (initial sequence), whose absence

of a consistent self in the conventional sense is replaced by a multitude of selves which is what contributes to and defines the comedian. Second, the look behind the scenes that is fed to the viewers after each surprising turn in the stream of narration results in a loss of Kaufman's subversive potential for today's viewers. Thus, the ambitious attempt to offer a 'true' biography and present Kaufman as the enigmatic entertainer at the same time can only fail, because the one excludes the other. Third, the final revelation concerning the wrestling is presented in quite a casual way so that Kaufman's escape into the world of wrestling is presented as another coup emphasizing his brilliant 'concept of criticism'.

4.1 The Film "by" Andy Kaufman Introducing the Film *about* Andy Kaufman

Man on the Moon begins with a black screen and silence. A black-and-white shot of a dark haired person in a light shaded jacket and a turtle neck underneath is the next thing we see. After some moments of hesitation, scanning his imaginary audience (or in fact, the viewers of the film) with his eyes, that person begins to speak. The man talks with a foreign accent and introduces himself as 'Andy'. These initial seconds of the film belong to the most important ones for a number of reasons. The use of black and white film stock designates that the first two sequences – in this chapter referred to as "The film *by* Andy Kaufman" – are different from the rest of the film, which is in color. The biopic about Andy Kaufman is thus organized as a film *by* Andy Kaufman and the use of black and white film stock emphasizes the claim to tell the 'real story'. As has already been mentioned, he pretends to see his audience by moving his eyes from right to left as if he were scanning his audience. Furthermore, he directly stares into the camera and thus enhances the impression that he is in control of what is about to happen and what is about to be told. He introduces himself as 'Andy', but his behavior resembles that of the character, which was to be called *Foreign Man* later. From the very beginning it is thus pointed out that the different characters of Kaufman are inseparable regardless of their distinct features. Kaufman controls whom he is going to 'let out' first. If he chooses to appear as *Foreign Man* first, that does not keep him from calling this person 'Andy'. This, in turn, does not mean that *Foreign Man*, or Andy Kaufman, or any other character is going to consistently follow the once-established characteristics. *Foreign Man* tells the viewers that he has made a movie, but that he did not like it in the end and cut out all the 'baloney'. In fact, he remarks, so much has been cut out that the movie has

been reduced to the final credits. Consequently, the final credits start to appear on the screen (left of him). While they are rolling, the theme song of *Lassie* resounds. The music comes from a record-player which he smilingly operates.⁵¹³ Kaufman's characteristic manner of manipulating just everything is illustrated when the music ends and the credits stop rolling and he repeatedly puts the needle back to start the music and the credits start rolling again. This is exaggerated when he gets carried away and starts to scratch the record so that the credits jump up and down on the screen, too. The use of black and white film stock, the executive power to decide what can and what cannot be shown, the manipulative influence demonstrated by scratching the record, and the unwillingness to present a character coherently possessing certain characteristics illustrate the premise of the film. In *Man on the Moon*, Kaufman is depicted according to the rule that there is no 'real' Kaufman, which is what contributes to and defines this comedian. This is established from the very beginning, even before Kaufman disappears at the end of sequence one and comes back in sequence two, then claiming to be yet another character.

After *Foreign Man* has 'left the screen', which remains dark for a few seconds, Kaufman suddenly reappears on the left to check whether the viewers have obeyed his command to leave. Enthusiastically, he steps back in until he reaches the 'middle of the screen'. He now talks in a 'normal' voice, without any noticeable accent. Happily thanking them for staying, he assures the viewers that he is now willing to show his movie. He claims that the film is actually really good and interesting with loads of characters like the one that has just left and the one who is now on the screen. Remarkably, he insists that he is still playing a role, even though his accent has vanished and he does not introduce a new name for his character. It seems as if this character is very close to the 'real life' Andy Kaufman (and not the film's protagonist) and this impression is definitely intended. As a matter of fact the situation speaks for itself. The viewer is immediately warned that no matter how 'real' Kaufman might seem, one must understand all of his characters as roles. In fact, it is the multitude of characters that constitutes this entertainer. Although this is pointed out so early, the viewer gets caught in each and every one of Kaufman's traps. Let me anticipate an explanation: the

⁵¹³ The use of this particular musical piece plays a part at a later point in the film. When Kaufman's disease is diagnosed and he claims to tell his friends the 'truth' about it, he leaves the room and watches an episode of *Lassie*. (Sequence 25) In this particular episode (which is set in a courtroom) it is confirmed that a little boy has told the truth about *Lassie's* innocence. Then, the music is heard. Thus, the use of this particular piece of music in the initial sequence illustrates Kaufman's claim to tell the 'truth' about his life in the following. The fact that the music is played at the end of the film which he did not like points out that the action of sequence 1 was deceit. It was a hoax and 'in reality' he likes the film. This is, in fact, confirmed in sequence 2.

perspective of the contemporary audience is imposed upon the viewers of the film. As a consequence, the viewers do not even see the need to mistrust Kaufman. They simply ‘take him for real’, to use a colloquial expression.

Kaufman’s inviting gesture also inspires his audience’s confidence. By taking a look into a nearby camera he encourages the viewers to watch his movie and share his memories. We now see make-believe amateur material. Kaufman’s ‘childhood memories’ are shown and that creates the impression that the audience is now joining Kaufman in going back in history. The blurry scenes in pale colors (an old car, his siblings, and father) simulate original biographical material. When a close-up of Kaufman’s mother is shown, the blurry images suddenly become sharp and normal in color. The woman begins to speak, and the ‘real’ film begins.

4.2 The Film about Andy Kaufman – A Concept in its Infancy

Man on the Moon depicts Kaufman as representing that final, thought-out ‘concept of criticism’ from the very beginning. The filmmakers even took a further step back. Andy Kaufman is introduced as a child that was born with a tendency to switch characters. Thus, material extracted from popular biographies as that of Zehme and Zmuda is included in the film. The use of this kind of material certainly has a bearing on the film’s perception. Especially in a Hollywood production that is meant to reach a mass audience and that claims to tell the ‘truth’ about Kaufman. The use of that kind of material emphasizes the objective of presenting that thought-out concept that was doomed to failure because audiences were not ready for it, rather than explaining the difficulties such a program was faced with.⁵¹⁴ Furthermore, the viewers are emotionally captured when Kaufman is presented as a child with extraordinary abilities. The idea that Kaufman presents a thought-out and perfected concept of comedy is thus strongly emphasized. The resulting problems he was faced with (his mother is worried, his father forbids him to perform in front of imaginary audiences instead of real people) has the viewers side with Kaufman. The transition from the childhood days to a grown-up Andy who is at the beginning of his career makes us sympathize with the adult just as much as we did with the child. The cute singing of a childhood sing-along (‘The Cow Goes Moo’) with his sister Carol is linked with one of Kaufman’s first unpaid

⁵¹⁴ This especially accounts for the wrestling which remained unexplained until 1999, as was mentioned before.

performances in a nightclub. The responsive ‘roar’ expected to be heard by Carol – we still see her face – is replaced by a real lion’s sound. The cut to a yawning man completes the transition to the next scene and at the same time the next stage of Kaufman’s career. We now see a comedian in his early days doing the very same material in front of adult audiences that just moments before was perceived as cute when Andy was a child. The initial sympathy directed towards the child is not immediately enhanced when we see Kaufman as an adult. The viewers of the biopic might find the performance extremely strange and embarrassing. Although they have already been provided with the essential background information – the preceding scenes taught them that the comedian is constantly playing roles – feelings of embarrassment are evoked. The viewers experience the performance through the eyes of the contemporary audiences who did not have the essential background information. The imposed perspective mingles with established feelings of sympathy and, as a consequence, the viewers feel uncomfortable and worried and wish for Kaufman to stop. Instead of being annoyed or disinterested, we worry. Our concern shows how sympathy has been established by including childhood scenes. The viewer ‘is hooked’ from the very beginning and thus Kaufman’s concept of evoking a range of emotions works.

The atmosphere in the nightclub is one of boredom and annoyance. It must be noted that, strictly speaking, Kaufman’s concept works similarly well on that fictitious audience, because even anger, annoyance and boredom belong to the range of feelings Kaufman seeks to evoke. The audience in the night club is not yet given any clue how to handle the performance. Cuts to individual members of the audience illustrate these feelings and the resulting confusion. Some of the people reluctantly sing along and are obviously bored, but most people shake their heads thus expressing their disapproval. The reactions of the audience strongly contrast with the feelings the viewers of the film experience (worry, pity). This in turn enhances the viewers’ sympathy directed towards Kaufman. Kaufman’s enthusiastic and friendly attitude despite the fictitious audience’s indifference or hostility also contributes to the perception of Kaufman as a likeable figure. We worry about him and we do not want him to be laughed or yelled at.

The scene that follows the very first night club performance is in fact a brilliant illustrative example of how Kaufman manipulates the perception of his person. The club owner and the viewers perceive Kaufman, who has just failed to be entertaining – or so it seems –, as the poor loser who is now confronted with the threat to be dismissed. Actually Kaufman is fooling everyone all along, as we find out later when he

leaves the club and smiles knowingly. Nevertheless, for the moment the viewer feels pity for Kaufman who seems to have tried so desperately to be funny. This is an important observation: *only* the viewers of the biopic are worried. They worry, because neither the audience nor the club owner seem to respect Kaufman or are willing to give him another chance. Every time the viewer of the biopic gets to take that look behind the scenes the contemporary audiences were denied – later on in the film this becomes even more evident – Kaufman’s depiction is distorted. The film’s organization seems to hush up the fact that the perception of Kaufman when he was alive strongly contrasts with that evoked in the film. In other words, it is not communicated directly that much essential information is provided in the film that was denied in ‘real life’. As a consequence, the claim to tell the ‘true’ story of Kaufman *and* of his comedy is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, the entire truth *is* told by offering that crucial look behind the scenes. On the other hand, the claim to have the viewers experience the ‘real story’ is not met, because the provision of essential background information sharply contrasts with the lack of information the contemporary audiences had to deal with. Thus, the subversive potential the contemporary audiences had to handle is lost for the viewers of the film. Instead of *experiencing* the confusion and thus the real story, the viewers of the film only *see* the confusion Kaufman’s comedy provoked.

In fact, it is very likely that the filmmakers were completely aware of their dilemma. They were caught in between the desire to tell everything and the effects such revelations would have. The following analysis will show to what extent the subversive nature of Andy Kaufman’s humor is lost for the sake of being as close to the ‘original’ as possible. Every time feelings of surprise, shock, anger, or shame are aroused, the very next scene offers the essential explanation that was inaccessible for contemporary audiences. Thus, the viewers of the biopic experience a *similar* range of emotions as contemporary audiences did, because the film imposes their perspective upon the viewers of the film. Wonder, embarrassment, and confusion might belong to the range of emotions experienced by the viewers of the film, too. But it must be suspected that their reactions cannot be *identical* to those of the contemporary audiences, due to the above mentioned reasons.

4.3 Staged Confusion

The viewer unacquainted with Kaufman's performances experiences a first encounter with Kaufman's ability to confuse and surprise in the first performance of *Foreign Man* in a nightclub. Although the character *Foreign Man* was introduced to the viewer in the initial sequence of the biopic, the predominant feeling which is evoked is that of shame and embarrassment. *Foreign Man* certainly cannot be mistaken as a real stranger from that faraway island. But surprisingly, instead of curiously waiting for the punch line or some kind of clue that reveals the parody, the viewer is confused and wishes the comedian to stop embarrassing himself. Most viewers probably perceive *Foreign Man* as *the comedian* – instead of perceiving him as a role – and think that his program is really bad and unprofessional. The preceding developments of the film have paved the way for this kind of emotional involvement with the protagonist. The emotional attachment strongly contrasts with the reactions of contemporary audiences who tended to respond with boredom and disapproval only. But although the viewers have already 'met' *Foreign Man* in the very first sequence and have just observed the discussion with the club owner, they at first feel confused when they watch the performance. And the confusion which is evoked on the part of the viewer of the biopic is probably very similar to that of contemporary audiences. As was mentioned earlier, the viewer steps into every one of Kaufman's traps no matter how many revealing clues have been offered before. This falling for tricks is similar to the reaction of contemporary audiences, because the viewers have no choice but to perceive the situation from the point of view of the original audiences. The emotional attachment to Kaufman, however, is exclusively different from the reactions of contemporary audiences. Consequently, an obvious attempt to soften the subversive potential of Kaufman's comedy is noticeable. The threatening 'otherness', before the turning point in the performance occurs (the transformation into Elvis Presley), becomes somewhat cute and helpless and loses its potential to be annoying to the point of disgust. In fact, most of the material *Foreign Man* utters is somewhat tasteless or at least disturbingly out of fashion. The utterance "take my wife....please! Take her!", which has probably been used a hundred times before, makes the performance seem unprofessional. However, the viewer of the biopic understands *Foreign Man's* vain attempts to meet American standards of stand-up comedy as a result of the preceding discussion with the club owner and is thus not annoyed but feels pity.

The organization of the performance itself is very close to original material. Concerning the method of surprising the audience, it works on the viewers of the biopic just like it did on original audiences. Jim Carrey's performance is an outstanding adaptation of Kaufman's characteristic *Foreign Man* movements, as well as his brilliant Elvis Presley parody. As a consequence, no close reading of the performance in the movie is necessary. By contrast, the film's action following the *Foreign Man* performance is of vast importance, because it provides one of those glimpses behind the scenes that present a softened version of Kaufman's subversive comedy.

George Shapiro, played by actor Danny de Vito, approaches Kaufman backstage and enthusiastically offers to manage this new and talented comedian whose performance he has enjoyed just moments before. The viewer of the biopic was offered quite a few clues that the character from the island in the Caspian Sea was just a role. In fact, it is explicitly stated that Kaufman was born in Great Neck, Long Island; he was heard speaking English with no accent as a child and with the club owner in sequence 5. However, not until the conversation with George Shapiro does the viewer really comprehend that the character *Foreign Man* is a thought-out concept used by Andy Kaufman to deliberately create confusion. The imposed perspective makes a distant observation during the performance almost impossible so that Kaufman's revelation behind the scenes might come as a real surprise for the viewers of the film. Experiencing Kaufman's comedy *is* possible in the film – *but only up to a certain point*. As soon as the action goes on behind the scenes, the viewer – now provided with essential explanations – is ahead of original audiences. Thus, Kaufman's threatening character is lost. Furthermore, that person introducing himself to Shapiro, once he has realized who he is talking to, is suddenly presented as the private person Kaufman. The screenwriters of the biopic claim to refrain from attempting to trace the 'real Andy Kaufman' in the film and instead, as Florian Keller states in his book, describe their concept as follows:

[...] they decided that their protagonist should be 'like an onion – layers of masks and subterfuge. But when you peeled off the final layer, trying to get a look at the man inside, there was nothing there. It was anti-Rosebud, and conceptually perfect.'⁵¹⁵

Keller might be right when he complains that "[...] the concept of 'anti-Rosebud' is no more than yet another Rosebud⁵¹⁶, though one that is defined *ex negativo*".⁵¹⁷ Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the viewer unacquainted with Kaufman *does* perceive the person talking to Shapiro as the 'real', the 'private' Kaufman as opposed to

⁵¹⁵ F. Keller, 71.

⁵¹⁶ The use of 'Rosebud' refers to the key to the secret of Charles Foster Kane's last word in *Citizen Kane*.

⁵¹⁷ F. Keller, 72.

the comedian Kaufman. There are other – somewhat vain – instances which hint at the absence of a person behind the mask. In the conversation with Lynne Margulies in sequence 23, for instance, the existence of a ‘real person’ is called into question, because not even his girl-friend can or wants to trace a ‘real’ Kaufman. However, the viewer of the biopic is not explicitly warned to mistrust that person talking to Shapiro backstage and unavoidably understands this man as the private person. And the private Kaufman is immediately understood as the ‘real’ Kaufman, which means that this person is no longer playing a role. The difficulty of distinguishing between ‘real-life’ comedian and ‘real-life’ private person is not truly put into action in the film. Although the filmmakers’ objective was just the opposite, they fail to show Kaufman without a coherent self. The behind-the-scenes Kaufman is marked ‘private’ and thus automatically as no longer playing a role. All attempts to give the private Kaufman a somewhat mysterious edge appear vain and helpless: Bob Zmuda is taken in by Kaufman’s tricks and Lynne is unable to define Kaufman’s ‘true’ self. The backstage scenes introduce and establish a private Kaufman who is not playing a role. The emotional attachment that is maintained throughout the movie results in the distinction between what is introduced as the stage person and the ‘behind the scenes-person’.⁵¹⁸ The latter, mostly shown along with George Shapiro, Bob Zmuda, or Lynne Margulies, represents that exclusive look behind the scenes the contemporary audiences were denied and thus mitigates the subversive character of Kaufman’s comedy those audiences were forced to cope with. This ‘behind the scenes revelation’ fed to the viewers of the biopic only serves as the starting point for a differentiation between the public character and the ‘behind the scenes-person’. In the course of the film, more obvious examples of this occur.

4.4 Behind the Scenes

It has become evident that the filmmakers’ attempt to present Kaufman as close to the original as possible and to deliver the missing pieces by offering the viewers of the biopic an exclusive look behind the scenes is an honorable but at the same time dangerous attempt. In fact, it turns out to be double-edged. The gap between the perception of the contemporary audiences and that of the viewers of the biopic grows larger the more details are offered.

⁵¹⁸ Especially towards the end of the film (sequence 29), no one would want to argue that the ill Kaufman hardly able to speak is not ‘private’ and thus not playing a role at that moment.

The business lunch with George Shapiro⁵¹⁹ is an excellent example of how the existence of the ‘private’ person Kaufman is established although the opposite is intended.⁵²⁰ Interestingly, the scene itself is a very entertaining and typical example of Kaufman’s confusing humor. Nevertheless, it quite strongly contributes to the viewer’s emotional involvement and enforces the manifestation of a ‘behind the scenes Kaufman’, who is no longer perceived as a person playing yet another role. Although a *business* lunch, the sequence is exclusively private. The viewers of the biopic get to see and hear things that were obviously inaccessible for contemporary audiences. A close evaluation of the scene should illustrate the inevitable though unintended differentiation between ‘Kaufman onstage’ and ‘Kaufman behind the scenes’.

In this scene, one is once again forced to feel ashamed when Kaufman – enthusiastically talking to Shapiro – does not seem to notice the booger sticking to his nostril. Moreover, it is very likely that at first only very few viewers find the scene funny. The faux pas is not yet revealed as a trick and it is most probably dismissed as bad taste humor or no humor at all. Feelings of shame and disgust prevail. Shapiro is the one who reflects the feelings of the viewers by wrinkling his forehead and by coyly avoiding Kaufman’s eye. In fact, Shapiro feels so queasy that he does not even notice how Kaufman switches the booger from one nostril to the other in an unobserved moment. From that moment, Shapiro no longer reflects the emotions of the viewers, because from now on the viewer knows more than Shapiro. Instead, he attracts the viewers’ pity. We know now that Kaufman is fooling him, but we do not necessarily perceive the situation as funny yet. At first we felt uncomfortable, now we feel pity for Shapiro, but we might still not be able to perceive the comical. Not until Shapiro’s final decision to make the embarrassing move and tell Kaufman about the assumed faux pas do we feel like laughing. Watching the scene, we can relate to Shapiro’s situation. Everyone knows that kind of situation where we feel that we are obliged to make an embarrassing move but secretly hope that someone else does it. Thus, we feel relieved and laugh at Shapiro, when he eventually does what we hoped to escape from. By watching Shapiro doing what has to be done, using Freud’s terminology, the viewer obtains pleasure due to a saving of psychical expenditure.

Kaufman’s reaction reflects naïveté – he pretends not to have known about the booger. This shows his genuine ability to control and manipulate a situation. At the same time it keeps Shapiro from complete embarrassment. Kaufman offers a hand to

⁵¹⁹ Sequence 7.

⁵²⁰ This can be suspected, because the screenwriters claim to refrain from seeking to trace the ‘real’ Kaufman, as was mentioned before.

overcome a situation dominated by insecurity and embarrassment. However, he does not hesitate to withdraw the hand a second later and to let his opponent step into his next trap: Shapiro is forced to realize that Kaufman was certainly aware of his booger. Consequently, it was no real faux pas anyway, because it was staged all along. Kaufman reveals that the incident was a hoax by sticking the booger to a piece of advertisement and by announcing to sell it when he is a famous star. The final laughter evoked by this surprising idea represents a self-reflexive and derisive reconsideration of former misperceptions which need to be discarded.

The situation at hand serves as an additional ‘exercise in Kaufman-humor’ and it is exclusively reserved for the viewers of the biopic. Once again, the mere idea of showing behind-the-scenes action automatically results in the establishment of a ‘private’ Kaufman. No matter how manipulative or surprisingly inconsistent Kaufman might be in these ‘behind the scenes’ sequences⁵²¹, as soon as the curtain falls, the emotionally involved viewer automatically becomes an eye witness of the supposedly ‘private’ Kaufman. One could say that the intention of the filmmakers to show a Kaufman whose personality is constituted by a lack of a coherent self is indeed fulfilled, because the ‘private’ Kaufman of the film is still not at all times a coherent character.⁵²² The crucial point is that although the ‘behind the scenes’ Kaufman is unpredictable, the mere idea of showing the offstage Kaufman results in a loss of the threatening and subversive potential of his comedy. Anticipating the clue to an understanding of the film’s position, one could say that *Man on the Moon* depicts the *person* Andy Kaufman by consistently following the rule that the lack of a coherent self is what constitutes his character. Kaufman’s *comedy*, however, loses its subversive potential as a result of that exclusive look behind the scenes.

4.5 Tony Clifton

The look behind the scenes increases the viewers’ confusion very much when Tony Clifton is introduced. Instead of having to cope with Clifton’s strange performance onstage, we hear the Las Vegas lounge singer on the phone. George Shapiro, Andy’s new manager, receives a peculiar phone call by this unknown person in

⁵²¹ Another example of this can be found in sequence 15. Zmuda takes Kaufman to a brothel thinking that it is going to be Kaufman’s first time with a prostitute. In fact, Kaufman is a frequent guest.

⁵²² As was mentioned earlier, this is a controversial point, because the attempts to make the private Kaufman appear inconsistent may seem helpless and vain.

his office.⁵²³ Using vile and vulgar language, a person introduces himself as Tony Clifton and tells Shapiro to refrain from managing and booking the psychopath Andy Kaufman. At this point in the film, the viewer is not able and obviously not meant to associate Clifton with Kaufman. No clues have been offered yet and Shapiro's bewilderment echoes the viewers' impression. By way of introducing Clifton via phone instead of showing him in person, the intended distance to Kaufman is established. This time the look behind the scenes creates confusion rather than offering explanations or revelations. However, this scene will remain one of the few ones that confuse instead of clarify throughout the film.

Tony Clifton is not mentioned again until we see Kaufman in Shapiro's office negotiating the terms of his engagement on the sitcom *TAXI* with.⁵²⁴ As if it were his natural right, Kaufman requires four guest appearances of Tony Clifton. Recalling the unusual phone call, Shapiro remembers Clifton as a very rude person and certainly expresses his doubts. Kaufman enthusiastically praises Clifton's abilities but Shapiro and the viewers are left with wonder at that unknown and mysterious person. The slow and gradual introduction of Tony Clifton creates a great amount of tension and dissociates Kaufman from Clifton. 'Mentor' and his supposed 'protégé' are introduced as two distinct characters. The latter still depends on the former, because Kaufman negotiates Clifton's performances for him. The differentiation between Clifton and Kaufman is pointed out in Clifton's first appearance, because he enters the stage smoking a huge cigar. He is the exact opposite of Kaufman, who was shown eating vegetarian food at the business lunch with Shapiro and who earlier attended a session of transcendental meditation. The health food fanatic is clearly juxtaposed to the roué who seems to like smoking, drinking, and girls. This proves true much later when Clifton provokes his dismissal from *TAXI* accompanied by two female prostitutes.⁵²⁵ As a consequence, the viewer unacquainted with Kaufman's comedy indeed perceives Clifton as a separate person and watches Clifton's performance with wonder and growing incomprehension. Unlike such original material as that offered in *The Midnight Special*, where Kaufman announces Clifton as his protégé, the film creates the impression that Clifton performs as an independent character not to be associated with Kaufman in any way.⁵²⁶ The omission of an announcement like that on *The Midnight Special* further increases the

⁵²³ Sequence 7.

⁵²⁴ Sequence 9.

⁵²⁵ Sequence 15. Although it is Kaufman who hires the two girls and at that point in the film the viewer has found out that Clifton is played by Kaufman, throughout the rest of the film Kaufman is associated with his steady girl-friend Lynne (who appears in sequence 18 for the first time) rather than with enjoying the company of different women.

⁵²⁶ Sequence 10.

distance between Clifton and Kaufman. In Shapiro's office, he and Kaufman were talking about Clifton's guest appearances in the sitcom. The separate performance in the nightclub, however, makes Clifton appear as an established and independent performer who needs to be booked by Kaufman to appear in the sitcom. Thus, Clifton is not really introduced as Kaufman's protégé in the film. As a consequence, the differentiation between the two of them is further enhanced. Clifton's first performance becomes increasingly disturbing and the audience obviously disapproves of the obnoxious entertainer. The viewer of the biopic, who is emotionally attached to Kaufman, dislikes Clifton and is outraged when he humiliates several people, among them some women and finally a certain Polish man named Bob Gorsky. Certain comical effects are noticeable in the performance – as were in the corresponding performance that was analyzed in my chapter on Kaufman's strategies of humor. It must be noted again that as soon as individual moral limits are crossed, the viewers might withdraw their sympathy. Depending on their individual limit, they lose their 'anesthesia of the heart' at some point and refuse to find the performance funny. The less the viewers like Clifton, the more yawns the gap between Clifton and Kaufman. Consequently, it is a big surprise when behind the stage it is suddenly revealed that Clifton *is* Kaufman and Bob Gorsky is Kaufman's collaborator Bob Zmuda.⁵²⁷

A fact many people in contemporary audiences only gradually began to comprehend is thus communicated to the viewers of the film in condensed form. The problem of story time versus discourse time is certainly a common problem for the directors of a biopic. A process which gradually developed back then must be condensed to fit the narration. The risk of deterring processes is certainly always present. However, instead of having the viewers find out the clue to the 'double-identity', the hoax is revealed immediately after the disturbing performance. A great amount of the performance's subversive potential is thus lost. The business meeting following the conversation behind the stage intensifies the revelation that has just been communicated to the viewers of the film: Tony Clifton *is* Andy Kaufman. Andy Kaufman *is* Tony Clifton. By observing how this important piece of information is given to a very small group of *ABC* executives in a business meeting, the viewer is included once again. Now the viewers belong to the small circle of insiders. However, the sense of the double-identity remains unexplained. Shapiro's enthusiastic explanation that instead of one Andy Kaufman the executives get 'two for the price of one' is not really put into action in the film. Not before Clifton enters the set of *TAXI* to sabotage

⁵²⁷ Sequence 11.

the show do we meet him again. The coexistence of Kaufman and Clifton is reduced to the singular performance of Clifton in sequence 10 and the following offstage scene. It is not really mentioned in the film that for years, performances of Kaufman and Clifton, as well as those of Kaufman introducing Clifton as his protégé, alternated. At the end of sequence 15, Kaufman and his collaborators discuss reviews with headlines such as ‘Who is Tony Clifton?’ Not until then does the viewer of the biopic realize how much confusion the coexistence of Kaufman and Clifton must have caused in the 1970’s and 1980’s.

However, before Clifton reappears in the biopic – on the set of *TAXI* – emphasis is put on those stages of Kaufman’s career that were responded to positively. The huge success of *TAXI* (before Clifton appears) is documented by showing a selection of different scenes. In order to differentiate between the mean character Clifton and the likeable character Latka, the scenes are accompanied by cheerful music thus reflecting the positive atmosphere of the successful show. Latka usually gets good laughs. In fact, Latka’s remarks seem to get the most laughs just as well as his *Foreign Man*-like ‘Tenk you veddy much’. People enthusiastically cheer after each show. The contrast to the rude Tony Clifton could not be sharper at this point. While we still hear a cheering crowd, a frustrated Kaufman is shown behind the stage. He complains that the show is getting worse every time, which of course comes as a surprise for the viewers of the film. It seems to be a first sign that the likeable character from *TAXI* is not going to be present for very long. Kaufman’s dissatisfaction with his successful sitcom-character Latka announces a rebellion and the attentive viewer can suspect that Tony Clifton might return again. However, this suspicion has a bitter aftertaste. The friendly character Latka conjures up images of *Foreign Man*, who in comparison to Clifton seems more attractive. The emotional attachment to Kaufman is maintained throughout the film and every opportunity to enjoy Kaufman’s friendly side is enthusiastically seized. The viewers accept and appreciate that the coexistence of Kaufman and Clifton is not satisfyingly explained. Like original audiences, the viewers of the film are led up a wrong path and the eventual return of Clifton and Kaufman’s refusal to present nice characters thus come as an uncomfortable surprise. However, when Zmuda cheerfully reminds Kaufman that he originally signed the contract for *TAXI* in order to be able to produce a 90 minute ‘Special’ in which he can do whatever he likes, the viewers of the biopic are given another revealing clue what to expect next. Although the contrast between the incomprehensible Clifton and the obviously funny

Latka makes the viewer dislike Clifton even more, Kaufman's frustration behind the scenes shows that one must be alert and watch for traps.

Each and every one of those bite-sized explanatory offstage scenes in the film leads to two essential, at first sight contradictory effects. Firstly, the emotional attachment to the private Kaufman grows stronger because Kaufman's personal struggles are displayed. Secondly, although the viewers are emotionally attached, they are warned not to trust the comedian blindly and, as a consequence, the last bit of Kaufman's subversive potential is lost. The following look behind the scenes of the production of his 'Special' shows Kaufman's unwillingness to produce standard comedy. The unconventional performance on a College Campus also anticipates Kaufman's rebellious attitude and his refusal to be the friendly comedian the audiences have begun to love.⁵²⁸

The eventual return of Tony Clifton in the biopic occurs in sequence 15, when Clifton enters the stage accompanied by two prostitutes. It is important to note that Clifton's misbehavior takes place behind the scenes. The incident itself was communicated to contemporary audiences by the media. The show with Clifton jumping across the set and insulting fellow actors and executives was never shown on TV. This important offstage scene severely distorts the depiction of Tony Clifton, because he is presented to the viewers of the biopic as Kaufman's secret weapon only. Clifton is no longer perceived as that other, very disturbing entertainer who appeared every now and then. Instead, he is presented as Kaufman's weapon to destroy the sympathy Kaufman so eagerly seeks to reject. This observation proves true at the end of sequence 15, when Zmuda, Shapiro, Kaufman's assistant Linda, and Kaufman are shown sitting in a restaurant and discussing newspaper articles about Tony Clifton. They enthusiastically enjoy the confusion around Tony Clifton. They are excited how the character has even become three-dimensional. As a matter of fact, at no point in the movie was Clifton perceived as such. The long period of alternating performances of Clifton and Kaufman is not included in the film. As a result, the viewer is quite surprised when Kaufman and his collaborators congratulate each other on the creation of that distinct character that has become three-dimensional. It is certainly true that Clifton's one and only performance dissociated him from Kaufman. One could argue that the existence and construction of this performance is sufficient to illustrate and to shorten a long period of alternating performances. However, this method of offering a condensed version of a longer period of time does not work very well. As has already

⁵²⁸ These scenes will not be analyzed further.

been mentioned, the offstage scene that immediately follows Clifton's performance, as well as his misbehavior behind the scenes of *TAXI* present Clifton as Kaufman's weapon and not as that subversive, three-dimensional character. Thus, it becomes obvious once again that the offstage scenes cannot meet the objective of having the viewers of the film experience Kaufman's comedy in a similar way as did the contemporary audiences. Despite the fact that the confusion concerning Tony Clifton's performances is not depicted in a fully satisfactory way, the viewer understands that the conversation about the reviews is meant to substitute this lack of information. Sequence 16 points out that Clifton is a popular guest in nightclubs and TV shows and the viewer can suspect that by now the film's fictitious contemporary audiences have found out that Clifton is played by Andy Kaufman. Interestingly, the point at which audiences found out about the hoax remains unclear, too. There is one scene in which George Shapiro answers requests to book Clifton (most club-owners seem to be secretly wishing for Kaufman). We can only assume that by now audiences have caught up and found out about the double-identity. It might be suspected that whereas the lack of information concerning the hoax resulted in the loss of subversive potential for the viewer of the biopic, the omission of the point at which audiences began to understand can be seen as a method to condense a longer period of time. However, the next scene illustrates that the lack of information results in a quite illogical depiction of the contemporary audiences.

What is communicated to the viewers in a condensed version (Tony Clifton *is* Andy Kaufman) is now turned upside down all at once. During a typical Clifton performance, Andy Kaufman appears on the same stage and an argument between the two develops. The situation escalates when a furious Clifton throws a glass of water at Kaufman. We should take a closer look at the scene, because it marks the transition point at which 'likeable Kaufman' begins to vanish and 'mean Kaufman' takes over. The short scene in which Shapiro negotiated Clifton's contracts was meant to compress Clifton's rise to fame – a fact that seems confirmed in Clifton's following performance. With a large band and an impressive show ballet in the background, Clifton performs his usual material. He yells at the audience from time to time, sings off-key, and makes awkward gestures. The reactions of the audience seem to be quite ambiguous. On the one hand, his request to remain silent while he is performing is responded to with astonishment and disapproval. On the other hand, when he begins his strange singing, laughter and applause are heard. Judging from people's reactions, it is not at all clear that Clifton is a character played by Andy Kaufman. In fact, it can be assumed that in this

scene the audience is supposed to be unaware of the fact that Clifton is Kaufman. Cuts to individual members in the audience illustrate that most people do not know how to handle Clifton and their applause and laughter seems to reflect uncertainty. People do not seem to understand that the performance is a parody.

It is obvious that a heterogeneous depiction of a contemporary audience, with some people aware of the double-identity game and others unaware, is quite difficult to achieve. If we assume that the people do not know that Clifton is one of Kaufman's characters, the viewers of the biopic are a step ahead, because they know that Clifton is played by Kaufman. It nevertheless comes as a surprise that the depicted audience in the film perceives Clifton as a fool rather than as the parody of a fool. In order to consistently and logically follow the stream of narration, people should now be able to tell that Clifton is not a separate person. People's reactions should display that they understand the parody. Instead, the same astonished incomprehension as in the first performance of Tony Clifton in sequence 10 is written all over their faces. As a result, the first moments of the performance solely repeat what has already been brought to the viewer of the film in a preceding sequence. The final surprising turning point when Kaufman enters the stage behind Clifton is perceived differently by those who watch the film and those who watch the performance *in* the film. The latter enthusiastically greet the approaching Kaufman, relieved that the obnoxious Clifton is being stopped. There are just a few astonished faces in the audience which are all of a sudden meant to reflect the knowledge about the double-identity. They strongly contrast with people's preceding reactions, when Clifton's behavior was generally met with disgust. Now the audience is supposed to be a heterogeneous mixture of some people who are aware of the double-identity and others who are not. Just moments before the audience's reactions purely reflected that they were all unaware of the illusion.

However, the viewers of the film experience a great moment of surprise and wonder, because they have to realize that their former perception must have been completely wrong. As a matter of fact, Clifton is not necessarily Andy Kaufman. Thus, Kaufman's remark about Clifton as a three-dimensional character is proven true in this scene: whether people know about Clifton being a parody or not – they treat the character like a real person. Some people might always have known or have suspected that Kaufman was playing Clifton. However, as soon as Kaufman appears, all that knowledge and all suspicions become worthless. Clifton is dismissed like an individual person no matter who is impersonating him. People in the audience seem to immediately accept that their supposed knowledge was also wrong and Kaufman is not

Clifton. This can be seen when they start to cheer for Kaufman and boo Clifton off the stage. We must finally assume that the depicted audience in the film does not know about the parody and that people perceive the situation as Kaufman interrupting the performance of another, unprofessional colleague. In this respect, the reactions of the contemporary audience are very different from the reactions of the viewers of the biopic. The viewers certainly begin to wonder who might have impersonated Clifton this time. However illogical the depiction of the audience in the film might be, it is nevertheless made clear that no matter how much people knew in advance and what they expected, whether Clifton was played by Kaufman, by somebody else, or was no parody at all, Clifton was dismissed and it was the friendly version of Kaufman people wanted to see.

Whether the problem in this sequence is that the depiction of the audience is rather weak and illogical or that the information provided in the preceding scenes contrasts with the depicted reactions, it can be concluded that this revealing point marks the disappearance of a 'friendly' Andy Kaufman. Even if the depicted audience supposedly thinks that Kaufman simply interrupts Clifton's performance, in the end, Kaufman leaves the stage and Clifton stays. No matter how exaggeratedly Kaufman makes a fool of Clifton – especially when he seems to illustrate Clifton's feelings of rage, desperation, failure to regain control, and loss of temper on his conga drums – Kaufman does not take over but decides to leave. The struggle between the beloved performer and the object of hate, as well as the eventual capitulation of the former symbolizes the self-determined departure of a friendly and likeable Kaufman.

The following offstage scene offers the explanation for Kaufman's voluntary departure: apart from killing himself onstage, he cannot think of anything else to shock the audience.⁵²⁹ Whereas at first emphasis is put on Kaufman and Zmuda enjoying their latest coup, the scene ends with a frustrated Kaufman who seems to be on the verge of giving up. This scene illustrates that the 'double-identity game' must end, too. Because the audience in the film is depicted as a crowd of people still unaware of the double-identity it seems unlikely that they have started to appreciate the confusion. However, the viewers of the film do enjoy the confusing charade. Thus, the biopic seems to be organized to directly communicate with the viewers of the film and to such an extent that very little attention is paid to a logical depiction of the reactions of the audiences in the film. The claim to tell the 'truth' about Kaufman is fulfilled, because everything is explained to the viewers of the biopic. At the same time, the viewers are saved the

⁵²⁹ Sequence 16.

trouble contemporary audiences were faced with. A logical depiction of the contemporary audiences in the film yields the claim to teach the viewers of the film the ‘true story’.

4.6 Wrestling With His Audiences

Kaufman is in a desperate creative crisis. He has to face a possible loss of credibility and resulting economic difficulties.⁵³⁰ Shapiro has just put into question whether it makes any sense to destroy the double-identity. To take his mind off those things, Kaufman watches a TV wrestling match with his friend Bob Zmuda. The exclusively private scene with Zmuda suggests how the creative crisis supposedly led to the birth of the idea of ‘Wrestling against women’. The two private offstage scenes explain the development of Kaufman’s concept instead of illustrating the course of his career. They are exclusively presented to the viewers of the film with the intention of explaining Kaufman’s ‘true’ story rather than depicting Kaufman’s career as it was perceived by contemporary audiences. This results in a tremendous lead for the viewers of the biopic, because they are offered an explanation *why* Kaufman began to wrestle women. The wrestling, which is purely built upon the breaking of a taboo, loses its subversive potential for the viewers of the film. The birth of the idea seems to be logically developed and consistently follows his strategies of humor and concept of criticism. As a result, the following scenes of Kaufman’s wrestling matches on TV probably appear much funnier to the viewers of the film than they ever did to contemporary audiences. That the wrestling is a parody is clearly communicated to the viewers. Now that we know what initiated the wrestling, the spectacle suddenly carries meaning. It is understood by the viewers as the only suitable method to escape categorization and to reject sympathy.

The introduction of Lynne Margulies⁵³¹, one of the first women to wrestle Kaufman and soon his steady girl-friend, is meant to legitimize Kaufman’s exaggerated wrestling career. By linking the excessive and misogynous wrestling with a romantic love story, the former loses some of its dubious character. The look behind the scenes once again reveals that Kaufman’s provocative behavior is staged and a parody. Furthermore, the scene is used to put emphasis on the intimate understanding between Margulies and

⁵³⁰ Sequence 16.

⁵³¹ Sequence 18.

Kaufman. Kaufman seems to have found his soul mate in her. Every time Kaufman is on the verge of breaking yet another taboo in his wrestling performances, there is an explanatory offstage scene. In these scenes, Kaufman calms down Margulies and explains to her that the wrestling is just a parody. The explanations work just as well to calm down the viewers of the biopic. At the beginning of their relationship, Margulies must learn Kaufman's unpredictability the hard way. At first she takes his wrestling challenge seriously. When he reveals himself to her behind the stage, she understands herself as one of the chosen few who are initiated and know about Kaufman's staged spectacles. In order to enhance this impression of intimate understanding between the two, Margulies responds to Kaufman's quick proposal to marry her in Memphis with the question 'Why Memphis?' instead of asking 'Why marry so quickly?'.⁵³² Thus, her companionship is pointed out, and moreover, her trust in Kaufman. As a consequence, the viewer of the biopic is as surprised and outraged as she is, when Lawler rejects her as Kaufman's next opponent at the crucial fight in Memphis. Thus, the romantic idea of marrying afterwards seems 'thwarted'. At this point, the viewers can relate to Lynne's furious disappointment. Moreover, the viewers start to mistrust Kaufman. The look behind the scenes after Kaufman's fight against Foxy Jackson reveals that everything was planned beforehand and Lynne never played a particularly important role in the spectacle. The woman replacing Lynne, a real female wrestler named Foxy Jackson, was brought in by Lawler. Thus, the whole spectacle was used to introduce Kaufman's *real* next opponent – Jerry Lawler. The offstage scene shows how Kaufman enthusiastically explains how well his plan worked out. His excitement is emphasized to such an extent that the viewer – just like Lynne – tends to forgive Kaufman. Suddenly, we are all able to laugh at ourselves and our previous misperception of the action.⁵³³ This scene illustrates how the intermingling of the wrestling and the love affair make the *Intergender Wrestling Champion* appear likeable – at least to some extent. At the same time, however, the fight against Foxy Jackson marks the point at which the supposedly spontaneous wrestling against members of the audiences is slowly turned into strategic intrusion into the circuit of professional wrestling. At this point, the viewers of the biopic have to reconsider the sense of Kaufman's wrestling career. As Kaufman becomes increasingly aggressive and obsessed with the wrestling, its previous relevance as part of Kaufman's concept of criticism gradually begins to vanish.

⁵³² Sequence 18.

⁵³³ Sequence 19.

From now on, Kaufman's career focuses on the wrestling and all other performances are used to promote his wrestling spectacles. His appearance on the show *Friday's*, for instance, is used to announce Kaufman's upcoming fight against Jerry Lawler in Memphis, Tennessee.⁵³⁴ Although originally meant to bring his career back on the right track, Kaufman's behavior during the show causes a big mess. He refuses to do 'drug humor' and disturbs the action by yelling at his fellow actors and the executives of the show. This scene is, by the way, a brilliant demonstration of Kaufman's ability to use TV as his medium to manipulate perceptions. After his supposedly spontaneous refusal to say his lines and his hysterical yelling at the crew, a first cut to commercials is supposed to save the episode. The viewer of the biopic is granted a look behind the scenes of the show and knows in advance that after the commercial break Kaufman is supposed to tell the viewers that the spontaneous fight was staged. One of the network officials suggests turning the disaster into a 'happening'. It is the last resort to avoid complete chaos. The debacle is thus deliberately turned into a typical Kaufman performance. First, Kaufman agrees to play along. Nevertheless, he eventually takes control. The bluff – the agreement to reveal the fight as staged – gives Kaufman the power to get his way and announce his upcoming wrestling match. The viewers of the biopic knew all along that Kaufman only agreed to appear on the show *Friday's* because it was broadcast live. Whereas Shapiro still represents the attempt to meet the expected standards, Kaufman's unwillingness to be categorized in any way is already alluded to and seems inevitable. Of course, Shapiro does accept Kaufman as a multi-faceted entertainer and clearly recognizes his abilities and importance, but he is also the one who tries to juggle Kaufman's experimental material and economic interests. In other words: he seeks to find a compromise between Kaufman's desire to remain unpredictable and a program conventional enough to assure economic survival. Thus, Shapiro is the one who knows about the audience's power. He is aware that the use of TV as the medium to reach audiences may become inaccessible for Kaufman if he goes too far. However, Shapiro's intentions of bringing Kaufman back on the right track are finally disappointed. Kaufman's exit from the comedy stage as a final departure to escape categorization is inevitable.

Not until the film reveals that the fight against Lawler is also staged does the viewer of the biopic attach importance to the exaggerated wrestling spectacle. The wrestling against women seemed relevant to display his concept of criticism (to make people in a media-dominated society realize their misperceptions and thus to have them

⁵³⁴ Sequence 20.

self-reflexively confront their superficiality). Furthermore, wrestling helped him to defy categorization. However, the fight against Lawler and the entire wrestling community does not appear to be very much more than a flying visit into a world other than the comedy world. At first it intensified Kaufman's desire to escape categorization. However, the exaggerated and extended wrestling career more and more loses its entertainment value the longer it lasts. Kaufman's appearance in long john's and bathing shorts, his cocky behavior and macho attitude, as well as the rude insults towards the Southern audience (Kaufman explains how to use soap and toilet paper) may appear just as funny as those original scenes that were analyzed in my chapter on Kaufman's strategies of humor. In addition, the entire spectacle points out the difference between the celebrated hero Lawler and Kaufman. Lawler enters the stadium in a glittery costume, accompanied by impressive music, cheers from the audience, and pyrotechnical effects. By contrast, Kaufman enters the stadium in a bathrobe and is immediately received with boos. Zmuda accompanies him carrying a single sparkler. This scene emphasizes how Kaufman ridicules the codes of wrestling in order to infuriate the audience. However, the relevance of the spectacle as carrying some sort of criticism remains unclear for the viewers of the biopic. Even as the fight between Kaufman and Lawler culminates on *Late Night with David Letterman* at some point after the fight, the sense of the spectacle remains vague. However, Lawler's illegal move during the fight results in his disqualification and makes Kaufman win the palm. Although claiming to be physically injured, the intruder into the wrestling circuit is able to leave the stadium as a winner. In the following episode of *Late Night with David Letterman* Kaufman also presents himself as a winner. The prolonged fight between Lawler and Kaufman on the show with host David Letterman, who is unable to retain control of the situation, illustrates Kaufman's complete escape into that other world and his refusal to be the comedian audiences had liked. It does not explain that Kaufman's interference with the wrestling circuit is just another method to fool the audiences.⁵³⁵ Kaufman exhaustedly tries to justify his behavior in the stadium and comes up with new accusations directed towards Lawler, who repeatedly questions Kaufman's masculinity. Although Kaufman reveals that he was "just playing bad guy wrestler", his behavior is not perceived as a parody. As soon as the two men begin to argue again, Kaufman vitiate his previous apology. He reveals that he was playing a role and displays the very same obnoxious and arrogant behavior he was criticized for before. It is almost

⁵³⁵ Apart from that, the scene offers a great comical moment when Letterman thinks about whether some of Kaufman's words are allowed to be uttered on TV and comes to the conclusion that those words might in fact be used but what is definitely forbidden is to throw coffee at other guests.

impossible to understand that Kaufman prolongs the role he is playing by repeating it. Instead, people consider his behavior dishonest because it contradicts the sincerity of his preceding apology. The satirical content of his role is no longer perceivable. Shortly thereafter, the audience of *Saturday Night Live* is asked to decide whether Kaufman should remain a regular guest on the show or not. As a result, the contemporary audience turns away from Kaufman at this point of his career. Finally, Kaufman is dismissed as an entertainer, because the meaning of his entire act is no longer understandable for contemporary audiences.

When the viewers are granted another look *behind* the scenes, though, the concept invisible for contemporary audiences is illuminated for the viewers of the film. Thus, the perception of the contemporary audience and that of the viewers of the biopic is completely different. Earlier, the worried faces of Kaufman's family and friends during the fight enhanced the impression that the action (and Kaufman's eventual injury) was to be taken seriously. The viewer's perception of the action (the fight in the stadium *and* the fight on *Late Night with David Letterman*) was identical to that of contemporary audiences who also took Kaufman seriously. However, the sudden revelation that Lawler and Kaufman have been collaborators all along enlarges the gap between the contemporary audiences and the viewers of the film once again. What used to be completely unclear to contemporary audiences for such a long time is suddenly revealed as the biggest hoax ever. The final revelation is communicated to the viewers in a very entertaining way. The discussion between Shapiro and Kaufman about the incident on *Late Night with David Letterman* and the resulting vote against Kaufman at first visually and aurally excludes Lawler from the scene. When Shapiro suddenly expresses his doubts whether those "two guys should ever work together again"⁵³⁶, a cut to the same scene shot from behind Shapiro's back reveals that Lawler is sitting next to Kaufman. His first remark is "We thought it was funny". This comment emphasizes how the viewers of the biopic have been doubly fooled. Not only do the viewers have to reflect their misjudgment of Kaufman's escape into the world of wrestling, but also their misjudgment of Lawler. Lawler was taken seriously as a 'real' wrestler and so was his anger at Kaufman.⁵³⁷ The viewers of the film are thus fooled twice and need to reconsider their perception of the whole spectacle and of Lawler's role, too. Contemporary audiences withdrew their sympathy when Kaufman's excessive wrestling remained unexplained. The biopic's final revelation has the opposite effect: instead of

⁵³⁶ Sequence 22.

⁵³⁷ Of course, Lawler *is* a 'real' wrestler. The point is that he is a 'real' wrestler who is playing a role.

choosing to dismiss the uncomfortable entertainer, the viewers of the film acknowledge Kaufman's abilities and are thus emotionally prepared to observe the upcoming backlashes in his career and private life.

4.7 The Fall and Rise of Andy Kaufman

George Shapiro's words at the end of his conversation with Kaufman and Lawler echo the prevalent sentiment: "They don't want you back."⁵³⁸ Kaufman is forced to accept that his escape into the world of wrestling met with the audiences' refusal. This backlash is further illustrated in one of the following scenes. Kaufman's meditation group dismisses him; the other participants are no longer willing to accept Kaufman's sexist and discriminatory behavior.⁵³⁹ The viewers of the biopic perceive Kaufman's backlashes as rather unfair, because they know about the wrestling hoax. They feel pity for the frustrated and depressive Kaufman. Although it is absolutely clear to the viewer that Kaufman brought it all onto himself, the emotionally attached viewers develop sympathetic feelings for the sad Kaufman. In the next scene he is resting in his bed. He is filmed from above and his sad face is illuminated and contrasts with the dark blanket pulled up to his neck. Lynne is next to him. She assures Kaufman that he is not a bad person. Her remark is meant to be a somewhat summarizing description of Kaufman's position as an entertainer. Her assurance that "there isn't a real you" seems to make him happy again and reminds him that he has cut his own path, because he wanted to. Furthermore, the unwillingness to divert his course actually defines his character.⁵⁴⁰ At this point, the fall of Andy Kaufman as an entertainer is already brought to an end. Although the diagnosis of cancer and his deteriorating health might illustrate a further decline, his rise to posthumous fame has already and paradoxically started. Members of his audiences are asked to touch his "celebrity cyst", which he happens to palpate after he has just recovered confidence.⁵⁴¹ Kaufman embellishes the macabre idea of charging people for touching his cyst: he despairingly tells them that *TAXI* has just recently been cancelled. In fact, he was very happy when he found out about the show's cancellation. In addition, he even tells the audience that his wife left him and took away the kids. All of this might be really funny to the viewers of the film. In the next scene, however, the

⁵³⁸ Sequence 22.

⁵³⁹ Sequence 23.

⁵⁴⁰ That this scene is debatable concerning Kaufman's depiction has already been mentioned earlier and will not be considered again.

⁵⁴¹ Sequence 24.

mood takes a turn for the worse. Kaufman meets with his friends at four o'clock in the morning to tell them that he has been diagnosed with a rare form of lung cancer. This time, the offstage scene probably offers the most private Kaufman of the entire film. The desire to depict Kaufman – the entertainer *and* the private person – as being constituted by an absence of a coherent self is not fulfilled at this point. His friends' attempts to reveal another trick fail and what is left is inevitably perceived as the private or even 'real' Kaufman. With respect to this, the following scene with Lynne Margulies is of vast importance. Andy is watching an episode of *Lassie* and Lynne is sitting behind him. The first sentence we can hear is: "We want the truth, boy. The truth!" It is uttered by some yet unknown man as part of the action of the episode. A little boy responds that he claimed that Lassie bit him because his father had told him to say so. Next, a close-up of Lassie and after that a close-up of the judge is shown on the TV-set. The judge's summarizing words finally reveal that Lassie never bit the boy and that the case is thus dismissed. The theme song from *Lassie* is heard. It is the same music which was heard in sequence 1 of the biopic. The action and music of the *Lassie* scene symbolize 'truth' and thus we have come full circle. The claim to tell the 'truth' about Andy Kaufman is fulfilled. Not only is the diagnosis of cancer confirmed. It is also revealed that at this moment Kaufman is not playing a role. Consequently, he is as close to a 'private' Kaufman, who is no longer playing any roles, as possible.

The *Lassie* scene once again shows that the claim to be as close to the original as possible by offering every detail available, automatically and paradoxically had to result in a depiction less close to the original. The attempt to present Kaufman as being constituted by a lack of a 'real' self can no longer be maintained. All of a sudden there is a private Kaufman, who is no longer playing a role. As a consequence, this leads to the loss of Kaufman's subversive potential in general, because he is no longer a threatening performer difficult to grasp.

The depiction of Kaufman's rise to a somewhat legendary fame has already begun. The performance in which Kaufman charges people to touch his cyst marks the point at which the doomed Kaufman initiates his rise to a legendary status as an entertainer. Making his cyst a devotional object, he anticipates his posthumous acknowledgement as an icon. The Carnegie Hall performance emphasizes his status, too. The spectacular performance also illustrates the point of reconciliation between Kaufman and his contemporary audiences.⁵⁴² In an attempt to create a purely positive

⁵⁴² As was mentioned before, the film does not reflect the chronology of events: in fact, the Carnegie Hall concert took place in 1979.

program, Kaufman re-approaches his audience in order to escape that atmosphere of negative energy he feels surrounded by. And again, Shapiro is the voice of reason. He reminds Kaufman that the negative energy is a result of what he has created. Thus, they discard all macabre ideas for the show and, in the end, the Carnegie Hall performance sparkles with 'positive energy'. The 'group singing' is a reminiscence of 'before-wrestling-times' and cuts to members of the audience emphasize that people appreciate how Kaufman conjures up images of the 'good old days'. Lynne Margulies and George Shapiro are amongst people in the audience and happily observe Kaufman's last concert. Up to this point, the concert is a huge and appreciated success. However, there must certainly be one moment that spoils the cheerful sentiment. The last surviving member of the little girls on hobby horses (they are shown on a large screen) appears. Kaufman asks the 94 years old lady to do the dance with the hobby horse once more and begins to conduct the orchestra. He exaggeratedly encourages the orchestra to play faster and faster and the old lady is forced to pick up the pace. The length of the performance alerts the audience and the viewers of the film and we must suspect that something is about to go wrong. Thus, feelings of suspicion are directed towards Kaufman once more. The final breakdown of the old lady and Kaufman's ignorance – he gets a little carried away with the baton – confront the audience and the viewer of the film with the distressing insight that Kaufman's 'positive-energy-concept' should not have been trusted. Whether the spectators take the death of the old lady for real or suspect another tasteless joke, Kaufman's performance immediately seems to be a 'gone-too-far- performance'. This perception sharply contrasts with the positive atmosphere so gratefully seized at the beginning of the concert. Nevertheless, the audience's nerves are not strained for very long. As soon as the doctor pronounces the old lady dead, Kaufman appears with a huge Indian headdress. He dances some supposedly ritual dance and howls like an Indian. He 'manages' to resurrect the old lady with this ritual and the audience is immediately reconciled with Kaufman. As a consequence, the resulting cheerful mood can be topped again and again. The 'Mormon Tabernacle Choir' singing a Christmas song, the dance and drill team 'The Roquettes', and finally Santa Claus gliding in from the ceiling and covering the audience with glitter confetti surpass each other in splendor. In order to top everything else, Kaufman invites the entire audience to milk and cookies. Buses are waiting outside ready to depart. The Carnegie Hall concert ends with a scene in the cafeteria. Kaufman and his girlfriend happily watch the excited audience. The slow motion used in some parts of the scene

illustrates Kaufman's supposedly last cheerful moment and thus the highlight of his career.

The entire concert represents Kaufman's concept of comedy as he understood it: having the audience experience a range of emotions and making them as happy as children in the end. In fact, this is exactly his intention when he plans and discusses the concert with Zmuda and Shapiro. He wants to make people regress to childhood days.⁵⁴³ The dramatic death of the old lady is needed to include the experience of different emotions. As a result, people are even happier than they would have been without the dramatic incident. The overall impression of the concert is that the period of struggles and backlashes is over and Kaufman's concept of humor is finally understood and appreciated. Audiences are ready to forgive and finally acknowledge Kaufman in the face of his inevitable death. As was mentioned earlier, the Carnegie Hall concert actually took place in 1979 – years before Kaufman's death. Used as a filmic device to soften the inevitable sad ending of the film, the fictitious concert dulcifies Kaufman's troublesome last months and his death. He dies a happy man in the film and his death is definitely not perceived as his final triumphant escape. He re-approaches his audiences after a period of frustrations and backlashes and is thus presented as the originator of his 'posthumous career' as a legendary entertainer. Instead of escaping the audience one last time as the preferable opportunity to being predictable, Kaufman and his audience mutually agree on a compromise – the performance at Carnegie Hall. The media's reaction certainly reflects that some people still do not really trust Kaufman.⁵⁴⁴ There seems to be a slight chance that Kaufman faked his illness and death. Clifton's performance in the last sequence hints at Kaufman's existence, too. However, the fact that people cry for Kaufman shows that audiences are reconciled with him and that they want him back. They no longer disapprove of his macabre humor. The viewers of the biopic can relate to the audiences' feelings, because they have grown emotionally attached to Kaufman. They acknowledge the importance of Kaufman's comedy and mourn the loss of this entertainer.

Much emphasis is put on Kaufman's different attempts to find cure – orthodox medicine as well as spiritual methods of healing. Kaufman desperately tries to get hold of his newly-discovered positive attitude. In a conversation with Shapiro the pale and weak Kaufman, who has already lost his hair, even talks about his new plans for a children's program. Thus, the viewer of the film perceives his desperate last weeks, his

⁵⁴³ Sequence 26.

⁵⁴⁴ Sequence 25.

physical decline, and the final death as the last steps of a man reconciled with his audiences. He seems satisfied and happy with his position as an entertainer who has paved the way to legendary fame himself. The detailed depiction of the journey to the Philippines is meant to point out Kaufman's despair. His desperate attitude reflects his will to survive. On the Philippines, the healer Kaufman consults uses a trick to cure his patients. He pretends to pull bloody pieces of flesh from the patient's torso, but these are taken from a large bowl and hidden in a towel. This might be interpreted as an ironic allusion to Kaufman's habit of tricking his audiences and thus reflects that not every hoax necessarily proves successful – just like in Kaufman's career. The last impression of Kaufman is that of a man laughing – in fact it seems as if Kaufman dies laughing right there on the healer's bench. This last image is morphed into a close-up of the dead Kaufman's face. Kaufman is thus depicted as having had his last laugh. On the other hand, we get the impression that he realized the irony of the healer's trick. Kaufman's last laughter thus illustrates the filmmakers' coup of showing both a man who realized his mistakes and a man who carried out his concept until the end.

The funeral reunites all people who have ever met and worked with Andy Kaufman. The mourners are instructed by Kaufman himself how to deal with his death. On a large video screen, Kaufman appears and encourages people to sing along. The viewer of the biopic immediately recognizes the black and white image from the initial two sequences of the film and thus the wheel turns full circle. People are asked to sing "It's a friendly world". The words of the song reflect Kaufman's positive attitude and all people at the funeral are asked to hold hands. The entire scene illustrates Kaufman's journey to legendary fame. He was the one who initiated it and now he further consolidates it. By using the same image as in the initial sequences of the biopic, the viewer perceives the film as consistently organized. Andy Kaufman introduced the biopic about himself and he also brings it to an end. Thus, despite all obstacles towards the end of his career, he is the one who is in control and who presents a consistently thought-out concept that is maintained throughout the film, until the end, and beyond.

The eventual differentiation between Clifton and Kaufman was hinted at earlier, when the ill Kaufman privately performed as Clifton claiming that Andy was sick.⁵⁴⁵ The last sequence of the film finally confirms that Clifton has separated himself from Kaufman, but is used to prolong Kaufman's fame. The afterimage of Kaufman singing on the video screen at the funeral can still be seen, when a year later a large limousine approaches a night club and a person with a well-known pink jacket gets off the car

⁵⁴⁵ Sequence 29.

hiding his face underneath a paper bag. First, Clifton shoots the audience's enthusiasm down. He tells them to bring flashlights and shovels if they want to see Andy Kaufman. Then, Clifton begins to sing the song "I will survive". At first glance this song might demonstrate Clifton's eventual taking over, but a closer look, however, reveals that this song illustrates how in Clifton Kaufman is going to live on. Kaufman's afterimage at the beginning of Clifton's performance and the last image of Kaufman's neon-light pictogram seem to confirm this assumption.⁵⁴⁶ Clifton's repeated staccato of the line 'I will survive' accompanies the close-up on several neon-light pictograms of famous and legendary comedians. The very last one is Andy Kaufman's pictogram. Thus, Kaufman's status as a legendary entertainer is confirmed. The camera's pan across the audience reveals that Bob Zmuda is among the people in the audience – it cannot possibly be him onstage and the secret will never be disclosed. In fact, the performances of Tony Clifton starting about a year after Kaufman's death were impersonated by Bob Zmuda, as he reveals in his biography of Kaufman.⁵⁴⁷ In the biopic, however, this very last surprising revelation symbolically summarizes the film's message and thus Kaufman's comedy: when it comes to Andy Kaufman you should never trust what you see.

⁵⁴⁶ F. Keller mentions the negative effects of this depiction. According to him, it illustrates how Kaufman "[...] cannot escape from being uncannily outlived by his own personae [...]" which leads to a status of being 'undead' instead of immortal. See F. Keller, 162. I will discuss Keller's interpretation in my chapter on the legacy of Andy Kaufman.

⁵⁴⁷ Zmuda, 289.

**C 5. “A movie nearly as ambiguous as Kaufman himself”⁵⁴⁸
– The Reception of *Man on the Moon***

The dilemma of offering each and every detail on the one hand and presenting Kaufman as the enigma without a definite manifestation on the other resembles the media’s reaction to the film’s debut in December of 1999. In a year offering a broad variety of different films – ranging from *Stuart Little* and *Toy Story II* to *Sleepy Hollow*, *Girl Interrupted*, *Anna and the King*, *Snow Falling on Cedars*, *The Green Mile*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, or *Any Given Sunday*, to name only a few – the press does not seem to find a consensus regarding *Man on the Moon* either. Some find that the film is “[...] nearly as ambiguous as Kaufman himself”⁵⁴⁹, but do not recognize that the excess of revelations results in the loss of Kaufman’s subversive potential. This is exactly what others emphasize: “The film is content simply to delineate the different roles Kaufman played and the immediate motives that apparently lay behind each one”.⁵⁵⁰ However, some journalists even complain about the filmmakers’ failure to “[...] delve more deeply into Kaufman’s life and times.”⁵⁵¹ In general, the latter seems to be the most common complaint concerning the film: the lack of private insights, the distance kept between Kaufman and the viewers of the film, and the little information about Kaufman’s inner life. *San Francisco Chronicle* journalist Mick LaSalle criticizes how “*Man on the Moon* is lost when it comes to Kaufman’s inner life and motivations.”⁵⁵² Elsewhere, critics miss social context and comment that “the filmmakers don’t even attempt to give Kaufman an inner life”⁵⁵³ and that the film “[...] offers no clues about what made him tick.”⁵⁵⁴ Similarly, the absence of a definite answer to the question who Kaufman actually was, is said to limit “[...] the film’s ability to give Kaufman three dimensions.”⁵⁵⁵

The criticism summarized above can probably be traced back to the fact that the film deviates from expected biopic-standards. *Man on the Moon* is classified as an anti-

⁵⁴⁸ J. Ressler: “The Odd Fellows. The Unconventional life of Andy Kaufman proves perfect for Hollywood’s Boswells of the offbeat”, in: *New York Times*, December 31, 1999.

⁵⁴⁹ J. Ressler.

⁵⁵⁰ D. Walsh: “But here one earth...”, January 8, 2000.
http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/jan2000/moon-j08_prn.shtml.

⁵⁵¹ D. Walsh.

⁵⁵² M. LaSalle: “Mystery Man. Despite Carrey’s best efforts, comedian Andy Kaufman remains an enigma”, in: *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 22, 1999.

⁵⁵³ J. Hoberman: “End Games. Stone Muddles Huddle, Carrey Conjures Kaufman; Taymor Shakes Spears”, December 22-28, 1999. http://www.villagevoice.com/generic/show_print.php.

⁵⁵⁴ S. Holden: “CRITIC’S NOTEBOOK; Films Glow, Independently”, in: *New York Times*, January 7, 2000.

⁵⁵⁵ J. Maslin: “FILM REVIEW; Exploring the Outer Limits of an Odd Comedic Universe”, in: *New York Times*, December 22, 1999.

biopic; a biographical picture “of someone who doesn’t really deserve one”.⁵⁵⁶ Some critics recognize the resulting tension: “[...] a Hollywood biography about a most un-Hollywood guy”.⁵⁵⁷ Others call the very existence of the biopic into question: “[...] why watch Carrey do his imitation, why not simply seek out filmed versions of Kaufman’s own performances?”⁵⁵⁸ The ‘standard’ criteria of the genre biopic are certainly not met if the protagonist is meant to remain a mystery. But does this really prove true in *Man on the Moon*? David Walsh, for instance, argues that presenting Kaufman as the enigma with no definite manifestation is “[...] an example of giving up before you begin.”⁵⁵⁹ In fact, it is pointed out right from the beginning of the film (sequences 1 and 2) that the absence of one consistent self and the multitude of selves instead represent Kaufman’s personality. In my opinion, no detailed depiction of his character is necessary because presenting Kaufman as a ‘conceptual enigma’ is what constitutes his character. Walsh suggests that *Man on the Moon* should have used biographical material to shed light on Kaufman’s “fascination with whatever was the opposite of Great Neck”.⁵⁶⁰ Some more details could probably have explained his comedy as a reaction to his upbringing: a childhood and adolescence caught in between the luxury of postwar American life and living in a Jewish family in the face of recent history. Indeed, the film does not pay tribute to Kaufman’s roots nor does it focus much on how his past might have influenced his comedy. Walsh concludes that the filmmakers’ plan to set “Kaufman’s particular ‘genius’ outside the bounds of the comprehensible [making him] the ‘man on the moon’”⁵⁶¹ represents a vain attempt to circumvent the search for Kaufman’s secret motivations. Would the quest for more intimate biographical details really have helped to explain the comedy of Andy Kaufman? In my opinion, the opposite is the case: the offstage scenes already reveal too much information so that a great deal of Kaufman’s subversive potential gets lost in the film. An attempt to find more biographical details to psychologically explain Kaufman’s concept of humor would have enlarged the gap between the viewers of the film and the contemporary audiences even further. As a result, the last bit of mysterious and subversive power would be lost. Kaufman’s position as a comedian with a threatening program that endangered moral standards and challenged the limits of ‘good taste’ would be reduced to the role of a goofy weirdo, if he were completely explained. As a consequence, I come to the conclusion that the

⁵⁵⁶ J. Ressler.

⁵⁵⁷ M. LaSalle.

⁵⁵⁸ D. Walsh.

⁵⁵⁹ D. Walsh.

⁵⁶⁰ D. Walsh.

⁵⁶¹ D. Walsh.

film's attempt to accept Kaufman as a conundrum and to depict him as that is the right choice.⁵⁶² At least a bit of Kaufman's subversive power is delivered to today's viewers.

The objection which certainly has to be discussed is that original material might be preferable to watching Carrey's impersonation. As a *San Francisco Chronicle* critic writes: "Fans of Kaufman's may prefer to watch the real thing, and the uninitiated might not be interested."⁵⁶³ One could argue that a Hollywood biopic is quite a promising method to resurrect a celebrity. It is comfortable and easily accessible. In addition, it might be a reasonable method to convince people who have never heard of Kaufman to find out about one of the pioneers of stand-up comedy. It is probably the only way to capture the 'uninitiated' and a promising method to attach posthumous significance to a widely misunderstood comedian. Furthermore, a biopic arouses just the affection and interest Kaufman would have deserved during his lifetime. And indeed, as a *Washington Post* critic writes – although not convinced whether Kaufman's comedy was worth a biopic – "[...] there's no question we leave the movie with a new affection for Andy Kaufman [...]"⁵⁶⁴ The biopic presents the mysterious Kaufman and his threatening comedy to those who are unfamiliar with this comedian and "[...] as an introduction – or a reminder – of a singular talent, it has its appeal."⁵⁶⁵ Despite its weakness of offering way too much explanatory material, the mere idea of depicting Kaufman as an enigma explains the concept of Kaufman's humor. Viewers who are completely unacquainted with Kaufman might receive an entertaining impression of his comedy, even though the threatening character of Kaufman's performances is softened if not lost. It is correct that "there's a sense of that genius in *Man on the Moon* [...]"⁵⁶⁶ to those people who are unacquainted with Kaufman and also to those people who are familiar with his material. However, to both there might be "[...] even more to be found in *Andy's Fun House*"⁵⁶⁷ or other original material.

Whereas original material relentlessly displays the threatening character of Kaufman's performances, in the film "[...] a quality of mischief is absent".⁵⁶⁸ Carrey's performance – although widely recognized as outstandingly and almost uncannily brilliant – might have Kaufman appear all too likeable. The softening character of the offstage scenes certainly makes people forget that some people used to hate Kaufman. There is another obvious problem: Jim Carrey as *the* funny man might not be the perfect

⁵⁶² "Man on the Moon poses the central Kaufman enigma", as J. Hoberman writes.

⁵⁶³ M. LaSalle.

⁵⁶⁴ D. Howe: "A Star Turn in 'Moon'", in: *Washington Post*, December 24, 1999.

⁵⁶⁵ M. La Salle.

⁵⁶⁶ J. Hoberman.

⁵⁶⁷ J. Hoberman.

⁵⁶⁸ M. LaSalle.

choice to depict Kaufman because the film and its hero are immediately classified *funny*. Without a doubt, Carrey's portrayal of Kaufman – and regarding this point, critics agree – is of “[...] dispassionate, ultimately hypnotizing objectivity.”⁵⁶⁹ Elsewhere, Carrey's performance is praised, because he “[...] replicates Kaufman with uncanny precision.”⁵⁷⁰ There are even a few anecdotes claiming that Carrey asked for two separate trailers during the filming – one for Kaufman and one for Clifton. Of course, they are not to be taken completely seriously. However, these anecdotes charmingly illustrate that “Carrey simply did not exist during the film.”⁵⁷¹ The most convincing argument in favor of Jim Carrey as Andy Kaufman comes from *New York Times* critic Janet Maslin: “[...] time has turned Kaufman into a hugely influential avatar of confrontational comedy. Jim Carrey, to name just one spiritual descendant, would not be possible without him.”⁵⁷² Taking this statement as a starting point, I understand Kaufman as one of the pioneers of subversive stand-up comedy. In the following chapter, I will analyze his position and legacy as a comedian who displayed social criticism in an unusual way. Kaufman's legacy has been initiated, confirmed, and manifested by the biopic *Man on the Moon*. Despite its weaknesses, it is still as ambiguous as Kaufman and it “[...] gives us Andy, the pop postmodernist, and permits us to make what we will of him, which is a fascinating activity.”⁵⁷³

⁵⁶⁹ R. Schickel: “A Paean To A Pop Postmodernist”.

⁵⁷⁰ D. Howe, also see J. Maslin: “FILM REVIEW; Exploring the Outer Limits”, J. Ressler, or J. Hoberman.

⁵⁷¹ F. Decaro: “STYLE OVER SUBSTANCE; Split Personalities Can Be Better Than One”, in: *New York Times*, October 17, 1999. Also see: M. Orecklin: “People”, in: *New York Times*, October 5, 1999. In a *Rolling Stone* article, it is reported how footage of Carrey getting carried away as Kaufman and Clifton was shown at a celebration of his life and work at the House of Blues in 2004. See: C. Rubin: “Andy Kaufman: Still Dead. Friends pay tribute to late eccentric comic”, in: *Rolling Stone*, posted May 17, 2004, article taken from http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/6053649/andy_kaufman_still_dead

⁵⁷² J. Maslin: “FILM REVIEW; Exploring the Outer Limits”.

⁵⁷³ R. Schickel: “A Paean To A Pop Postmodernist”.

C 6. The “[...] avatar of confrontational comedy”⁵⁷⁴ – The Legacy of Andy Kaufman

Andy Kaufman crossed limits and stepped into new and unexplored territory just to surprisingly jump back into familiar territory a moment later. Jim Carrey, Kaufman’s impersonator in the biopic *Man on the Moon*, calls Kaufman one of the comedians who not only opened the doors but slammed them down to explore new and yet unknown areas.⁵⁷⁵ Critics complain that *Man on the Moon* does not offer insights into Kaufman’s inner life and motivations. They argue that in the biopic Kaufman is situated outside the comprehensible: on the moon. These critics seem to miss one important point. Andy Kaufman is the ‘man on the moon’ not because he and his comedy are incomprehensible and should thus be metaphorically situated as far away as possible, but because he is one of the pioneers of comedy. Kaufman symbolizes the American desire to explore new territory, to move the frontier, and to expand the inhabited areas. The United States’ landing on the moon in 1969 suitably reflects this very American desire to explore new territory. Thus, the filmmakers’ choice to let Kaufman be the ‘man on the moon’ seems to be the perfect symbolic act to characterize Kaufman as an American comedian who curiously crossed limits and explored new territory.

Pioneers are daring and are willing to take risks. Kaufman took the risk of losing the audiences’ appreciation and his chance to appear in public places and on TV. He sometimes was absolutely incomprehensible and thus called into question the established standards of stand-up comedy. “He is continually questioning, then undermining the idea of what is funny. ‘Andy takes a lot of risks,’ Zmuda says. ‘What performer in his right mind would go onstage and deliberately bomb?’”⁵⁷⁶ In fact, other performers also took risks and refrained from delivering what was expected of the average performer. Lenny Bruce is just one impressive example. With his daring act, his outspokenness concerning taboo subjects and the incorporation of foul language, Bruce had to face the loss of sympathies, the loss of his freedom of speech, or even the loss of his personal freedom. However, he knew about the impact of his criticism and tried to accept the challenge. By contrast, Kaufman’s criticism did not pose a clear and obvious threat. Something about his act was as threatening as the mirror Bruce held up to people’s faces, but it was a threat which was somewhat blurred and hard to grasp. It was

⁵⁷⁴ J. Maslin: “FILM REVIEW; Exploring the outer limits”.

⁵⁷⁵ “He’s one of those guys that kicks the door down and goes ‘You know what? It doesn’t have to be that normal set-up, you know, punch line – reaction. It doesn’t have to be that.’” See the extras section on the DVD *Man on the Moon*: interview with Jim Carrey.

⁵⁷⁶ T. Clifton: “Laughter from the Toy Chest”.

something people could not get hold of, let alone explain and understand at first. The incomprehensible nature of his performances, and the difficulty to understand why exactly his act was threatening made Kaufman's comedy even more subversive than Bruce's ever was. Summing up the results of my analysis, Kaufman's at first sight strange behavior onstage exaggerated literal conformity and thus satirized the superficial demands of a society addicted to shallow entertainment. His performances seemed to reflect complete non-conformity and people disapproved of his routines. Nevertheless, his comedy possessed considerable potential to severely criticize American society. Kaufman even used somewhat simple strategies of humor. He created sudden incongruities by offering the least expected. Sometimes, he surprisingly did exactly what people expected. He utilized repetition and stiff movements to create comical effects thus following the Bergsonian idea of the unnatural covering and contradicting the vivid flow of life. In general, Kaufman reduced comedy and hence the contemporary audiences' expectations to its purest forms: childish singing, lip-synching, and dancing. Even *Foreign Man* and Tony Clifton took the audiences' demands literally and satirically enacted their superficial demand for shallow entertainment. Furthermore, as Florian Keller remarks, both *Foreign Man* and Tony Clifton represent the American Dream ideology of having the opportunity to become successful. "[...] they both are clearly discernable as representations of "proverbial' American identities"⁵⁷⁷: *Foreign Man* came as the immigrant to the 'land of limitless opportunities', and Tony Clifton is from Las Vegas – the city that symbolizes success, fame, and luxury. However, the satirical approach could only be perceived as threatening non-conformity. *Foreign Man* and Tony Clifton represented failure and thus questioned American society's demand for standard entertainment. Moreover, they satirized the American myth of success and happiness. As Keller states:

[...] Kaufman's strange performances were too uncannily familiar in the context of American culture, because what Kaufman staged, however in an excessively literal way, was precisely the ideological core text that defines America's cultural identity.⁵⁷⁸

Keller refers to Kaufman's range of characters and his endless recreations when he suggests that they incarnate the idea of the American Dream. At the end of the day, Keller's interpretation of Kaufman as the "fundamentalist American dreamer"⁵⁷⁹ might be a suitable one. However, it is applicable to the 'end-product', the 'concept of criticism' which Kaufman symbolizes – when judged in retrospect. It seems

⁵⁷⁷ F. Keller, 81.

⁵⁷⁸ F. Keller, 46.

⁵⁷⁹ F. Keller, 47.

inappropriate when talking about the Andy Kaufman contemporary audiences had to deal with. My analysis has shown that individual performances always provided a moment of revelation at some point in the performance and thus made people realize and confront their previous misperceptions which in fact reflected their failure to perceive satire. I do not agree with Keller, who states that Kaufman does not use humor to communicate criticism. According to Keller, Kaufman's performance is "[...] not critically detached from the cultural topography that it questions [and] Kaufman's cultural criticism consists in the fact that he incarnates the very kernel of America's most potent ideology".⁵⁸⁰ In my opinion, Kaufman uses humor to have the audience experience a moment of critical self-reflection. His strategies of humor are explicable with acknowledged and quite timeless theories of humor. Although this approach might be a bit unusual at first, the revealing moment and the resulting laughter vividly illustrate how Kaufman makes use of strategies of humor in order to teach people something. The revealing moment of each individual performance and the confrontation with previous misperceptions make people perceive Kaufman's criticism of American society's superficial demand for shallow entertainment and the underlying attempt to gloss over problems smoldering beneath the surface. The staging of failure such as that of *Foreign Man* and the following transformation into the all-American performer Elvis Presley *explicitly* questions the myth of the American Dream. There are various hints in this performance which show that Kaufman criticizes tongue in cheek. Consequently, Kaufman *does* stand aside from his material and can thus be called a comedian detached from the material he presents, which is something Keller does not seem to have considered.

If we consider the coexistence of Kaufman's many different characters, Keller's idea seems reasonable. The series of creating confusion, dissolving, questioning the dissolution, and thus creating new confusion made Kaufman seem mysterious and unpredictable. It might be understood as symbolizing the American Dream: everyone has got the opportunity to make it to stardom and to reach an immortal status. If that fails, there is always the chance to invent a new version of oneself until this final objective is achieved. The idea of recreation can definitely be traced in Kaufman's behavior. However, if we consider contemporary audiences and how they must have perceived Kaufman, this interpretation seems problematical. Whereas single performances revealed that Kaufman critically stood aside from his material, Kaufman's maniac desire to escape categorization did not make any sense to contemporary

⁵⁸⁰ F. Keller, 47.

audiences. Once Kaufman's escapes began to annoy the audiences and there were less and less revealing moments, people simply withdrew their attention and thus sanctioned the entertainer. In the end, even the 'master of illusions and manipulations' (most of them made possible with the help of the media) had to realize that without the necessary attention, his strategy of escaping did not make any sense to a contemporary audience. Keller agrees at this point:

[...] Kaufman enacted too literally the fantasy of permanent self-invention as represented by the American Dream, but at the same time, his performance art was also not literal enough for himself to survive in the commercial context of comedy.⁵⁸¹

As a consequence, death seems to be the last drastic option to finally win and triumphantly escape. Keller's interpretation of Kaufman as *the American Dreamer* should be briefly summarized at this point. According to him, the American Dream is defined as the possibility to achieve a status of immortality through stardom. If that fails, one can create a new self and simply try again. The inconsistency of this mythological concept is that it implies the acceptance of one's mortality. Thus, "[...] the traumatic recognition of mortality functions as the inherent stain of the American Dream, which needs to be precluded for the ideology to remain operative."⁵⁸² Furthermore, according to Keller, the production of an endless series of selves results in the unhealthy proliferation of identities and the subject finally turns into "serial-subjects".⁵⁸³ Kaufman represents the "[...] fact that our self is bound to multiply and dissolve in the process of these self-inventions."⁵⁸⁴ By taking off mask after mask it is revealed that no kernel exists. Thus, the reinvention of the self finally results in the dissolution, or death of the subject. Keller eventually comes to the conclusion that the existence of Kaufman's several characters means that he is "the serial subject who resists dying, as he is endlessly suspended in the space between his personae."⁵⁸⁵ Correspondingly, Keller states that the ending of *Man on the Moon* symbolizes that the endless recreations resulted in Kaufman's inability to escape one of his own personae – Tony Clifton. Clifton outlives him, which, as a consequence, shows that the American Dream ideology fatally leads to a status of being 'undead' instead of being immortal. The neon light pictogram of Kaufman, which is actually the very last frame of the film, is thus undermined by Clifton's physical presence.

⁵⁸¹ F. Keller, 104.

⁵⁸² F. Keller, 66.

⁵⁸³ In other words, "[...] the alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter's fragmentation." F. Jameson: *Postmodernism or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999, 14.

⁵⁸⁴ F. Keller, 103.

⁵⁸⁵ F. Keller, 161.

In my opinion, the suggestion that Kaufman represents the American ideology of self-invention to reach immortal fame and pursue happiness was not clearly visible for contemporary audiences. In fact, the series of self-inventions was a development for the worse. The likeable characters disappeared and cleared the way for offensive ones. We are speaking of characters that were booed off the stage and that led to Kaufman's decline in the end. To what extent can a development to publicly hated selves, which absorbed the likeable versions, represent the ideological possibility of reaching fame and thus immortality? This is certainly what Keller had in mind: Kaufman represents the inconsistency and thus the failure of that ideology. I must say it again: judged in retrospect, Kaufman's concept of criticism is a brilliant and sharp method to symbolize the myth of the American Dream and its inconsistency. It suitably calls into question the dynamics of a postmodern society in which the death of the subject (as a result of endless recreations) yields the maintenance of America's defining ideology.

As the fundamentalist 'believer' who takes the ideological imperative of the American Dream by its word, Kaufman is also victimized by it, and necessarily so, because this Dream is a fantasmatic narrative and, therefore, ultimately impossible.⁵⁸⁶

However, as my evaluation of the reception of Kaufman's comedy has shown, the development of offensive and unpopular characters was perceived as an escape from categorization and not as criticism of that predominant American ideology. Kaufman's comedy criticized the conventions of stand-up comedy and people's superficial demand for shallow entertainment.⁵⁸⁷ A hint of that criticism suggested by Keller can be traced in a typical *Foreign Man* performance. *Foreign Man's* supposed failure obviously satirizes the myth of the immigrant coming 'from rags to riches'. However, Keller's suggestion that "Kaufman took the American injunction to 'live the Dream' by its word, and thus became the performer of a version of the American Dream that was too literal (and too familiar) for the public to bear [...]"⁵⁸⁸ seems a bit too abstract concerning the Kaufman contemporary audiences had to deal with. His escapes from being a likeable and appreciated comedian are understood as criticism of inertness and as a satirical display of the desire to be entertained in the most conventional, comprehensible, and thus comfortable way. As a consequence, his escapist stunts illustrate the wish to remain the surprising comedian who utilizes his unpredictability to criticize. The avoidance of appreciation and categorization dominated Kaufman's public career, and as that it was perceived. As long as the public was given enough hints to understand his escapes, his

⁵⁸⁶ F. Keller, 106.

⁵⁸⁷ The dancing, singing, and lip-synching should serve as examples.

⁵⁸⁸ F. Keller, 104.

concept of criticism was visible and understandable. However, people were not given any clues about the wrestling and thus Kaufman's behavior turned out to be senseless so that people withdrew their attention. His maniac intrusion into the wrestling circuit was disapproved of and labeled as annoying, unfunny, and stupid. It is not very likely that his nonetheless conformist adaptation of existing rules was perceived as part of a satirical program that was meant to show how he literally acted out the American Dream. In fact, his immersion into this other world could only be interpreted as illustrating the final death of the subject. Since people were not given any clues about the wrestling until fifteen years later, Kaufman got lost in that world. It simply meant the end of his career. Analogous to Keller's interpretation of the ending of the biopic, Kaufman's wrestling adventure means some kind of dead-end. It is like a black hole in which he falls without having achieved immortality. He leaves the stage unpopular, and thus somehow 'undead'. He is trapped in one of his identities and does not seem to be able to escape once again. As a consequence, his death does not enable him to escape his status of being 'undead' instead of immortal, because the wrestling is not yet demystified.

The biopic *Man on the Moon* and its crucial revelation concerning the wrestling hoax eventually give sense to Kaufman's last escape and thus grant him the status of immortality. Despite its excess of revelations, the film finally points out what could not be recognized towards the end of Kaufman's career. Kaufman's status and impact as a pioneer and precursor is eventually acknowledged. The 'undead' person is put to rest and can be resurrected as that revolutionary forerunner who explored new territory and opened doors for generations of new comedians. His critical stance towards the American society finally makes sense. Judged in retrospect and with the restrictions mentioned above, even his questioning of the American Dream ideology reveals its significance.

Man on the Moon is, despite its weaknesses, a long-overdue recognition of a comedian who was a true pioneer and whose followers can be found until today and not only in the American entertainment scene. Comedian Tom Green's 'wedding' to actress Drew Barrymore on *Saturday Night Live* is just one example. The wedding was canceled because Barrymore supposedly got 'cold feet' just minutes before and the press and audiences were left confused wondering whether the whole incident had been completely staged or not. The confrontational comedy of British entertainer Sacha Baron Cohen and his alter egos *Borat*, *Ali G*, and *Bruno* seems like a true homage to Kaufman's comedy. Popular German entertainers such as the comedians and late night

talkers Harald Schmidt and Stefan Raab seem to prove Kaufman's iconoclast status and after-effect, too. In a somewhat original reminiscence of Kaufman's *Great Gatsby* performance, Schmidt once had his audience read Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, whereas Raab boxed against German Flyweight Champion Regina Halmich in two celebrated TV spectacles.

In the end, Kaufman should be remembered as another pioneer of stand-up comedy who was dismissed by contemporary audiences once his performances became unbearable. He crossed limits to explore new territory and paved the way for following comedians. Again, the postulate cited in Collins and Skover's account of Lenny Bruce's life and achievements is suitable to conclude the analysis: "Posthumous sainthood comes only to those whom the living could not face."⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁹ R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 8.

Conclusion

The recognition that ‘only’ those artists reach a status of posthumous fame that were faced with rejection and denial during their lifetime emphasizes the position of stand-up comedians within American society.⁵⁹⁰ Their performances reflect current problems, fears, and uncertainties of a particular era. It is their mission to juggle the duties of a critic and the pleasures of an entertainer and to confront audiences with current topics of social and political relevance. In a postmodern society in which “[...] the importance and power of the mass media and popular culture means that they govern and shape all other forms of social relationships”⁵⁹¹, critical stand-up comedy plays a decisive role. Popular culture is here understood as the entirety of all profitable products and their corresponding interdependencies that are thrown on the market to encourage consumption.⁵⁹² These products depend on mass media distribution which leads to “[...] a postmodern popular culture which celebrates consumerism, hedonism, and style.”⁵⁹³ Stand-up comedians form part of a postmodern popular culture and thus “[...] provide the means by which people define themselves in their changing world”.⁵⁹⁴ However, stand-up comedians also take up a critical stance. They might criticize that all products of popular culture are consumed for their image and less for their actual use which may lead to a state in which the only ‘concept of reality’ that exists is one created and encouraged by the mass media. As Strinati points out, not only do the media play “[...] some part in constructing our sense of social reality, and our sense of being part of this reality [...]”⁵⁹⁵ but “[...] only the media can constitute our sense of reality.”⁵⁹⁶ As entertainers of postmodern culture, both Lenny Bruce and Andy Kaufman formed part of the popular culture industry and at the same time managed to question the media-dominated construction of ‘reality’.

The two stand-up comedians confronted audiences with their hypocritical morals and values in order to achieve a “revolution in consciousness”⁵⁹⁷ (Bruce) or with

⁵⁹⁰ This statement refers to Collins and Skover’s aforementioned remark that “Posthumous sainthood,” [...] “comes only to those whom the living could not face.” R. K. L. Collins/ D. M. Skover, 8.

⁵⁹¹ D. Strinati: *An Introduction to Theories of Poplar Culture*. London/ New York: Routledge, 1995, 223 f. “[...] everything in our social life - from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself - can be said to have become ‘cultural’ [...]”, see F. Jameson, 48.

⁵⁹² See A. McRobbie: *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*. London/ New York: Routledge, 1994, 17.

⁵⁹³ D. Strinati, 236.

⁵⁹⁴ R. B. Browne: “The Dynamics of Popular Culture Studies”, in: P. Freese/ M. Porsche (eds.): *Popular Culture in the United States*. Essen: Verlag Die Blaue Eule, 1994, 32 f.

⁵⁹⁵ D. Strinati, 224.

⁵⁹⁶ D. Strinati, 224.

⁵⁹⁷ R. Ehrlich: *Norman Mailer: The Radical as Hipster*. Metuchen, N. J. & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1978, 8.

their naïve demands (Kaufman) by using strategies of humor. In the course of this study, Bruce's performances were analyzed with regard to their comical effects. I explained and exemplified that in a typical Bruce performance individual and collective suppressed urges are dug up and released after the censorship has been convinced by the stunning logic of Bruce's argumentation. Bruce's radical performances revealed the hypocrisy of Cold War America trying to ignore the present danger of a nuclear war smoldering beneath the idyllic and prosperous surface. Lenny Bruce used vile or vulgar language to arouse attention and create tension necessary to finally release suppressed urges. As was shown in the chapter on Bruce's reception, his words and how he arranged them – his strategic means to convey his messages – were taken out of context in order to ban the performer from stage. The hypocritical attempt to officially silence the rebel failed to dismiss Bruce as an outstanding artist. Instead, it showed that Bruce's ideas and methods were as effective as they were necessary. I have been able to show that Bruce's impact as a critic should not be separated from his achievements as a comedian. Instead of focusing on the critical content of his material only, my detailed analysis of his strategies of humor showed that Bruce brilliantly knew how to apply his strategic means in order to have his audiences experience a self-reflexive rethinking of former restrictions and to realize the need to release suppressions. The attempt to trace Bruce's strategies of humor revealed the intensity of his messages, which is also useful to explain the enduring significance of Bruce's comedy for today's audiences.

My analysis of the biopic *Lenny* showed how, on the one hand, the whitewashed version of Bruce in the film reflects the hypocritical posthumous recognition of Bruce and how on the other hand, his strategies of humor can be of importance for today's viewers. Despite its flaws, the biopic offers a glimpse into an important era of the past and introduces a comedian whose material still seems to be highly relevant today. The restrictions that popular music, radio, film, and television are still confronted with seem to indicate that Bruce's message is still relevant today: it is the suppression of words and topics that gives them the power.

Andy Kaufman's material, which seems to be so entirely different from Bruce's routines, was very critical and satirical, too. By offering at first sight incomprehensible material such as seemingly naïve and pointless singing and dancing or supposedly failing performers (*Foreign Man*), he satirized American society's demand for shallow entertainment. He offered people a chance to confront their superficiality and to experience self-reflection and reconsideration. His escapist stunts as attempts to evade categorization ridiculed people's superficial demands for entertainment that was easy to

digest. However, his final escape into the world of wrestling seemed pointless and eventually made him fall into oblivion. His play with ‘concepts of reality’ – the destruction of what is, the creation of something new and the destruction of it once again – satirizes the media-dominated society of postmodern America in the most obvious manner. His understanding of comedy illustrates a satirical “celebration of socially constructed reality – not just of social reality, but of all reality.”⁵⁹⁸ Apart from his ability to control people’s immediate reactions, he also used the media to influence his perception and reception. The confusion Tony Clifton caused is an obvious example of this. However, the escape into the world of wrestling became too absurd for contemporary audiences and Kaufman was unable to regain control. In the end, people were more powerful than him, which in fact illustrates the relevance of Kaufman’s criticism of a media-dominated postmodern society. The release of the biopic *Man on the Moon* finally helped resurrect the rejected entertainer and manifest his well-deserved status as a pioneer of comedy. Not until then was Kaufman’s significance as a comedian who satirized postmodern society fully acknowledged. There are certainly obvious weaknesses: the ambiguous attempt to reveal everything and have the viewers experience Kaufman’s comedy as intensely as possible at the same time, for instance. Nevertheless, *Man on the Moon* emphasizes that Kaufman’s unique tactics of undermining conventions, creating new modes of stand-up comedy and destroying them once again, deserve recognition in the history of stand-up comedy.

It is the pioneer character – the courage to cross limits – which characterizes the comedy of both comedians. Moreover, they convincingly applied their strategies of humor in order to convey a satirical and critical message to audiences of the corresponding era. The refusal to be called comedians quoted in the introduction to this study seems to reflect the troublesome perception and reception of Bruce and Kaufman rather than be a serious self-characterization. Instead of recognizing the irony in these somewhat desperate refusals to be considered comedians, these crucial statements seem to have initiated an evaluation of the two entertainers which has frequently neglected their outstanding application of strategies of humor.

The premise of this study was that a stand-up comedian’s performances need to be analyzed with regard to the comedian’s actual comical means. Hence, it was possible to show how these comical means gave the impetus to individual and self-reflexive reconsideration. Even decades later, the strategies of humor still seem to work. My

⁵⁹⁸ A. A. Berger: *Television as an Instrument of Terror. Essays on Media, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*. New Brunswick, N. J.: Transactions Books, 1980, 152.

analyses of the biopics show the endurance of these strategies of humor and, consequently, even the up-to-the-minute relevance of the implied criticism. Bruce and Kaufman's comedy does not seem to be sharply restricted to a certain period of time – Bruce's 'Are There Any Niggers Here Tonight' performance, for example, makes us cringe even today. In addition, their comedy is not just exclusively funny and relevant to American society. The lasting applicability and impact of their strategies of humor suggests that any kind of viewer of the Western world, regardless of nationality or decade, might be able to experience what original audiences must have felt and even associate it with current topics. However, as no empirical data is available to prove this, further studies might clarify this point. In general, it seems worthwhile to analyze strategies of humor of fellow or following comedians to really understand their material. Moreover, the enduring applicability of certain strategies of humor can be revealed to emphasize the comedians' relevance for later generations.

Appendix

1. To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb

(Transcript of track 1 on the Audio CD *To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb*, also see M. Damon: “The Jewish Entertainer as Cultural Lightning Rod: The Case of Lenny Bruce”, *Postmodern Culture* 7:2, 1997, <http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.197/damon.197> (18.09.2006) or see L. Bruce/ J. Cohen (ed.): *The Essential Lenny Bruce*. London: Open Gate Books, 1973, 137-140 for a slightly different version.)

Toooooo is a preposition

To is a preposition, Come is a verb.

To is a preposition, Come is a verb.

To is a preposition, Come is a verb.

The verb intransitive.

To Come.

To Come.

I've heard these two words my whole adult life,
and as a kid when I thought I was sleeping.

To Come.

To Come.

It's been like a big drum solo.

Did you come? Did you come good?

Didja come good?

Didja come good?

Didja come good?

Didja come good?

Didja come good?

Didja come good?

Didja come good?

Recitatif: I come better with you sweetheart than with anyone in the whole goddamn world.

I really came so good. I really came so good 'cause I love you.

Really came so good. I come better with you sweetheart, than anyone in the whole wide world, I really came so good. So good.

BUT

Don't come in me.

Don't come in me.

Don't come imme, mimme, mimme

Don't come imme, mimme, mimme

Don't come in me.

Don't come imme, mimme

Don't come in me, mimme

I CAN'T COME.

Cause you don't love me, that's why you can't come.

I love you I just can't come, that's my hangup. I can't come when I'm loaded, all right?

Cause you don't love me.

Just what the hell is the matter with you? What has that got to do with loving you? I just can't come, that's all.

Now, if anyone in this room or the world finds those two words decadent, obscene, immoral, amoral, asexual, the words “to come” really make you feel uncomfortable, if

you think I'm rank for saying it to you, and you the beholder gets rank for listening to it, you probably can't come.

2. Las Vegas Tits and Ass

(Excerpt from L. Bruce/ J. Cohen (ed.): *The Essential Lenny Bruce*. London: Open Gate Books, 1973, 43-45)

Now. You'd assume that in a society that says, "Alright, this is clean; this is dirty" – that in the entertainment capital of that society, the entertainment capital of the world, Las Vegas, that the attraction would be the most austere. What's the attraction at Las Vegas?

"Well, at the Stardust we have the Passion Play."

"Correct; then they're consistent. What follows the Passion Play?"

"Well, I think they're having a Monet exhibit, then Eugene Ormandy and the New York City ballet. It's a very spiritual type of show.

Is that the attraction that all the purists support in Las Vegas?

No. What's the attraction? Tits and ass.

"*I beg your pardon?*"

"Ah, tits and ass, that's what the attraction is."

"*Just tits and ass?*"

"Oh, no. An Apache team and tits and ass."

"Well, that's about all I actually go to see – the Apache team. And that's just one hotel. What's the second biggest attraction?"

"More tits and ass."

"*Get off it!* The third?"

"Tits and ass, and more ass, and tits, and ass and tits and ass and tits and ass."

"Do you mean to tell me that *Life* magazine would devote three full pages to tits and ass?"

"Yes. Right next to the article by Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale. *Life* and *Look* and *Nugget* and *Rogue* and *Dude* and *Cavalier* and *Swank* and *Gent* and *Pageant* (the Legion of Decency's *Playboy*) and millions of other stroke books – the antecedent to *Playboy*, *National Geographic* with the African chicks – oh yes, they're stroke books."

[...]

"Ah, well, that may be the truth, but you just can't put TTTS AND ASS NITELY up on the marquee outside on the strip."

"Why not?"

"*Why not!* Cause it's *dirty* and *vulgar*, that's why not!"

"Titties are dirty and vulgar? Well, they're not to me. I like to hug'em and kiss'em."

"No, you're not going to bait me. It's not the titties, it's the words, the way you relate."

"I don't believe you. I believe to you it's the titty that's dirty. Cause I'll change the words to TUCHUSES and NAY-NAYS NITELY."

"HMMMM. That's a little better."

"Well, you're not anti-semitic. That's point one for you. But how about making it very austere – Latin: GLUTIUS MAXIMUS AND PECTORALIS MAJORS NITELY."

"Now that's clean!"

"To you, schmuck, but it's dirty to the Latins. And the fact that you're an illiterate doesn't get you off the hook."

“Well, I don’t care what you say; you just can’t put TITS AND ASS up there. You have to do something a little, ah
 –LA NOVELLE VOGUE! LA PARISIENNE!”
 “Ah, the Follies! Lou Walters! French tits and ass. Class with ass.”
 “I’ll buy that. Unless I can have something patriotic – how about THE MOST AMERICAN GIRLS IN THE WORLD?”
 “American tits and ass – Grandma Moses’ tits and Norman Rockwell’s ass: draw my ass and win a Buick. [...]

(Wrong spelling, as for instance, ‘Glutius maximus’ and ‘pectoralis majors’ is identical with the Bruce/ Cohen transcripts)

3. Are There Any Niggers Here Tonight?

(Excerpt from L. Bruce/J. Cohen (ed.): *The Essential Lenny Bruce*. London: Open Gate Books, 1973, 78 f.)

[...] are there any niggers here tonight?

[*Outraged whisper*] “*What did he say?* ‘Are there any *niggers* here tonight?’ Jesus Christ! Is that *cruel*. Does he have to go that low for laughs? Wow! Have I ever talked about the *schwarzes* when the *schwarzes* had gone home? Or spoken about the Moulonjohns when they’d left? Or placated some Southerner by absence of voice when he ranted about *nigger nigger nigger?*”

Are there any niggers here tonight? I know that one nigger who works here, I see him back there. Oh, there’s two niggers, customers, and, ah, *aha!* Between those two niggers sits one kike – man thank God for the kike!

Uh, two kikes. That’s two kikes, and three niggers, and one spic. One spic – two, three spics. One mick. One mick, one spic, one hick, thick, funky, spunky boogey. And there’s another kike. Three kikes. Three kikes, one guinea, one greaseball. Three greaseballs, two guineas, one hunky funky, lace-curtain Irish mick. That mick spic hunky funky boogey.

Two guineas plus three greaseballs and four boogeys makes usually three spics. Minus two Yid spic Polack funky spunky Polacks.

AUCTIONEER: Five more niggers! Five more niggers!

GAMBLER: I pass with six niggers and eight micks and four spics.

The point? That the word’s suppression gives it the power, the violence, the viciousness. If President Kennedy got on television and said, “Tonight I’d like to introduce the niggers in my cabinet,” and he yelled “niggerniggerniggerniggerniggerniggernigger” at every nigger he saw, “boogeyboogeyboogeyboogeyboogey”, “niggerniggernigger” till nigger didn’t mean anything any more, till nigger lost its meaning – you’d never make any four-year old nigger cry when he came home from school.

Screw “Negro!” Oh, it’s so good to say, “Nigger!” Boy!

“Hello, Mr. Nigger, how’re you?”

4. Religions Inc.

(Excerpt from L. Bruce/J. Cohen (ed.): *The Essential Lenny Bruce*. London: Open Gate Books, 1973, 18-23)

We take you now to the headquarters of Religion Incorporated. And, seated around the desk on Madison Avenue, sit the new religious leaders of our country: Oral Roberts, Olin Jagers, Billy Graham, Patamunzo Yogananda, Herb Jeffries, Danny Thomas and Eddie Cantor, Jane Russell, Frances Farmer, Pat O'Brien and General Sarnoff and the other people who feel insecure in industry. [...]

Religion, big business. We hear H.A Allen addressing the tight little group on Madison Avenue.:

[*Southern Accent*]: Good evening gentlemen. Nice to see so many boys heah tonight. Most of yew religious leaders ah haven't seen in many yeuhs. [...]

Ah, the greyaph heah tells the stawry. That's about it. Faw the fust time in twelve yeuhs, Catholicism is up nine points. Judaism is up fifteen. The big P., the Pentecostal, is stahntina move [...]

AIDE: 'Scuse me sir, your long-distance call just came in from overseas. [...]

ROBERTS: Alright...Ah got a lawng distance cawl in heah from headquarters, the Vatican – ah'll tawk to yew boys latuh...Yes opuratoh, this is Oral Roberts...Yes, yes, alright, ah'll take the chahges...yeah...yeah...HELLO JOHNNY! WHAT'S SHAKIN BABY?...yeah...Meant to congratulate you on the election...yeah...That puff of white smoke was a genius stroke. Was in the papuhs faw six days heah...Great! ...We got an eight-page layout with Viceroy – “The New Pope Is A Thinking Man.” Ah'll send ya a tear sheet on it...yeah...yeah...Same old jazz...How's your Old Lady? No, nobody's onna phone...Listen, Ah hate to bug ya, but they're buggin us again with that dumb integration...NO, AH DUNNO why the hell they wanna go to school eithuh...yeah that school bus scene...Well, we hadda givem the bus, but theah's two toilets on each bus...that's what's spending awl the money. We got awl toilets for evvribuddi. An we got some mo advances – we gotta new bus that drives from the back...yeah...yeah...BUT THAT'S IT!...Yeas...They keep saying, Integration, make the religious leaduhs tawk about it...No...Yes...No they donwannany quaotations from the Bahble. They wannus to come out an *say* things. Say Let Them Go To School With Them...No you *dunno* whatthehell is going on heah!...Ah, ah *did* Walkin Across The Watuh!...Yeah, an the Stop The War Scene. He said, “Thou shalt not kill means just that, it doesn't mean Amend section A, it means stop war”...Ah *did* Snake inna Cane too. Ah did em awl ah'm telling yew...BUT THEY'RE BUGGIN US!...STEVENSON! THAT BAWLBUSTUH!...Yeah, ah know it...No ah ain't getting snotty but we gotta *dew* something!...WELL WHATTHEHELL YEW THINK AH CAWLED YA FAW?...YEAH!

POPE: *Dominus vobiscum populus succubus...*

ROBERTS: SURE, THAT'S EASY FAW YEW TO SAY, YOU'RE OVUH THEAH!...Yeah...Yeah we got the deal with Langendorff, the daily bread scene...Yeah...Yeah...Don't lie to me!...Yeah...Yeah...Yeah...Listen, Listen, hold on a minute, heah?

[*Aside*] Hey, Billi! Yew wanna say somethin to em?...

[*Back on phone*] Billi wants to know if yew can get him a deal on one o those Dago spawts cahs....Ferali or some dumb thing...yeah...yeah...[...]
When ya comin' to the coast? I can get the Steve Allen Show the nineteenth...Matinee Theatre dropped...Jus wave, thass awl. Wear the big ring...yeah...yeah...yeah...yeah...O.K., Sweetie...yeah...Yew cool it tew...NO, NOBODY KNOWS YOU'RE JEWISH!

5. Sequence Graph: *Lenny*

Lenny (1972), a Marvin Worth production based on a script by Julian Barry, was directed by Bob Fosse, starring Dustin Hoffman as Lenny Bruce and Valerie Perrine as Honey Harlowe. The edition at hand is an MGM DVD. (The following subdivision does not correspond with the chapters on the DVD.)

Min'Sec	Sequences
00'00	Exposition (1) Interview Honey (2) Performance Lenny Bruce (F)* (3) Interview and strip performance Honey
06'24	Getting to know each other and coming closer (4) First encounter (5) Performance Lenny and interview Honey (6) Party and at the hotel (7) Performance Lenny (F) (8) First morning and interview Honey
14'24	Relationship and influences on the relationship (9) Beginning of the relationship (10) Interview Honey and performance Lenny (F) (11) Interview with manager und conflict with mother Sally (12) Visiting Sally
23'24	First marital arguments (13) The „double act“, performance Lenny (F) and interview Honey
25'19	Development of the entertainer Lenny Bruce (14) Conflict with entertainer Sherman Hart (15) Performance Lenny (F)
30'40	Honey's car accident (16) After the accident, Lenny's affair and performance Lenny (F) (17) Departure to California and interview Honey
36'46	Drug abuse and end of marriage (18) Conflicts resulting from threesome, separation, reconciliation/performance Lenny (F) (19) Interview Honey, talking about daughter Kitty
46'00	Lenny Bruce after divorce (20) Lenny and Kitty, performance Lenny (F), interview Honey (21) Honey under the influence and performance Lenny (F)
55'15	Lenny the entertainer (22) Sally intervenes and first contract (23) First success (24) Lenny visits Honey in prison
69'18	Arrests and trials (25) Performance Lenny and first arrest (26) Interviews with Honey, Sally, and manager (27) The trial, some performances and the verdict
85'44	Drug addiction and decline (28) Return Honey and Honey and Lenny under the influence of drugs (29) Performance under the influence of drugs and loss of popularity (30) Trials, performances and loss of control (31) Death and final interviews
105'40	Closing credits
106'33	End

* (F) indicates foreshadowing of a later performance

6. Sequence Description: *Lenny*

Sequence 1, Interview with Honey Harlowe: Close-up on Honey Harlowe's lips. After a few seconds she begins to speak and tells the interviewer that Lenny Bruce got arrested at least nine or ten times.

Sequence 2, Performance Lenny Bruce (F): Lenny Bruce, a bearded comedian, is shown onstage in a night club. His performance is about American society's dealing with sexually transmitted diseases. The screen fades to black and while Lenny's words are heard from the off, the opening credits appear.

Sequence 3, Interview and performance Honey: Honey on a sofa. She answers a ghost interviewer's questions. She narrates when and where she and Bruce met. Afterwards a long strip performance of Honey is shown; it is accompanied by Jazz music.

Sequence 4, First encounter Honey and Lenny: Lenny and Honey see each other for the first time in a cafeteria, both accompanied by others. Both ask their company about the other person. Although Lenny is described as a very bad comedian, they immediately seem to like each other.

Sequence 5, Performance Lenny and Interview Honey: Young Lenny, not sporting a beard yet, tells bad jokes in front of a bored audience. Honey states that the reason why she liked Lenny was that "He was just huggable".

Sequence 6, Party and at the hotel: Lenny and Honey are at a party. In the background Jazz music can be heard, people are drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana. The scene reflects a rather relaxed mood. Lenny and Honey exchange long and intense glances across the room and leave the party together in the end. They go to a hotel and find out that both have booked a room in the very same hotel. They end up in the same room.

Sequence 7, Performance Lenny (F): The performance resembles that of sequence 2. This time the topic is the expression 'Fuck you'. According to Bruce, this expression cannot be called an insult since it does not describe a negative action. He improvises example situations, such as a telephone call with his parents. He first asks them how they are doing and then greets them with a 'Fuck you'.

Sequence 8, First morning and interview Honey: Lenny is shaving in front of a mirror while Honey is still in bed. Both seem very happy and Lenny realizes that he can hardly believe that she is with him. He claims to be such a shy guy and starts pulling away her blanket. In order to overcome the problem with his shyness, he slips back under the blanket instead of going to work. In the following interview sequence Honey comments this scene by telling the interviewer that "It was quite a week!"

Sequence 9, Beginning of the relationship: Lenny and Honey are in bed. Lenny asks her to come along and meet his mother. This inquiry results in an outburst of happy giggles of the two of them. Afterwards Honey tells the interviewer that she had work to do in Miami and how happy she was when Lenny came to visit her one day.

Sequence 10, Interview Honey and performance Lenny (F): Lenny is lovingly decorating a hotel room with dozens of flower bouquets. This action is repeatedly interrupted by a foreshadowing performance in which he states that "Everyone got that one chick who really busted up our ass." Honey approaches the hotel room door and is amazed when she sees the flowers and delighted because she knows that Lenny has arrived. She poses naked in between the flower decorations and when he finally opens the door she calls his "big boy" to join her. The scene is interrupted by another foreshadowing performance, in which Lenny satirizes a married couple's conversation about the issue "You don't touch it anymore."

Sequence 11, Interview with manager and conflict with mother Sally: We see Lenny's manager – his name is Artie Silver as we later find out – who tells the interviewer how difficult it was for him to decide to what extent he was supposed and allowed to tamper with Lenny's personal life. Nevertheless, in the next scene we observe how he tries to persuade Lenny on the phone to leave Honey because of her doubtful reputation. Lenny's mother Sally appears for the first time. She is sitting in the manager's office during the phone call, and we realize that she initiated the call. Shortly after, Lenny surprises Honey with a wedding proposal. In the following interview, Honey talks delightedly about her wedding dress and the ceremony.

Sequence 12, Visiting Sally: Lenny and Honey are expected for a visit. Lenny's aunt Mema watches from out of an apartment window how Lenny and Honey are talking in a car. Sally, whirling across the kitchen in between steaming pots and pans, calls over to Mema: "Give her a chance". Mema keeps wondering what exactly the two in the car are talking about. We see a short interview with Sally. She remarks: "Oh, I knew all about her." However, she is determined to leave the decision to her son. In the meantime, Lenny is preparing Honey for the visit. Honey is scared; a point which is emphasized by a short interview sequence in which Honey talks about the problems with meeting the fiancé's relatives. Finally, they are all sitting around a table and, as Lenny had predicted, it is Sally who takes over the conversation. She tells stories about Lenny's first performance. She pushed him into going onstage – without having prepared him. Lenny interrupts her every once in a while, since he already knows every word of those stories. Especially the story about Lenny's first embarrassing appearance onstage encourages laughter; however, Sally's laughter seems fake. Mema remains in stony silence. Only twice does she throw in a question: "How long had the two of you known each other before you got married?" The first time this question is thrown in, Sally saves the day by simply ignoring the question. She keeps telling her stories as if nothing has happened. The second inquiry provokes Honey to talk back to Mema

with a cheeky “About half an hour. I picked him up on the D-train after he exposed his putz to me” which results in Lenny and Sally’s hysterical laughter. Sally yells “Oh, Lenny, she’s a terrific girl” and Mema leaves the room. Lenny yells “Feh Feh” – an imitation of Mema’s habit.

Sequence 13, The “double act”, performance Lenny (F) and interview Honey: The following topic is introduced by a foreshadowing performance of Lenny: He talks about the problem of men when their girl-friends become their wives. Afterwards we see Lenny and Honey driving in a car, all the while arguing about Honey’s job as a stripper. Lenny wants Honey to stop. She is quite amused about his jealousy. Cut to the performance. Lenny is now talking about the issue of men only liking sexy women as long as they are not their own wives. Back in the car, Honey agrees to try a double act with Lenny. He is supposed to do comedy and she is supposed to sing. In the following interview sequence she states that the act proved quite successful.

Sequence 14, Conflict with entertainer Sherman Hart: Sherman Hart, an already very successful and influential entertainer, echoes Honey’s last statement from the preceding sequence. The scene takes place at a swimming pool; Hart is sitting opposite Lenny and Honey – in bathrobes – and congratulates Lenny on his clean humor. Hart puts his hand on Honey’s naked thigh and we find out why the three of them have come together. During a previous performance the microphone picked up something Bruce had not meant the audience to hear (“And now for my jacket off bit”). The ambiguity of this statement outraged the audience and in order to make up for this faux pas, Hart gives Bruce the opportunity to apologize onstage next time. In the next scene, it at first seems as if Lenny is going to do as he was asked to do. And indeed, he apologizes. But a second later he bursts out “I think, I’m gonna piss on you”. Afterwards, outside in the pouring rain, Lenny and Sherman Hart yell at each other and threaten to ruin one another before Lenny and Honey laughingly leave in their car.

Sequence 15, Performance Lenny (F): A foreshadowing performance reflects the topic “What is dirty and what is clean?” Lenny compares the plot of pornographic films to the depiction of a murder in a film and thus demonstrates that pornography cannot be called “dirty” because it reflects love. By contrast, a murder reflects hate.

Sequence 16, After the accident, Lenny’s affair and performance Lenny (F): Lenny and Honey have a terrible car accident. Lenny remains uninjured but has to fear for his wife’s life, for she is covered with blood. He desperately calls for help. In an inserted interview Honey tells us about the severity of her injuries. Next, we see Lenny waiting in the hospital and getting to know an attractive nurse. Shortly after, they start an affair. A foreshadowing performance illustrates Lenny’s attitude towards affairs in a marriage: “If you really love your wife, deny it.” Parts of this performance alternate with scenes from Honey’s recovery, her discharge from hospital and how she finds out about the affair. Then, interview bits with Honey – she interprets Lenny’s affairs as lack of self-confidence – alternate with the very same performance of Lenny. He repeats his credo: “Deny it” and “They believe you, because they wanna believe you.”

Sequence 17, Departure to California, interview Honey: Lenny gives Honey a black Cadillac as a present when she finally leaves the hospital and they happily head off to California and settle down. In the following interview Honey starts talking about problems with narcotics for the first time. Impressions of the experimental entertainment scene Lenny and Honey were part of are shown.

Sequence 18, Conflicts resulting from threesome, separation, reconciliation/performance Lenny (F): Honey hesitantly admits: “You do things on dope that normally don’t come to your mind”. Next, Lenny and Honey are shown in bed. Lenny wants to persuade Honey to give a threesome a try. He repeatedly asks her if she loves him and thus puts pressure on her. The following scene shows the couple with another woman. The scene is not accompanied by music and lasts a couple of minutes. After that, a foreshadowing performance about lesbians in general and wives with lesbian interests in particular alternates with a heated argument between Lenny and Honey. Many accusations are made (he admits his unfaithfulness and accuses her of having had bisexual interests and experiences before) and many tears are shed. The discussion ends up in a split and yet another reconciliation.

Sequence 19, Interview Honey, talking about daughter Kitty: Honey tells the interviewer that the couple went on splitting up and getting back together and that a child was supposed to save the marriage.

Sequence 20, Lenny and Kitty, performance Lenny (F), interview Honey: Kitty is now a year old and Lenny is sitting with her in a Chinese restaurant. They are waiting for Honey to return, but she is late. When she finally arrives she is high and cannot take care of her child. Transition to a similar scene in the same restaurant: Again, Lenny and Kitty are alone. When their order is ready to be picked up and the waiter asks for Lenny’s wife, we discover that the couple is already divorced. In the following foreshadowing performance Lenny tries to overcome the divorce by talking about the problems and hardships of single dads. The performance is interrupted by an interview with Honey, who at first denies that it was her fault that the child was taken away from her but then admits that she was no longer able to take care of Kitty.

Sequence 21, Honey under the influence and performance Lenny (F): Lenny is feeding Kitty, who is now about two years old, when Honey calls on the phone. She is high on drugs and in a devastated state. Lenny cannot help her anymore. In Lenny’s next performance (F) he comments upon the subtitles of the pictures that capture the Kennedy assassination (“Never for an instant did she [Jackie Kennedy] think of

flight”). He denounces the hypocritical portrayal of Jackie Kennedy’s behaviour. He emphasizes his point by saying “People don’t stay”, which also accounts for his personal situation.

Sequence 22, Sally intervenes and first contract: In an interview, Sally talks about how a Jewish mother is determined to help her son. We see a few performances of various strippers in a night club; Lenny is the one who announces the strippers. In between announcements, behind the stage with Sally, Lenny negotiates a contract. When he re-enters the stage he proudly tells the crowd that he is about to leave to become a big star.

Sequence 23, first success: In an interview, Sally tells us how Lenny started to improvise onstage. For the first time, we see performances that are on the same level as the ones we have already become acquainted with from the foreshadowing performances. They cover a wide range of topics: “Eisenhower and the bomb”, “Homosexuals in prison”, “Are there any niggers here tonight?” and “The Jew – one who killed our Lord”. In the following negotiations Lenny is depicted as a successful comedian. An interview with a *TIME* journalist enhances this impression. In the following performance, Lenny talks about an article in which he is described as the “sick comic Lenny Bruce”. The label ‘sick’ evokes his association with unequal payment of different professions. He compares the salary of a school teacher to that of an entertainer. This is what he refers to as really sick.

Sequence 24, Lenny visits Honey in prison: Lenny shows Honey some pictures of Kitty. While they are chatting, she finds out that he is cheating on her again. However, she is impressed when he shows her his first record album and enthusiastically tells him that she will be released from prison earlier than she had thought.

Sequence 25, Performance Lenny and first arrests: Performance Lenny: it is about the unfair treatment of two homosexual school teachers. Immediately after the performance he is arrested due to the use of the word “cocksucking” in public.

Sequence 26, Interviews with Honey, Sally and manager: All three of them point out Lenny’s success and fame and how he enjoyed his life as a famous comedian.

Sequence 27, The trial, some performances and the verdict: Lenny’s trial is documented in detail, his admirers as well as his opponents state their opinion. Additionally, tape recordings are played in court. Some of them illustrate how Lenny included the incidents in court in his performances (circumvention of the word “cocksucking” by saying “blah blah blah” instead). The jury finally agrees on the verdict ‘not guilty’. Neither the jury nor Lenny seems happy with the acquittal. When Lenny picks up Honey from prison he moans “I wanted to win it on the first amendment”. Honey’s memories of how happy she was and the manager’s reminiscences about Lenny’s success conclude this sequence.

Sequence 28, Return Honey and Honey and Lenny under the influence of drugs: In tears, Honey confesses in an interview that she kept relapsing. In the following scene we see Honey and Lenny high on narcotics, giggling, and hardly able to stand or walk. Lenny is actually supposed to soon go onstage. Sally’s accusations are ignored and responded to with giggles.

Sequence 29, Performance under the influence of drugs and loss of popularity: Lenny enters the stage wearing a coat, thus demonstrating that he is ready for his next arrest. He is nervous and unable to focus on any of his thoughts. He loses track of his ideas in mid-sentence and his audience responds with uncomfortable silence. The physical and mental decline of Lenny Bruce seems obvious. After the performance, he vomits and gets arrested on the spot.

Sequence 30, Trials, performances and loss of control: In the following performances all Lenny talks about are his trials, which finally results in the loss of popularity. In an interview, his manager confirms Lenny’s decreasing fame. He states that Lenny, who by now was a sick man, kept getting bad reviews. In another interview, Sally points out Lenny’s illness. The following interview with Honey reveals that she had lost control once more. She explains how she kept getting arrested due to drug abuse and that she was admitted to psychiatry. Extracts from some performances show Lenny’s despair. He dismisses his lawyers and completely loses his faith in justice. Eventually, he asks for his verdict.

Sequence 31, Death and final interviews: We see a shot of Lenny’s naked body lying dead on the floor in his house. In the following interview, Sally denies the possibility of suicide and argues that he was happy and about to start a diet. We see a flashback showing a happy Lenny waving goodbye to his family who are leaving in a car. A short insertion of a sooty spoon on the rim of a sink and flashbacks showing happy moments of Lenny and Honey (the flower scene in the hotel) alternate with interview sequences of Honey (“He was just so damn funny”) and the manager who talks about his plans for a biographical picture. At the end of each interview, the ghost interviewer thanks his interview partner and turns off the recorder. The last shot of the film shows Lenny’s dead body and the screen fades to black.

7. Sequence Graph: *Man on the Moon*

Man on the Moon (Universal Pictures, 1999), a Shapiro/ West production based on a screenplay by Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski, was directed by Milos Forman, starring Jim Carrey as Andy Kaufman, Paul Giamatti as Bob Zmuda, Danny DeVito as George Shapiro, and Courtney Love as Lynne Margulies. The edition at hand is a Concorde Home Entertainment DVD.

(The following subdivision does not correspond with the chapters on the DVD.)

Min'Sec	Sequences
00'32	Exposition (1) "foreign man" (2) "Andy Kaufman"
04'20	Childhood (3) 'Home videos' (4) Andy and his father, Andy and his sister Carol
06'16	Andy Kaufman's first performances (5) Performance "The Cow goes Moo", discussion with club owner (6) Performance "Foreign Man turns into Elvis Presley" (7) Encounter with George Shapiro, phone call Tony Clifton (8) Meditation and "Mighty Mouse" performance (9) Shapiro and Kaufman negotiate a role on the sitcom <i>TAXI</i>
24'00	Tony Clifton (10) First performance Tony Clifton (11) Revelation: Tony Clifton <i>is</i> Andy Kaufman
30'00	First rebellion (12) Scenes from <i>TAXI</i> and discussion with Zmuda (13) The "Kaufman-Special" (14) Performance "The Great Gatsby"
41'13	Second rebellion (15) Dismissal from Sitcom <i>TAXI</i> caused by Tony Clifton (16) Performance Clifton <i>and</i> Kaufman at the same time
52'54	Wrestling (17) The birth of an idea: "Wrestling against women" (18) First wrestling matches and encounter with Lynne Margulies (19) Staged fight with Foxy Jackson and introduction Jerry Lawler (20) Live Show <i>Friday's</i> (21) Fight against Lawler
76'33	Loss of popularity (22) Dismissal from <i>Saturday Night Live</i> (23) Dismissal from Transcendental Meditation Group
82'18	The illness (24) First reactions (25) Reactions of friends, family, and media (26) Planning the Carnegie Hall performance
90'54	Carnegie Hall (27) "Death" of the old lady (28) Revelation and happiest moment
96'36	Andy Kaufman's last journey (29) Attempts to find cure, re-appearance of Tony Clifton (30) Visit to the Philippines (31) Funeral (32) Performance Tony Clifton
107'50	Closing credits
113'49	End

8. Sequence Description: *Man on the Moon*

Sequence 1, 'foreign man': In front of a black screen a person wearing a light shaded jacket and a turtle neck appears. After a few seconds, he begins to speak with a foreign accent and introduces himself as 'Andy Kaufman'. He announces to show a film he has made. It is a film he did not like in the end so that he had to cut out most of its content. In fact, he remarks, the film had to be reduced to its ending, or to be more precise, the closing credits. He asks the audience to leave and turns to his right to operate a record player. The theme song of *Lassie* accompanies the closing credits which start rolling on the left side of the screen. The closing credits stop every time the music ends and start rolling when 'Andy Kaufman' puts the needle back on the record player. Finally, he leaves.

Sequence 2, 'Andy Kaufman': He 're-enters the screen' from the left and is happy to see that the viewers have not left. He now talks with a different voice and explains that the preceding scene was a trick to get rid of those viewers who would not have understood him anyway. He points out that he actually likes his film very much and that he is now going to show it. He then takes a look through a camera that is on the left side of him. At this moment R.E.M.'s song "Man on the Moon" begins.

Sequence 3, 'Home videos': The viewer joins Kaufman's insight: scenes from his childhood are shown. The blurry scenes in pale colors simulate original biographical material. A shot of the house in Great Neck, Long Island is followed by shots of the car, his siblings and father. When his mother is shown in the kitchen, the 'home video'-style vanishes, the scene 'comes to life' and the action of the film begins.

Sequence 4, Andy and his father, Andy and his sister Carol: The mother is in the kitchen when Kaufman's father comes home from work. He immediately asks if Andy is in his room. Judging by the looks on their faces, both of them seem to be worried. Mr. Kaufman approaches little Andy's upstairs room and even before he opens the door, Andy's voice can be heard. The approximately eight-year-old boy is jumping up and down on his bed, commenting on an imaginary sports show. His father asks him to play outside instead and enjoy the company of other children. Andy's desperate claim that he has to do his shows is met with his father's demand that his shows are only allowed if they take place in front of real audiences. Consequently, Andy pulls his little sister Carol into his room and performs the children's song "The Cow goes Moo" together with her. She takes on the task of imitating the animal sounds. When she is supposed to roar like a lion, we hear a real lion's roar.

Sequence 5, Performance "The Cow goes Moo", discussion with club owner: Cut to a scene in a night club. A corpulent man is shown, sitting on a stool at the bar. His yawn matches the roar that was used to link the scene with the preceding one. The audience is unexcitedly watching how the grown-up Andy Kaufman performs "The Cow goes Moo". Some people hesitantly participate and seem annoyed and bored. After the show, the club owner asks Andy to come on over and talk to him. He tells him that he has to let him go. They discuss the point of Kaufman's performance and what an average audience might think is funny. Kaufman refuses to understand the exemplary joke told by the club owner ("Why did the Siamese twins go to England? Because then the other one could drive"). Andy's reply: "Why didn't the other one just learn how to drive?"). The club owner suggests marital problems and the traffic as more adequate topics for a comedy performance. Kaufman leaves the club, smiling knowingly outside on the backstreet.

Sequence 6, Performance "Foreign Man turns into Elvis Presley": Andy enters a different night club stage; this time he speaks with the foreign accent the viewer is acquainted with from sequence 1. He talks about the traffic and his wife's bad cooking. He is not at all funny. Next, he announces an imitation of Jimmy Carter. During the imitation he keeps his foreign accent. Then, he tells the audience that he will now imitate Elvis Presley. He turns around and, accompanied by impressive music (*Richard Strauss'* "Thus Spake Zarathustra"), he begins to rip off his costume revealing a different, glittery and Elvis-like costume underneath. He does a brilliant and convincing imitation of Elvis Presley. The audience responds with enthusiasm. When the applause subsides, Kaufman thanks the audience again with his foreign accent. ("Tenk you veddy much?").

Sequence 7, Encounter with George Shapiro, first appearance of Tony Clifton: George Shapiro, who was also a guest in the club, is looking for Andy behind the stage. While they are talking, Kaufman keeps his accent. Shapiro offers to manage Kaufman, but not until Kaufman realizes who he is talking to does he reveal that *Foreign Man* was a parody. During a business lunch Kaufman states his ambitions: he understands himself as a "song and dance man" and seeks to play Carnegie Hall. During the conversation, a booger is sticking to one of Kaufman's nostrils. Shapiro is very uncomfortable with the situation. In an unobserved moment, Kaufman switches the booger to his other nostril. When Shapiro finally decides to tell Kaufman that something is sticking to his nose, Kaufman takes the booger and sticks it to a piece of advertisement and remarks that he is planning to sell this little piece of art once he is famous. At this moment, Shapiro realizes "You're insane. But you might also be brilliant." In the next scene, Shapiro receives a call from some unknown Tony Clifton. Clifton yells at him and calls Andy Kaufman a psychopath.

Sequence 8, Meditation and "Mighty Mouse" performance: Andy attends a meeting of Transcendental Meditation and asks the teacher for the secret to being funny. His answer is "silence". Kaufman puts this

answer into action in his next performance. His parents are in the audience, too. Kaufman is up onstage and remains still and silent. He keeps staring at his audience. The audience and Kaufman's parents are growing increasingly nervous. He finally operates a record player and the *Mighty Mouse* theme song resounds. Andy remains mute and still up to the line "Here I come to save the day". Only then does he lip-synch the lyrics and imitate a singer by moving his left arm. After that, he falls back into silence. When the chorus resounds once more, he again lip-synchs the line "Here I come to save the day" and moves his arm. In the end, the audience cheers enthusiastically.

Sequence 9, Shapiro and Kaufman negotiate a role on the sitcom TAXI: Shapiro and Andy are in Shapiro's office. Shapiro offers Andy the role of foreign mechanic Latka Gravas on the sitcom *TAXI*. Surprisingly, Kaufman refuses to play the role. In his opinion, sitcoms belong to the worst form of entertainment. Kaufman negotiates a "Kaufman-special" and four guest appearances of some unknown person named Tony Clifton. Then he finally agrees and signs the contract. In the following scene, Shapiro is forced to defend the unusual terms of his client in front of some network executives.

Sequence 10, first performance Tony Clifton: Before Clifton enters the stage of the nightclub, the audience is asked to refrain from smoking. Clifton takes the stage wearing a tacky costume, large sunglasses and a fake moustache. He is smoking a huge cigar. He begins to sing off-key ("Volare cantare") and approaches the audience. He yells at individual members. Among these is a certain Bob Gorsky, a Polish man who is about to become Clifton's favorite victim. Clifton yells at him and finally empties a glass of water over his head. A worried George Shapiro is in the audience, too.

Sequence 11, Tony Clifton is Andy Kaufman: An angry Shapiro is determined to take Clifton to task. Clifton finally lifts his glasses and reveals that the person behind the mask is Andy Kaufman. Bob Zmuda – or Gorsky as he was called just moments before – appears, congratulates Kaufman on the brilliant show and introduces himself as Kaufman's best friend and collaborator. Shapiro is astonished and brims over with enthusiasm for the hoax. When he is talking to some network executives he is eager to defend the double identity.

Sequence 12, Scenes from TAXI and discussion with Zmuda: Several scenes of the sitcom *TAXI* are shown. It seems to be a funny and successful show. Nevertheless, a very frustrated Andy Kaufman tells Zmuda that the show is getting worse every time. Zmuda cheers him up by telling him that this is exactly the plan: people are supposed to love him so that on his 'special' he can do whatever he wants to do with them.

Sequence 13, The "Kaufman-special": One of the network executives is asked to come to the set because Kaufman is causing trouble during the shooting of his 'special'. Kaufman wants to show a sequence of him talking to a puppet with a vertical hold interrupting the scene. In his eyes it is very funny that the viewers will probably get up thinking that their TV-set is out of order. Despite the official's objections and after some haggling, they agree on ten seconds of vertical hold. When the "Special" is shown to some other network officials, the trick works perfectly well. One of them gets up and knocks on the TV. However, the "Special" is not going to be aired. As a consequence, Kaufman starts working in a restaurant.

Sequence 14, Performance "The Great Gatsby": Andy Kaufman performs in front of a college audience. The students cheerily demand Latka, *Mighty Mouse* or Elvis. Instead, Kaufman reads from the novel *The Great Gatsby*. The students are disappointed and annoyed. He asks them if they preferred listening to a record. They certainly expect the *Mighty Mouse* performance. Instead, Kaufman's voice resounds. It is a recorded version of Kaufman reading *The Great Gatsby*. He turns the record player off and reads the book until its very ending. Only a few sleeping people are left in the auditorium.

Sequence 15, Dismissal from sitcom TAXI caused by Tony Clifton: Shapiro asks Zmuda to cheer up Andy. He takes Kaufman to a brothel. At first, Kaufman seems shy and insecure. Finally, Kaufman picks two ladies and takes them to a separate room. In the meantime, it is revealed that Kaufman is a frequent guest in the brothel which means that not even Zmuda knows all about him. Andy wrestles with the two ladies and asks them to come to Hollywood with him to destroy a TV show. They accept the offer and in the following scene Tony Clifton and the two women misbehave on the set of *TAXI* until he is thrown off the set. Andy receives the message about Clifton's dismissal in full Tony-costume and is extremely amused. Kaufman, Shapiro, Zmuda and Kaufman's assistant Linda discuss reviews of the daily press with headlines such as "Who is Tony Clifton?"

Sequence 16, Performance Kaufman and Clifton at the same time: Tony Clifton is a popular guest in nightclubs and on shows. People hope to get Andy Kaufman if they book Tony Clifton. Despite Shapiro's warnings that Clifton is not necessarily Andy Kaufman, people take their chances. During one of Clifton's performances, Andy Kaufman suddenly appears onstage. They argue and start a fight. After the performance, Shapiro angrily questions the point of the preceding revelation. He accuses Kaufman and Zmuda, who is still in his Clifton costume, of risking their credibility and financial success. Andy seems burned out and replies that he does not know how to shock the audience anymore.

Sequence 17, The birth of an idea: "Wrestling against women": Andy and Zmuda enjoy a wrestling match on TV. As a result, Kaufman begins to dream of a career as a wrestler. Zmuda reminds him that he is physically inferior to male opponents. The idea of wrestling against women is born.

Sequence 18, First wrestling matches and encounter with Lynne Margulies: Kaufman, who is wearing white long johns and black shorts, infuriates women on a TV show by telling them that they are useless. His first opponent is Lynne Margulies. Kaufman easily defeats her all the while showing some lack of sportsmanship. The audience is outraged, especially when he begins to imitate a chicken (accompanied by the corresponding music). Behind the stage, Kaufman meets Lynne. To his surprise, she is very angry, because she took his parody seriously. She angrily accuses him of being very good at playing the macho-guy. Kaufman is very happy when he finds out that people disapproved of his new performance. Scenes from other fights are shown, followed by a meeting of Kaufman and Lynne who are going on a date. Kaufman asks her to come with him to Memphis and marry him as the winner of a staged wrestling match. She agrees.

Sequence 19, Staged fight with Foxy Jackson and introduction Jerry Lawler: The fight against Lynne does not take place because the hoax is revealed before they can even start. Jerry Lawler, “The King of Memphis Wrestling”, challenges Kaufman to fight Foxy Jackson instead. She is a tall and athletic professional women wrestler. To everyone’s surprise, Kaufman wins. After a series of provocations and accusations, Lawler challenges Kaufman to wrestle him. After the show, Lynne finds out that the entire show had been planned and that she fell for it. Despite her disappointment she forgives Kaufman when he apologizes.

Sequence 20, Live Show “Friday’s”: In order to bring Andy’s career back on the right track, Shapiro arranges a guest appearance on a Live TV show. Although Kaufman is not thrilled at the idea, he agrees as soon as he perceives the word ‘live’. He spoils the sketch by refusing to do drug-humor. Kaufman yells at several fellow actors so that the show has to be interrupted and cut to commercials several times. At the end of the show he announces the match against Lawler. His parents, who are watching him at home on TV, are extremely worried when they find out about it.

Sequence 21, Fight against Lawler: The fight against Lawler is a huge spectacle. People furiously scream and boo. Nevertheless, Kaufman keeps provoking the Southern audience. When the fight begins, Lawler makes some forbidden moves and is thus disqualified. Although Andy wins, he is injured and rushed to hospital.

Sequence 22, Dismissal from “Saturday Night Live”: Kaufman and Lawler are on the show *Late Night with David Letterman*. Kaufman is wearing neck protection. He and Lawler accuse each other of being ‘wimps’, which results in the final escalation: Kaufman throws coffee at Lawler. Shortly after, while Kaufman is talking to Shapiro about the incidence, it is revealed that Lawler has been Kaufman’s partner all along. The whole spectacle was staged. Next, the viewers of *Saturday Night Live* are asked to decide about Kaufman’s future on the show. Kaufman loses and cannot believe that the audiences do not want him back.

Sequence 23, Dismissal from Transcendental Meditation group: Although desperately asking the other members’ forgiveness, Kaufman is dismissed by his meditation group. They are not willing to tolerate his attitude towards women. In the next scene, a very sad Kaufman is lying in bed. Lynne comes home to cheer him up with ice cream and tells him that he is not a bad person. When he claims that she does not know the ‘real’ Andy, she responds that there is no ‘real Andy Kaufman’. The conversation seems to really cheer him up and he happily asks her to move in with him.

Sequence 24, First reactions: Kaufman is in their new house. In between packing cases, he discovers a cyst on the back of his neck. Disgusted, he feels the lump in front of a mirror. He charges people to touch the “celebrity cyst” during his next performance.

Sequence 25, Reactions of friends, family, and media: Kaufman meets with Zmuda, Shapiro and Lynne and reveals that he has been diagnosed with a rare kind of lung cancer. At first, nobody believes him and they angrily think that it is just a bad taste joke. Finally, they realize that he is not joking and are shocked. Lynne is the first to leave the room and then Andy runs after her. They watch an episode of *Lassie*. Kaufman’s family find out about the bad news in hospital. Whereas his siblings do not believe the doctor’s words, his parents are shocked. The news quickly reaches the media.

Sequence 26, Planning of the Carnegie Hall performance: Andy Kaufman feels surrounded by negative energy and realizes that *he* has created this atmosphere. As a consequence, he begins to plan the highlight of his career: the show at Carnegie Hall. It is supposed to be a delightful show and thus all macabre jokes are discarded.

Sequence 27, “Death” of the old lady: The show begins with Andy playing the conga drums. He cheerfully encourages the audience to sing along. After that, he shows a short sequence of a film: little girls dancing on hobby-horses. The last remaining dancer who is still alive enters the stage and begins to dance on the hobby-horse. Andy conducts the orchestra and encourages the musicians to play faster and faster. Finally, the old lady collapses. Kaufman exaggeratedly keeps conducting without noticing the collapse. A doctor pronounces the old lady dead.

Sequence 28, Revelation and happiest moment: Andy Kaufman re-appears. He is dressed up like an Indian and performs some kind of ritual dance. The old lady is thus resurrected. The resulting happy atmosphere is enhanced by the appearance of the dancing group “The Roquettes”, the “Mormon

Tabernacle Choir”, and Santa Clause gliding in from the ceiling. In the end, the entire audience is invited to milk and cookies. Next to his girl-friend Lynne, Kaufman happily watches the scene.

Sequence 29, Attempts to find cure, re-appearance of Tony Clifton: Andy Kaufman is pushed into a CT scanner; next a healer places rhinestones all over his body. Despite these different attempts to find cure, Andy’s condition deteriorates. He loses his hair, weight, and voice. In the next scene, he suddenly appears as Tony Clifton for the last time. Being good old Tony, he jokingly chats with Lynne and his assistant Linda in the kitchen, but when they ask him for Andy he responds that Andy is ill.

Sequence 30, Visit to the Philippines: In a last attempt to find cure, Andy Kaufman, Lynne Margulies and Bob Zmuda fly to the Philippines to consult a healer. The healer pulls bloody pieces of flesh from Kaufman’s torso. In fact, they are taken from a large bowl and hidden in a towel. After the procedure, the camera zooms on Andy’s laughing face, followed by a transition to a close-up of Kaufman’s dead face. When the camera moves away from the corpse, it is revealed that Kaufman is lying in a coffin at his funeral.

Sequence 31, Funeral: The mourners are shown. Andy’s friends, family and colleagues are sitting in the pew. They are asked to watch a video of Andy Kaufman singing a karaoke version of “It’s a friendly world”. One after the other joins in and locks hands with his neighbor. The last sequence of the video freezes: it is a shot of Andy Kaufman staring into the camera.

Sequence 32, Performance Tony Clifton: While the faded after-image of Kaufman can still be seen, the next scene begins: A large limousine approaches a nightclub and a man gets off the car. His face is hidden underneath a paper bag. Inside the club, Tony Clifton enters the stage to perform. When people start asking for Andy Kaufman, Clifton tells them to bring some flashlights and shovels and begins to sing “I will survive”. Cuts to Lynne Margulies, George Shapiro and Bob Zmuda sitting amongst the people in the audience reveal that it cannot be Zmuda playing Clifton onstage. There are large neon-light pictograms of famous comedians on the walls of the nightclub. They are shown one after the other; the last one is a pictogram of Andy Kaufman.

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