Why have film theorists shunned funny movies? Is it simply that theorists are unwilling to exacerbate their killjoy reputations by making a move on cinematic humour? Even more puzzling, given the way jokes have been used to beat women around the head, is the fact that the large and influential contingent of feminists writing on film have said so little on the perennially popular genre of comedy. Rather than wheeling out the old line about feminists' lack of humour, I'd like to suggest that the tools of trade of film theorists are, in the fashion of a Laurel and Hardy sketch, quite destructively getting in the way of an investigation into the comic in films.

During the mid-70s, feminist accounts of film made a huge leap forward when attention shifted from stereotypes of women to the way in which the act of watching film is gendered. The key to this new approach was a picture of the processes of viewing, based on a metaphor between the darkened cinema and the scene of the child's incorporation into society and language as described in re-readings of Freud. This metaphor has proved immensely productive. Unfortunately, the tendency to see even a symbolic family hearth as the uncomplicated domain of pink and blue playsuits has beset many feminist writers on film who have produced a diverse and fascinating range of film analyses in which influence of ethnicity (or indeed class, racism and so on) is either entirely ignored, or made to parallel neatly the workings of gender.

Perhaps the neglect of comedy, then, can be attributed to its manifest dependence on the play between particular notions of class, race, religiosity and a multitude of other social distinctions. In Jokes and their Relationship to the Unconscious, Freud suggests that jokes are a symptom of underlying psychic processes. Taking the substance of humour seriously, however, is one interesting way of discovering how popular culture links gender with other kinds of social identity. And what better example could present itself than Baz Luhrmann's Strictly Ballroom?

One of the central scenes in Strictly Ballroom gives a strong indication that understanding comedy can involve relating ideas about gender to those around ethnicity. Fran's grandmother, teaching Scott to dance “from the heart”, comments admiringly to her rather embarrassed grandchild about the nice body exposed by his unbuttoned shirt. The older woman's remark is in Spanish, conveniently subtitled for English-speaking members of the audience. It's a funny moment, playing on assumptions about women's (and especially older women's) supposed disinclination to look at male
bodies. The joke signals a reversal of the romance plot, suddenly giving Fran inside knowledge and the upper hand in a relationship with Scott which had until then been characterised by his mastery and her ignorance.

The recourse to subtitled Spanish also pulls the audience into line with the two women's look at a male body, making explicit the undercurrent of display present in the flamboyant dance sequences throughout the movie. Feminist accounts have pointed out that in classical cinema it's overwhelmingly male characters who serve as the proxy for the spectator, more often than not directing the gaze of both camera and audience at the image of a female body. Even within Strictly Ballroom, the removal of Fran's glasses is a time-honoured metaphor for her transformation from observing ugly duckling to an attractive dancer at the centre of attention. Given the importance of this convention, it is of considerable interest that it's the timely intervention of Spanishness which triggers the audience's identification with a female gaze at a male body. Understanding the effects of ethnicity might be crucial, at least in this film, to an understanding of gender and comedy.

Spanishness isn't of course the only ethnicity which features in Strictly Ballroom. Rather, it's a particular variant of Australian identity which gives the movie its distinctive quality—a specifically feminised kind of kitsch. The film traces the struggle of the talented Scott for an individual kind of dance. Scott's first recognition of Fran's choreographic ability, for instance, is prompted by a snappy Spanish-flavoured step. The laughter that greets Scott's attempts at the ballroom version of the paso doble in the presence of Fran's family provides an internal reference point for jokes on the stylised qualities of ballroom dancing.

Two kinds of women—Scott's mother and partner on the one hand, and Fran on the other—embody Scott's two alternatives of the romantic novel plot. Along with romance and drama, the tension between these two versions of femininity provides most of the humour of the film. However, without recognising the weight of 'authentic' ethnicity in the plot, or the significance of an Australianised conformism in the depiction of the women in the film, one would be hard-pressed to see how Strictly Ballroom works as a comedy. Attending to these elements within film doesn't mean losing sight of cultural influence of gender. Rather, it means grasping the nuances of gender itself. And, hopefully, in the process, gaining some insight into the gendering of comedy.

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