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Transculturality in British Comedy

Changing Perspectives on Race and Culture[1]

Abstract. Intercultural competencies are often called on in educational programmes and in the construction of school curricula. Given the new mainstream success of British Asian TV and film comedy productions at the turn of the millennium, this article explores the question of whether such formats of 'intercultural comedy' can be fruitfully employed in teaching transculturality. Through a close reading of selected sketches from the BBC comedy series *Goodness Gracious Me* (1998–1999), the paper analyses the jokes' humoristic strategies of meaning creation in order to determine their educational and transcultural potential. The educational potential of comedy in a transcultural classroom is shown to lie in the possibilities for changing perspectives, the breaking down of old logics and relations, and the dynamic reshuffling of meanings.

Keywords. Humour, postcolonial theory, politics of representation, transculturality

Transkulturalität in britischen Komödien

Wechselnde Perspektiven auf ‚Rasse' und Kultur

Zusammenfassung. Bildungspläne und Kommissionen für die Curriculumsentwicklung in Schulen betonen routinemäßig die Bedeutung von interkulturellen Kompetenzen als ein Hauptbildungsziel. Vor dem Hintergrund des durchschlagenden Erfolgs von Film- und Fernsehkomödien britisch-asiatischer Kulturschaffender um die Jahrhundertwende untersucht dieser Artikel

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1   This article is based in parts on Assmann 2019.

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die Frage, ob solche ‚interkulturelle Komödien' auf fruchtbare Weise im Unterricht eingesetzt werden können, um Transkulturalität zu lehren. Auf der Basis eines *close readings* ausgewählter Sketche der BBC Comedy Serie *Goodness Gracious Me* (1998–1999) analysiert der Beitrag die humoristischen Strategien der Bedeutungskonstruktion in den Witzen, um deren transkulturelles und Bildungspotenzial zu bestimmen. Dabei wird gezeigt, dass das Bildungspotenzial von Humor im transkulturellen Klassenzimmer darin liegt, Perspektivwechsel zu fördern, alte Logiken und Beziehungen aufzubrechen und Bedeutungsstrukturen neu zu mischen.

Schlüsselwörter. Humor, Postkoloniale Theorie, Repräsentation, Transkulturalität

1 'Laughing Back': The Changing Face of British Television in the 1980s and 1990s

Topics surrounding transculturalism in Britain have taken centre stage in English classes in German schools, with the Chicken-Tikka-Massala speech a staple in English textbooks and core curricular topics such as 'Post-colonialism and migration: Ethnic communities in 21st century Britain'. Given the important role of comedy in raising visibility of minority ethnic communities in British popular culture and beyond, this article asks whether and how transculturality in British comedy can be used to convey changing perspectives on race and culture in Britain in the late 20th and early 21st century. Can comedy be a useful tool in the transcultural classroom, or even in establishing a transcultural educational space, as outlined in the editorial of this issue (see Pranaitytė, Wienand 2023)? What are the gains and pitfalls of discussing comedy in educational settings? In order to approach this question, the article outlines the politics of representation surrounding the popular British comedy sketch series *Goodness Gracious Me* (1998–1999) (section 1), and provides an analysis of its most famous sketches (section 2) as a basis for determining their educational and transcultural potential (section 3).

One important step towards a transcultural educational space is visibility and representation. If we understand the classroom as a 'contact zone' that reflects the diversity of today's societies and engages with its entangled histories and present, then it is vital that this diversity is also represented in the teaching material, be it in the textbooks that are used, or, in subjects like English, in the texts that students engage with. Changing demographics in many European countries after WW II did not find immediate representation in cultural production (film, TV,

music industries or literature, etc.). In her debut novel *Anita and Me*, Meera Syal describes what this meant when growing up in the only non-white family in a small Northern-English town in the 1960s. When the book came out in 1996, Syal was already well established as an actor and writer, having been a cast member of the Hanif Kureishi-written film *Sammi and Rosi Get Laid* (1987, dir. Stephen Frears) and the BBC Television sketch comedy *The Real McCoy* (1991–1996), as well as having written the screenplay of Ghurinder Chadha's debut film *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993). In *Anita and Me*, she looks back at a time with less opportunities for Black and Asian British creatives to leave their stamp in the entertainment industry or on the literary scene:

> According to the newspapers and television, we simply did not exist. If a brown or black face ever did appear on TV, it stopped us all in our tracks. '[…] Quick!' papa would call, and we would crowd round and coo over the walk-on in some detective series, some long-suffering actor in a gaudy costume with a goodness-gracious-me accent […] and welcome him into our home like a long-lost relative. But these occasional minor celebrities never struck me as real; they were someone else's version of Indian, far too exaggerated and exotic to be believable. (Syal [1996] 2004, p. 165)

This passage shows the importance of representation for marginalized groups to feel recognized, the potential for identification that lies in representation, but also the dangers of misrepresentation and their harmful effects. In such an imbalanced condition of underrepresentation, the few faces that do enter the public field are quickly perceived as representative of a whole group or community, they are made to carry what Kobena Mercer famously called 'the burden of representation' (Mercer 1990). Moreover, if such exotizising and othering representations are the only images that are out there, then they have all the power over shaping people's views and cementing racist perceptions.

The "goodness-gracious-me accent" mentioned in the passage is a nod to Peter Sellers, one of the most famous British actors and comedians of the 1960s and 70s, who appeared in two popular brownface roles, where he portrayed Indian characters in the West. The phrase "Goodness Gracious Me" originates from a comedy duet that he sings with Sophia Loren in the film *The Millionairess* (1960). Like his famous role of Hrundi V. Bakshi in Edward Blake's *The Party* (1968), Sellers's role of Dr. Ahmed el Kabir in *The Millionairess* is, in itself, not a malicious or injurious portrayal, but rather a rare instance of an unlikely lead who nevertheless, in the end, 'gets the girl' (see e. g. Kureishi's overall positive appraisal of both roles, Kureishi 2017).

The title of the BBC sketch series *Goodness Gracious Me* (*GGM*) is thus an instantly recognizable reference to Sellers' "racial performance" (Davé 2013) in these two films, a performance which is memorable to a broad and culturally diverse British audience, albeit in different ways. On the one hand, these famous brown-face roles point to the long tradition of othering 'ethnic' characters, written and played by white writers and actors for a white audience, in which laughter becomes a gesture of degradation that creates distance (cf. Wirth 2019, p. 27). In the postcolonial sense of 'writing back',[2] the sketch series is clearly an answer to this exclusionary practice, subverting its roles and meanings. Comedy can offer ways of 'laughing back' (cf. Knopp 2009, p. 65), and "ethnic joking and role-play [are effective …] survival strategies of 'speaking back' to counteract hostility and aggression" (Göktürk 2004, p. 102). On the other hand, these specific representations nevertheless played a significant role for people from the Indian subcontinent and for South Asian British families, who, despite the exaggerations and stereotypical nature of the roles, were able to identify with the characters and their representation on some level, much like Syal describes in her novel (see also Kureishi 2017). With this reference, the new sketch series thus lays claim to an existing comedy tradition and emphasizes its transcultural dimension; in re-inscribing difference into the idea of Englishness as national culture, it dissolves any 'contained' notion of such a culture. The show can be seen as an appropriation of a predominantly white tradition which is being made to accommodate a more diverse crowd, both on-screen and in the audience, and thereby fitted to the existing reality of late 20th-century demographics in Britain. The title melody of the show perfectly exemplifies this: a remix of the original song with bhangra and other Indian and Pakistani-style infused musical elements, it brings together different strands of tradition and styles in a truly transcultural fashion with the effect of creating something new.

The transcultural outlook of the series can be located in an atmosphere of political and cultural change in the 1990s in Britain, when we see a transformation of Englishness in terms of its permeation by migrant groups. The presence of migrant

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2 The 'writing-back paradigm' was first expounded by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in their 1989 book *The Empire Writes Back*, which reads postcolonial literature as a radical critique of and answer to the worldview, knowledge, norms and values disseminated by the colonial powers during the age of colonialism. The title of a stage show on which the later sketch series was based, *Peter Sellers Is Dead*, drives home the message of the show that "the days of white men blacking up and putting on a funny voice to play Indians were over. Asians were doing it for themselves" (Channing 1999). In addition, the phrase "goodness gracious me" conveys a sense of quaint Englishness that attains a comic touch in the mouth of an Indian foreigner. As Marie Gillespie (2003, p. 95) writes, the makers of *GGM* "demonstrated how the programmes [of the 1960s and 70s] could be read 'against the grain' by Asians, and used as a source of inspiration and something to react against". See also Emig (2010).

communities, particularly in their diversification over different generations, challenges the closedness of national cultures as they create new ways of re-telling history from its margins (cf. Göktürk 1998, p. 101). Starting in the 1980s, we see more artists of colour, Black and Asian British actors, screenwriters, directors, gaining screen time on British screens, resulting in a diverse and rich movement of Black British film[3] gaining momentum. While most of the productions from the early phase of Black British film can be categorized as 'cinema of duty', the 1980s saw a greater proliferation and diversification of forms, styles, and narratives. The formation of Channel 4 in 1982, the new BBC outlet for minority-based and independent filmmaking, paved the way for much of these developments (cf. Malik 1996, p. 205). In his 1987 article *New Ethnicities*, Stuart Hall ([1987] 1996, p. 171) hailed in a new moment in cultural production, marked by a "refusal to represent the black experience in Britain as monolithic, self-contained, sexually stabilized, and always 'right-on' – in a word, always and only 'positive'".

As this new era of representation was less determined by fixed meanings and more open for ambiguities and ambivalences, it also enabled comedy formats which, in turn, tapped new and broader audiences. With sitcoms and series such as *Desmond's* (1989–1994) or *The Real McCoy* (1991–1996) paving the way, the sketch series *Goodness Gracious Me* became a huge success at the turn of the millennium, along with films like *East Is East* (1999) and *Bend It like Beckham* (2002) or also Zadie Smith's bestselling debut novel *White Teeth* (2000), which was a major success even beyond Britain. All of these films, TV shows and novels have in common that they, successfully, use the format of comedy as a means of gaining access to 'mainstream' audiences and as a way of tackling sensitive themes of cultural/ethnic difference in a lighter way (cf. Korte, Sternberg 2004). Their success and mainstream appeal has to be seen in the light of politics at the time, and with the New Labour party's rebranding of Britain as 'Cool Britannia' and as a 'multicultural' state. Under these auspices, the multi-ethnic and diverse make-up of the nation were embraced as an important aspect of its creativity and vibrancy, rather than fought against, as previous conservative governments had done, particularly in the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher's rule. As part of this rebranding, which was not merely symbolical but also brought about actual political and social changes, we also see the commemorations of the 50-year

3   This terminology that uses 'Black' as an umbrella term for a diverse group subjected to experiences of difference and racialization is widespread in the British context and includes film-makers from the Asian, African and Caribbean diaspora likewise. "This collective category came into usage not only to trample on a history of negation, but also to find a cohesive voice in order to fight collectively for greater political rights and better representation." (Malik 1996, p. 204) Specifications such as British-Asians or British Muslim increasingly surface in the 1990s due to more visibility and broader recognition of difference within diasporic groups.

anniversary of the arrival of the Empire Windrush, the first ship to bring hundreds of immigrants from the Caribbean to Britain in 1948. In 1998, this event was celebrated as the starting point of post-WW II immigration and as moment of origin for post-Imperial multicultural Britain. The late 1990s also saw the climax of the 'Asian Cool' trend, when South Asian influences shaped British pop culture, particularly in the realms of fashion, music and food. In this cultural and political atmosphere, *GGM* marks an important milestone in the visibility and representation of migrant communities in British mainstream culture beyond the spheres of sport and music (cf. Channing 1999).[4] After its move from BBC Radio to television, the series "quickly became to be seen as a flagship for British Asian comedy, garnering enthusiastic reviews and media awards and attracting a large audience across ethnic groups" (Schlote 2005, p. 180).

2   *Goodness Gracious Me*: Inversions, Role Reversals and Playing with Stereotypes

As arguably the most famous ethnic comedy programme in Britain, the sketch series *Goodness Gracious Me* offers a good point of departure for discussing the potentials and pitfalls of laughter in tackling issues surrounding ethnic and cultural identity. Employing several staples of ethnic humour, *GGM* is in many ways representative of the format, and a closer analysis of the sketches' joke structure can help to detect similar patterns in other shows. This means that, for example in a school setting, a discussion of *GGM* can easily be linked to comedy shows that the students might be more familiar with.

The jokes in the series are often structured along recurring comedy formulas, such as role reversals, intertextuality (i. e. intermedial references and parodies), exaggerations and the play on cultural stereotypes. A central element of humour in the series is inversion. Through the comic reversal of roles and power relations, incongruities appear with an alienating effect that makes discriminatory practices visible and, ideally, takes off their edge by offering them up for ridicule. Famous examples for this kind of sketch are *The New Employee*, *Rough Guide to the UK*, or *Going for an English*. In these cases, typical situations are transferred

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4   Hesse (2000) shows that the presence of Black and Asian British people in the media was limited for a long time to music and professional sports. The beginning of the impactful 1998 BBC documentary *Windrush* is a very strong case in point, showing popular Black British celebrities from exactly these two fields in order to illustrate the changed face of the English nation since WW II, along with the narrator's claim: "Britain without these faces would today be hard to imagine" (Windrush, minutes 0:00–0:35).

from their English context to India, or vice versa. In the first case, a person from England joins the staff of a Delhi newspaper, but his name Jonathan proves to be an obstacle for his colleagues. At the end, his boss kindly suggests him to take on an Indian name if he wants to get ahead in his career. The second example shows a group of young students from India backpacking through England, complaining about rip-off "tourist prices" and looking both for an "exotic experience" and "the real England" in the South-East English county Surrey and the "village" Guildford in particular, where they meet "people […] who had never even seen a brown face". The third example transforms the "quintessential British experience" (Gillespie 2003, p. 101) of *Going for an Indian* after a night of Pub-drinking into "Going for an English" and presents a group of friends in Mumbai "tanked up on Lassis" ending up in an English restaurant, where they order "the blandest thing on the menu" and harass the waiter in drunken misbehaviour. The reversal of roles not only exposes clichés and the power structures inscribed in them, it takes them *ad absurdum*. While the reversed gaze on England in the 'rough guide' sketch actually reveals aspects about the country that the audience will recognize, the reversed racial stereotypes directed at the waiter in the restaurant sketch produce no such recognition: "for the audience the scenario is as funny as it is surreal. They are faced with a reversal of binaries, yet the poles that are now exposed in the sketch are blanks for them" (Emig 2010, p. 178). The comic effect comes from the original stereotypes that the audience can detect in their inversion and that they have to keep in mind in order to make sense of the reversal. By thus framing the stereotype as a stereotype, the joke activates a meta-level that plays the decisive role in the process of reception: the stereotype itself, rather than the ethnic group, becomes the object of laughter (cf. Kotthoff 2004, p. 194).

A large part of the series consists of a sequence of sketches with recurring characters, in which the comedy to a large degree derives from the repetition, variation, and exaggeration of an initial joke. Such self-referential sketches serve to strengthen the in-group of an audience who is in on the joke, by creating a code of humour and a pattern that the audience can learn to recognize and appreciate. In this way, new alliances of laughter may be created that do not run strictly along cultural lines. Exemplary of the transcultural nature of such a code of humour and common language created through comedy is the phrase "kiss my chuddies", which is used by the Bhangra Muffins, two Hip Hop-style teenagers. The *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies the word 'chuddies' as partly a borrowing from Hindi and Panjabi, and lists uses of the word in Indian English dating back to the late 19th century and states that it is "now also frequently [used] in British

Indian contexts", a geographical transferral that can be traced to the sketch series (cf. OED, 'chuddies', n.).[5]

Among such recurring characters, named after their catchphrases, are the "I can make it at home for nothing" Indian mom, the "Competitive Mothers", whose competitiveness takes a wrong turn when it is directed at their sons' sexual prowess, the "I can give you cheaper" uncle, who appears out of nowhere in increasingly absurd transactional situations, or the "Mr Everything Comes from India".[6] The last of these characters originates in a scene where he teaches his son some English words derived from Hindi, such as 'veranda' and 'shampoo', which, as he points out, originally "come from India" and thus attest to the long history of transcultural exchange between the two countries. What makes sense initially is taken to extremes in the following scenes, which construct relations between increasingly disparate elements. The character will take anything that crosses his path in England and relate it back to an Indian origin, so that, for example, the Queen quite naturally appears Indian, along with the whole royal family, since her ancestor, Queen Victoria, was Empress of India, all marriages in the family are arranged, all family members work in the family business and live with their parents until they marry, etc. The humour in these sketches lies in the surprising connection between heterogeneous elements. The parallels that are drawn are based on cultural stereotypes which usually signify difference and are employed in practices of othering. Here, in contrast, they serve as points of similarity. Showing that similarities can be found within differences, these sketches can be read to prise open and undermine with laughter the concept of cultural otherness.

Another recurring set of sketches revolves around two couples who try to outdo each other in their over-performance of cultural assimilation. The complete identification with English culture is staged along traditional lines of ethnic humour that can be observed in the early Marx Brothers' films (Göktürk 2004) or other film comedies that play with the "*mise en scène* of the exaggerated identification with stereotypes" (Wirth 2019, p. 36; my translation). Some of these strategies of humour that appear in these early films and can also be found in *GGM* are defamiliarization, exaggeration, reversal, role play, masquerade, and mimicry. Much like

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5   See also Asthana (2004) on the influence of *GGM* and *The Kumars at No 42* (the follow-up comedy programme by the same group of comedians) and these shows' take on second-generation immigrants' language use on English. Asthana lists a whole range of new dictionary entries modelled on "the Queen's Hinglish", but 'chuddies' is probably the most famous and widely received example, as the media attention that accompanied this new entry attests.

6   The object of laughter in these sketches are the peculiarities and antics of the older generation of British Asians which, despite the use of cultural specificities and stereotypes, also speak to a more universal theme of intergenerational difference.

their anglicized names (Dinesh and Shashik Kapoor become Dennis and Char-
lotte Cooper, Sarjeet and Veena Rabindranath St John and Vanessa Robinson),
the two couples appropriate English identity mainly via performance in language
and clothing. Their exaggerated imitation appears as a comical play in which
especially Dennis Cooper constantly runs the risk of stepping out of character. He
keeps misunderstanding idiomatic expressions or fails to align his act with what
is in these sketches established as Englishness. His catch phrase 'I knew that',
the retroactive attempt to cover up his mistake, "makes the implicit frames and
rules palpable and thereby in their effectiveness identifiable" (Wirth 2019, p. 26;
my translation). However, this failed performance is no more a failure than the
others' performance of Englishness, which "is an adaptation that fails because it
chooses as its object not a realist idea of Britain, but a cliché" (Emig 2010, p. 179).
The two couples' appropriation of Englishness becomes visible as 'mimicry' in
Homi Bhabha's sense, in which "the discourse of mimicry is constructed around
an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its
slippage, its excess, its difference" (Bhabha 1996, p. 86). As this clichéd English-
ness takes on absurd forms, it illustrates the discrepancy between the majority
society's expectations of immigrants to socially integrate on the one hand, and its
(un)willingness to accept them on the other. The Robinsons and Coopers them-
selves embody this contradiction: their 'acquired' Englishness seems to repre-
sent an open and constructivist concept of cultural identity, while, as part of that
Englishness, they have adopted an exclusionary essentialist understanding of
culture that finds expression in a racist attitude towards people of colour. When,
in one of the sketches, a brick comes flying through the window with the mes-
sage "P* Go Home" written on it, the two hyper-adapted couples wholeheartedly
approve. They do so in other sketches as well in which their assimilation fails due
to the racist rejection from the group into which they attempt to integrate, as
represented, for example, by a particularly exclusive tennis club.[7]

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7   As the message on the brick refers to one of the most commonly used racist slurs directed against
    people of perceived South-Asian heritage in Britain, it is in this case unlikely to express, from
    an Indian perspective, rejection of another immigrant group. The couples' disdain, in another
    sketch, of tonic water that turns out to be *Indian* tonic water as they want to share a Gin and
    tonic, the British colonial drink par excellence, would seem to affirm that their rejection is
    directed towards their own cultural heritage that appears foreign from the adopted perspective
    of the British.

3 'Transcultural Comedy'? Breaking Up Fixed Relations through Comedy

Although credited as having "created its own genre – Asian Comedy – which was previously unheard of in British television" (Channing 1999), *GGM* uses a sketch format that has been popularized in Western television by shows such as *The Monty Python* in Britain or *Saturday Night Live* in the US – a comedy format that is, given the success of these two shows and others that have followed in their wake, familiar to an international audience. With its 'all-Asian' cast and team of writers and its focus on themes relating to cultural and ethnic identities, role expectations and intercultural communication, however, *GGM* can be said to give the genre a transcultural twist, thereby making it its own, much in the style of the title song's fusion of different musical cultures.

The concept of transculturality seeks to "account for the complexity of culture in a world increasingly characterized by globalization, transnationalization, and interdependence; […] transnational connections and the blurring of cultural boundaries" (Schulze-Engler 2009, p. ix). These phenomena in their current shape often have their roots, if not exclusively then to a great part, in colonialism and imperialism. The English context, in particular, highlights the paradigm of postcoloniality in conjuncture with transculturality. The question of power-relations, which is so key to postcolonial theory, is also at the heart of Fernando Ortiz's concept of transculturation developed in the 1940s (cf. ibid., p. x). On the basis of Wolfgang Welsch's more recent concept of transculturality, however, some of the tenets of tranculturation and postcolonialism alike have come under question, namely the tendency, firstly, to retain a thinking in terms of 'national cultures', and, secondly, classical dichotomies related to their hierarchization, "such as colonizer vs. colonized or centres vs. peripheries" (ibid., p. xi). In this light, the concept of transculturality functions as an alternative to postcoloniality that opens up new ways of understanding and conceptualizing cultural relations outside of such fixed and confining notions. With regard to comedy, we have to ask, then, whether humour and the structure of the joke can be aligned with this idea of transculturality, or whether they only *follow* in the lines of postcolonial thinking. Does *Goodness Gracious Me* promote the tenets of transculturality, and if so, how?

With its great potential for subversion, comedy has a long history as a postcolonial genre. As Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein show in their edited volume *Cheeky Fictions*, there are many ways in which the postcolonial is intricately bound up with humour as a key tactic of unsettling existing power structures: "laughter is a central element, humour a key feature, disrespect a vital textual strategy of

postcolonial cultural practice" (2005, p. 1). The "commensurability of postcolonial approaches with theories of laughter" lies in their shared focus on "some kind of incompatibility or some incongruity" (ibid., p. 9). Laughter is, moreover, intimately concerned with boundaries; it can be transgressive and has the power of dissolving boundaries and clear delineations. It may also, however, strengthen existing boundaries or have the effect of drawing new ones. Freud has described the social dynamic of the joke as involving three parties: the maker of the joke, the object of the joke, and its addressee (cf. Göktürk 2019, p. 43–44). According to this tripartite model, the joke creates a communion of laughter between maker and addressee, but does so at the cost of another instance that is excluded. Hybrid humour in post-migrant or postcolonial societies is hyperaware of this social dynamic, having partly grown out of this culture of exclusion. In an essay on her career as a comedian, Syal emphasizes how the social dynamic of laughter is interwoven with power dynamics: "Laughter was no longer a weapon used to keep out the foreigners; the foreigners, the odd balls, the women, the Irish, they were reclaiming it, grabbing it and turning it back onto its makers." (Syal 2003, p. 30) Consistent with this is the fact that, with regard to *GGM*, the makers' concerns about "humorous appeasement" were focused on being "accommodating to white sensitivities" (rather than those of their own or other minority groups), as producer Anil Gupta stated in an interview (Channing 1999).

The question in which cases laughter successfully manages to break up fixed categorisations and patterns, and in which it cements these through perpetuating racial or ethnic stereotypes is both complex and at the heart of transcultural comedy. It is also one that is impossible to find definitive and final answers to. First, the ambiguities inscribed into the code of humour itself serve to destabilize boundaries and clear definitions. Second, the diversity of the audience plays an important role in this context, as it entails shifting alliances rather than reinforcing stable groups in fixed roles. The format of the sketch comedy, thirdly, constantly creates new humorous constellations and thus keeps reshuffling relations, references and codes of meaning. With this essentially open format that covers a wide range of different comedy and narrative genres (cf. Emig 2010, p. 177), specific transgressions that function in an exclusionary way can be balanced out in the greater frame through changes of perspective or diversity of types. The boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are thus generally in flux and dynamic, as the object of the joke constantly changes between different migrant groups or the white majority population in a sequence of partly very short sketches. The effect can be a "recalibration of perspectives" in the form that Lina Pranaitytė and Christiane Wienand (2023, p. 5) call for in their introduction to this volume.

Even within a single sketch, techniques of comedy are used that lead to cultural boundaries being crossed or blurred. This can be observed especially when intercultural relations are brought into view. For example, when watching the Robinsons and Coopers outdo each other in imitating Englishness, one can laugh heartily both at their grotesque overfulfilment of the standard and at the cliché of Englishness evoked in the process. Mimicry as a strategy of humour gains an additional dimension here through Homi Bhabha's postcolonial interpretation of this procedure as the imitation of the colonial master by the colonized subject. At the core of the concept is, in Bhabha's words,

> an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power. […] It is from this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double, that my instances of colonial imitation come. What they all share is a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the *ambivalence* of mimicry (almost the same, *but not quite*) does not merely 'rupture' the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a 'partial' presence. (Bhabha 1994, p. 86)

In the performative mirroring of the Other, there always remains an alienating element in mimicry that opens up an interstice of ambivalence, making reinterpretation and re-evaluation possible.[8] As is typical of ethnic humour, much of *GGM*'s jokes are based on cultural stereotypes; however, these are often subverted in the caricature, which diverts the laughter to the stereotypes themselves so that they lose their discriminatory effect, and the process of stereotyping itself is exposed (cf. Leveen 1996, p. 43). In this way, the audience's expectations are constantly subverted in an anarchic and silly way, incongruities are highlighted and clear attributions of meaning are denied. As Graeme Dunphy and Rainer Emig (2010, p. 25) have shown, the play with difference and similarity is inherent in the nature of comedy: while "difference (of positions, assumptions,

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8 See also Bhabha 1996, p. 91: "What I have called its 'identity-effects' are always crucially *split*. Under cover of camouflage, mimicry, like the fetish, is a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing, history. For the fetish mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it deauthorizes them."

and expectations)" is an important prerequisite for humour, surprising similarity creates the common ground for understanding.[9]

Playing with stereotypes, however, always bears the risk of confirming them in repetition, because the subversive potential does not reach every viewer, as can be seen in the comments section of individual sketches on YouTube.[10] Whether a joke has a hurtful effect or hits the mark in an amusing way is one of the uncontrollable contingencies of humour. Through these contingencies, comedy can shed light on how questions of cultural identity are always relational, grounded in social processes and interaction.

4   Conclusion: Teaching Transcultural Comedy as In-Between Space of Ambiguity

Whether comedy shows such as *GGM* can be fruitfully employed in the transcultural classroom is a question that largely depends on implementation and the educational setting. Given the way such comedy shows build on cultural stereotypes for laughter, it is all-important to establish a safe learning environment in which not only the potentials but also the dangers of comedy are acknowledged.[11] One key step here is to establish the classroom community in advance in order to get to know the different elements that constitute the shared space of learning. If sensibilities are raised and acknowledged, this may constitute respectful dialogue and an exchange of experience and knowledge that is substantial for recognizing difference (rather than obliterating it). It is necessary to allow enough time for discussing the complex meanings and relations created in the sketches, and to understand the discourses that they allude to, their historical roots and social consequences.

If these prerequisites are considered, comedy can be a useful tool and source of material in teaching transculturality, as it may offer up ways of seeing things

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9   See Assmann (2015) for more on the role of similarity in relation to difference for the cultivation of empathy and creating a sense of affinity between the audience and the characters on screen in British Asian film. The concept of similarity in relation to cultural difference is elaborated by Bhatti et al. (2011).

10   The series' success was, from the beginning, also accompanied by criticism from the British Asian community itself, who felt attacked by the show's humour, as well as by the fear that the jokes could cement existing prejudices among the English audience (cf. Channing 1999).

11   The following points for establishing a framework for the discussion of comedy in educational settings were collected in a workshop on *Transcultural Comedy*, conducted by Bernd Hirsch and me as part of the 2020 Digital Autumn School *Transculturality in Teacher Education*.

differently and open up new perspectives by subverting and reversing established social positions, categories, and meanings. What is key here is comedy's potential to change perspectives and to incite new ways of understanding. This learning effect is closely tied up with the ability to cope with ambiguities – the idea of 'Ambiguitätstoleranz' that is increasingly cited as a main developmental achievement for people navigating transcultural societies. The persistence of unresolved ambiguities lies in the nature of comedy itself, which plays with polysemy and ambivalences that often cannot be completely narrowed down to one meaning but appeal to different levels of understanding. Ambiguity, sliding signifiers and other games of confusion are the element of comedy and they also characterize to a great extent the transcultural situation of a post-migrant society. Establishing an analogy between these two realms is the successful recipe of 'transcultural comedy' in the British Asian comedy series. In *Anita and Me*, the narrator describes her first memory in the prologue:

> My earliest memory, in fact, is of the first time I understood the punchline to a joke. […] I've always been a sucker for a good double entendre; the gap between what is said and what is thought, what is stated and what is implied, is a place in which I have always found myself. (Syal [1996] 2004, p. 10)

This position between different meanings and understandings is evoked again in the novel when Meena speaks of the "grey area between all the categories" (p. 149) she inhabits: an in-between space of cultures with their respective systems of values, norms and meanings. The ambiguity of the *double entendre* that lies at the origin of comedy creates possibilities for new interpretations and ascriptions of meaning: "Meaning is inverted or doubled, and identities are challenged, distorted, or even abandoned" (Emig 2010, p. 172). Thus comedy has a transformative potential and can subvert old references and logics. These ambiguities and different levels of understanding require an active reception from the audience, which gets involved in thinking and rethinking. In this way, comedy can help to break down old logics and create new constellations and relationships outside of a rigid hierarchical thinking and fixed notions of dependencies or continuities. It is in this potential for understanding relations as dynamic, constantly in flux and in reshuffling formation, that we can find the transcultural possibilities of a comedy such as *Goodness Gracious Me*.

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