

The Appearance and Evolution of the Disaster Joke

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Sick jokes, like the great majority of jokes, involve the breaking of social conventions about how we speak. The joke tellers may have accepted these conventions and incorporated them into their own way of thinking or they may see them as something imposed on them from the outside but all that concerns us here is that they know that the conventions exist and can be broken to produce humour. Jokes are in one way or other breakers of social conventions about the use of language.

An obvious example would be jokes about sex or excretion or blasphemous jokes. From an early age people learn that there are restrictions on how these matters may be spoken about. One indication of this is that the more sensitive words are used in swearing. The conventions about the words we are expected not to use can be broken in contexts other than jokes but such breaches are very central to joking. It is noticeable that it is men rather than women and particularly men in tough, dangerous jobs such as policemen, soldiers, firemen, miners ('pit-language') who, in the absence of women, are the hardest of swearers, fond of jokes involving transgressive language and an excellent source of disaster jokes. The political jokes of the former Soviet empire can also profitably be seen as a way of breaking the rules of speaking imposed by the authorities; that is why they could be, and often were, enjoyed by upholders of the regime including KGB men [Deriabin and Gibney 1960 pp 173-5 Davies 2007], who can hardly be described as politically rebellious. For them, and indeed for most jokers, jokes are merely 'time off' from the everyday constraints on how we speak. Ethnic jokes such as *Türkenwitze* likewise speak of minorities in ways that in other contexts might be seen as disrespectful; the jokes are again a breach of conventions about how we are expected to speak [Davies 1990]. Jokes have no material or practical implications whatsoever [Davies 2002] but those who disapprove of humorous breaches of language conventions can get quite cross, even tetchy, when such jokes are told or the written version brought to their attention. Those who peevishly deplore joking are often individuals whose own life has become merely verbal, a vain life spent vainly exhorting and criticising others; their gross over-estimate of the importance and impact of their own petulant harangues and scribblings leads them to invest jokes with a power that jokes do not possess.

At a more general level jokes, like lies, or acting, depart from the rules of *bona fide* discourse, which demand an unambiguous conveying of accurate information from one individual to another [Raskin 1985]. Jokes involve a quite different form of discourse from the others, one with its own rules and patterns; incongruity, ambiguity and inconsistency are sought rather than avoided. The conventions that words have single meanings or that arguments should be coherent are broken in jokes but when we revert to serious and sincere communication they are restored, as are the other conventions, though a deliberate or accidental breach of them will again make people laugh. Jokes and humour are temporary enjoyable disorder.

It is in this context that we shall consider disaster jokes, which are an important and distinctive subset of sick jokes. Sick jokes and humour cut through the hedge of divinity that surrounds the ways we speak about death, disfigurement, corpses, [Narváez 2003] and cremation [Davies 2005] as well as fatal accidents, murder and suicide. There is nothing

novel or modern about such humour, nor is it restricted to particular societies. Disaster jokes, though, the jokes that rapidly follow a well-publicised disaster or the sudden death of a celebrity are new, are modern and flourish only in societies dominated by television.

The Incongruities of Television and the rise of the Disaster Joke

Disaster jokes are quite new for they break a radically different version of the older conventions. They break the new conventions of 'television-speak'. The disaster jokes about the death of celebrities or widely reported accidents, famines or killings only began with television; their numbers grew as television established its grip on the population. These jokes began in the early 1960s at the point where, in the United States at least, television had very largely replaced radio and become the dominant medium. The earliest ones concern the assassination of the American President John F. Kennedy in 1964

These earliest jokes were American and few in number but they were the beginning of a new era in joking. Disaster jokes multiplied and became international [Davies 2003]. Those that followed the loss of seven lives when the American space shuttle Challenger exploded in 1986 were sufficiently numerous and important to provoke and justify many academic articles [Simons 1986, Smyth, 1986], notably the insightful and pioneering analysis of Elliott Oring [1987]. After the death of Princess Diana and her fancy man Dodi Fayed in a road accident in 1997, jokes about the accident were in circulation within minutes and soon there existed hundreds of very varied jokes in many languages including French, German and Spanish [Davies 1999]

What was the last thing that Diana said to Dodi?
I want it hard and fast and up against the wall.

*Was haben Diana und Boris Becker gemeinsam?
Beide schlagen mit 180 km/h auf...*

What have Diana and Boris Becker in common?
They can both hit something at over a hundred miles an hour.

Internet Reference 1 For the latter, another version of the former and many more jokes in German see
http://www.remi.de/RH/Files/diana_3.htm

Disaster jokes are still very popular today. Even the attack on the World Trade Center in New York on 9/11/2001 could not quench them [Kuipers 2002, 2005]. They are a permanent feature of Western popular culture. 2009 was a good year for celebrity deaths with jokes about Michael 'deadped' Jackson, Jade Goody, Stephen Gately, Farrah Fawcett, Walter Cronkite, old Uncle Ted Kennedy and all. In the 2010s someone else is bound to turn down.

Internet reference 2

<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20090625163814AAGiA74>

Internet reference 3

<http://www.sickipedia.org/tag/michael+jackson+dead>

They are going to cremate Michael Jackson.
The last time he was black was in 1991

Internet reference 3

<http://www.sickipedia.org/tag/michael+jackson+dead>

Jade Goody's latest therapy includes mud baths.
The doctors admit they will serve no medical purpose whatsoever but will get her used to the smell of freshly dug earth!

Internet reference 4

<http://forum.meetthegeeks.org/forum/showthread.php?t=8499>

Ted Kennedy never became President because unlike Washington he couldn't cross a river

Internet reference 5

<http://contrapauli.blogspot.com/2009/08/couldnt-find-many-good-ted-kennedy.html>

Celebrities who support President Obama's Health Care Plan.

Patrick Swayze,
Michael Jackson,
John Hughes,
Farrah Fawcett,
Walter Cronkite,
David Carradine,
Bea Arthur,
Senator Edward Kennedy,
Eunice Kennedy Shriver,
"DJ AM",
Natasha Richardson,
Karl Malden,
Billy Mays,
Steve McNair,
Les Paul,

.....*None of whom could be contacted for comment.*

Internet reference6

http://www.dailycomedy.com/hottopic/Walter_Cronkite

Disaster Jokes and the Sentimental Hegemony of Television

Those who run and make television provide an insistent, incessant, hectoring and hegemonic moral rhetoric about the disasters from which they make their living and the deaths of the celebrities that they have created. Television tells people that they must be feeling and must feel the same emotions in the light of what is being shown on the screen that they would if they were present on the spot or if the disaster had involved individuals close to them, drawn from their own family or circle of friends. Yet the viewers are sitting at home gorging themselves on a 'television dinner', while watching a famine on the screen from a comfortable armchair, an, in all senses, remote disaster or the death of someone only known to them from television itself. This kind of incongruity is bound to give rise to jokes. Some viewers do respond as they are told to do, as we can see from the distasteful hysteria in Britain after the death of Diana Princess of Wales [O'Hear 1998, Thomas 2002, Walters 1999]. It was essentially similar to the ephemeral frenzy that followed the death of the film actor Rudolf Valentino in 1926, that also saw tearful outbursts by fans who only knew him from his film roles. The Diana phenomenon was on an even bigger scale because television has more viewers, is better at blurring image and reality and enters that very private space, the home. Television kept telling the British that 'A Nation Mourns' for Diana, when in fact a majority of the population felt alienated [Thomas 2002 p 79] but who, because of the hegemony of sentiment imposed by television, were unable publically to express their disgust at and contempt for the 'mourning' minority [see Thomas 2002 pp 110-15]. The keening mob temporarily had dominance conferred on them and were even urged on by the Prime Minister, 'Tony' Charles Lynton Blair M.A. (Oxon), who misused his high office to take time away from his important political negotiations in Saudi Arabia [Sylvester, 1998] and denounce the leading British dissenter, the eminent philosopher Professor Anthony O'Hear [1998]. Britain under Blair became almost as good as a source of mocking jokes as the Soviet Union under Brezhnev [Yurchak 1997]. In addition jokes were being vigorously invented and circulated on the internet in many languages including French, German and Spanish and in English in Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands and the United States. It was a joyous world-wide jokefest that exactly matched the excessive grief-ridden international television coverage.

Television grief is, of course, quite different from real grief at the loss of someone truly close to one. There is no extended emptiness in life, no aching longing for the company of the person lost to death, for the touch of a vanished hand and the sound of a voice that is still, nor the cold, grey, cold-grey, ever-returning heartbreak that is part of real grief. It is perfectly reasonable and indeed moral to feel nothing at all when a celebrity dies, much as a viewer may feel nothing at the death of an imaginary character on screen. If someone says 'I do not remember where I was when Kennedy was shot; maybe I was taking a leak' or 'I do not give a damn about Diana's death', we are not in the company of a callous person but of a candid one. Yet all the time the television screams that you ought to feel, must feel, do feel like the truly bereaved feel and this creates an absurd incongruity [Smyth 1986 p 236], the very basis of jokes. When the disaster jokes inevitably appear soon after the news, this leads to two absurd theses. One is that the jokers are not trying to be funny but merely allowing their essential callousness to emerge and indulging in schadenfreude. They provide no empirical evidence to support this view. A freedom from imposed sentiment does not indicate callousness. The other thesis is that the joking is a 'coping mechanism'. But what do the jokers have to cope with? They are not faced with the loneliness and loss that comes with personal bereavement nor are they or their near and dear in any danger, the most likely

circumstances in which it is plausible to argue that joking is a way of coping with or at least being distracted from distressing circumstances. Why should the happy jokers share the feelings of those others who are out there wailing and rending their garments at the death of a celebrity?

Television messages are both hegemonic and contradictory. They are hegemonic in that all the channels are saying the same thing. There is no dissent after the sudden death of a celebrity whom television itself has created. There can be no disrespect, just as there could be none for Soviet political leaders or heroes. Political hegemony, like television's hegemony of sentiment, inevitably leads to a flurry of underground *Flüsterwitze* mocking the myths being peddled, the fake heroes being built up and those who are going along with it all.

One could have been sent to jail under communism for telling such jokes. So far no-one has been jailed in a constitutional democracy for telling disaster jokes but such joking can have political repercussions, if they are told in public or in the wrong setting at a time of television ordained synthetic grief. If you told them at work a paranoid colleague with an unscrupulous lawyer might try to get you sacked or sue you for harassment [Bernstein 2003]. If you are prominent in any field in Britain, a country where there is no longer any sense of fair play, or in the United States, where greed rules, the telling of a disaster joke in private runs the risk that one of the ubiquitous petty informers who proliferate in these countries will go to the press to wreck your career. Following a disaster in Morecambe bay in England in which Chinese cockle pickers were drowned, Anne Winterton, a British MP, told at a private dinner party the harmless disaster joke: "Two sharks were bored with having nothing but tuna to eat. One said to the other 'I'm fed up with this, let's go over to Morecambe for a Chinese.'" (in colloquial English to go for a Chinese means to go to a restaurant or to a take away that serves Chinese food), A nark overheard her telling the joke and reported her heinous crime and she was suspended by her party in Parliament. These are the subtler restrictions on the freedom to joke that deface democracy.

Television, an incongruous Garbage Sandwich, and the Disaster Joke

A further incongruity leading to humour stems from the fact that television cannot dwell continuously on the tragedy or pseudo-tragedy that is being hyped, though for a time, some programmes may get postponed. Commercial television has to intersperse disaster news with foolish jingles and visual effects that make up the advertisements that pay for the television station to exist. On all television channels, including public broadcasting channels, the usual trivial quiz shows and snooker and football matches and pop songs must soon go on. They cannot be cancelled for any significant length of time or the viewers would switch off or over to another channel. Sometimes the next episode of a banal soap opera may be postponed and rescheduled; those addicted to them can feel very resentful but are forced to suffer withdrawal symptoms. The next already-made episode may even contain the 'tragic' death of one of the characters, a kind of parallel to the death story on the news and the death of a fictional character also possesses a spurious reality for those who get involved in these melodramas. Television is a garbage sandwich in which farce and tragedy alternate, thus reducing tragedy to farce. This incongruity is a gift to jokers, who indeed often incorporate fragments of advertising [Oring 1987, 1992 pp 38] and bits of familiar banal television

programmes [Kuipers 2002 and 2005] into their jokes. That this happens is in itself a clear indication of the close links between what is seen on television and the generation of disaster jokes.

Why did Indira Gandhi change her deodorant?

Because her right guard was killing her [UCBFA Anglo-American Jokes II-2 F3, P6 N6 Famous Political Non U.S. Collected by Christina Bartolucci in California two days after Mrs Gandhi was killed by her Sikh body guards standing to her right on 31st October 1984]. It was done in revenge for her ordering the second dire Amritsar massacre in June 1984, a quite unnecessary attack ordered by Mrs Gandhi in which her army used artillery in a crowded town, resulting in the killing of several hundred Sikhs, including children and the elderly and the desecration of the Golden Temple, the holiest temple of the Sikh]

The growth in the numbers of disaster jokes and their faster circulation has been facilitated by the internet, which has speeded up their transmission through emails and websites. Disaster jokes are truly a product of an electronic world. The internet has undermined the hegemony once enjoyed by television. Television is authoritarian, centralized, controlled, and rule-bound. A few small groups control it and a few small groups censor it. The internet is a free, anarchic, democratic network where all the jokes, ideas, facts suppressed by the television makers and censors can move freely. The joke tellers now have their own medium in which the unsayable can be said and the internet is a great multiplier of jokes. There were far more jokes in 1999 about the death of President Kennedy's son, John F. Kennedy Jr., an utter nonentity (and the editor of the trivial and failing George magazine (possibly named after George William Frederick, prince-elect of Hanover), who died in a routine accident when incompetently flying his own private plane, than there had been about the assassination of his father, a President of the United States in 1964. There are fifty-eight jokes about his death on Mark Liberator's website alone. JFK Jr.'s wife and sister-in-law also died in the accident and the jokes often refer back to his father's death and to the manslaughter of Mary Jo Kopechne by his drunken uncle Ted Kennedy; she was a passenger in his car and he drove into a river and left her to drown. Recycling and cross-referrals are a common aspect of disaster jokes

Everyone keeps saying how good looking and popular JFK Jr. was.
It just goes to show that he was twice the lady killer as his uncle Ted.
[Liberator 2004]

What did the board of directors do at George Magazine when they heard JFK Jr. had died?

They swore in Lyndon Baines Johnson Jr. as the new editor in chief.
[Liberator, 2004].

As predicted by Elliott Oring's [1987] model based on earlier cycles of disaster jokes, there are many references to the advertising of commercial products in the later JFK Jr. joke-cycle.

What was JFK Jr. drinking just before the crash?
Ocean Spray. [Liberator, 2004].

Giselinde Kuipers' [2002 and 2005] view that with the growth of the internet other items of popular culture rapidly get built into the jokes is also confirmed.

What's the difference between Ramsey Street and Prince Charles?
One has a Mrs Mangel; the other has a Mangled Mrs.

[Australian joke 1998. Mrs Mangel was an unpopular character in the Australian TV soap opera Neighbours and lived in Ramsey Street. Vivean Gray who played the rebarbative Mrs Mangel received a vast amount of abuse from Australian viewers who could not work out that Mrs Mangel did not exist and that she, the actress, was not Mrs Mangel]

Internet reference 7

<http://www.perfectblend.net/neighbourhood/bio/mangel-nell.htm>

What will they name the movie about JFK Jr.?
Three funerals and a wedding. [Liberator, 2004].

Television's Faked Heavenly bodies

For the television viewers of the early 1960s President Kennedy was a mere visual image, an artificial creation of the new medium of television, on which he was endlessly portrayed as young, fit, handsome, clean-cut, with a fine head of hair and regular teeth, in contrast to the sinister looking Richard Nixon with his six-o'clock shadow stubble. It was a television fiction. The real Kennedy was crippled with serious back damage, which is why he couldn't duck down when shot at; the campaign photos of him throwing a ball were faked. He had a chronic sexual disease that was a product of his compulsive promiscuity and so many bodily flaws and diseases that he was only kept going with large doses of drugs and frequent injections. Physically Kennedy was rotten through and through.

Internet reference 8

<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/JFK+and+Addisons+Disease.htm>

Television creates celebrities like the sick Kennedy or his son JFK Jr. or the bulimic Princess Diana out of people who have or can fake, a youthful, handsome, vigorous appearance. The camera gives them glorious, powerful bodies that shine as the brightness of the firmament in contrast to the weak, lowly and dishonourable ones of the viewers. Yet when they die by disaster the illusions are reversed and in the jokes their once perfect, imagined, televisual bodies are represented as mangled and dismembered, even when their actual mode of death did not produce these effects [Smyth 1986 pp 252-3]. Neither Princess Diana nor JFK Jr. were in reality mutilated in death, only in the jokes.

If Diana's heart was in the right place, why was it found tucked into the glove compartment....?

Queen of Hearts?
Off with her head, more like it

Did you hear about Arby's new Martha's Vineyard Salad?
It contains pieces of apples, cranberries and is covered with a robust raspberry vinaigrette dressing. Don't forget to go *New England* and order a few shiny, pink, chunks of JFK Jr. brains. [Liberator 2004]

Disaster Jokes and the Mistrust of Television

The jokers live in a world where many suspect that a degree of fakery has been imposed on them by producers and cameramen, a phenomenon brilliantly satirised on British Channel 4 Television in the satirical situation comedy 'Drop the Dead Donkey' [Hamilton and Beaton 1994] that ran from 1990-98. In it Damien Day the cameraman for Globelink News always carries around a toy teddy-bear to place in the foreground in case he should film a story about dead or injured children. When his filming of an execution by firing squad in Latin America was unsatisfactory, he asked the military officer in charge to do a retake so that he could get some better material for television. This is deliberate satire but its popularity fits very well with the existence of the disaster jokes, which also blend fiction and humour. Damien Day is a liar seeking fame and money and the jokers are merely having fun but both seriously depart from the conventions of *bona fide* communication. In Drop the Dead Donkey the television humorists have cleverly appropriated for television the disaster jokes told by the public at television's expense. The satire in 'Drop the Dead Donkey' or in the television episode of the Barry McKenzie cartoon strip [Humphries and Garland 1988] is not unfair. Television producers seek out what they call "good television", which means the pursuit of impact and immediacy at the expense of other more important qualities such as objectivity or sophistication. It was television producers who invented that mendacious genre the 'drama documentary' in which fact and fiction are so blended that the viewer often does not know which he or she is watching and is manipulated into a particular set of feelings and even indignation through pictures. Pictures are more subtle and sneaky liars than words. However, as audiences become used to the tricks of television a large part of them are cynically able to recognise what is being done and may reasonably suspect that disaster reporting on the news has some of these deceiving qualities. Those who control and make television are a 'them', a small, distant, relatively homogeneous group with a common background and a common outlook who impose a product on 'us'. We are bribed with entertainment to allow them to penetrate our quite different social world. We know from our everyday experience that things are not the way the powerful broadcasters say but until recently the sheer expense of broadcasting and the allocation of wavelengths gave them a technical monopoly. The internet is a free and decentralised medium, the new key rival and opponent of everything television stands for and it has become a place where disaster jokes circulate freely and quickly.

Disaster Jokes sneak sideways into Television

Television cannot ignore disaster jokes altogether, since they are now such a strong part of popular culture and a curious dialectical relationship is being created between the two. Here is a joke that illustrates one aspect of it;

What did they say at South Park when they heard the news about JFK Jr.?
OH MY GOD! THEY KILLED KENNEDY! YOU BASTARD! [Liberator, 2004].

The reference to the satirical programme South Park turns the jokes in a full circle, since the politically incorrect humour of that television series defies all the conventions of how we are supposed to speak about disasters. In many episodes of South Park the animated cartoon character Kenny, gets killed in a gruesome and ludicrous way, whereupon his friends Stan and Kyle would shout "Oh my God, they killed Kenny! ...You bastards!" Rats would then appear and nibble Kenny's corpse. It became a catch phrase and it appears on the mug from which I am drinking coffee as I edit this text. The phrase "they killed Kenny" plays with the original 'they killed Kennedy' remembered from 1964 and Kenny now becomes Kennedy again, in the shape of JFK Jr. Each plays off the other. A contemporary Hungarian comic poster shows Vladimir Ilyich lying dead on the ground killed by a hammer and sickle to the head with Marx, Engels and Stalin lined up as South Park characters exclaiming Oh my God! They killed Lenin! You bastards! In the background is the mausoleum in Moscow labeled East Park.

On 7th January 2009 after President Obama's election but before his inauguration I was sent an email by a coalman from St. Louis, Missouri headed 'God Bless America'. Inside it read:

Many believed this day would never come but in a few short days an African-American man will move from his private residence into a much larger and infinitely more expensive one owned not by him but by the taxpayers. A vast lawn, a perimeter fence and many well trained security specialists will insulate him from the rest of us but the mere fact that this man will be residing in this house should make us all stop and count our blessings because it proves that we live in a nation where anything is possible.

Today, I thank the Lord above that I am an American and that I live
in a nation where wrongs are righted, where justice matters and where
truly anything is possible
Who is this man, you ask? See below

Scrolling down I found not the Obama hinted at but a picture of the notorious African-American murderer O. J. Simpson, standing in court with his wrists in handcuffs about to be sent to jail. The first script of the joke fits Obama going to the White House as well as Simpson to the penitentiary but the time at which the joke was told and its tone made the reader think of Obama. Suddenly a visual punch line, the photo of Simpson, switches us from a virtuous and uplifting script about American democracy to one about a notorious criminal.

The habitually violent Simpson cruelly stabbed his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ronald Coleman to death in 1994 but he managed to get acquitted in a very dubious and twisted criminal trial in 1995, a serious and scandalous miscarriage of justice. However, O.J. Simpson lost a civil action brought by the victims' families in 1997 that clearly

demonstrated his guilt. They were awarded most of the wealthy Simpson's considerable assets.

What do you call a poor black woman in OJ's jacuzzi?
Juror number 7.

What do you have if you put O.J., Magic Johnson, and Mike Tyson together?
The Butcher, the Laker, and the license plate maker.
[Magic Johnson played basketball for the Los Angeles Lakers but left basket balls when diagnosed as HIV positive. Mike Tyson was a boxer and rapist spent three years in jail for rape, quite probably making licence plates for the government when incarcerated. All were big news on television as disgraced sports celebrities. The joke is a play on the children's nursery rhyme "Rub-a-dub dub, three men in a tub. The butcher the baker, the candle-stick maker" In British and Australian English a rub-a-dub, a rubbidy is also rhyming slang for a pub but that joke would not work in America].

Simpson did not go to jail for his killings but in December 2008 he was convicted of a new crime, an armed robbery, and given a 33 year prison sentence. Most Americans rejoiced that justice had very unexpectedly caught up with him.

There now appeared a second wave of O J Simpson jokes that was not spontaneously generated and not a people's humour, but produced by and on American television. The emotional force of the original murders had been dissipated by this time. The style of the television wisecracks below is entirely different from that of the true disaster jokes that are told by the people. You can feel a great huddle of script-writers trying to cobble something together quickly for the host of a late-night comedy talk-show. Their product is funny but it is synthetic and you suspect, perhaps unfairly, that the material may have been read off an autocue. Would anyone really speak sentences like the ones below?

"O.J. Simpson was released on bail today. ... O.J. was charged with two counts of robbery with a deadly weapon. The deadly weapon, of course, was O.J." --Jay Leno

"When the cops arrested O.J., they found him at the blackjack table trying to play the race Card." --Jay Leno

"Apparently, after O.J. was taken into custody, he was questioned by police. He continues to maintain his innocence. O.J. says there's no way he committed the crime because it's not murder enough." --Conan O'Brien

Internet reference 9

[<http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/celebrities/a/ojsimpsonjokes.htm>]

These are jokes written for television. They are parasitic on but quite unlike and indeed inferior to the earlier disaster jokes told in 1995 and provoked by the television coverage of the original murder and the trial

Disaster Jokes are neither Tendentious nor Political

Jokes are never truly tendentious nor political, nor do they have any consequences. This is certainly true of sick jokes and disaster jokes. It is not possible to infer simply from the text of a joke what was in the minds of those who tell it. Those who claim that they know are deluding themselves.

The leading contender for explaining death or disaster jokes in terms of the emotions tellers is the thesis that they are a ‘coping mechanism’. This silly argument is based on a fallacy and a rhetorical trick. It is true to say that people are at times anxious about death, particularly their own death or that of those close to them. It is also true that we are capable of feeling sympathy and grief at the misfortunes of others. Many, including myself, experience such feelings, even at a distant tragedy, such as reading an old tombstone in a remote churchyard and realising that parents had lost a much loved child, that a woman had died in childbirth or that a sailor had drowned at sea. It does not follow that any of these feelings are present in the minds of those who tell, those who listen to or those who laugh at jokes about death and disaster. There is no evidence that this is the case and the entire burden of proof lies on those who claim that coping is present. People do use humour under circumstances of danger and stress but the tellers of disaster jokes are most likely in a calm and neutral environment. It is quite illicit to apply observations made of how people use humour in social interactions under extreme circumstances to serene situations where they are merely sharing jokes for entertainment. In order even to begin to understand what those who exchange disaster jokes are thinking and feeling it would be necessary directly to observe the telling of the jokes, to make visual and audio recordings and also to ask the participants what their views were. Even then it would be impossible to generalise from this since the joke can be perceived differently in different settings. What is certain is that very little can be deduced from the text on its own; it is tone and context that matter [Davies 2002].

In general there is no political dimension to disaster jokes, though there may well be political references. Most of the jokes about the death of Diana, Princess of Wales in a car crash merely defy the hegemonic grief imposed by the mass media but a few raised in jest a question that was later to be raised in earnest – were the British royal family involved in her death? There were not, of course. It was a simple case of drunken driving by the French chauffeur Henri Paul hired by Dodi al Fayed, the last of Diana’s many paramours, resulting in a fatal accident, a very common occurrence indeed in France. Diana died for the same reason that Mary Jo Kopechne drowned, when also a passenger in a car driven by a drunk, one which came off the bridge at Chappaquiddick into a river. The car was driven by the notoriously boozy lush, Senator Edward Kennedy.

Not only was the driver drunk, so was Di. She’d got three pints of Carling inside her. [Oral circulation, England 1998. Also on the Internet. It had been alleged that Diana had had an affair with Will Carling, a Neanderthal rugby sportsman.]

Internet reference 10

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/04/20/48hours/main612818.shtml>

They found a new job for Harald Juhnke as a security officer and driver at the Paris Ritz.

(Harald Juhnke was a German alcoholic and entertainer).

What's the difference between George Best and Dodi's chauffeur?
George Best can still take corners when he's pissed.

Internet reference 11

[http://websitelineonenet/n_mystacy/jokes/Tasteless/Diana.htm]

[George Best was an Irish alcoholic and football player. He lived by football and died of drink].

How did people find out Ted was dead?
He didn't show up at the bar this morning.

Internet reference 12

[www.celebjihad.com]

These jokes about drunks are to the point but nonetheless there emerged both jokes and conspiracy theories that tried to put a different, sinister twist on these disasters.

What did Ted Kennedy say to his secretary when she told him confidentially, "I've got a problem"?

He said, "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it". [UCBFA Anglo-American file. Jokes II-2, F3, P6 U9 K4 Collected by Richard Peters in 1970]. As we have seen Kennedy drove off a bridge at Chappaquiddick and his aide Mary Jo Kopechne was drowned. The joke plays with the speculative idea that either she or some subsequent secretary was pregnant and this was a Kennedy way of dealing with the problem. Kennedy was, of course, a notorious philanderer like his president brother.

Hat der Englische Geheimdienst Diana umgebracht (getötet) ?
Nein, der französische Untergrund.

(Did the English security services kill Diana?
No, the French underground)

Internet reference 13

[<http://www.remi-de/RH/Files/Diana-3.htm>]

The jokes express but do not endorse conspiracy theories about the deaths of the two women. In the case of Mary Jo Kopechne the suggestion is that Senator Kennedy deliberately drowned her to eliminate a woman he had made pregnant and to avoid the scandal of this being made known. The jokes, like urban legends, are amusing fictions but the conspiracy

theories are seriously believed, even though based on spurious evidence. Both have their origin in the question 'Who would benefit from this person's death?' This question is often central to fictional detective stories about murder; it makes for a good tale. In the Kennedy joke the motive is clear, though most conspiracy theories do not dwell on this but rather on the cowardly and corrupt way in which Kennedy behaved after the accident in order to hide and diminish his culpability. It is perhaps noteworthy that all his life Ted Kennedy enjoyed jokes about the accident that had led to the death of Mary-Jo Kopechne.

The British monarchy benefited greatly from the death of Diana. Her promiscuity, continual publicity seeking and malice towards Charles' stable and sensible new bride, Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, were a great embarrassment. If Diana had had a child, particularly an illegitimate one or following a marriage to a Muslim such as Dodi al Fayed, this would have created even more severe problems. The royals probably also wondered what kind of publicity seeking bad behaviour she would provide on the occasion of Charles' eventual coronation, perhaps demanding that her son by Charles, Prince William be made king instead. She would certainly have displayed unremitting hostility to good Queen Camilla, a sweetly modest woman who does not seek the limelight. For the older generation of British royalty the death of Diana, whom they saw as a hateful, hating, vengeful, emotionally unstable little trollope, was an unexpected bonus. Given the centrality of the monarchy to the British constitution and sense of identity and continuity her death also benefited the British state. This is why there are jokes in German as well as English about the involvement of MI6 (the relevant branch of the *Sicherheitsdienst*) in her death one willed by the Queen and Prince Charles. Alongside the jokes lies a conspiracy theory which is still being pushed by sections of the gutter press in Britain and has led to a series of expensive, independent British inquiries, even though the original commonsensical French verdict of 'drunken driving' was perfectly accurate and adequate. Humour and paranoia have focused on a single theme and they are both drawing on a more widespread cultural phenomenon, the politics of blame. There is a general unwillingness often rooted in a general ignorance of statistics to accept that disasters happen randomly or that random disasters occur in clusters. Someone has to be to blame and to be blamed. The jokes delight in and play with such irrationality. The blame syndrome has been parodied in comic rhyming narratives, notably *Albert and the Lion* written in the 1920s by Marriott Edgar and recited by Stanley Holloway. In it Albert Ramsbottom's respectable Northern working class parents take him to the Zoo at the plebeian seaside resort, Blackpool where Albert harasses a lion called Wallace by poking him in the ear with 'his stick with the 'orse's 'ead 'andle'. The irritated lion eats Albert. The tale goes on to describe the reaction of the deceased Albert's indignant parents.

So the manager had to be sent for
He came and he said, "What's to do?"
Pa said, "Yon lion's eaten our Albert
And 'im in his Sunday clothes, too."

Then Mother said, "Right's right, young feller
I think it's a shame and a sin
For a lion to go and eat Albert
And after we've paid to come in!"

The manager wanted no trouble
He took out his purse right away
And said, "How much to settle the matter?"

And Pa said "What do you usually pay?"

But Mother had turned a bit awkward
 When she thought where her Albert had gone
 She said, "No! someone's got to be summonsed"
 So that were decided upon.

Internet reference 14

http://www.monologues.co.uk/Albert_and_the_Lion.htm

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3jXMsfLxhI>

This poem has an author and a well-known recite, who can still be seen reciting it on U-tube. It also has a fixed location and must be recited with a Northern (England) accent. It is not a joke but it contains many of the same elements as a disaster joke. A young boy, an only child, dies tragically in a bizarre accident, yet his being eaten is treated in a humorous way. His parents are upset but their grief is undercut by their material greed, their concern at the loss of Albert's best 'Sunday suit' and the father's eagerness for financial compensation. Finally it turns to the politics of blame. Albert's mother wants to have someone held responsible and punished, so 'someone's got to be summonsed', to be brought before a court.

What this immensely popular item from the late 1920s demonstrates is people's liking for the humours of disaster. But it required the stimulus of television to call disaster jokes into existence, even though the other ingredients were already there. In 1937 Harold Francis Davidson, the Vicar of Stiffkey was eaten by a real lion in Skegness Amusement Park (Skegness is another working-class seaside holiday town, the English Midlands' equivalent of Blackpool the town where the fictitious Albert had been eaten) but at that time there was no television and so there was no cycle of disaster jokes about the Vicar's strange demise.

Sick and Violent Jokes and *Tendenz*

For a reinforcement of my thesis as to how disaster jokes come about, let me turn to a different kind of sick joke studied by Alan Dundes and Thomas Hauschild [1983] in their pioneering study *Auschwitz Jokes*, about a joke cycle that began in Germany. The death of a celebrity is merely a statistic but the deliberate murder of six million is a tragedy. We still feel it as a tragedy today, long after the fate of Diana has disappeared into obscurity. The Shoah, the Holocaust, is not a mere television three-day wonder but lies at the very heart of how we see the real tragedies of the past.

I first heard such jokes when I was a student staying in a youth hostel in Bunkyo-Ku, Tokyo in 1966. They were told by a man from Westphalia in his early twenties who was teaching English conversation to the Japanese. Thomas Hauschild collected many of them in West Berlin in 1982 and his German colleagues provided many more.

Wozu hat man die Juden 1936 bei der Olympiade gebraucht?
 Für die Aschenbahn und fürs olympische Feuer [Dundes and Hauschild
 1983]

What were the Jews used for in the 1936 Olympic Games?
 For the cinder track and for the Olympic flame.

Ein Kind spielt mit einem Stuck Kernseife. Da sagt die Oma:
 “Willst du wohl die Finger von Anne Frank lassen?!”
 [Dundes and Hauschild, 1983 p. 253].

A child is playing with a piece of soap. Grandma says, “Keep your hands off Anne Frank”.

Was is der Traum eines Juden?
 Ein Fensterplatz im Hochofen.
 [Dundes and Hauschild, 1983 p. 254].

What is a Jew’s dream?
 A window seat in a high oven.

Dundes and Hauschild [1983p. 249-50] go on falsely to conclude on the basis of these jokes, which they describe as aggressive, that these jokes convey anti-Semitism. They do not. It is utterly circular and fallacious to use the text of the joke to decide its origins and then to use these entirely speculative views to account for the jokes turning up in Germany and their subsequent flourishing in many countries including Britain, Sweden and the United States Dundes and Hauschild [1983 pp. 250] conclude that “the implication is that to the extent that anti-Semitism is international, the jokes expressing such prejudice are equally international”. They assert this. They provide no proper supporting evidence. The levels of anti-Semitism were very low in Britain and Germany at that time, lower than they ever had been in the past and lower than in the twenty-first century, when we have seen the growth of the New Anti-Semitism [Iganski and Kosmin 2003] and the end of the *Schonzeit* [Markowits 2007 p188 and see pp 190-9]. Yet today such jokes are no longer being invented and there is no evidence that the old ones are popular in the general population. Even if they were, it would merely indicate, as the jokes of the period 1968-1982 did, that people joked about anti-Semitic violence. It would not indicate that the jokers supported or were indifferent to it, nor that the jokes were a vehicle for hostile attitudes to the Jews.

Rather, like the disaster jokes set off by television, the Holocaust jokes are best seen as a response to a pervasive moral rhetoric. The best evidence in favour of this thesis comes from an Israeli study by Anat Zajdman [1994] written in Ivrit. She showed that Holocaust jokes had flourished among young Jews in Israel but only after it had been made a compulsory subject of study in schools. This is in line with my general explanation of disaster jokes as a response to a hegemonic discourse. It also explains why they first arose in Germany, where Holocaust awareness was most actively propagated, and why they then proved popular in other democratic countries. The tragedy of the Holocaust has become an aspect of the sacred and to deny or diminish it is rightly seen as abhorrent. Those British religious groups who on specious and mendacious grounds refuse to take part in the ceremonies that mark Holocaust Memorial Day each January have made themselves utter pariahs [*BBC News* 5th January, 2006, Leppard.2005]. Its centrality to our sensibilities is shown by the way the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has gone out of his way to belittle it and to encourage a horde of long discredited Holocaust deniers from other countries. It is his way of confronting the values and pieties of the West. Those who told Holocaust jokes in the 1970s have nothing whatsoever in common with Ahmadinejad.

Let me make it clear that I am not denying that anti-Semites could enjoy these jokes in a nasty way and put them to malign use. Indeed they appear on hate-websites attacking the Jews, though as an enticement and entertainment, not as persuasion. However, the uses people make of a joke cycle do not tell us how it came into existence.

Let me cite an example of an anti-Semite relishing such a joke , which I recently found in the folklore archive of the University of California, Berkeley, one of Alan Dundes' great legacies to us.

How do you fit 500 Jews in a Volkswagen?
 `Three in the back, two in the front and 495 in the ash tray
 [UCBFA 2000. Afghanistan miscellaneous file].

The joke is essentially similar to one recorded in Mainz and again in Berkeley in 1980. [See Dundes and Hauschild, 1983 pp. 250-51]. In and of itself it is merely one more disaster joke. Nothing more can be said about it. But the joke-teller, a twenty one year old Afghan-American student and video salesman then living in Union City, California, commented on his own joke:

I hate the fuckin' Jews. I'm so glad Hitler took care of six million of them in the concentration camps. Who knows how evil this world would be if that God-sent Hitler didn't kill the devil's kids – the Jews.

The folk-lore collector adds that the teller had learned the joke from his uncle in 1999 in Union City, CA, that he had been brought up learning anti-Semitic legends and folklore in his family and that his friends and family all hate Jews. The collector says of his informant that he "is a proud anti-Semitic (sic) and speaks passionately against the Jews".

The joke-teller and his associates are clearly extremely nasty individuals and we may reasonably infer from his comments that his abhorrent views are a product of the nasty culture from which he comes but these qualities are not inherent in the joke. Tendentiousness does not lie in the text of a joke. The way the teller made use of such jokes was only revealed by his comments. Had we observed him when he told it , we might have inferred his perceptions from his tone and from the context in which he chose to tell it but it is these and these alone that give purpose and direction to a joke and this is true of all disaster jokes, rough-hue them how we will .

The Strange Case of Visual Jokes about Disasters

Giselinde Kuipers has shown how a new purely internet based disaster humour has developed [Kuipers 2002 p 451, 2005 p 80] , one that is entirely visual and which is created by cutting and pasting and joining disparate images together to form an incongruous montage. This kind of visual humour was especially common after the 9/11 disaster [Kuipers 2002 p 455] in 2001 when a group of fanatical Muslims hijacked planes and used them to destroy the World Trade Centre and to attack the Pentagon, causing great and tragic loss of life. The very visual nature of the television reporting of these events and the preservation of images from it on the internet such as the burning towers made it possible to construct various kinds of digital collage on a computer and to send them to others or to post them. These television

images were combined with others already on the internet, such as planes, the terrorist Osama bin Laden and even special effects from films like the giant ape King Kong climbing a sky-scraper [Kuipers 2005]. The occurrence of these new items which mix genres is not, though, evidence of a fragmented culture but simply shows that the computer is a toy that allows us to play new games in which we can fragment and reassemble without regard to convention, the way we did as children with bits of stick-on coloured paper or modelling clay. Artists, such as Joan Miró i Ferrà or in a different way Henri Matisse, have consciously used these childhood techniques in the past. It makes more sense to say that television had imposed a deceptive unity on visual culture and that the means is now available to emancipate ourselves from it. Besides only a small proportion of internet go in for creative fragmentation, though a larger minority of them can appreciate others doing so. Monty Python was a minority taste as was the equally fragmented *Le Nouveau Réalisme*. Most people's everyday lives are highly structured, repetitive and uncreative – daily commuting, daily work, more daily commuting, daily squabble with spouse, daily watching of imposed television. For a few of us leisure is a brief period of time off in which to fragment cultural items and reassemble them in a new form but as a contrast to, not a product of, the quotidian world.

This visual humour, this most recent form of disaster humour, has some of the necessary properties of jokes, in this case disaster jokes, but not all of them. In some respects these montages are more like cartoons. Like jokes, cartoons often depend on the intersecting of two scripts in an incongruous way but unlike jokes they are created by particular known artists and usually signed. Also the same artists or their colleagues may choose to employ these skills to provide another kind of cartoon in which distortion and caricature and visual metaphors, often incongruous metaphors, are used to make an entirely serious point. The latter may well not be intended to be humorous nor perceived as such by those who peruse them. In such case we can try to speak, as we cannot do with jokes, of the creator's motives, intentions, purposes and feelings. Now the computer has enabled those who are not good draughtsmen to become amateur cartoonists and to create a collage and put it into a circulation. The problem for the observer is that some of them have the structure of a joke and possess a resolved or unresolved incongruity but others do not. Also, although the new visuals are anonymous and circulate like internet jokes, they leave their audience with a sense that somewhere in the background lurks an 'author' who could in principle be traced and identified, even if the images have been tweaked by others since it was first launched. This is not true of jokes or urban legends. These new visual items are more like the fake Stella awards, fictitious tort cases about one American being awarded huge damages against another, which get posted,

Internet reference 15

<http://www.stellaawards.com/bogus.html>

<http://anthillonline.com/stella-awards-2009-rewarding-human-stupidity/>

<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/chat/2160489/posts>

in imitation of the Stella awards site, a site that collects real cases of this kind.

Internet reference 16

<http://www.stellaawards.com/>

In the case of a stellar but bogus Stella award you do not know who the hoaxer is but you do know that there is a hoaxer.

It is, though, almost impossible to assign with any certainty a motive or a meaning to the disaster visuals created after 9/11. Many seem to be patriotic and aggressive, an American fight-back after a major terrorist attack on their nation but they could well be a parody of that

general patriotic and aggressive American response that was to lead to the long and continuing war in Afghanistan against the Taliban or they could be simply playing with images for its own sake [Kuipers 2002 p469. 2005 p 79] In truth we do not know, for ambiguity is the very essence of humour. However, we have here a new kind of disaster humour, quasi-disaster jokes, that will call for new kinds of analysis, since the visual nature of the internet means that it can transmit humorous and ambiguous material in ways that differ from traditional oral transmission. There is now a ghost of an author and a ghostly hint of his or her intentions

Conclusions

In this article I have made two sets of points, one negative and one positive. My negative conclusion is that the often propounded explanations of the existence of jokes in terms of the motives or psychological needs of the jokers are wholly false. Those who put them forward never provide any good evidence to back up their claims. Jokes are neutral. Jokes have no moral content one way or the other, which is why those who think a particular joke carries a tendentious message often quarrel among themselves as to what it is but have no way of settling the argument by appeal to reasoned criteria. It is impossible to verify the claims of either of the parties and their arguments are futile and irrational. What drive these arguments are either individual feelings or some ideology or other; these are then dressed up and disguised either in rhetoric or in arcane academic language. Those who are driven by emotion cannot see that the world is not a mere projection of how they feel about it. Being horrified at the existence of disaster jokes is not a good basis for understanding them. The ideologists are ‘true believers’ who have taken on board a set of general explanations to which they are strongly committed, such as one of the many forms of psychoanalytic quackery or untestable and often incoherent critical cultural theories. These theories are pointless; they are, to use Wolfgang Ernst Pauli’s phrase, “not even wrong”. “*Das ist nicht nur nicht richtig, es ist nicht einmal falsch!*” While it is possible to observe the particular telling of a joke and to infer, though very uncertainly, something of what is in that teller’s mind or even, from the audience’s response something about what they feel, this information is not helpful in explaining why a particular set of jokes, such as disaster jokes or a particular cycle of disaster jokes exist. If these critical culture theory, pop psychology and psychoanalytic theses were proper theories, they would be able to explain why other types of joke or joke cycles that could have emerged from a particular culture did not or why joke cycles sometimes do not cross the cultural boundaries between countries with a shared language [Davies 1998, Davies 2006] They are completely unable to do this. Likewise you cannot use the gloss that someone puts on a joke or the rest of a joke-teller’s text, perhaps a partisan speech in which a joke is used to make a particular point, to explain a generic joke. Other glosses and other speeches are always possible.

My main positive conclusion, which largely concurs with the pioneering analysis of Elliott Oring and its excellent follow up by Giseline Kuipers is that the key to an understanding of disaster jokes is the impact of the television reporting of disasters. When people are incessantly preached at, they respond by telling jokes that breach the preachifying conventions imposed on them. The most telling evidence for me is the fact that such jokes did not exist before television and this also makes my version of the theory falsifiable. If someone were to produce a whole sheaf of contemporary jokes about the Vicar of Stiffkey being eaten by a lion then I would have to go back and start again.

Notes

UCBFA stands for University of California Berkeley Folklore Archive

For a more detailed account with substantial notes and bibliography
see

Christie Davies **Jokes about Disasters: a response to Tales Told on Television full of Hype and Fury.** In (eds) **Christian Hoffstadt** and **Stefan Höltgen**, *Sick Humor*, Bochum and Freiburg : **Projekt Verlag** 2010 pp 11-40

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