

# Tasting Funny ?

International Conference on Humour and Taste

14-15-16 September 2023, University of Basel



**Confirmed Keynote lecture:**

**Sophie Quirk (University of Kent)**

**“The Politics of Taste: Challenges for the Comedy Industry”**

## **Call for Papers**

Characterising humour in its different flavours gives rise to a variety of sensory metaphors, many of them food-related. Jokes can be tasty, cheesy, crusty, corny, sour, saucy, stale, canned, elaborate. Moreover, palatability is a common metaphor of a cultural production’s acceptability, and humour can demonstrate good or bad taste, sometimes depending at which end of an aggressive joke one stands.

What is there to understand from this affinity between humour and food metaphors? Is it linked to the element of pleasure, of enjoyment? Has it to do with the comfort we retrieve from both laughing and eating? Is it our societies' way of labelling humour as something more essential, an ingredient indispensable to human life? Humour and food trigger similar responses in us, partly sensory and immediate, with memories vividly brought back or the risk of eliciting disgust, partly cognitive, delayed, with sometimes a disgusting or delicious aftertaste?

Can humour be tasteful without being dull? Does humour have to create some degree of unease? Does it have to address taboo subjects? Where is the line between transgressive and offensive humour, between progressivist contestation and reactionary rhetoric? And is humour appropriate as long as it matches an audience's sensitivity? If we reduced the notion of sick joke solely to Veatch's [N+V] theory, then a racist joke delivered to a racist audience would lose its offensiveness, with recipients perceiving the violation as sufficiently minor.

What are the criteria used to define tasteful and tasteless humour, and what is there to see behind this distinction? Can we discriminate between voluntarily and accidentally tasteless humour? Off-colour jokes are commonly offensive ones, yet may also serve a different purpose: addressing themes wholly outside of good taste, themes triggering a reaction of horror (rapes or genocides for instance), not to mock the victims but to attack the abusers, and upturn the meaning of bad taste. Such practices point to bad taste as a tool for protest, and to good taste as an instrument for silencing the powerless, an extension of their oppression. On the deeply political terrain that is humour, we must distinguish between the bad taste of a rancid discourse and that of a painful or taboo topic.

There is a kinship between good taste and social norms, so that bad taste raises issues of cohesion and belonging. Is a bad taste in humour a cause for exclusion from the in-group, or can bad taste also - paradoxically - bring people together (around a liking for "kitsch" for instance)? At what point does a tasteless transgression start forming a new norm? And how does this circulation of taste norms through shared ethical and aesthetic values relate to the construction of class identities?

Pushing the food metaphor towards the culinary terrain, one can wonder whether there exist palatable, funny for all, fail proof joke recipes, as well as sure pitfalls, guaranteed to be frowned upon, across languages, cultures and time periods. Or is humour so utterly embedded within a geographical, social, and temporal space that it is essentially barred from any universality? One can wonder whether the bad taste of a failed joke is similar to that of a failed dish, whether a pinch of salt can make everything tastier, and whether the right preparation can elevate mediocre

ingredients. Or explore the development of humorous productions in children, from the clumsy mixing of incompatible ingredients towards more expert elaborations.

Possible topics for presentations may include but are not limited to:

- good and bad taste as categorisations of humour
- varieties of bad taste humour: kitsch, dark, gory, showy, bowdy, cringeworthy, etc.
- good or bad taste as strategies for producing humour
- taste and social norms
- good or bad taste of humorous topics
- good or bad taste in the choice of joke targets
- culinary metaphors of humour
- bland humour
- disgust
- the taste of the audience
- the development of humorous expertise in children
- ...

We welcome papers on any humorous cultural production (literature, music, film, graphic arts, sculpture, architecture, design, fashion, advertisement, etc.), from any time period or language area. We also welcome papers on the translatability of jokes, whether food-related jokes or ones that would be unequally tasteful in different cultures.

Presentations of 20 minutes can be delivered in English (preferred) or French, the subsequent exchanges will be conducted in English.

Abstracts of approximately 300 words in English or French are to be submitted by 1st June, 2023 [via this form](#).

**Deadline:** 1st June 2023

**Organisers:**

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**Timeline:**

Deadline for submission of abstracts: 1st June, 2023

Notification from committee: 16th June, 2023

Conference: 14-15-16 September, 2023

**URL:** <https://slw-comicverse.dslw.unibas.ch/tastingfunny.php>

**Image:** Nils Couturier