



The Aha, Ha! Moment: A Gestalt Perspective on Audiovisual Humour

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In my previous work about film music, I had adopted Gestalt as a theoretical framework to explain the functions and effects of music in film, from a perspective that did not stem from musicology but from film studies. I developed what I call 'micro/macro configurations' analysis. In films, music contributes to the overall form with its specific Gestalt (the configuration of the musical structures), and such musical Gestalt meets the Gestalt of some other cinematic device/s. Besides music, any device (light design, colour schemes, dialogue, acting, camerawork, cutting...) has a specific micro-configuration that can fuse with those of the other devices, and it can be analysed in terms of micro/macro-configuration. The product of the fusion of these micro-configurations is a macro-configuration in which the devices create an audiovisual whole that is 'something else than the sum of its parts'. In this article I apply this Gestalt-inspired analytical approach to audiovisual humour, more specifically to 'audiovisual puns', 'sight gags', and 'perceptual pranks'. The bulk of the examples come from the cinema of the Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker trio, whose comedy is largely based on a clash of incongruous micro-configurations, on perceptual accumulation that creates results similar to multistable figures, and even on comical optical illusions. Closing the article is a proposal that links Gestalt to the Release Theories of humour, explaining the laughter engendered by humour as a 'Aha, Ha! moment'.

In this article I start by surveying the contribution that Gestalt theory can give to film analysis; then I present my Gestalt-inspired approach of 'micro-configuration/macro-configuration analysis'; finally, I offer a Gestalt perspective on audiovisual humour. Given the film-studies oriented nature of this discussion, I shall not consider 'found humour' — situations we can find humorous in everyday life — but 'invented humour', which is the one we find in film comedies.¹ I employ the Law of Prägnanz ('good configuration'), the Theory of Amodal Completion (which stems from the Law of Good Continuation), and the Theory of Problem Solving (the 'insight' or, perhaps more famously, the 'Aha! Moment'), which all derive from Gestalt Theory. I principally refer to the works of Wolfgang Köhler and Gaetano Kanizsa, instead of Rudolf Arnheim, whose theories are already more renowned in film and media studies.² It is important to point out that this article is inspired by the conceptual framework of Gestalt Theory but it has no pretence to pass itself as a work pertinent to the 'hard sciences': its disciplinary

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area is Film Studies, and its concern is the analysis of humour in films. Hence Gestalt is employed in looser terms than it would be in a Psychology journal.³

GESTALT AND FILM ANALYSIS

In 1979, the Italian Gestalt Psychologist Gaetano Kanizsa wrote: 'today Gestalt theory does not have much credit as an explanatory theory'.⁴ In Film Studies too, Cognitivism has proven more popular in the last decades, at least as an alternative to the post-structuralist and culturalist approaches.⁵ Yet, the interest for Gestalt Theory has seen some resurgence lately, perhaps as a consequence of the discovery in the 1990s of the mirror neurons, whose action seems to resemble the 'Psychophysical Isomorphism' postulated by Gestaltists in the 1910s.⁶ A renewed interest has consequently emerged in film studies too, especially in the area of sound and music, for example in the work of K. J. Donnelly and Danijela Kulezic-Wilson.⁷

Gestalt can provide a more holistic view of the audiovisual experience than the more modular view of Cognitivism.⁸ Often, the computer-like processing of perceptual data appears too central in Cognitivism, with cognition being given a predominant importance. Gaetano Kanizsa, in his works on visual perception, argued for a neater separation between the perception process and the cognition process, calling the two 'primary process' and 'secondary process', respectively. Primary process, though not exactly immediate — because 'the organisation is not contained in the stimuli (even if the latter contains the conditions), but is added by the organism' — is arguably more independent of cognition than Cognitivism would posit.⁹ In watching a film, for example, the perception of movement and the figure/ground separation would be a matter of primary processes — and not much cognitive processing is required — while the mental reconstruction of the 'fabula' from the 'syuzhet' would be a matter of secondary processes.¹⁰

The primary process, a 'preconscious process', is precisely what the Gestalt theorists have concentrated on, and it responds to organisational rules that were categorised into the Gestalt laws.¹¹ An experiment that supports the separation of the two processes is the 'Ames Room Illusion': even when one is made aware of the 'trick' behind it, the illusion is still perceived, a sign that cognition has little or no effect on that specific perceptual experience.¹² Gestalt-oriented film studies have similarly advocated for a neater separation of the two processes. K. J. Donnelly explains:

Stimulus recognition takes place before cognition. Unconscious affect always creates emotion, whereas conscious cognition does not necessarily do so. [...] Cognitive Psychology's notion of perception is that there is a small amount of stimulus and the 'work' all takes place as a cognitive process in the brain. This so-called mental model affirms that stimulus requires the considerable brain input of 'enriching' through hypothesis-testing. [...] [T]here are distinct aspects of the aesthetic process (for film especially) that are poorly accounted for by such an approach.¹³

Within film studies, my own work has also been influenced by Gestalt, in particular in my research on the functions and effects of music in films.¹⁴

From this research I developed, from Gestalt Theory, what I called 'micro/macro configurations' analysis.¹⁵ In film, music contributes to the overall form with its specific 'Gestalt' (the configuration of the musical melody, harmony, timbre, etc.... is such that music is perceived as threatening, for example), and such musical 'Gestalt' meets the 'Gestalt' of some other cinematic device/s (say, a close-up of a smiling face).¹⁶ From the encounter of these micro-configurations (threatening music x smiling face) a macro-configuration is produced in which the two devices fuse to create an audiovisual whole (a 'creepy' person). The 'creepiness' configuration is neither in the image (the face is smiling) nor in the music (the music is threatening), but it appears as the product of the fusion of the two elements.¹⁷ This fusion responds to the Law of Prägnanz: in the apparently incongruous pairing of these two divergent elements, our mind searches for some sense, some stability, some meaningful relation between the two, until an interpretation emerges — that person appears creepy because behind the positive smiling facade some negative intent is hidden — and the percept is thus stabilised.

If the perception of the smiling face and the threatening music can be a matter of 'primary processes', the interpretation of this apparently incongruous pairing seems to be calling for some higher-level processing, a secondary process more cognitive than perceptual. Yet, in keeping with Gestalt Theory, the secondary process of film interpretation can also be theorised with Gestalt's theory of problem solving. In ordinary film *comprehension*, we usually apply 'reproductive thinking', that is 'the application of tried-and-true paths to a solution. The thinker reproduces a series of steps that are known to yield a workable answer'.¹⁸ With *interpretation*, we are faced with a *problem* that requires an act of 'productive thinking' on our part, which is 'characterized by shifts in perspective which allow the problem solver to consider new, sometimes transformational, approaches'.¹⁹ If film interpretation is conceptualised as a problem-solving activity, and if a problem is considered like an unstable configuration, then the Gestalt theory of problem solving can be profitably used.

According to this theory, a solution is found when the configuration of the problematic object is made stable. To achieve this, the 'relations' between the elements of the problem at hand have to be examined, we have to gain an 'insight': 'we may now discover other relations in the material which make the difficulty disappear. In some instances, we are at first unable to see any relations in the material which are relevant to our task. When this happens, we have to inspect the given situation until, eventually, it does exhibit relations from which a solution can be derived'²⁰

Gestalt tackles problem solving not only as a secondary process, and not so much as a *cognitive* effort of hypothesis-testing, but as a *perceptual* effort of relation-seeking — 'seeing relations', 'insight'... The problem has to be observed from different angles until the right one is found from which we can see a relation between the elements that can reveal a solution. This is the 'Aha! Moment', the

moment in which the solution to a problem presents itself to the mind: all the pieces fall into the right place all of a sudden because we have found the right angle of observation.

Back to our example of the creepy person macro-configuration, we are confronted with a juxtaposition of two micro configurations (threatening music and smiling face) that, taken singularly and compared, are not isomorphic at all: reproductive thinking would expect 'happy' music to go with a smiling face. This is the interpretive problem: why the juxtaposition of these two incongruous elements? When we apply productive thinking and find a relation between the elements, a stability of the percept is reached: the two micro-configurations (smiling face, threatening music) reconfigure one another and a macro-configuration of 'creepy person' finally emerges. We perceive an incongruity between the two micro-configurations, the incongruity is made noticeable as a problem, which alerts us that interpretation (problem solving through productive thinking) is needed. When we eventually have an insight into the relation between the apparently incongruous micro-configurations — music is not incongruous: music is telling me that something threatening is hidden behind that smiling face — then the incongruity itself is removed and a macro-configuration is stabilised: arguably, a creep is about to perpetrate something disturbing.

GESTALT AND AUDIOVISUAL HUMOUR

I have used the word 'incongruity' to describe micro-configurations that do not seem to fit together. And 'Incongruity Theory' is precisely the principal orientation currently employed to explain why we experience 'comic amusement', the emotional state produced by 'humour' in all its forms.²¹ According to Incongruity Theory, 'human experience works with learned patterns. [...] The core meaning of 'incongruity' in standard incongruity theories is that some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our normal mental patterns and normal expectations.²² Faced with such incongruities, our mind at first turns to a state of alert, because any deviation from normalcy might entail a potential danger; but soon after, when the incongruity is assessed as a jocular and unthreatening one, we experience comic amusement for the humorous contestation of normalcy.

It is cognitive psychology that has been largely employed to explain the mechanics of humour. Verbal comedy, in particular, has a substantial scholarly literature rooted in Linguistics or Cognitivism, largely falling within the Incongruity Theory — for example, Delia Chiaro's *Pragmatics and Descriptive Linguistics* or Victor Raskin's *Script Theory*.²³ Such explanations — according to which humour is produced through a play with our mental scripts, schemata, and through a set-up that leads us to formulate false inferences that are then subverted by the punchline — are in line with Cognitivism's focus on the secondary process, and indeed Incongruity Theory is the most popular amongst cognitivists.²⁴ Yet, in the processing of *visual* and *audiovisual* humour there is

arguably a stronger agency of the primary processes than in the more cognition-driven effort of processing *verbal* humour, which is based on symbolic language that needs stronger cognitive elaboration.

Visual humour can be registered, *perceived*, with a higher level of immediacy than verbal humour: if a written joke in Swedish is read by people who are not able to enact a secondary processing of the language, the humour is not registered at all; on the contrary, the cartoon of some pompous self-important man spectacularly slipping on a banana peel has the potential to elicit comic amusement trans-culturally, because it is registered through primary processing. Hence, Gestalt can perhaps offer some complementing perspectives on *audiovisual* humour, specifically applying Gestalt's problem-solving theory.

When we experience an instance of humour, we are presented with a problem — an incongruous situation — and we are required to find a solution. In terms of problem solving, there is a resemblance here between what happens with comprehension through reproductive thinking (the approach we apply in regular situations) and the need to apply productive thinking to something unusual. A Gestalt-based explanation had already been given in 1932 of 'the relevant mental processes of the humorous experience', an explanation that gave perception a stronger role: the meaning of a set of elements depends on the specific configuration of said elements; when a sudden change in configuration is experienced — as happens in the incongruous punchline of jokes — the result is a sudden change of meaning.²⁵ More recent contributions directly linked the pleasure that is experienced in solving a problem to the one experienced when understanding a joke: both entail a 'revelation experience' and 'pleasures of the mind' that are characterised by 'surprise, violation of expectations and [...] a feeling of mastery or virtuosity'.²⁶ While most of these studies focus on verbal jokes or the visual humour of cartoons, I shall direct my attention to the audiovisual humour of films.

Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik singled out some categories of comedic devices in film and television: *comic events* (humorous actions that are built into larger narratives, for example all the ludicrous troubles triggered by the rejuvenating potion in *Monkey Business* (Howard Hawks, 1952); *gags* (isolated humorous moments in the 'field of visual, physical action'); *jokes* and *wisecracks* (isolated humorous events and actions that 'imply a *control* of language'), and, within the latter, *visual puns* ('one of the forms taken by the comic interplay between language and action').²⁷ Here, I leave aside the comic events and the jokes and wisecracks and concentrate on the gag and the visual pun.

The *gag* is also known as 'sight gag', which in films often 'derives from exploiting the magical properties of cinema, a comedy of metaphysical release that celebrates the possibility of substituting the laws of physics with the laws of the imagination.'²⁸ A classic example of such 'comedy of metaphysical release' is the delivery man in *Hellzapoppin'* (H.C. Potter, 1941) who is recurrently seen trying to deliver a potted plant to one Mrs. Jones in the most absurd situations — always unsuccessfully. Moreover, every time he appears, the plant has grown in size, and in the later attempts it has reached the dimension of a tree. The

recurring gag has the core of its humour in the *sight* of the paradoxical rate of growth of the plant and of the delivery man's increasing exasperation and fatigue for carrying around the item.

The *visual pun* consists in a humorous play with double-meanings and the ambiguities of language, like the verbal pun, but it is realised in the visual domain.²⁹ An oft-cited example is in *Horse Feathers* (Norman Z. McLeod, 1932) where Groucho Marx, president of a university, inspects an official document before signing it. He stops, alarmed, 'Wait a minute there's no seal here. Where's the seal?'. And Harpo, promptly, brings in a sea seal instead of the expected piece of stationery. Though Maltin's coinage of 'visual pun' for this example is justified by the fact that this is a pun whose punchline takes place visually, I think that *audiovisual pun* is a fitter qualification. The pun works by means of one *visual* and one *aural* element, and it works only because the two are fused together. The visual micro-configuration (Harpo bringing in a sea seal), though certainly bizarre, is not per se humorous. The aural micro-configuration is not humorous at all (a character asks for a stamp). It is the fusion of the two that creates a humorous macro-configuration. Whereas the traditional pun is a wordplay in which the comic effect is produced by a double meaning within the same sensory modality — 'All calendar's days are numbered' — in audiovisual puns the verbal part typically functions as a first leg of the joke (set-up) while the second leg (pay-off) is offered visually.

Film comedy typically employs the visual *and* aural modalities in combination to produce humour. Even in *sight* gags, sound constitutes an important micro-configuration: consider the various gags about music shifting from the non-diegetic to the diegetic level — what Biancorosso calls 'epistemological jokes'.³⁰ Viewers are tricked into believing that music is non-diegetic (coming from outside the narrative world) but then they suddenly realise it is in fact diegetic (it comes from some source within the story-world). A classic example is from Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles* (1974). We see the sheriff riding his horse in the prairie to the sound of Count Basie's 'April in Paris' — a choice that is per se already incongruous with the western-film setting, but motivated by the incongruous designer's saddle sported by the sheriff. Yet, as the camera pans to follow the horse ride, we discover that Count Basie and his orchestra are actually there, playing the music from a stage incongruously placed in the middle of the prairie. The music we assessed as non-diegetic accompaniment (following the patterns of reproductive thinking as per our film-viewers' experience) is actually a diegetic performance.³¹ Both modalities are actively involved in the production of the gag's macro-configuration: the aural micro-configuration (Basie's song) and the visual micro-configuration (the sheriff meeting the orchestra in the prairie). If this had been a silent film, we would have had the surprise of finding an orchestra in the middle of nowhere, but the non-diegetic/diegetic humorous trickery is made possible precisely by the *audiovisual* fusion. Like this, a sizable number of sight gags involve an aural component, and they are based on some trickery of our *perception*, not only of our mental schemata and scripts: first we perceive the music as non-diegetic, and then the perception is suddenly shifted

to another angle — diegetic.

Observed from this perception-oriented angle, audiovisual humour of this kind is similar to multistable images, in which 'sensory information is ambiguous and consistent with two or more mutually exclusive interpretations'.³² The Duck/Rabbit, the Old Lady/Young Maid, or the Rubin Vase are famous examples: 'such figures provide the experience of looking at a constant external stimulus whose perceptual appearance changes from one viewing to the next, or indeed from one moment to the next in continuous viewing'.³³ In such figures, two co-existing sets of stimuli are juxtaposed, liable to be arranged into two or more different macro-configurations; we try to stabilise one macro-configuration, but that macro-configuration would not really stabilise, some tension remains, something unusual is perceived in the image. Then, we eventually 'solve the problem' by noticing, from another angle, that there is another relation between the micro-configuration sets of stimuli.

The reaction when we are presented with a multistable figure and we realise the trick it plays on our perception, can be one of smile and comic amusement. An example of such effect produced by this multistability — at least on me — is a particular version of the Rubin Vase.³⁴ It is not a drawing but a photorealistic rendering of a vase with the British royal family crest on it. At first, I see the vase, and that seems the way the macro-configuration is stabilised. But there is something weird about this vase: it is asymmetrical and odd-shaped, it does not conform to the Law of Good Form — nor to basic standards of good pottery. By inspecting the vase for solutions to the oddity, the perception suddenly flips to another side: now the profiles of Queen Elisabeth and Prince Philip can be seen, which explains the odd contours of the vase. A new macro-configuration is reached in which what I perceive is not a slovenly shaped vase but a humorous homage to the Royal couple.

Kanizsa studied other types of optical illusions, the so-called 'impossible figures', like Penrose's triangle or fork.³⁵ He too detected reactions of comic amusement when people were confronted with such odd images. Kanizsa, also a painter, discussed some of his works in which he created configurations that can be obtained in the bidimensional world of the canvas but that would be impossible in the tridimensional world of real life — as happens in Escher's lithographies. In Kanizsa's paintings, the absurd effects are produced by confusing our perception about the distinction between figure and ground through the flatness of bidimensionality, the juxtaposition of bright and dark areas, and a play between thick and thin elements, cues which all tend to be configured automatically, driven by the primary-process Gestalt laws. The result is that elements of the characters in the foreground seem to absurdly fuse or intersect with the objects or characters in the background: 'The fishing rod is thinner than the sail, so it is "forced" to pass behind [...], the fencer's sword pierces the referee several meters away, the umbrella is threaded through the girl's hair, and the man and the woman are strangely entangled in the fence. All these figures seem absurd'.³⁶ These absurd paintings suggest 'a humorous effect to the observer'; the first impression is one 'of oddity and absurdity,

because the effect is both unexpected on the basis of everyday experience and in conflict with the perspective information on depth given by the figure' and one can also notice 'the surprise of the observers and their saying, as they did in the case of the fisherman and of the fencer, that there must be some mistake in the picture'.³⁷

Audiovisual gags like Count Basie in the prairie function somewhat like multistable figures: we first see something and then suddenly our perception is flipped to something else, and when we realise the trickery at the base of the image, we experience amusement.³⁸ Apart from the amusement for the sudden switch of perspective, multistable figure-like humour can also derive from the perception of the presence at the same time of two contrasting configurations – like in the Old Lady/Young Maid image. For instance, the humour might lie in the contrast between one serious micro-configuration and one ridiculous micro-configuration: in the same macro-configuration we have two different sides, as in a multistable image. The oeuvre of David Zucker, Jim Abrahams, and Jerry Zucker is exemplarily replete with gags based on this multistable 'audiovisual disjunction'.³⁹

One gag in ZAZ's TV show *Police Squad!* (S01xE05, 1982) sees Lieutenant Frank Drebin – in an undercover mission – paying a visit to a mob chieftain in his office. As customary after the James Bond films, the stereotypical villain is at his desk, cuddling a white cat on his lap. As the dialogue proceeds on serious tones, the mobster puts the cat away by sticking it inside one of the desk-drawers, and then opens another drawer to grab a gun, but we can peek a white toy poodle inside this other drawer. As these animal gags run, the tone of the dialogue is threatening and confrontational, and the music too accompanies it in a serious mood. Moments later, the mobster opens a file cabinet to put in a document while he assigns to Drebin – who pretends to be wanting to join the crime organisation – a murder as an initiation test. The music punctuates the words 'I want you to kill him' with a dramatic figure of the trombones, but as the mobster opens the file cabinet, doves fly out of it, continuing the series of stored-animals gags. If we *hear* only, the scene seems to belong to the drama genre; if we *watch* only, it clearly belongs to the comedy genre. The humorous macro-configuration is produced by the multistable tension of the two contrasting micro-configurations.

If we consider audiovisual puns, these are not only interpretable in terms of multistability – the flipping from one meaning to another – but they have also a component of trickery played upon our 'amodal completion' processes, that is one of the two modalities through which we interpolate non-visible parts to create a good form and stable configuration in our percepts. In Kanizsa's words:

we have phenomena of totalization, of completion, of integration, of 'filling in the gaps' – that is, of making present what is absent. The interpolation in the primary process can be modal or amodal. Examples of modal completion are [...] the formation of anomalous contours and surfaces. In all these cases the filled-in parts have the characteristics of visual modality [...]. Much more numerous are the

*cases of amodal completion. By 'amodal presence' we mean that type of perceptual existence [...] that is not verified by any sensory modality. [...] One need only recall the fundamental fact of figure-ground segmentation in the construction of the phenomenal world, in which the articulation always implies the completion (precisely amodal) of the continuous background existing behind the figure.*⁴⁰

Audiovisual puns play with our tendency to anticipate the continuation of an event, to fill the gaps according to the normal expectations that reproductive thinking suggests us. We perform an amodal completion of elements that we suppose are going to come next, even if evidence of this has not been ostensibly presented yet by any modality. In the case of the Marx Brothers' seal audiovisual pun, the normal amodal completion suggested by reproductive thinking — how we mentally see the event progressing — is the anticipation of an office seal to appear soon; instead, something else appears, which is not in line with the prediction.⁴¹

In *Police Squad!* again we have a number of such instances. For example, in one episode (S01xE04), Hocken and Drebin pay a visit to a night-club to question the resident starlet. They found her in the dressing room, with the scant costume still on. As they talk, she asks, 'Do you mind if I change' and then moves behind a dressing screen. Presently, she comes out as a totally different actress, a complete *change*, not a tall red-head but a petite blonde. Despite the absurd twist, the conversation continues undisturbed, as per the style of Zucker, Abrahams, and Zucker [\[fig. 1\]](#).

A less evident audiovisual puns is in ZAZ's *Top Secrets!* (1984): at a performance of Tchaikovsky's ballet *The Nutcracker* (1892) we see the male dancers sporting exceptionally prominent crotch bumps in their leotards; as they stand in line, the female dancers leap in the air and continue dancing by stepping on the male anatomical protrusions — a veritable 'nutcracker' ballet, for those who recognise the title of the musical piece.

There are cases of sight gags that are specifically based on tricks played on our perception. These 'perceptual pranks' are abundant in the cinema of Jacques Tati and of Zucker, Abrahams, and Zucker.⁴² In both, the comedic style is typically based on a play with the viewer's perception — not only through off-centred, background, or multi-layered gags — but also through veritable optical illusions. A Tati example from *Play Time* (1967) is the doorman who bends down to open the floor latches of a large glass door, and in doing so the ornate handles of the door gets superimposed to his head and look like a massive pair of antlers. Tati's films are an examples of 'parametric cinema' which 'exploits the very limits of the viewer's capacity'.⁴³ Also, 'the strongly parametric film, in departing from the classical system, must create a degree of perceptual uncertainty'.⁴⁴ While in classical cinema we can rely on reproductive thinking, with parametric cinema we have to resort to productive thinking to solve the perceptual challenges, like when we are faced with humour. Comedies in the parametric style are thus most interesting from a Gestalt perspective.

Within the 'nonsensical accumulation' typical of ZAZ's works, we find numerous

Fig. 1:
 'Do you mind if I
 change?', from *Police
 Squad!* (David Zucker,
 Jim Abrahams, Jerry
 Zucker, 1982), Episode 4



perceptual pranks at the expense of the viewers.⁴⁵ A particularly rich repository is *Top Secret!*. A striking instance of an articulate and technically complex perceptual prank is the Swedish bookstore scene, which I have analysed elsewhere.⁴⁶ Another is the departing train station: the protagonist is sitting in a train that has just stopped at a station. We hear the whistle signal, the engine warms up, and we see, from inside the wagon, that the train is leaving the station... until we realise that it is actually the station that is leaving the train. The false movement is confirmed when the narration cuts to the exterior of the wagon and we see the station, bizarrely mounted on a wheeled platform, departing from the stationary train – to add more absurdism, a late-coming passenger chases the travelling station.

Other gags in *Top Secret!* deceive the viewer by playing on the flatness of the bidimensional film image, in a way similar to Kanizsa's paintings. As the leader of the underground fighters is observing through binoculars the meadow in front of the prison they are about to infiltrate, we cut to a point-of-view shot: we see the typical reverse-eight-shaped black matte of binoculars framing the meadow, in which some cows are roaming. Suddenly, the cows jump over the black matte as if it were a fence, tilting our perception of the different planes of

the space, as in a *trompe-l'oeil* [fig. 2].

In another scene, the perceptual prank is played through forced perspective — the same trick used to make objects or people look bigger or smaller depending on their position between the camera and the set, a sort of Ames



Fig. 2:
Trespassing Cows,
from *Top Secret!* (David
Zucker, Jim Abrahams,
Jerry Zucker, 1984)

room, as employed in *Darby O' Gill and the Little People* (Robert Stevenson, 1959).⁴⁷ The scene starts with a phone ringing in a large salon with people in the background. The phone is very close to the camera and appears magnified because of its placement. The East-Germany commander walks to the phone to



Fig. 3:
Big Phone, from *Top Secret!* (David Zucker, Jim Abrahams, Jerry Zucker, 1984)



Fig. 4:
Boots, from *Top Secret!* (David Zucker, Jim Abrahams, Jerry Zucker, 1984)



picks it up, and as he walks our perception changes: we realise that the phone is actually oversized [\[fig. 3\]](#).

Perceptual amodal completion is at the base of other gags. The East-Germany commander is seen reading a book in his office, his boots lying on the desk. We are distracted by the book's title: 'Hermann Goering's Workout Book', and we are led to think that this is the sight gag here. When the attendant enters the office, the commander stands up and his boots keep staying on the desk: they were fake boots, disconnected from his body. At the sight of boots on a desk and a person behind it, we amodally complete the image by filling in the missing parts — we see boots, we see a person, we connect the boots with the person, imagining legs that we do not actually see, as per the Law of Good Continuation. These gags make fun of our routinised perception: do not presume the presence of legs only because you see boots! [fig. 4]

In a later scene, the protagonists knock at the door of the underground-movement headquarters. A little sliding window opens on the very top of the door and a man peeks outside suspiciously, asking for the password. Given the high position of his head, we prepare ourselves to see an abnormally tall person. As the newcomers provide the correct password, the door is open... to

reveal that the peeking man was in fact a 'little person', evidently standing on a high stool. Because of our routinary amodal completion process, we imagined a person as tall as the door window, filling the non-visible parts supposed to lead up to the visible head [fig. 5].

The types of sight gags that can be called perceptual pranks are not as



Fig. 5:
Tall/short, from *Top Secret!* (David Zucker, Jim Abrahams, Jerry Zucker, 1984)

common as audiovisual puns and the 'regular' sight gags, but when one finds them, these are ideal for the application of Gestalt, because they rely more on the primary process than on the secondary process: they do not disrupt our knowledge of norms and conventions; they disrupt our perception.

THE 'AHA, HA! MOMENT'

As a conclusion, an important question of Humour Theory might be tackled, even if only tentatively: Why we often laugh when faced with audiovisual humour, multistable figures, or perceptual pranks? In the case of the Royal Couple Vase, the first reaction is one of weirdness, and weirdness can be a threat to normalcy and stability, so we muster psychic energies to solve the problem. When the weirdness is found to be innocuous and deliberately created to play on our perception, then a re-configuration of the energies happens and comic amusement is the effect of this sudden mental switch. This comic amusement might produce the physical reaction of a smile or even a burst of laughter. Why?

Release Theories concentrated on this: What is laughter? This is admittedly 'something left unexplained by the [...] Incongruity Theories'.⁴⁸ The Incongruity Theories focus on the mental processes, and the *psychic* reward is a 'mental pleasure' similar to the one gained from solving puzzles, 'but when we engage in genuine puzzle solving [...] we aim at discovering the right answers and take pleasure in that, whereas with things such as jokes, we are happy — really happy — with the wrong answers', notes Noël Carroll.⁴⁹ From the angle of Release Theories, the *physical* reward is the pleasure deriving from a discharge of pent-up energy.

Release Theories posit that laughter is a discharge of energy: when we are confronted with a puzzling situation, we muster psychic energies to face the potential problem, and when we realise that the puzzling situation is nothing serious, then the accumulated energy is released in the form of the laughter. Quoting John Dewey, Morreall succinctly expresses the point: 'the laugh is thus a phenomenon of the same general kind as the sigh of relief'.⁵⁰ In Gestalt terms, an energy pattern in the brain is suddenly reconfigured into a different one. When the new macro-configuration stabilises, the sudden switch from one macro-configuration to the other creates a release of the energy summoned for the problem-solving effort. A burst of laughter ensues: it is a type of problem solving in which we experience a 'Aha, Ha! Moment'.

Release Theories are largely dismissed nowadays because of the mental model they posit, 'based on an outdated hydraulic theory of the mind',⁵¹ and they have a 'tendency [...] to proliferate unwarranted mental entities and/or processes'.⁵² The critique about 'outdated theories of the mind' and 'unwarranted mental processes' reminds of the principal critique against Gestalt theory, and specifically against the already-mentioned psychophysical isomorphism.⁵³ The cognitive psychologist Alan J. Parkin sums it up in these words: 'While Gestalt demonstrations are very powerful, the theory that went along with them

was rather weak. [...] Their principal idea was that of isomorphism, in which a particular Gestalt was thought to set up a corresponding electrical force in the brain which served as the basis for perception'.⁵⁴

The energy fields that flow in the brain posited by Gestalt's psychophysical isomorphism might look, to the contemporary eye, quite similar to the 'hydraulic' theory of the mind on which the Release Theories are based. Energy patterns in the brain are triggered and shaped in specific ways by the external stimuli, and the configuration of such energy patterns in our brain determines the configuration in which the stimuli are organised into shapes and objects in our resulting perception. In his 'maluma/takete' experiment, Köhler demonstrated that the perception of a 'Roundness' Gestalt is shared by both a round figure and the non-word 'maluma', and the perception of a 'Sharpness' Gestalt is shared by a spiky and angular figure and the non-word 'takete'.⁵⁵ Both image and sound are perceived as curvy or spiky, respectively. Apparently, certain stimuli, whether visual or aural, activate the same energy patterns in the brain, and such energy patterns produce the same specific perception in either modality. The Gestaltists could never demonstrate this theory convincingly. Yet, the way in which we react to multistable figures seems to suggest that there seems to be some sudden switch in perception that has little or nothing to do with cognition, exactly like an energy field that suddenly changes configuration: when we flip from one configuration to the other, there is like a mental 'click' that commutes the configurations. Indeed, some current neurological studies explain the shifts in multistable perception on the ground of 'perceptual alternations [that] derive from the autonomous oscillations of a circuit within the visual areas'.⁵⁶

It is not my intention here to defend psychophysical isomorphism or outdated 'hydraulic' views of the mind but to submit that it would be perhaps enriching to integrate the Incongruity Theory with the Release Theory, to explain the 'Aha, Ha! Moment' as a sort of tickling of our brain induced by the sudden shift of energy fields. I am not the first one to propose such integration. For example, an attempt to reconsider Release Theory from a cognitivist's perspective was made by Noël Carroll: 'when presented with an anomaly — such as the punchline of a joke — one is affronted with a challenge, an incongruity which may be appraised as threatening, annoying, in need of a solution, or amusing, the difficulty is removed. From being primed for effort, a sense of effortlessness, ease, and relaxation ensues. An initial intuition that something is being demanded of us disappears, resulting in relief'.⁵⁷ We do not have to worry about finding a solution for the anomaly because the anomaly is there just for fun, and hence we experience a 'mental experience of being unburdened cognitively'.⁵⁸ What I propose here is an approach to audiovisual humour that employs Gestalt Theory not only as an analytical tool but also as a sort of Release Theory, to be integrated to the more diffused approaches based on Cognitivism and Incongruity Theory. As in the case of film music in my previous works, I see Gestalt as a fruitful addition that can add new implements to our film-analysis toolbox. Instead of discarding tools because of their supposed obsolescence or because of current fads in the academe, it is more productive to enlarge the set of tools at our disposal.

Moreover, the more resources we can mobilise to study humour, the better it is, given humour's centrality in our lives and its socio-cultural importance. Not dissimilarly to multistable and impossible/unthinkable figures, humour often constitute a challenge not only to our normal *understanding* of things — 'to disrupt the heuristics we deploy in everyday life' and to single out the 'cognitive bugs'⁵⁹ — but also to our normal *perception* of things. Besides procuring us comic amusement, humour has also a central function as a 'source of social information about the norms that govern the culture we inhabit' because it 'alerts us to the relevant social norms and serve to reinforce them. [...] In some cases, humour may even function to *enforce* norms — to serve as a corrective'.⁶⁰ By contravening the expected results and disrupting the norms, humour highlights those norms and expectations that are often so common that become invisible to us in everyday life.

This social function of making us look at everyday life from another perspective is also the key social function of all the arts according to the Russian Formalists. As explained by Kristin Thompson:

*Art is set apart from the everyday world, in which we use our perception for practical ends. We perceive the world so as to filter from it those elements that are relevant to our immediate actions. [...] Films and other artworks, on the contrary, plunge us into a non-practical, playful type of interaction. They renew our perceptions and other mental processes because they hold no immediate practical implications for us. [...] The nature of practical perception means that our faculties become dulled by the repetitive and habitual activities inherent in much of daily life. Thus art, by renewing our perceptions and thoughts, may be said to act as a sort of mental exercise, parallel to the way sports is an exercise for the body.*⁶¹

As Viktor Shklovsky puts it, 'as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic' and 'habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. And Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony'.⁶² What Art does is 'defamiliarise' the world for us, making our perception of it 'roughened' so that habituation and automatism are removed and we can appreciate the world anew. By aesthetically transforming the 'materials' of the world and making fun of them, humour too operates such defamiliarisation and constitutes an indispensable instrument not only for the *cognitive* consolidation of the societal cultural norms but also to 'break the glass armour of familiarity' of our routinised *perception*.

Notes

¹ Noël Carroll, *Humour* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 37.

² For example, Meraj Dhir, 'A Gestalt Approach to Film Analysis', in *Arnheim for Film and Media Studies*, ed. by Scott Higgins (New York: Routledge, 2011), 89–106.

³ I would like to thank the editors of this issue and one of the two anonymous peer-reviewers for their constructive criticism and suggestions.

⁴ Gaetano Kanizsa, *Organization in Vision: Essays on Gestalt Perception* (New York: Praeger, 1979), 3.

⁵ See Gregory Currie, 'Cognitivism', in *A Companion to Film Theory*, ed. by Toby Miller and Robert Stam (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 105–122.

⁶ Psychophysical Isomorphism is a central, though controversial, tenet of Gestalt, according to which the energy patterns in the brain configure in such a way that a correspondence exists between the perceptual phenomena and the mental processes — more on this below. On Psychophysical Isomorphism, see Abraham S. Luchins and Edith H. Luchins. 'Isomorphism in Gestalt theory: Comparison of Wertheimer's and Kohler's concepts', *Gestalt Theory*, 21.3 (1999), 208–234. On 'mirror neurons' — neurons that fires both when an action is performed and when the same action is merely observed — see Giacomo Rizzolatti, Luciano Fadiga, Leonardo Fogassi and Vittorio Gallese, 'Resonance Behaviors and Mirror Neurons', *Archives italiennes de biologie*, 137.2 (1999), 85–100. The relation between the two is surveyed, for example, in Morris N. Eagle and Jerome C. Wakefield, 'Gestalt Psychology and the Mirror Neuron Discovery', *Gestalt Theory*, 29.1 (2007), 59–64, and Carmelo Cali, 'Isomorphism and Mirror Neurons', *Gestalt Theory*, 29.2 (2007), 168–173.

⁷ Danijela Kulezic-Wilson, *The Musicality of Narrative Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015).

⁸ Cognitivism, more than a 'specific theory', has been called a 'program' for the difficulty to establish a unity of and general consensus on the doctrines at its base: see Currie, 106.

⁹ Kanizsa, *Organization in Vision: Essays on Gestalt Perception* (New York: Praeger, 1979), 5.

¹⁰ On fabula and *syuzhet* in films, see David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 49–62.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 3.

¹² Kanizsa, 4.

¹³ Kevin J. Donnelly, *Occult Aesthetics: Synchronization in Sound Film* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 18–19.

¹⁴ Emilio Audissino, *Film/Music Analysis. A Film Studies Approach* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

¹⁵ Audissino, 'A Gestalt Approach to the Analysis of Music in Films', *Musicology Research*, 2.1 (2017), 69–88.

¹⁶ The word 'gestalt' is sometimes translated as 'form' but I see this as potentially confusing with the more vague concept of 'form' that is used in everyday parlance — the outer aspect of something, or the 'vehicle' of contents in the form/content-split discourses — or the 'form' as used in formalist approaches. I employ the term 'configuration' to translate Gestalt's specific concept of a dynamic process of organisation and reciprocal relation amongst the parts of a system. This distinction is also essential to clarify that I do not claim that the overall form of a film should be equated to the concept of 'gestalt': the film has its own formal system (in formalist terms) and to analyse the functions and effects of the devices within the film form, I employ the Gestalt-inspired micro-configuration/macro-configuration method to study the function and effect of the single device at hand.

¹⁷ This type of fusion is similar to the 'widow concept' discussed by Sergei Eisenstein in *The Film Sense*, trans. and ed. by Jay Leda (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 7–8. The Kuleshov effect can also be interpreted as two micro-configurations (Close-Up of Mozhukhin observing something x Detail Shot of the observed object/person) producing a novel macro-configuration: Mozhukhin is hungry; Mozhukhin is mournful; Mozhukhin is lustful. On the Kuleshov Effect, see *Kuleshov on Film: Writings of Lev Kuleshov*, ed. by Ronald Levaco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 200.

¹⁸ Ronald T. Kellogg, *Fundamentals of Cognitive Psychology* (Los Angeles and London: Sage, 2012), 246.

¹⁹ J. Burton Cunningham and James N. MacGregor, 'Productive and Re-productive Thinking in Solving Insight Problems', *Journal of Creative Behavior*, 48 (2014), 44–63. While they are often considered synonyms in the post-structuralist or culturalist approaches, where films are 'read', I distinguish 'film analysis' — which also considers 'film comprehension' — from 'film interpretation': 'interpretation' is only one part of

analysis', Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 34n25.

²⁰ Wolfgang Köhler, *The Task of Gestalt Psychology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 143–144, 147–153.

²¹ Carroll, *Humour*, 4.

²² John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 10–11.

²³ Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Dordrecht, Boston and Lancaster: D. Reidel, 1985); Delia Chiaro, *The Language of Jokes: Analyzing Verbal Play* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

²⁴ Carroll defends it as 'the most fruitful', after having traced the deficiencies of the competing theories – Carroll, *Humour*, 8.

²⁵ Norman R. F. Maier, 'A Gestalt Theory of Humour', *British Journal of Psychology*, 23 (1932), 69–74 (69).

²⁶ Ivana Bianchi, Erika Branchini, Carla Canestrari and Roberto Burro, 'On Pleasures of the Mind Related to Humour and Insight Problem Solving: An Investigation of People's Awareness of What They Like and Why', *Journal of Cognitive Psychology* (2022) <doi: [10.1080/20445911.2022.2047058](https://doi.org/10.1080/20445911.2022.2047058)>. Other articles in the past had already connected insight and problem solving with humour: for example, Ori Amir and others, 'Ha Ha! Versus Aha! A Direct Comparison of Humor to Nonhumorous Insight for Determining the Neural Correlates of Mirth', *Cerebral Cortex*, 25.5 (2015), 1405–1413, and Aaron Kozbelt and Kana Nishioka, 'Humor Comprehension, Humor Production, and Insight: An Exploratory Study', *Humor – International Journal of Humor Research*, 23.3 (2010), 375–401.

²⁷ Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 48–51.

²⁸ Carroll, 'Notes on the Sight Gag', in Id., *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 146.

²⁹ Leonard Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons* (New York: New American Library, 1987), 291.

³⁰ Giorgio Biancorosso, 'The Harpist in the Closet: Film Music as Epistemological Joke', *Music and the Moving Image*, 2.3 (2009), 11–33.

³¹ The scene is analysed in terms of 'syn-diegetic perspective' in Emile Wennekes, 'Out of Tune? Jazz, Film and The Diegesis', in *Cinema Changes: Incorporations of Jazz in the Film Soundtrack*, ed. by Emile Wennekes and Emilio Audissino (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), 3–18 (12–14).

³² Philipp Sterzer, Andreas Kleinschmidt and Geraint Rees, 'The Neural Bases of Multistable Perception', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 13.7 (2009), 310–318 (310).

³³ Andrew J. Parker and Kristine Krug, 'Neuronal Mechanisms for the Perception of Ambiguous Stimuli', *Current Opinion in Neurobiology*, 13.4 (2003), 433–439 (433).

³⁴ Reproduced in Benjamin B. Lahey, *Psychology: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 148.

³⁵ Kanizsa, 21–22.

³⁶ Ibidem, 41.

³⁷ Ibidem, 41–45.

³⁸ Multistability has been employed elsewhere to study verbal and visual comedy: for example, respectively, Daniel Kjellander, 'Gold Punning: Studying Multistable Meaning Structures Using a Systematically Collected Set of Lexical Blends', *Lexis Journal in English Lexicology*, 14 (2019), 1–28; Karin Kukkonen, 'Adventures in Duck-Rabbitry: Multistable Elements of Graphic Narrative', *Narrative*, 25.3 (2017), 342–358.

³⁹ On Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker, see Audissino, 'New Hollywood's "Zany Godards": A "Shirley" Serious Assessment of Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker', in *New Wave, New Hollywood: Gender, Reassessment, Recovery and Legacy*, ed. by Nathan Abrams and Gregory Frame (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 79–100, and Audissino, 'Police Squad! The Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker Style VS the Substance of Traditional Television', in *Substance/Style: Moments in Television*, ed. by Sarah Cardwell, Lucy Donaldson and Jonathan Bignell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022), 178–201.

⁴⁰ Kanizsa, 6.

⁴¹ Of course, one might argue that, since we are dealing with a Marx Brothers film, expectations are oriented towards abnormality rather than normality, so the appearance of the sea seal might not be entirely unexpected. Nevertheless, the humorous effect is produced precisely because the normal amodal completion of the event constitutes the term of reference that anchors our perception of abnormality in the

deviant development of the scene.

⁴² ZAZ and Tati are compared in Audissino, '*Police Squad!*', 186–187.

⁴³ Bordwell, 306.

⁴⁴ Thompson, 251.

⁴⁵ The comedic mechanics of non-sensical accumulation are exemplified in Audissino, 'New Hollywood's "Zany Godards"', 86.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 95.

⁴⁷ Fiona M. C. Dorward and Ross H. Day, 'Loss of 3-D Shape Constancy in Interior Spaces: The Basis of the Ames-Room Illusion', *Perception*, 26.6 (1997), 707–718.

⁴⁸ Morreall, 16.

⁴⁹ Carroll, *Humour*, 36.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Morreall, 17.

⁵¹ Morreall, 23.

⁵² Carroll, *Humour*, 41.

⁵³ Some of the misunderstandings of Gestalt Theory are discussed in Riccardo Luccio, 'Gestalt Psychology and Cognitive Psychology', *Humana Mente*, 17 (July 2011), 67–128.

⁵⁴ Alan J. Parkin, *Essential Cognitive Psychology* (Hove and New York: Psychology Press, 2000), 7.

⁵⁵ Köhler, *Gestalt Psychology: The Definitive Statement of the Gestalt Theory* (New York: Liveright, 1947), 224–225.

⁵⁶ David A. Leopold and Nikos K. Logothetis, 'Multistable Phenomena: Changing Views in Perception', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 3.7 (1999), 254–264 (254).

⁵⁷ Carroll, *Humour*, 41.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, 70.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, 76.

⁶¹ Thompson, 8–9.

⁶² Quoted in *ibidem*, 10.