

**THE COMEDIC BASE OF BLACK COMEDY:  
An analysis of black comedy as a unique contemporary film genre.**

**Abstract**

Contemporary black comedy has changed significantly since its inception. Suffering now seems paramount and its previous light and amusing style has disappeared. This raises the question whether it can still be called a comedy.

This thesis examines the metamorphosis of black comedy into its current form and style, and analyses and compares its comedic base with that of traditional comedy. The approach to this analysis is practitioner based research and comparison – the intention being to provide a better understanding of this changing genre for film practitioners.

After defining and differentiating traditional comedy and black comedy, the thesis differentiates between the “mode” of black humour and genre of black comedy. It examines the mechanisms and the rhetorical devices of underplay, trivialization and incongruity operating in black humour. It and traces the development of black comedy from its roots in early traditional comedy, and from social, artistic and philosophical influences. It is now, more than any other film genre, one that reflects the changing frustrations of the individual in modern society.

The thesis then discusses the characteristics of black comedy –protagonist’s lack of power, his rebellion, transgressive, negative goals and false values. It looks at the character flaw of lack of perceptiveness and the tragic failing which produces ambivalent or negative endings. How and why black comedy plays with dysfunction and derides the status quo is examined. The enlightening effect on audiences, and common themes, such as man as beast, the powerlessness of the individual, absurdity, and omnipotence of death, are discussed.

The mechanics or “physics” of comedy are then examined. The thesis finds that the mechanics of comic premise, comic gap, comic perspective and comic distance all operate in both traditional and black comedy. Premise structure and comic perspective are found to be very different in black comedy. Audience reactions are also different- black comedy eliciting uncomfortable amusement and intellectual reflection. The secondary comedic devices that operate in comedy are also examined - clash of context, truth and pain, conflict and collision, conviction, and obsession, wish fulfilment, worst fear, and chaos and anarchy. Their function in black comedy is then studied and the importance of incongruity discussed. An examination of the genre of comedy and its different forms, story types, sub-genres, and “modes” then follows.

The thesis reveals many differences between comedy and black comedy which are contrary to the conforming requirements of genre. It also finds similarities with tragedy. It concludes that modern black comedy has changed so much from its early form that it can no longer be considered a sub genre of comedy.