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The Wisecracking Dame: An overview of the representation of Verbally Expressed Humour produced by women on screen

Despite the fact that women have a reputation for talking abundantly, in this essay I shall argue that the comedic styles of female cinema actors are seldom founded on language. Based on a small, self-selected sample of comic films, what clearly emerges is that, at least as far as the big screen is concerned, the use of language does not seem to be women's preferred means of achieving a humorous effect. It would appear that, in order to get their laughs, most often funny women rely on their physicality or on the situations they spark off, rather than on their verbal repartee. Yet, when women do resort to Verbally Expressed Humour, they are likely to adopt a variety which is unique to their gender alone.

Keywords: cinema; comedy; gender; Verbally Expressed Humour.

1. Introduction

Over the years numerous women have taken on comic parts in the movies, yet, whether audiences laugh benevolently at the cheeky group of nuns in Sister Act (Emile Ardolino 1992, USA), relish in the political incorrectness of laughing at the topos of a woman who insists on trying to seduce a male for whom she is clearly not quite attractive and/or young enough or whether they express amusement at the dumbness of a shapely blonde, it soon becomes evident that at the movies, funny ladies are frequently willing to be laughed at.

Now, the archetypical funny lady on screen is unlikely to conform to conventional standards of female beauty. She will typically be somewhat overweight like Kathy Najimy, the break dancing nun in Sister Act, or else she will tend to be unattractive like Rossy de Palma (Women on the verge of a nervous breakdown, Pedro Almodóvar, 1988, Spain) or a combination of both old and unsightly. Speaking of British comedy, Larraine Porter remarks that

Numerically in the minority, those women who have attained comic stardom have tended to operate within the narrow range of personas and comic types available to them. Tarty, giggly blondes […], nagging wives […], plump matriarchs […], frustrated spinsters […], and female grotesques […] formed the paradigm for female comic typecasting. (1998: 69)

On the other hand, if the female comic is sexually attractive, she will often simply be there to provoke a comic situation to the advantage of the male cast around her. In fact, using her physical attributes, whether they are positive or negative, as a catalyst for a potentially funny situation is a typically female role on the big screen.

The body of the actress is a convenient device on which meanings can be projected: dumb blonde, mother-in-law, tart with a heart of gold; and it is rare for these meanings to enshrine contradictions or subtleties. The comic skills which she brings to bear on the stereotype are instinctual, aspects of a 'self ' she offers for consumption. If she is judged as anything beyond sexual object it is as foil for the more conscious skill of her male counterpart. (Gray 1994: 23)

For example, female laughter provoking catalysts may come under the form of the 'bombshell', namely a dumb blonde with an outstandingly shapely body underscored by skimpy clothing who typically triggers off a reaction in her male admirers, who, bending over backwards to get her attention, or simply shocked by her voluptuousness, soon find themselves in comic predicaments. The archetypical example of this is, of course, the well known scene in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (Howard Hawks, 1953, USA) in which, by walking up a short flight of stairs in a tight skirt, Marilyn Monroe causes the milk bottles on the doorstep to erupt and explode and the milkman's glasses to steam up and crack. Again, if a script is short of a laugh, then directors may well fill the gap with a hard-hitting female. For some reason, being punched on the nose or being hit over the head by a lady's handbag appears to be a guaranteed cause for hilarity like Patricia Hayes, the thrashing old woman in A Fish Called Wanda (Charles Crichton, UK, 1988) and Kirstie Alley in Look Who's Talking (Amy Heckerling; 1989, USA). None of the situations mentioned requires the use of words. Interestingly, actresses' aversion at being trapped in such stereotypes is well documented. "Cute, cute, cute – the ruination of our careers" complained Debbie Reynolds; Britain 's Barbara Windsor considered herself "a body, a bosom, a joke" and most famously, Monroe herself is quoted as having said "A sex symbol becomes a thing. I just hate to be a thing." (Quoted in Gray 1994:11).

Now, if we look at purely visual, non-verbal humour in male actors, they too, of course, are often there to be laughed at, yet not so much for their physical attributes, but more for the messes into which they get themselves. There appears, in fact, to be a strong pre-dominance of the "Look Mummy I've done something wrong syndrome." From Stan Laurel to Mr Bean, Hugh Grant and beyond, audiences laugh at the grown up man who has acted like a six-year-old, as the camera homes in on a close up of the comedian's embarrassed expression. It would not, in fact, be unfair to say that female non-verbal humour is centred around the comic's body in a way in which male humour is not,

Comedy positions the woman not simply as the object of the male gaze but of the male laugh – not just to-be looked-at but to-be-laughed-at – doubly removed from creativity. (Gray 1994: 9).
The kind of laughter provoked by plump Bridget Jones *Bridget Jones' Diary* (Sharon Maguire, 2001, UK / USA / France) struggling into a pair of panties which are clearly too small for her is quite different from that caused by the sight of Darcy (Colin Firth) wearing a home-made sweater with a reindeer on the front. In the same film, Bridget, dressed up as a bunny girl cannot be considered the same kind of funny as her father dressed up as a vicar. Yet over the years, women's sexual attributes have become a common source of derision on screen.

In this essay I shall examine a small, self selected corpus of films in which women play comic roles with a view firstly to briefly observe their roles as non-verbal vectors of the comic and secondly to investigate their use of Verbally Expressed Humour (VEH). What I would like to claim is that, just as in non-verbal comicality women tend to set up situations for which male comedians subsequently obtains a laugh, also as far as VEH is concerned, the utterances of many female comic actresses often simply serve as a springboard from which their male counterparts can go for the final ‘good line’. Having said that, however, I intend to show that the few comic actresses who have managed to cross the line from comic sidekick to comic diva, tend to adopt a style of VEH which is typical only of females.

### 2. Operational Definitions

The corpus chosen for this study is a convenient one consisting of 20, self selected comedies from North American and British cinema containing a total of 110 comic actors, roughly half of whom are female. Apart from its limitations in terms of size, the corpus raises a number of problems which require brief clarification.

#### 2.1. The concept of humour

So far I have adopted the terms ‘humorous’ and ‘comic’ in a vaguely synonymous manner. Yet the terms are not at all synonymous. In fact, an important issue in the field of Humour Studies is that, as yet, there is no universal consenus of an unequivocal definition of the concept of humour (Ruch 1998:5-12). Of course we all know what we mean by humour, but the scores of existing definitions are mostly at odds with each other. From its original Latin meaning of ‘fluid’ (umor), over the centuries the word has travelled from its early days as a medical term of the science of physiologie, to the discipline of aesthetics, from France to England and finally across the Atlantic to become the unclear umbrella term it is today. In effect, today the term humour has acquired what Ruch calls “multiple usage” (1998: 6) as it also embraces concepts such as comedy, fun, the ridiculous, nonsense and scores of notions each of which, while possessing a common denominator, all significantly differ from one another too. What is more, to complicate matters further, the concept of humour often appears to be used as a synonym of sense of humour (Ruch 1998: 6). This confusion naturally leads to problems when deciding what can be defined humorous on film.

Of course without attempting to define it, we all know that humour is something to do with the concept of funniness. Funniness exhibited by a positive humour response in terms of smiling and laughter, as a reaction to some kind of stimulus. And here is where matters begin to become muddled because we all are perfectly capable of finding something funny and yet not react with a laugh or a smile, which are two very different phenomena both in terms of bodily process, behavioural reaction and emotional response. Thus the “positive humour response”, expression coined by Paul McGhee (1979) to conceptualise the perception of a humorous stimulus as being funny, has been deemed inadequate in personality research and replaced by the term “exhilaration” (Ruch 1993: 605-616). Exhilaration incorporates reactions such as laughter and smiling to the “humour response” as well as a series of physiological changes. Possibly most importantly of all, exhilaration includes the emotional effect which is experienced to a humorous stimulus, an effect which leaves the recipient with that agreeable feeling of physical well-being with which most people are familiar. However, let us not forget that we could theoretically split our sides laughing simply by being successfully tickled or by consuming nitrous oxide. Neither is it uncommon to laugh because of nervousness or fear. Likewise, it is a well known fact that smiles do not exclusively communicate amusement. However, even if the reaction to a humorous stimulus may well be invisible, an internal physiological reaction, combined with an emotional response, namely exhilaration, will certainly occur and this effect can be quite separate from a visible display of appreciation.

And let us not forget that we don't all find the same things funny. Humour is in the eyes, ears, the mind – and to tangle the web even further – in the mood of the beholder too. Therefore, if a film is to be defined as being humorous, this begs the question, “humorous according to whom?”

Furthermore, is exhilaration as a response to a stimulus proof of the stimulus being humorous *per se*? The answer is of course not. As we know, one may well be amused and experience exhilaration when faced with a perfectly serious situation simply because at times life presents us with situations which are unintentionally funny. And notice here how I am caught off guard as I equate the notion of amusement with that of funniness, two concepts which are semantically linked but certainly not synonymous in physiological, behavioural and emotional terms. Which leads us straight into the philosophical meanderings of the humorous versus the comic and intentional versus unintentional which are beyond the bounds of this discussion. Thus, to hastily recapitulate, so far we have humour, sense of humour, funniness, amusement, laughter, smiling, humour response, exhilaration and comedy – a sort of psycho-lexical melting pot in which separate boundaries are ill-defined and confusion reigns.

Why this preface? Simply to underscore that what is considered humorous by one person, may not be considered so by another. Furthermore, as we shall see below, as diverse filmic genres have merged and blended into each other, we find that the term comedy has come a long way from the original meaning of the Greek word komos which involved the notion of misfortune followed by a happy ending.

#### 2.2 Verbally Expressed Humour

VEH is an additional fuzzy area which is far from easy to delineate. Linguistic theories of humour offer us the Semantic Script Theory (Raskin, 1985:99) based upon the hypothesis that verbal humour occurs when one single verbal script contains two
After more than a century of cinema, the task of sorting and choosing a corpus of VEH to examine would be a gargantuan task. As I said above the corpus examined consists of 20 British and North American comedies filmed between the mid-fifties and 2001 containing a total of 110 comic actors, just over half of whom are female. The films included are: *Educating Rita* (Lewis Gilbert, 1983, UK); *A Fish Called Wanda*; *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, 1994, UK); *Bridget Jones' Diary* (Sharon Maguire, 2001, UK / USA / France); *Some Like it Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959, USA); *High Society* (Charles Walters, 1956, USA); *That Touch of Mink* (Delbert Mann, 1962, USA); *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978, USA); *Tootsie* (Sidney Pollack, 1982, USA); *Moonstruck* (Norman Jewison, 1987, USA); *Home Alone* (Chris Columbus, 1990, USA); *Look Who's Talking* (Rob Reiner, 1989, USA); *A Gun in Betty Lou's Handbag* (Allan Moyle, 1992, USA); *When Harry Met Sally* (Rob Reiner, 1989, USA); *Carry On Cruising* (Mike Newell, 1994, UK); *A Fish Called Wanda* (Lewis Gilbert, 1983, UK); *Sister Act* (Alan Menken, 1992, USA); *Mrs Doubtfire* (Chris Columbus, 1993, USA); and three typically British Carry On films, *Carry On Teacher* (Norman Hudis, 1959, UK); *Carry On Constable* (Peter Rogers, 1959, UK); and *Carry on Cruising* (Norman Hudis, 1962, UK). Over and above these 20 films, in this paper, I shall also give examples from others when necessary.

Yet are we certain that the scene the audience has just seen and heard contains two opposing and overlapping scripts? Arguably, there is no script opposition in such an utterance, unless of course we want to dispute that there is some confusion as to what exactly constitutes a comedy. It would appear that the days of gag-a-minute films like those uttered by the Marx Brothers in films like *Animal Crackers* (Victor Heerman, 1930, USA), the purely visual pranks of *Modern Times* (Charles Chaplin, 1936, USA) or the farcical mayhem of *Monkey Business* (Howard Hawks, 1952, USA) are over. Today comedy includes films like *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997, UK) and *La Vita è Bella* (Roberto Benigni, 1997, Italy) which, while indeed containing comic lines and routines, also deal with non-humorous subject matter like unemployment and the Holocaust which can hardly be defined as side-splitting. Furthermore, "Cool Britannia" comedies like *Notting Hill* (Roger Mitchell, 1999, UK) and *Love Actually* (Richard Curtis, 2003, UK) as well as North American romantic comedies such as *When Harry Met Sally* (Rob Reiner, 1989, USA), clearly aim at stimulating a variety of conflicting feelings which tend to place spectators on an emotional rollercoaster. What is more, individual actors no longer remain faithful to one single genre but try their hand at crossing genres. So at the end of the day, choosing examples of VEH whether uttered by a male or a female has had to boil down to a combination of a vague general consensus of what is considered to be comic.
seven female actors appear in leading roles. None of these women correspond to any of the chosen stereotypes, although interestingly, the script requires five of them to transform themselves during the movie either out of a sexy persona into a more chastised one, or vice-versa. For example, Jamie Lee Curtis in A Fish Called Wanda becomes a bombshell in order to seduce Archie (John Cleese); Whoopi Goldberg starts off as a somewhat inelegant singer in Sister Act to then take on the persona of a nun, Sister Deloris; shy librarian Penelope Ann Miller cuts her hair short, dons a mini skirt and starts smoking and confesses to a murder she didn't commit just to attract her husband's attention (A Gun in Betty Lou's Handbag) and leading actress Renée Zellweger (Bridget Jones) spends most of the film struggling with her extra pounds in an attempt to win her man. Furthermore, five actors actually verbalize their feelings of discomfort and/or conflict with regards to this split between comic and serious persona.

Finally, it would appear that, with or without words, at the movies, funny women in leading roles appear to be somewhat few and far between and that those who have managed to cross the line from comic subordinate to comic star are indeed a rarity. Furthermore, those who have crossed the line as comic subjects rather than comic objects are fewer still. Now, I would like to argue that those who have managed to become comedians in their own right as comic subjects have done so, not so much through their unusual appearance or the humorous situation in which they are involved, but especially through the appropriation of masculine verbal behaviour.

3.2. Quantifying Verbally Expressed Humour on Screen

Each film in the corpus was closely examined and all examples of VEH were localized and summed. Two separate counts were made according to whether a male or a female actor had uttered the gag. The number of gags uttered by men outnumbered those uttered by females.

Interestingly, even in films which contain just as many female actors as male, it usually tends to be the male actors who get to utter the “good lines”. If we take a classic like Some like it Hot, Monroe is responsible for just two wisecracks both of which work against her. One is the famous double entendre “I always get the fuzzy end of the lollipop” and the other “I don't know why you boys are always getting excited about sweater girls. Take their sweaters away and what have they got?” both of which allow audiences to laugh at Monroe’s innocence through their knowingness thus disempowering her of comic control. Numerically, the two gags compare weakly to the 18 shared by Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon. Again, out of a total of 35 verbal gags in A Fish Called Wanda, 25 are shared between John Cleese and Kevin Kline while the remaining 10 are uttered by Jamie Lee Curtis. Now, it could be argued that neither Monroe nor Jamie Lee Curtis had leading roles, yet the situation seems no different when the leading actor is a woman. In award winning Educating Rita starring Julia Walters, only 18 out of a total of 41 gags are uttered by the leading actress, while the lion’s share of wisecracking is left to Michael Caine; similarly in When Harry Met Sally, although Meg Ryan gets the best laugh in the film in the famous ‘orgasm’ scene, she and supporting actress Carrie Fisher are responsible for 43% of the quips against Billy Crystal's 57%. However, a significant exception can be found in Whoopie Goldberg and Maggie Smith in Sister Act who get to utter 24 verbal gags leaving a mere 4 to Harvey Keitel. Fig.2 illustrates the differences between the quantity of gags delivered by the two genders of actors and Sister Act clearly comes across as the only film in which gags uttered by females outnumber those delivered by males, while in Moonstruck, Cher and Olympia Dukakis manage to equal Nicholas Cage and Danny Aiello. In all the other examples most good lines are delivered by male actors.

To understand whether these differences were simply due to chance, in other words whether women really do use less VEH on screen than men, a two independent-sample t-test was used on 11 films from the corpus containing most numerous examples of VEH. This test was basically a modification of the one sample t-test that incorporates information about the variability of two independent sample means. The standard error of the mean difference is no longer estimated from the variance and the number of cases in the single group. Instead it is estimated from the variance and the sample sizes of the two independent groups. Before running this test, Levene's test indicated that equality of variances had to be considered for the two independent-sample t-test. The null hypothesis states that the average index of gags by male comic actors are the same, while the research hypothesis states the opposite, i.e. that the average index of gags by male comic actors is higher than the average index of gags by female comic actors. Values given by the two-independent-sample t test indicate that the test is significant to a value of 95% confidence at .005 (Fig.3). We can thus reject the null hypothesis. The fact that women use less VEH than men in movies is no chance matter.

4. Women's use of VEH on screen

Having established that men use more VEH than women on screen, let us move on to establish whether they use it any differently from men.

4.1 Women backstage

4.1.1 The best friend

Now, it would appear that when women do manage to get a comic word in edgeways, it will often tend to be in the role of second fiddle to the leading actor: the wisecracking Kirsten-Scott Thomas to Hugh Grant in Four Weddings and a Funeral or Celeste Holme to Frank Sinatra in High Society typify the lippy dame who is ever ready to administer smart advice to the star with whom she is secretly in love. These fast talking dames always have a sharp comeback at the ready yet they are often at their best, not so much when set against a male actor, but when playing against a leading lady. Audrey Meadows, Doris Day's best pal in That Touch of Mink, exemplifies the bosom buddy – she may not get Cary Grant, but she certainly gets the laughs:

“For two thousand years we've had their children, washed their clothes, cooked their meals and cleaned their houses and what have they given us in return? The right to smoke in public. And you don't even smoke!”
The best friend is never quite as pretty as the leading actress but she is certainly wiser and is ever ready to hand out sensible advice regarding men couched in witty terms. Consider Rosie O'Donnell, Meg Ryan's best friend in *Sleepless in Seattle* (Nora Ephron, 1993, USA), warning her against meeting up with an unknown man as he might turn out to be a "...a crackhead, a transvestite, a flasher, a junkie or a chainsaw murderer" and Sarah Kay Place in the *Big Chill* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1983, USA) who confides to best friend Glenn Close that all the available men are "...either married or gay or if they're not gay, they've just broken up with the most beautiful woman in the world or a bitch that looks just like you." While such lines are hard to push into a traditional category of VEH, they can certainly be labelled in terms of good lines or Non-specific VEH.

4.1.2 Bad girls backstage

Now, the movies have led women to believe that being funny and being feminine do not go together. More often than not the funny lady doesn't get her man. Now, it could be that this scarcity of truly comic divas may well be due to a certain reluctance for women to behave both literally and linguistically in traditionally unfeminine ways – at least when they are performing in Goffman's terms of "front-stage" (1959 : 107-112). According to Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor, our public front-stage activity is carefully controlled and adheres to customary rules of politeness and decorum. In the case of women, front-stage goes well beyond basic rules such as not spitting, belching and picking one's nose in public. Women must also conform to the conventional canons of femininity. Society requires them to be nice.

There are several studies which explore female niceness and they tend to underscore women's discomfort with having to behave nicely front-stage. Jennifer Coates (1999: 65-80) has explored the conflicts experienced by women behaving in a nice manner and points out that in contemporary Britain, laddish masculinity, such as the variety cleverly tapped in TV comedy series *Men Behaving Badly* (to which I would like to add *Ali G* and *The Office* as more recent examples), is seen as a positive personality trait. Coates then goes on to argue that while 'behaving badly' has a very positive connotation for men, the phrase has negative associations when related to women. According to her findings, based on a substantial corpus of mixed and single sex spontaneously occurring conversations, she found that one of the things that women do with each other is talk about their front-stage activity and that throughout their talk they will tend to contradict the polite front maintained throughout the performance. In other words, they tend to recount to each other episodes in which they cut a poor figure, lost face, did something 'bad' where for 'bad' we read 'episode with tragic-comic ending' while simultaneously trying to maintain a suitable decorum of niceness. Coates' findings tie in well to Barecca's arguments (1991:1-69) that distinguish the common split of women in terms of "Good Girl" who is supposed to neither tell or get the hidden sexual meanings in male humour and the "Bad Girl" who both gets the jokes and dare to tell them herself. According to Coates:

"Backstage interaction fulfills a vital need in women's lives to talk about behaving badly, whether this means recounting incidents where we behaved badly [...] or whether it means discussing and celebrating the unconventional behaviour of other women" (p.77).

The cinema gives us a glimpse of (imagined) female backstage.

Now, if as Aristotle claims, comedy is " a representation of inferior people... a species of the base or ugly..." (1927) then being funny hardly goes together with being physically attractive, a trait traditionally associated with femininity. It's all very well for Rowan Atkinson and Roberto Benigni (hardly Mother Nature's best lookers), to exploit their irregular features and less than muscular bodies, get into fine messes and win over their audiences, it is far harder for a woman to shed her attractiveness and act the clown. When Mae West, Bette Midler and Whoopi Goldberg respectively strut, wiggle and stomp across the screen, they are far from displaying conventional femininity, and that takes some courage. In fact, Renée Zellweger supposedly gained 20 kilos in order to transform herself into Bridget Jones, for then to be laughed at as we see a close-up of her chubby derrière sliding up and down a fire-fighter's pole in slow motion, or squeezed into a bunny girl outfit cellulite and all.

Of course there are exceptions, Jamie Lee Curtis, along with Marilyn Monroe, Jean Harlow and Sofia Loren are sexy and funny – but as I said before, as bombshells. We laugh at the male reaction to their physical excesses but are we certain that women feel comfortable with the fact that a woman's breasts and buttocks are transformed into humorous stimuli. The funniness of the bombshell is "cute". Being funny yourself, if you are female, is not cute. It is tantamount to being bad. Consider the closing scene in *A Fish Called Wanda* in which John Cleese, has Jamie Lee Curtis, who has not maintained much decorum throughout the film, promise to 'behave' before whisking her off to Rio and wedded bliss; consider too, Mother Superior's struggle with misbehaving Whoopi Goldberg and last, but certainly not least, chick flick's "bad girl" Bridget Jones attempts at transformation into a good girl in order to get her Darcy although he does (rather magnanimously) accept Bridget as she is in the final scene of the film.

Front-stage female comics have had to break a lot of rules and dispense with etiquette and niceties. When a girl's best friend makes a wisecrack on screen, she will tend to do so backstage, in female only company. When in single-sex company girls can be very bad indeed. Consider the female-only sleep over scene from *Grease* in which the girls smoke, drink and discuss sex. The lyrics of the song *Sandra Dee* speak for themselves:

*Look at me, I'm Sandra Dee*  
Lousy with virginity  
Won't go to bed 'til legally wed  
I can't, I'm Sandra Dee...  
I don't drink (no)  
Or swear (no)  
I don't rat my hair (eew)
I get ill from one cigarette
(cough, cough, cough)
Keep your filthy paws
Off my silky draws
As for you Troy Donohue,
I know what you wanna do
You got your crust
I'm no object of lust
I'm just plain Sandra Dee

One of the delights of films like Some Like it Hot, Tootsie and Mrs Doubtfire is that once a male cross-dresses, he is allowed into the holy of holies of female backstage and gets a new view on women in more ways than one. Among other things he, disguised as a she, apart from being groped by other men (in all three films a male falls in love with the cross-dressed protagonist) is allowed to witness a secret world of shockingly funny conversation which is aimed at a female-only audience. From Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis as Daphne and Josephine to Dustin Hoffman's Tootsie, women will confide in these men dressed up in women's clothing but time after time we find that it is the real woman who feeds the cross-dressed male the cue for the "good lines". Marilyn offers Daphne some liquor with the line: "This'll put hairs on your chest " and Geena Davis clad in underclothes claims "We've got everything" in reference to facilities at work, allowing Tootsie/Hoffman to retort a literal "I see".

4.1.3 Bad girls front stage

Let us now consider what happens when women do dare to misbehave in the company of men and take both verbal and comic control over their male counterparts. An example of this can be found in Four Weddings and a Funeral in which Kirsten Scott Thomas corners yet-to-be-ordained tongue-tied priest Rowan Atkinson. "Do you do weddings?" she asks him and when she discovers he is still to perform one she goads him with "Must be rather like the first time you have sex, but without the mess" reducing the young novice to a stammering pulp.

Now, one of the first women to come upfront, misbehave and speak her mind was the undisputed queen of screen comedy, Mae West. West's trademark was her strong aura of sexuality, yet despite this, whether she was actually sexy is questionable. She was, in fact, very much in control of her sexuality and in no way could she be considered either a sex symbol or a sex object; to quote critic Molly Haskell, "West was, in fact, all subject." When West declares that when she is good she's very good but when she is bad she is better (well known quote from I'm No Angel, Wesley Ruggles, 1933, USA) she is of course referring to her backstage activity, but the mere fact that she alludes to backstage wantonness is what makes her front stage persona so funny and so daring at the time, after all nice girls are not supposed to be bad (not even backstage) and if they are they are certainly not supposed to talk about it front stage.

West's technique was to have men feed her a line which she then transformed into a scintillating wisecrack. When an exotic fortune-teller looks into a crystal ball and tells her "I can see a man in your life" West looks dismayed and retorts: "What, only one?" (I'm No Angel, Wesley Ruggles, 1933, USA). West did her best to exploit innuendo, consider:

"I like sophisticated men to take me out"
"Well, I'm not really sophisticated..."
"Well, you're not really out either..."

and she was very much in control of her men:

"Baby I promise you anything..."
"Yeah but where d'you keep it?"
"You want me to swear"
"Never mind, I can do that myself"

Undoubtedly, Mae West's favourite type of gag consisted of shifting the position of words in the utterance of her fall guy, such as the famous "How do you find the men in your life?" which she answers with the famous retort: "It's not the men in my life that count but the life in my men". How far removed and audacious – and why not - feminist this seems when compared to Bridget Jones's self-deprecatory irony regarding her cellulite and singledom and whose one attempt at punning consists in nicknaming Mr Fitzherbert, one of her superior's, Mr Titspervert.

Over half a century later, Whoopi Goldberg is considered Mae West's closest descendant. While not having West's sexual aura, Goldberg is physically funny without being an object. Whether pretending to be a medium (Ghost) or dressed up as a nun escaping the wrath of her underworld lover in Sister Act, Goldberg is yet another bad girl. Like West, her VEH is not based so much on what she says but the way that she says it. Although she does not favour traditional wordplay or innuendo like West, Goldberg is able to juxtapose 'white speech' with her individual variety of Black Urban speech which she reserves for her punch-lines and what I would like to define as "fast talk". And this fast talk may well be the one typically female verbally expressed humorous strategy on screen.

4.2 'Fast Talk'

Examining the films in the corpus, a feature which came across quite strongly is what I would like to label 'Fast Talk'. It would appear that when a funny lady gets worked up and angry, there is no stopping her as she is likely to explode into a hilarious
monologue which consists of uttering as many words as she can at break neck speed, so as to pack in as much information as possible into a very short time span. These disproportionate monologues cram as much figurative wisecracking language as possible into a short space of time. In *Educating Rita* Julia Walters squashes 51 words into 11 seconds; Catherine O'Hara in *Home Alone* clocks up 109 words in 21 seconds; Meg Ryan in *When Harry Met Sally* 75 words in 22 seconds; while Marisa Tomei in *My Cousin Vinny* manages to utter 43 words in 9 seconds before coming up for air. Consider Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks,1940, USA) delivering the following 'speech' consisting of 78 words in 15 seconds:

> Get this you double crossing chimpanzee, there ain't gonna be no interview and there ain't gonna be no story if that certified cheque isn't leaving with me in twenty minutes I wouldn't cover the burning of Rome for you if they were just lighting it up and if I ever set my two eyes on you again I'm gonna walk right up to you and hammer on that skull of yours until it rings like a mighty gong.

Apart from speed of delivery, the language is colourful to say the least. Again, in 11 seconds Annette Bening tells Warren Beatty (*Bugsy*, Barry Levinson, 1991, USA):

> You're just another good looking, sweet-talking, charming, happy sort of a fellow with nothing going for him except dialogue, dialogue's cheap in Hollywood babe, why don't you run outside and jerk yourself a soda?

Apart from speed and not allowing the interlocutor to speak, these speeches contain crescendoes of adjectives and imaginative similies and metaphors. In a sense they are one, single, good line.

Of course this has been a quick and dirty analysis. This kind of production needs to be collected, measured and correlated, but it may well be that fast talk is the only original contribution women have made to VEH on screen.

5. Conclusions

What I have presented is a sample of how VEH used by women is typically represented on screen. Noticeably, the vast majority of female comic actors are directed by men, yet it appears that the handful of female directors in the corpus tend to follow suit in the way female use of VEH is depicted. However, I would like to argue that perhaps the slices of fast talk examined allow female comic actors to get their own backs on men, at least in quantitative terms. It may well be that by grabbing and subsequently making sure they keep the floor for so long, they have been able to find a way of making up for the endless silences and wisecracks they have not been able to make in over a century of cinema. However, I say so with my tongue firmly in my cheek because I know full well, that what I have presented is just a tiny drop in the vast ocean of VEH on screen.

References


Note