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Abstract

The paper takes as its starting point the relationship between "cancel culture" – and its related political correctness – and comedy. It articulates this relationship in more detail and places it in a sociopolitical context. Theories of comedy, the comic and humour highlight two different interpretations or functions of these genres: On the one hand, it can be a tool of social normativity, disciplining those parts of society that deviate from fictional norms through humour directed against them. On the other hand, it can also oppose such systems by revealing through comedy that "the emperor is indeed naked". The history of cancel culture has its roots in the historical social interactions of Black Americans, which were comically oriented. An undertone of comedy also marked the initial emergence of the term, which first appeared on Twitter in tweets by Black Americans in 2014. However, only as it spread to other social groups and entered popular culture did it take on its current meaning, with the aim of withdrawing public support from individuals, brands, etc., for perceived inappropriate or controversial behaviour. The view that comedy, in whatever form, is absolutely "sacred" and "untouchable" is merely a consequence of the bourgeois conception of the autonomy of art, which denies it any political charge and attempts to conceal the social power relations at work within comic procedures.

Keywords: humour theories, cancel culture, comedy, cultural critique, incongruity theory

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Where Are the Boundaries?

Maša Radi Buh and Nik Žnidaršič

Summary

The article explores the intersection of comedy and cancel culture, focusing on the survival of comedy in the face of the challenges of cancel culture. In the announcement of *Amfiteater*'s International Scientific Symposium titled Survival of Comedy, the term "survival" is linked to tragedy, suggesting a decline in other literary genres, such as tragedy or epic, while comedy continues to flourish. The central question is whether cancel culture will succeed in eradicating a sense of humour. By examining the political dimension of humour, the article explores the social functions of humour based on contemporary theories of humour, primarily superiority theory and incongruity theory. Superiority theory posits that laughter involves a sense of superiority over others, while incongruity theory explores perceived incongruities as a source of humour. The latter provides a broader and more abstract framework that allows for multiple interpretations of humour. Based on Noël Carroll's conditions and highlighting the role of discomfort in audience response, we argue that jokes that cause discomfort due to a significant dissimilarity between the speaker's and the audience's values may not be well received and, in turn, alienate one from the joke itself. The example of humour aimed at marginalised groups is discussed, emphasising the importance of intention, delivery and context in the reception of jokes. The concept of cancel culture is introduced, tracing its historical origins and its development into a contemporary phenomenon through social media platforms. Initially associated with African-American culture in the 1980s, the term gained prominence in 2014, largely through Twitter, but changed its nature from ironic and often playful to more activist. Cancel culture, as defined by scholar Eve Ng, is the act of rejecting or criticising individuals, brands or companies for perceived offences or inappropriate behaviour. Practices associated with cancellation include withdrawing public support and can lead to real-life consequences such as job loss. While cancellation is not always permanent, it can have a lasting effect on an individual's career. The article then considers the relationship between comedy and cancel culture, framing cancel culture as a progressive movement that challenges power structures. The critique of cancel culture is positioned as a rejection or fear of acknowledging the social or political power inherent in theatre. It is not about censoring humour but about calling attention to humour that reinforces superiority or targets absent groups in

the audience. It is important to allow room for genuine mistakes while distinguishing them from deliberately offensive behaviour. The article then refutes the notion that cancel culture is exclusive to left-wing movements and provides a Slovenian example where cancellation was associated with an artistic work rather than an individual's behaviour. The case of Ivan Cankar's *Lackeys* and the actor Daša Doberšek, whose performance was misused for political purposes, illustrates how cancel culture can be exploited by the right for political ends. Looking at specific cases in Slovenian theatre, the authors touch on the controversies surrounding Boris Kobal and the productions of Mladinsko Theatre, *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* and *Lackeys*. In the conclusion of the article, we stress the importance of maintaining a balance between freedom of expression and accountability in artistic creation. We argue that cancel culture, when approached responsibly, can serve as a corrective to perceived power imbalances and structural inequalities.