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Sophisticated humor against COVID-19: the Polish case

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Abstract: The analysis undertaken in the article focuses on a group of memes selected from the database which drew on culture-specific references. Specifically, they embrace the memories of socialist times and call on references to comic films and easily recognized characters in order to bring out the re-discovered absurdity of the current COVID-19 situation. This material seems ideal to revisit Raskin's early notion of sophistication, which was broadly argued to derive from intertextuality as well complexity of references that function as sources of humor. In all the examples discussed we can observe the intertextual and metatextual elements, multiple levels and shifts in points of view and attitudes as well as the mutual relations of verbal to visual within the meme cycles. In order to identify specific mechanisms of sophisticated humor, we attempt to identify the visual or verbal triggers of overlap of the two worlds in question, and discuss comic mechanisms of sophistication, including attributions of desire, belief and intention (purpose) to characters or the narrator as commentators on events or situations.


Keywords: attitude attributions; COVID-19 restrictions; intertextuality; memes; socialism


1 Sophistication of intertextual humor – cultural memory, attributes

Victor Raskin, in his seminal works on semantics of humor defines simple jokes against the broad background of sophisticated jokes. He draws attention to the possibility of sophisticated jokes being different due to their complexity, i.e. the presence of multiple or repeated script oppositions as well as erudite allusions, i.e. references to the type of encyclopedic knowledge that is available to some

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speakers only, or parodies thereof. He gives an example of a mildly obscene joke by Woody Allen which is no doubt sophisticated in this way: “Sigmund is astounded to see that she is part swan and part woman – unfortunately, divided lengthwise” (Raskin 1985: 138).

To understand this joke, one needs to be familiar with the libretto of *Swan Lake*, the genre of ballet libretto as well as know something about human and bird anatomy and sexual intercourse among humans, not to mention Sigmund Freud. Raskin does not detail the specific mechanisms involved here, though. The reference to *Swan Lake* is partially accurate only and parodies the unreal scene at the lake where Siegfried (not Sigmund) sees the swan-maidens for the first time; the text pretends to be part of notes for another ballet, *The Spell* (Allen 1991: 27), with a similar although less tragic plot, including a similar motive of beautiful maidens put under a spell and forced to dance overnight (thus is also a reference to Grimm Brothers tale of “The six swans” (Grimm and Grimm 1884), where six boys are turned into swans). Allen’s comment thus parodies the libretto and notes genres, and departs from both to make two jokes, producing the following: “Notes for a ballet, *The Spell*: Suddenly Sigmund hears the flutter of wings, and a group of wild swans flies across the moon ... Sigmund is astounded to see that their leader is part swan and part woman – unfortunately, divided lengthwise. She enchants Sigmund, who is careful not to make any poultry jokes” (Allen 1991: 28). Apart from three intertextual references and two genres as well as two characters (one, Odette – Siegfried’s love from *Swan Lake*, being present only implicitly), the sophisticated joke is based on attribution of belief perhaps to Sigmund, but certainly to the narrator (triggered by *unfortunately*), who regrets that Odette is not available sexually. The poultry jokes’ comment also invokes an attribution of the (false) beliefs that poultry includes swans, that jokes hurt their targets, that there is such a category of jokes, and consequently that poultry jokes would hurt Odette as a swan. There is also an intertextual reference to chicken jokes (a popular kind of nonsense jokes).

Later researchers point out related aspects of sophistication and intertextual or metatextual play (Raskin 2008). Attardo (2001:120) draws attention to the sophisticated nature of humorous irony, which shows “the speaker’s detachment and hence superiority and the speaker’s ability to “play” with language” and thus be in control of their emotions. He also talks of a sophisticated reader who gets all the intertextual allusions (Attardo 2001: 149, 2014; Attardo et al. 2002). This view is supported by Tsakona, who claims that:

“incongruity or script opposition cannot actually be established without reference to previous (con)texts, which are considered as expected, conventional, or normal in some sense. It is therefore suggested that ‘intertextuality lies at the heart of humor’ (Attardo 2001: 71), as it helps determine what is incompatible or incongruous in a given (con)text” (Tsakona 2020: 171).

Forabosco (2008), in turn, is interested in the complexity of humorous communication, drawing attention to its metatextual (meta-communication in his terms) nature and postulating the following four steps of the humor process:

“1. a prerequisite: “this is a joke” (meta-communication) 2. an incongruity is perceived 3. the incongruity is solved 4. a final conclusion: “it is funny” (meta-communication) ... One important implication of this process, which requires one or two stages and two levels of elaboration, is linked to its evident complexity” (Forabosco 2008: 50).

The above-mentioned attribution of an (often false) point of view, attitude, belief, opinion etc. to individuals is one of the standard techniques of humor, especially the sophisticated one, since it involves the audience to work out a range of outside references, often elaborate ones. This is indirectly confirmed by Attardo et al. (2002: 18), who lists the broad categories of faulty reasoning and reasoning from false premises among the logical mechanisms of humor. Chłopicki (2017) discusses his character frame approach, where the point of view, attitude, belief or opinion are separate slots in the frame and can evoke humorous oppositions, especially when they are assumed to be false or groundless or otherwise contrast reality, or put other people or events in a distorted mirror. One of the reasons of the way sophistication uses that mechanism is that it indirectly involves characters or events from outside of the world of the joke or meme along with their beliefs or attitudes (cf. Chłopicki 2017).

What has not been used in humor research so far and seems appropriate for purpose is the notion of attitudinal subworlds postulated by Werth (1999) in his conceptual analysis of text worlds.¹ These attitudinal subworlds can be of several types: desire (*want, wish, hope, dream*) worlds, belief (*believe*) worlds and purpose (*intend*) worlds (Werth 1999: 226–239), which represent important propositional attitudes relevant in humor analysis. Other subworlds are called *deictic*, which constitute “windows” to other scenes,² and *epistemic*, which rely on various modalities of the participants (Werth 1999: 216). They are comprised by the higher-level participant worlds (e.g. those of authors and narrators) and character worlds, which, interestingly, differ in accessibility, i.e. any of these discourse protagonists “can access the world they inhabit and any [sub]world they directly create” (Werth 1999: 213). The pool of beliefs, desires and intentions which are shared by protagonists (not necessarily explicitly) belongs to the common ground context.

¹ In his system, he is influenced by Gilles Fauconnier and his idea of “space builders,” which evoke the mental spaces, constituting the fleeting subworlds of sorts.

² In cognitive terms, they are metonymic, while the related humor research terms would be *connectors* and *disjunctors* (cf. Attardo’s (1994) analysis of jokes).

We also share the assumptions of Ritchie (2006), where he develops an elaborate interpretation schema of jokes (he prefers the term *interpretation* to *(sub) worlds*, although the latter is our preference in this study), involving the same concept of accessibility and those of viewpoints before and after the punchline, and illustrates how the perspectives on events change on the part of characters, narrator and hearer of the joke.

With regard to the notion of intertextuality itself, Norrick points out that it “occurs any time one text suggests or requires reference to some other identifiable text or stretch of discourse, spoken or written” (Norrick 1989: 117). Intertextuality (both within and across cultures) should thus be highlighted as a central feature that lies at the crossroads of the people, the medium they use and the message they send. This is a term that has acquired an important position together with the rise and development of internet culture. In humor research, it has traditionally been used in the context of a humorous text referring to another, earlier text, as in parody (Ross 1998). The references may shape the meaning depending on the availability of their frames for the audience. It is probably not possible to bring out all the possible sources of influence and inspiration of a particular item of humor (Coulson 2015), but locating specific (linguistically or otherwise specified) cultural texts within the wider global arena is informative both of the global tradition as well as of the choices and preferences of the carriers of that particular culture (Laineste and Voolaid 2016: 28). For example, intertextual references to old Soviet motives which arise from nostalgic motivation may display a degree of sophistication too. The absurdity of Soviet times, however appalling we now consider them to have been and how little we want them to return, is again and again called back in jokes, humorous TV series, even museums and tourism (Laineste and Voolaid 2016: 29).

Another important effect of intertextuality is the creation of intertextual chains³ (Fairclough 1992: 130–133). By recontextualizing formal or content elements from one text/genre to another, speakers establish traceable connections between texts/genres, and such connections may be repeated in time and across contexts. Intertextual chains are thus created which consist of “series of types of texts which are transformationally related to each other in the sense that each member of the series is transformed into one or more of the others in regular and predictable ways” and “for strategic purposes” (Fairclough 1992: 130, 133).

Intertextual messages can be attributed certain social functions (perhaps akin to humor as such), which unite people in difficult times and enhance uncertainty reduction. Due to their indexical nature, they also help identify a person and

³ Note the related term of *spreading activation* in semantic processing advanced by Collins and Loftus (1975).

affiliate them with a group (and this group can be age or gender-related, political, ethnic, religious etc.), enhance credibility of the speaker, deepen relationships and communicate feelings (Davis 2008: 554). Interestingly, humor is often employed in online environments to create ambient affiliation, namely to establish familiarity bonds among strangers through the (humorous or non-humorous) negotiation of common perspectives, values, and standpoints (cf. Tsakona 2020: 182; Vasquez 2019; Zappavigna 2012).

2 Internet memes

Internet memes have been of interest to many humor scholars (Davison 2009; Wiggins and Bret Bowers 2015).⁴ Successful memes, as Knobel and Lankshear (2008: 6) define them, may be considered sophisticated too as they include one or more of the following characteristics: (1) some element of humor (absurd, parodying, geeky, etc.); (2) a rich kind of intertextuality, such as wry cross-references to different popular culture events, icons, or phenomena; and/or (3) anomalous juxtapositions, usually of images (Laineste and Voolaid 2016: 32).

Participating with the content, e.g. by sharing, liking, and emulating existing humorous artefacts, constitutes a novel form of intertextuality in the digital age (Tsakona and Chovanec 2020: 15), but still its functions tend to be similar.

“Intertextuality may have a self-enhancing motive and effect, especially when intertextual connections are established with prestigious or culturally-significant prior texts. When either text producers or text recipients present themselves as able to process intertextual references to such texts, they manage to portray themselves as ‘educated’ and ‘literate’ individuals, who are familiar with ‘important,’ ‘central,’ or currently ‘fashionable’ intertexts. Intertextuality may thus have a self-aggrandising effect” (Tsakona and Chovanec 2020: 16).

3 Analysis of selected intertextual memes

Polish humor tradition, which has printed literature and oral and audio-visual media in the forefront, thus possesses cultural resources necessary for sophisticated humor to thrive. Political humor was crucial in early Poland as well as in the 19th century and the interwar period (Brzozowska and Chłopicki 2012). What

⁴ E.g. Brzozowska and Chłopicki (2019) discuss memes as a form of visual humor, which are based on, often contradictory, ethnic stereotypes. Memes have a separate section in the Internet Humor entry in the *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* as well, where the distinct genres of humorous memes were described (cf. Shifman 2014: 392).

cannot be underestimated either is the tradition of humor under socialism (1945–1989), with a special emphasis on jokes targeted at apparatchiks (cf. e.g. Davies 2011, where he discusses the mind vs matter dichotomy in jokes) as well as the references to the absurdities of life behind the iron curtain (cf. Davies 1998). In the present study we would like to present the way the Polish humorous tradition in some of its aspects was brought to bear on the sophisticated response to the recent outbreak of COVID-19 humor.

3.1 Methodology

The material consists of memes, short videos and comments collected between February and December 2020 – during the time of coronavirus pandemic. From the collection we chose the memes which can be considered as using native humor tradition, and refer to mainly some cultural facts such as films and paintings; they embrace the memories of socialist times and call on cultural references to comic films and easily recognized characters in order to bring out the re-discovered absurdity of the current COVID-19 situation. The decision can be justified by recent research as some 30% of Polish memes tend to include cultural elements, especially references to cinematographic tradition (see Norström and Sarna 2021).

In general, we will attempt to identify the types of mechanisms that influence the emergence of sophisticated intertextual humor, which include both complex and sophisticated references as well as diverse shifts in the point of view, beliefs, or attitudes of speakers which are forced by usually manifest references to other “texts” that serve the purpose of increasing cohesiveness of the target in-group (variously defined). They will be discussed in terms of their dominating or pivotal elements, either visual or textual, often within the meme cycles.

When discussing the memes, we will specifically take into account 1/their visual background, including human character(s) and their various assumed relations and culture-specific attitudes, their facial expressions or laughter, 2/intertextual references including various overlaps of film plots, painting scenes etc. with COVID-19-related situations, and 3/metatextual elements, such as opening line or punch line occurring in the meme cycles, or parodic lines, as well as 4/the mutual relations of verbal to visual within the meme cycles. In the analysis we draw attention to the range of mechanisms which occur and coincide to make the memes sophisticated to a certain degree. They include 1/**an overlap** of the former and present-day (fictional/actual, setup/target) world, which is 2/**triggered** by the visual and/or verbal element and the resulting humor is evoked by 3/the implied **attitude** (desire, belief or

purpose) of one or more characters, who is usually 4/a **commentator** on the present situation.

3.2 Overlap of the world of fiction and/or socialism and the world of COVID-19

The memes which we have collected illustrate the clash between the world of COVID-19 in its various aspects with that of either the time of the socialist regime that ruled in Poland between 1945 and 1989 or the fictional worlds of films (mainly comedies) produced in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, which largely ridiculed the world of socialism. The aspects which the meme creators draw upon are, first of all, restrictions of all kinds, including food rationing, restrictions in movement (lock-down of sorts), both of which happened during the martial law of 1980–81. They also refer to the rules regulating the life of smaller communities under socialism, such as a residential commune where the leader of the commune had an authoritarian power over the residents, or a communist factory where official meetings followed their regulated course and no opposed voices were allowed. Participants in both shared the awareness of lack of freedom and the need to obey the imposed rules. The meme creators also allude to the hypocrisy of the rules of socialist life, illustrating it with the habit of organizing highly elaborate ceremonies to mark socialist “successes,” with the select “socialist heroes” being rewarded with carnation flowers. The characteristic feature of the socialist world that is drawn upon in the memes is the inequality of the privileged apparatchiks and the mass of the population, the former being exempt from restrictions just because they were influential members of the communist party. The rural and working-class population was considered the healthy layers of society, with their simple attitude to life being also implied in the memes. Independent intellectual work was discouraged as dangerous to the system, and hence the memes where the contradictions in official rules are pointed out, the official policy being: the party is always right.

All of the above find their equivalents in the world of COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 as it unveiled in Poland. The food rationing was not introduced, but leaving home was restricted and shops (esp. shopping galleries) were closed for long periods of time. Various forms of lockdown were applied and rules were introduced which required everyone e.g. to wash hands more frequently than usual, and prohibited a number of activities, e.g. skiing and using ski lifts, which privileged officials ignored and were caught doing so by the media, the whole idea of obeying restrictions thus being put into question. Moreover, the Polish government (like many other governments) was highly inconsistent in the rules they introduced, the contradictions in which were emphasized by its critics and the media.

3.3 Verbal and visual triggers and their relations

The two worlds interrelate in various, sometimes elaborate ways in our memes. Generally, the intended interpretation process starts with the old world of socialism being evoked with a visual image – usually some still from a film or another visual which is intended as an invitation to recall the fictitious plot of the film or the course of some actual events. The visual scene is sometimes an essential intertextual element, the understanding of which ensures the grasping of the humor in the meme (usually through the characters and their relations), while in other cases the visual is only an artificial background against which a joke is told, which could be told independently. If newer and newer captions are superimposed on the same backdrop (and this happens with many of our examples), the role of the visual tends to be relatively insignificant. Nonetheless, the characters' emotions (esp. smile or laughter) could be considered factors which facilitate (or even enhance) the meme reception. Ironic captions both on the part of a character or the narrator are interesting in this regard since they correspond to the events not explicitly present in the meme which the caption negates.

The verbal text superimposed on the meme functions in a variety of ways. In some memes, there are direct verbatim quotations from the original that open the verbal caption, while in others they close it; in still other cases, parts of the text are adjusted, expanded, simplified, multiplied or even completely made up in order to make the connection with the COVID-19 world more emphatic. Furthermore, the elements of the COVID-19 world, such as virus, vaccine or references to restrictions are scattered in the text as “windows” to that world, to use Werth's term.

In terms of Attardo's (1994), they could be considered *connectors*, while sometimes they are *disjunctors* (elements of the punchline, or sometimes the punchline itself). It seems important to distinguish between triggers of the *overlap of the two worlds* involved, and *humorous triggers* (which should trigger the switch of two opposed scripts). Both of the triggers are verbal, and sometimes they occur separately – overlap triggers tend to be the opening lines or connectors, and humorous triggers are usually disjunctors or closing lines – while sometimes they coincide (especially if the verbal caption is short).⁵

3.4 Attributions of attitudes, desires, beliefs, or intentions

This aspect of the meme analysis is essential to our argument in the study as attributions of attitudes, i.e. desires, beliefs or purposes (intentions), to characters

⁵ See the table in Section 4 for collected examples.

or narrators thrive in different overlapping worlds and thus are an essential technique in evoking humor in memes. Werth's model of textual worlds comes in handy here, as the above-mentioned attitudinal subworlds all seem to occur in the memes. Characters (present in the memes or implied) are attributed most frequently with various kinds of beliefs (which correspond more or less closely with reality, or not at all), e.g. in conspiracy theories, in the overwhelming power of the government, in the danger of reading books, in cynicism in general, or, on the contrary, in the rational approach to the pandemic or even in the innocuous nature of the virus. Sometimes desires or intentions are implied too; for instance, the government is attributed by meme creators with (often fake or absurd) intentions or with the lack of these when their activities seem aimless and crazy. Apart from the attribution process some stereotypes are also evoked in the background, such as the stereotype of a Polish conservative, the stereotype of an upstart, or importantly the stereotype of a Polish intellectual, who always complains about the surrounding reality, is often cynical and self-aggrandizing and often jumps to easy conclusions in his reasoning.

3.5 Commentator figures

The function of the real or implied commentator is an important function in memes as they offer a sense of detachment to the audience. Although it could be claimed that the commentator (or the observer as some linguists call them) is explicitly or implicitly present in all instances of language use by definition, the combination of the visual and verbal in the memes makes this function particularly pivotal. Now the question arises how this commentary can be achieved. Some interpretation is usually necessary due to its indirectness, naturally called for in humor. Thus a character (or narrator in some cases) can be claimed to comment via a bold statement on reality, but also an innocuous or rhetorical question to an implied addressee, an ironic utterance, a joke, rhymed advice, exclamation, or even a laughter response. Certain attitudes arising from the commentators' utterances tend to evoke or strengthen the stereotypes mentioned in the previous section.⁶

3.6 Meme examples

A typical feature of Polish COVID-19 humor are references to the country's post-socialist legacy (cf. Krikmann and Laineste 2009). The Polish public has

⁶ In this connection, it is interesting to observe that all the commentator figures in our memes are men – this is perhaps an insight into existing stereotype of a complaining man.

immediately recognized the similarity of newly introduced restrictions to those a preceding generation experienced under the martial law introduced by the then communist leader, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, on Sunday, 13 December 1981. This had been a traumatic experience of the generation – lockdown within the places of residence, ban on traveling abroad as well as between towns, except by permission of military authorities. Thus, the intertextual meme that features smiling General Jaruzelski (Figure 1), when he allegedly learns from someone (i.e. he is attributed with the newly acquired belief) that borders have been closed due to COVID-19, evokes laughter among the Polish audience – the message apparently is a reassuring one: we have been through worse times, this is nothing. An additional feature is the coincidence with the dates: the border closures actually started on Sunday, 13 March 2020. For years after the martial law was declared until 1989, street protests and marches erupted on the 13th of every month in commemoration of the crackdown. Altogether, the set of references, the smile as visual trigger, the presence of the implied addressee, *powiadasz*⁷ (*you are saying*) as the verbal epistemic trigger of modality, and the ensuing belief attribution evoked by the meme make the meme quite sophisticated.

The martial law increased the rationing of various basic foods, alcohol, shoes and other goods, which had started in Poland already during the crisis in 1976. The pseudo-ration card in Figure 2 (attributing the government with the intention to introduce such regulations) includes one likely item: 10-article shopping coupon, some less likely ones: coupons for 30-min walks and visits to pharmacy, an unlikely coupon for six lottery bets, as well as a bonus card for denouncing a neighbor and boxes to tick party membership (affiliation, voter): (PIS – the ruling



Figure 1: General Jaruzelski: So you are saying that they have closed the borders on the 13th?

⁷ The Polish phrase is also grammatically sophisticated as it involves the present tense with the iterative aspect as the carrier of irony.

party), PO (main opposition party) or other. The presence of the latter two alludes to the authoritarian tendencies of the ruling party.

The nostalgia for the times when times seemed simpler (cf. Krikmann and Laineste 2009) and the right and wrong were clearly distinguished as well as when we were all younger and laughed heartily together is visible in the intertextual memes which invoke old Polish films. One of the cult films that were made at the time of socialism in Poland was *Rejs* [Cruise]. It is a typical example of a comedy film which expressed a veiled political critique aimed at fooling the all-encompassing censorship. The plot was rather simple. A group of passengers take part in a cruise on board of a ship down the Vistula. One passenger gets on board without a ticket and is mistakenly taken to be a new entertainment officer. He readily accepts the role and organizes various activities, starting with a general meeting where questions are asked, generally rather unintelligent, but often emotional (a parody of meetings in factories and other communist time enterprises). In Figure 3 (left), a participant, played by the famous born-actor Jan Himilbach, stands up and a COVID-19-related question is attributed to him. The kind of question he asks well corresponds to the original questions that were asked in the film (Figure 3, right). COVID-19-wise, he plays the character of a worker who is quite likely not to want to wash too frequently (or at all as his question suggests – attribution of desire). In Figure 4, in turn, he is attributed with the belief in the conspiracy theory that holds that COVID-19 vaccination results in installing a Microsoft or Apple chip in somebody's brain (a well-liked conspiracy theory among Polish conservative flat-heads), as well as with the desire for compatibility in electronic gadgets, thus evoking the humorous opposition of the past and present worlds.

The girl, referred to as Marysia, in Figure 5 is the character from *Poszukiwany/poszukiwana* [Man. Woman wanted] – a man dressed as the girl in order to be able



Figure 2: Epidemic – rationing-entry card. Walk – 30 min (7 tear-off cards), pharmacy (3), shopping up to 10 articles (2), Lotto – maximum six bets (1), bonus – extra card for denouncing a neighbor. Caption: “Soon for everyone.”

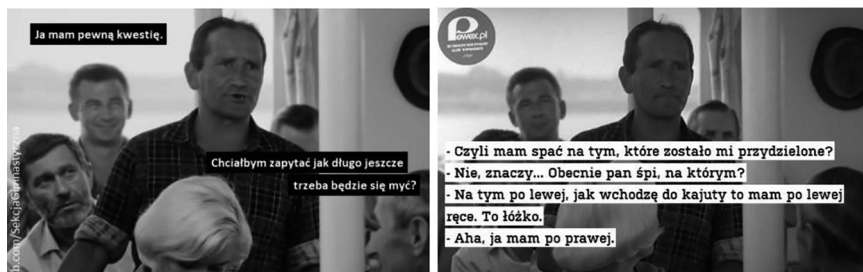


Figure 3: *Rejs* [Cruise] (1970). (On the left) “I have an issue to raise. I would like to ask how much longer will one need to wash oneself?”. (On the right - the original dialogue): Q. “So I am supposed to sleep on the bed which was allocated to me?” A. “No, well,... currently, you sleep on which one?” Q. “On the one on the left, as I enter the cabin then I have it on my left hand. This bed.” A. “Aha, I have it on my right.”



Figure 4: *Rejs*. “I have a certain issue concerning vaccination. Can one choose the vaccine with the Apple microchip instead of Microsoft one? I would like to be compatible with my phone.”

to work as housemaid. In the film, he makes a phone call to his wife to find out how to cook noodles, and then he burns them anyway. The visual trigger here is his pink dress and phone receiver he holds in hand, while the verbal is his colloquial language. He is attributed with the intention (and/or desire) to feed the policemen who are “checking the number of Christmas eve diners” as well as with the beliefs that they will stay and eat (Polish hospitality stereotype) and that the Prime Minister knows the exact number of policemen and is ready to provide such information by the phone.

Figure 6 is an example of references both to cultural stereotypes, in this case those of highlanders (*górale* in Polish) with their characteristic folk dresses, and the cult TV series about the 18th century highland robber *Janosik*,⁸ the quotes from which still circulate as winged words in general Polish discourse. The two characters in the photo are Janosik’s two main companions, known for their weakness

⁸ Originally, the Slovak Juraj Jánošík, active in the Polish-Hungarian border area.



Figure 5: *Poszukiwany/poszukiwana* [Man. Woman wanted 1972]. Hello? Prime Minister? ‘Cause I wanted to ask how many policemen will be checking the number of Christmas Eve diners? ‘Cause I don’t know how many plates to add extra?

for raw meat and booze, and their love for sleep. Highlanders are stereotyped as tough characters who live an austere life, raising sheep and cultivating an often barren mountain land, where the climate is inclement. Their view on life tends to be rather simplistic – they enjoy free time, money, vodka and women, and their favorite pastime is fooling tourists (cf. Chłopicki and Brzozowska 2017 for details on highlander jokes). As tough characters living in fresh mountain air, they tend not to fall ill even though they may not wear shirts, to which the meme in Figure 6 refers. Here the characters speak in dialect and in rhyme, and are attributed with



Figure 6: *Janosik* (1974). One highlander robber to another: “Drink booze, sit on your ass, and no virus will get at you” (rhymed in the original).

the beliefs that the virus can be killed by drinking booze and staying at home, and it is not so dangerous after all.

In Figure 7, there is a scene with peasant characters of *Miś* (cult comedy of 1981) riding the horse cart through town peddling the Christmas trees they had illegally cut in the forest. In the original dialogue, one of them admits he has a daughter of four, who is “generally and superficially” called Marysia (conventional diminutive of Maria [Mary]), but they want to call her Tradition – a suitable name for the times (stereotype of the conservative Pole is evoked here). The name has been replaced in the meme with Quarantine (the rest of the dialogue is the same), thus attributing the daughter’s father with the absurd belief that children names should reflect current events.

Figures 8–10 are intertextual memes which refer to another comedy film entitled *Alternatywy 4* [Four Alternatives]. It was made by the cult director of comedies that played on the absurdities of life in a socialist state, Stanisław Bareja (he is so well known that a new noun has been coined from his name to describe an absurdity – *bareizm*.⁹) The film is set in a typical block of flats in a Warsaw housing estate which



Figure 7: *Miś* [Teddy Bear] (1981). “So what is your daughter’s name?” “Generally and superficially we call her Marysia, but we would like to call her something more modern.” “There is such a name nowadays that is good for a girl. Quarantine.”

⁹ There is special Facebook page devoted to *bareizmy*, called Bareisms Always Alive: <https://www.facebook.com/bareizmy>.

seems permanently under construction. The community of residents, some of them intellectuals, live in very small and uncomfortable apartments and have a strong, rather primitive leader who has powers to organize their life, regardless of their preferences, including regular meetings announced at a very short notice. The scene used in Figure 8 takes place during the wedding party organized in one of the flats, where the two characters, drinking vodka, exchange their memories of counterfeit crimes during the Second World War, while the party goes on around them. The complaining comments of the two characters in the meme use the theme of washing hands and cleverly refer to the forced family life during the lockdown, attributing them with the comic belief that talking to children and reading books are threatening activities.



Figure 8: *Alternatywy 4* [Four Alternatives], part 8: Wedding [1982–1983]. “Terrible times have arrived, sir. People must wash hands, cook meals, talk to children. If things continue this way, they will start reading books.”



Figure 9: *Alternatywy 4*. A meme cycle featuring topical jokes. A worried coronavirus calls another and says: Have you heard [the news]? The government wants to limit the number of people at the Christmas table. What are we going to do? And the other says: Keep calm. We are going to meet at the midnight mass.¹⁰

¹⁰ The government allowed the traditional midnight mass on Christmas eve 2020 to be held as normal in churches.



Figure 10: *Alternatywy 4*. A meme cycle featuring topical jokes. Why was [President] Duda's test results positive? He knew the questions before.

Figures 9 and 10 from the same film represent a meme cycle where two characters from the film enjoy political jokes. One of the residents of the apartment block (on the right), who is privileged as a communist party functionary (reasonably intelligent at that) and whom, the other, the leader of the commune (on the left), is eager to please, tells political jokes as he is allowed to tell them. The meme cycle features typical old style narrative jokes (Figure 9) or puns (Figure 10), which allude to current reality – they are not very funny, but the upstart is laughing just to butter up to the well-connected intellectual (stereotypes of a social climber and cynical intellectual). What is striking here is that the jokes could function on their own without the visual backdrop, and the reason they do not is the rather memorable forced laughter scene, which obviously adds to the verbal jokes. In other words, the laughter of the commune leader attributes him with the belief that the jokes are funny, and thus he supports the joke teller as critical commentator on current political reality.

Seksmisja (*Sexmission*) is a film where the action takes place in 2044. Two men, having been hibernated for 60 years, wake up to the totalitarian world run by women. The men are kept in a closed room with white walls and are observed by women from outside. The hard facts, including the fact that they are the only two surviving men, are only slowly revealed to them to avoid shock reactions. In Figure 11, these shock facts include the revelation that the pandemic has been crushed, as well as other current facts, such as the Prime Minister being in quarantine, Minister of Health being in hospital, followed by the actual line from the film in which they are surprised to discover that the room has no windows and no door handles (like in the mental asylum), which obviously evokes the script of madness

and attributes aimless activities to the government (attribution of lack of intention).¹¹ Contrary to other memes, here (and in Figure 12) the character is highly emotional, which is understandable in the world of the film, and this is his way of conveying a commentary on the COVID-19 reality.



Figure 11: *Seksmisja* [Sexmission] (1984). The virus is retreating? There is nothing to fear? The pandemic has been crushed? Morawiecki is in quarantine? Szumowski¹² is in hospital, right? But why aren't there windows here? Why aren't there door handles here?

The film action is happening underground as the surface of the planet has apparently been contaminated. Towards the end of the film, the two men escape to the surface with two women helpers and with the last ditch effort walk along the beach and in the forest, only to see a stork flying over them, which is a signal that the air is not contaminated at all. The lines in Figure 12 recreate the original ones only partly, while the references to the “yellow tier”¹³ and “duck”,¹⁴ instead of the original stork, are introduced for a parodic effect and in order to attribute the government with the intention to deceive.

Figure 13 presents a cult scene from *Kilerów Dwóch* (*Two Killers*), when two ruthless gangsters nicknamed Siara and Wąski wait at a grassy airstrip, posing as an official delegation to receive the main character, Colonel Jose Arcadio Morales, who is to arrive with loads of contraband money. He parachutes to the ground from the

¹¹ Another meme not quoted here has the punchline saying: “I was supposed to have been vaccinated in 2038.”

¹² Mateusz Morawiecki, Polish PM, Łukasz Szumowski – Minister of Health in 2020.

¹³ Green, yellow, and green tiers were zones where different restrictions applied during the 2020 pandemic.

¹⁴ Reference to the Polish leader, Jarosław Kaczyński; *kaczka* – Eng. duck.



Figure 12: *Seksmisja*. Oh my God, what is he doing? He took off the mask in the yellow tier! He has gone mad! The contamination in the yellow tier is lethal! Lamia, look, a duck! If it can live, so can we! Take off this pilot's bubble.

passing plane, but his parachute does not open so the intricate plan of the gangsters seems to fall flat.¹⁵ He miraculously survives, but the complications only begin because he turns out to be Morales lookalike (nicknamed Kiler). Siara's attributed words in the meme ("Look how it is beautifully flattening") are a verbal trigger which evokes both the overlap of the two worlds and humorous irony (via the ambiguous *it*) – in the film the parachute seems to have fallen straight to the ground, and in the COVID-19 Poland of 2020 the curve of infections did not seem to flatten at all, thus the government is attributed with the false belief (held and publicly announced in the spring of 2020) that the pandemic is slowly weakening or the intention to deceive the public (for political gain). Siara (or the government) thus turns out to be an ironic commentator on reality. Figure 14 represents another twist, with the implicit narrator commenting on the government inaction and ill intention by attributing them with the desire to passively wait for the arrival of the new variant of the virus, instead of embarking on some active prevention.

Figure 15 represents a cult scene from the film *Dzień Świra* [*The Day of the Nut*], with the main hero lying down in his bed in the evening and bitterly reflecting on his life (stereotype of frustrated (presumptuous) intellectual – a commentator per se). The film is a twist on the American film *Groundhog Day* which is less of a fantasy and more of a comment on the depressing reality. The meme contains many overlap

¹⁵ In the original, after the parachute lands, Siara's line is: "Well, and our entire plan has just fucked up."



Figure 13: *Kilerów Dwóch* [Two Killers] (1999). Look how it is beautifully flattening.



Figure 14: *Kilerów Dwóch*. Warsaw (Okęcie) Airport. The government delegation awaiting the new variant of coronavirus.

triggers constituting a collection of simplified quotes from the contradictory moves of the government, while the final line (*Ja pierdolę, kurwa – Fuck, fuck, fuck*) is the trigger of humor by both referring back to the film as a typical line of the frustrated character¹⁶ as well as typical expletive line (see Chłopicki 2019), to which a stereotypical Poles resorts when frustration overcomes them.

In another development during the pandemic, the whole cycle of memes appeared with policemen pasted onto paintings, including those by famous Polish painters, where the obviously fake presence of the uniformed policemen (in Figure 16 they are shown with their backs to the viewer) became a standing joke. The point was to draw attention to the arbitrariness of their interventions and to the absurdity of their arguments outside of the world of the pandemic. In Figure 16, the humorous trigger is the attribution to the female protagonist of the renowned symbolist painting called *Szał* [Frenzy] of the intention to travel (via the policeman's question) and of acknowledging her own madness in response, thus commenting very indirectly on the world of the pandemic.

¹⁶ The final line also recurs in every meme from this cycle (with the same scene but different overlap triggers).



Figure 15: *Dzień Świra* [*The Day of the Nut*] (2002). We're closing shopping centers. We're closing ski slopes. We're opening ski slopes. We're closing ski slopes. We're closing hotels. We're opening hotels. We're closing hotels. We're winning with the pandemic. We're losing with the pandemic. Fuck, fuck, fuck!



Figure 16: Meme with a 19th century painting by Władysław Podkowiński (1866–1895) called *Frenzy*, displayed in Kraków National Museum. Policeman: "What is the purpose of the journey?" Lady: "I have simply fallen into a frenzy."

4 Concluding remarks

All the memes discussed in the present article display creativity and various degrees of sophistication, which involves both intertextual allusions and cognitive complexity, with several references being evoked at the same time, including those to inference-rich events (e.g. martial law) or references to films. We chose mainly

Table 1: Memes analysis.

Fig. no	Title	Overlapping worlds (marked by /)	Triggers A. Overlap B. Humor AB. Overlap and humor	Attributions	Commentator; method of commenting	Humorous oppositions (in Raskin's sense)
1.	Smiling Jaruzelski	Socialist times, martial law 13 December 1981 (General Jaruzelski as dictator)/COVID-19 lockdown 13 March 2020	AB. <i>You are saying: closed the borders on the 13th</i>	Attribution of attitude/belief (the general's amusement)	General Jaruzelski; rhetorical question with verbal epistemic trigger of modality	Political restrictions/pandemic; closed/open; freedom/bondage
2.	Epidemic – rationing-entry card	Socialist times, (regime, rationing of food)/COVID-19 (restricted shopping during the pandemic)	A. Printed rationing cards B. Coupons for walks, party membership, lottery, denouncing neighbours	Attribution of desire/intention	Implicit narrator as commentator	Food shortage/abundance; pleasure/duty; shopping/denouncing
3.	<i>Cruise</i> (1970) 1	Socialist times, factory meeting/COVID-19 politics	A. <i>I have an issue to raise.</i> AB. <i>need to wash?</i>	Attribution of lack of desire	Film character; seemingly innocuous question	Clean/dirty; dangerous/safe; sterile/dirty
4.	<i>Cruise</i> (1970) 2	Socialist times, factory meeting/COVID-19 politics (vaccination, conspiracy theories)	A. <i>I have a certain issue concerning vaccination.</i> AB. <i>microchip;</i> B. <i>I would like to be compatible with my phone.</i>	Attribution of desire	Film character; seemingly innocuous question	Old/new; technically backward/technically aware; Apple/Microsoft; pro vaccination/against
5.	<i>Man. Woman wanted</i> (1972)	Socialist times (corruption)/COVID-19 (corrupted visit rules during Christmas)	B. <i>Mr. Prime Minister; AB. How many policemen; 'Cause I wanted to ask; how many plates</i>	Attribution of desire/intention	Film character; inquisitive (naïve) questions	Man/woman; restrictions/no restrictions; policemen/guests; visits forbidden/welcome
6.	<i>Janosik</i> (1974)	Socialist times and highlander world		Attribution of (folk) belief	Film characters, highlanders; advice	

Table 1: (continued)

Fig. no Title	Overlapping worlds (marked by /)	Triggers A. Overlap B. Humor AB. Overlap and humor	Attributions	Commentator; method of commenting	Humorous oppositions (in Raskin's sense)
	(simple beliefs and cures) /COVID-19 (stay home policy, disinfection)	A. <i>Virus</i> AB. Highlander dialect, B. rhyme (<i>życi- chwyli</i>)			Healthy/unhealthy; drunk/sober; traveling/staying home; old/new
7. <i>Teddy Bear</i> (1981)	Socialist times and Polish national world /COVID-19 quarantine	B. <i>Generally and superficially</i> , AB. <i>Quarantine</i> .	Attribution of desire	Film characters, peasants; quasi-philosophical monologue	Name/no name; tradition/quarantine; modern, elaborate/backward, simplistic
8. <i>Four Alternatives</i> (1982–1983) 1	Socialistic times, residential commune/COVID-19 lockdown rules and needs	A. <i>Must wash hands</i> , B. <i>Cook meals, talk to children. start reading books.</i>	Attribution of belief (to the two men and to society)	Film characters, intellectual commentators; complaint	Terrible/good; normal/abnormal; clean/dirty; lazy/not lazy; educated/not educated
9. <i>Four alternatives</i> (1982–1983) 2	Socialist times restrictions, residential commune/COVID-19 social distancing, meetings restrictions	A. <i>Coronavirus; Christmas table limit</i> ; B. <i>A worried virus calls another and says: Have you heard [the news]? What are we going to do? And the other says: [joke setup] AB midnight mass</i>	Meta-textual attribution of belief	Film characters, social climber and cynical intellectual; laughter at the joke	Real/unreal; keep distance/not keep distance; happy/unhappy
10. <i>Four Alternatives</i> (1982–1983) 3	Socialist times, residential commune/COVID-19 tests	AB. <i>Test results positive? B. questions</i>	Meta-textual attribution of belief	Film characters, social climber and cynical intellectual; laughter at joke	Clever/stupid; positive/negative; good/bad

Table 1: (continued)

Fig. no	Title	Overlapping worlds (marked by /)	Triggers A. Overlap B. Humor AB. Overlap and humor	Attributions	Commentator; method of commenting	Humorous oppositions (in Raskin's sense)
11.	<i>Sexmission</i> (1984) 1	Socialist times restrictions, lack of freedom, frustration /COVID-19 restrictions, lack of freedom, frustration	A. <i>Virus retreating, nothing to fear, pandemic crushed Morawiecki in quarantine Szumowski in hospital</i> B. <i>No windows, no door handles</i> AB. <i>Mask, yellow tier, contamination B. a duck! If it can live, so can we!</i>	Attribution of (dis)belief	Film characters; notorious, rhetorical questions	Pandemic overcome/not overcome; fear/no fear; freedom/lockdown; normality/mental asylum
12.	<i>Sexmission</i> (1984) 2	Socialist times restrictions, lack of freedom/COVID-19 restrictions, lack of freedom, zone colours, wearing masks	A. <i>Mask, yellow tier, contamination B. a duck! If it can live, so can we!</i>	Attribution of (dis)belief	Film characters; rhetorical questions	Danger/lack of danger; life/death; freedom/prison; fear/no fear; mad/sane; pandemic overcome/not overcome; stork/duck; bird/politician (Kaczyński)
13.	<i>Two Killers</i> (1999) 1	Postsocialist times, corruption/COVID-19 politics	AB. <i>The curve is flattening. B. beautifully</i>	Attribution of belief	Film character; ironic statement	Real/unreal; good news/bad news; beautiful/disastrous
14.	<i>Two Killers</i> (1999) 2	Postsocialist times, corruption/COVID-19 politics (virus mutations)	B. <i>The government delegation awaiting A. the new variant of coronavirus.</i>	Attribution of desire/intention	implicit narrator; ironic statement	Good/bad; reasonable/unreasonable; Active/passive; effective/ineffective
15.	<i>The Day of the Nut</i> (2002)	Postsocialist times, frustration/COVID-19 frustration (virus mutations)	AB. <i>Opening, closing, shopping centers, ski slopes, hotels, winning, losing (the struggle) with</i>	Attribution of (dis)belief	Film character; multiple contradictions	Good/bad; reasonable, unreasonable; normal/abnormal; closed/opened; winners/losers

Table 1: (continued)

Fig. no Title	Overlapping worlds (marked by /)	Triggers A. Overlap B. Humor AB. Overlap and humor	Attributions	Commentator; method of commenting	Humorous oppositions (in Raskin's sense)
16. "Frenzy," painting (1894)	Postsocialist times, (po- licemen as butts of jokes)/COVID-19 restrictions (stay home policy, police patrols)	<i>the pandemic.</i> B. <i>Fuck, fuck, fuck!</i> AB. <i>What is the purpose of the journey?</i> B. <i>I have simply fallen into a frenzy.</i>	Attribution of belief/desire	Woman from the painting; acknowledgement of madness	Normal/abnormal; real/ unreal; old/new; art/everyday life; elaborated/down to earth; unemotional/ emotional; dressed/un- dressed; uniform/nudity

those memes which can be considered as using native humor tradition. Typical examples also include references to Polish cultural stereotypes and local COVID-19 politics.

In the Table 1 below we bring together the references from all the 16 examples discussed in the paper, in order to be able to assess better their sophisticated nature in comparison to other examples.

Humorous mechanisms visible in the table involve both central features of sophistication – complexity and intertextual allusions to films, TV series, political events, politicians, and topical news. In all these examples, we can observe an overlap of two worlds that is more or less complex, a variety of overlap triggers and humorous triggers as well as attributions of desire, belief or intention, and a variety of ways to comment on the COVID-19 reality. The figure of the commentators should be highlighted as central to the notion of sophistication discussed in the paper – offering detached perspectives through the whole spectrum of methods, they contribute to making the network of references richer and thus potentially more amusing, although the detailed analysis of all five factors of our model would require a separate study. The examples could perhaps be ranked as to their level of sophistication, but we leave this task to a different paper too.

Overall, the creativity reflected in memes shows the huge potential of cultural memory (Wójcicka 2019), cumulating and storing the stories, ready to appear when needed. They evoke the cultural scripts accumulated in collective minds and are reused to show hope, and unity of the community that survived different difficult times, but is alive, strong and determined to fight the pandemic, and kill it and kill the fear with the laughter.

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