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Statler and Waldorf as Two All-American Hecklers in the Show of Life

1. Introduction: Hecklers in the Show of Life

In this paper I am going to analyse the interactions of two characters from *The Muppet Show*, Statler and Waldorf, whose comments in the show illustrate well the on-looker scenario, the main theme of this volume. The comic puppet show, produced for television in the period 1976–1981, was highly popular in its heyday, the evidence of which was the presence of numerous top celebrities as guest stars on particular shows as well as numerous British and American awards it received. The show was re-run on television for the next twenty years, full movies were made, like *The Muppets Take Manhattan* (1984), and then several new revival attempts were undertaken, including *Statler and Waldorf from the Balcony* (2005–2006), where the two hecklers use similar commentary techniques as in the original show, discussing new films and referring to contemporary events and figures. As a blogger on *The Guardian* website recently pointed out:

[The] Muppets Studio – which is owned by Disney – is actively reaching out to a new audience using digital media. The Muppets have a YouTube channel (Bohemian Rhapsody was watched more than 12m times), a Facebook page, a Twitter account and an iPhone app where you can build your own monster with Elmo. And of course, there is the Muppet Wikia as well, and their news blog the “Muppet Newsflash”. ([The Guardian Digital Media Blog 2010](https://www.theguardian.com/digitalmedia/2010/mar/09/muppets-disney-interactive-digital-content))

The show’s production history is interesting in that the original show was devised by the American Jim Henson, who had become well-known for his part in developing the children show *Sesame Street* in the early 1970s, but it was British television which agreed to produce *The Muppet Show* and then sell it to American television, the American mainstream networks not
having initially accepted Henson’s proposal. The show’s generic convention originated in the vaudeville and music hall (later known as variety theatre) tradition, which had grown up independently in the US and Britain respectively in the mid-19th century in the form of open shows in pubs and then in theatres and other public venues. The shows consisted of a series of unrelated songs and a variety of comedy entertainment, such as comic sketches, magic tricks, ventriloquists, dancers, mime artists, impersonators as well as animals and puppet acts (cf. Double 2005 for the history of the genre).

Another tradition which influenced the shaping of The Muppet Show was that of stand-up comedy practiced in American comedy clubs, where comedians tried to warm up audiences to their acts and sometimes succeeded and sometimes were heckled (cf. Chłopicki 2012, Double 2005). Hecklers, often drunk or aggressive members of the audience, shouted abusive comments at the comedians, whose skills were then tested since they were expected to quickly retort (or squelch) in order to put down the hecklers. The presence of aggressive hecklers has been a special feature of American (as well as British) comedy shows (though perhaps not unique to the Anglo-Saxon world). This supposedly aggressive nature of American humour was studied by numerous researchers, notably Legman (1996 [1968]), who analysed the case of dirty joke, and Gruner (1999), who argued on the example of American humour that all humour is targeted and there is no such thing as an innocuous joke (cf. also Ziv 1984). The custom of a public “roast” of a celebrity grew out of the heckling tradition too. It was initiated by the New York Friar’s Club as long back as in 1910 with the motto: “we only roast the ones we love”. The issue of aggression in humour is not simple and generally it is assumed that aggression is better expressed by other means than humour (cf. Davies 2002), and when humour is used aggressively then it is often characterized by negative humorous interactions in which the purpose of the humor is typically antisocial. In some instances it may result in positive outcomes for the individuals affected by those issues. But in its most common form, aggressive humor is used as a way to degrade a particular social group or its members and may result in the perpetuation of negative attitudes or the expression of prejudice. (Strain 2014: 17)

American humor was also shaped in its popular content by the tradition of tall tale, improbable stories containing some grain of truth and surrounded by supernatural, unlikely or exaggerated elements, told at camp fires by bragging frontier men, traders, goldminers, cowboys and soldiers, telling of their hyperbolized achievements.

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1 Aggression is not entirely absent from comedy shows. The Spectator published a chilling article in 2010, telling the story of physical aggression during the Edinburgh comedy festival, when a consistently malevolent, verbally aggressive heckler was attacked after the show by the comedian, David Whitney (Evans 2010).

2 Cf. http://friarsclub.com/heritage/ where the history of the club can be found.
“The Wonderful Hunt” is a well-known example that recalls the adventures of a hunter who has such a remarkable luck that a single shot from his rifle kills both birds in the air and animals on the ground. When he wades into the water to get his game, even his boots fill up with fish. “The Split Dog” describes a dog that was cut in half and stitched back together with its back legs upside down. In another story the weather is so cold that people who speak to each other have to wait until spring for their words to thaw out and be heard. (Cassel McEntire 2014: 747)

There is also an entire tradition of American humour called frontier humour, where greenhorns were subjected to various lies told them by experienced frontier men (cf. Cassel McEntire 2014: 748). The tradition grew popular at the time of American Civil War, but the Wild West had generally offered a favourable climate for tall tales or other lying stories. It was so well exemplified by Mark Twain in his stories (notably that of “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County”; Twain (1867)). Similar stories were written by Edgar Allan Poe, sometimes based on true folk tall tales (notably “The Man That Was Used Up” 1839; cf. Kim 2013: 263–264) and sometimes horror stories with a tall tale background (e.g. “Tell-Tale Heart”, 1843). Exaggeration was thus the comic technique of the day, which contributed to the emergence of typically American hyperbolic one liners, analysed e.g. by Bergen and Binsted (2004), such as “Yo mama is so fat she wore a yellow raincoat and people yelled Taxi”, “Yo mama is so fat Mount Everest tried to climb her” or “Yo mama is so fat she sat on a quarter and a booger shot out of George Washington’s nose”. These jokes had a certain charm to them and exhibit a certain degree of creativity, although, of course, exaggeration is not among the most sophisticated mechanisms of humour since it normally involves the same semantic domain (e.g. fat is contrasted with very fat as in the above examples). This and other mechanisms identified by humour researchers under the guise of logical mechanisms are meant to “embody “local logic”, i.e. a distorted playful logic, that does not necessarily hold outside the world of the joke” (Attardo 2001: 25). Below is the list of 27 mechanisms identified by Attardo at al (2002: 18), which are broadly classified there into reasoning mechanisms and syntagmatic relationships (including various reversals and other linguistic phenomena):

role-reversals, role exchanges, potency mappings, vacuous reversal, juxtaposition, chiasmus, garden-path, figure-ground reversal, faulty reasoning, almost situations, analogy, self-undermining, inferring consequences, reasoning from false premises, missing link, coincidence, parallelism, implicit parallelism, proportion, ignoring the obvious, false analogy, exaggeration, field restriction, cratylism, meta-humor, vicious circle, referential ambiguity.

3 25 cents coin bears the face of George Washington. See https://www.thetoptens.com/best-yo-mama-so-fat-jokes/ for these and more examples.

4 There each of the mechanisms is briefly discussed and provided with an example; cf. also Attardo 2001: 27.
Some of these mechanisms coincide with (but are not identical with) the broadly conceived metonymy understood as a mapping within a single semantic domain, as opposed to a metaphor representing a mapping across domains (cf. Radden & Dirven 2007: 12–15).

In view of the analysis of the specific examples of comments from Statler and Waldorf, it worth noticing some other elements of American culture or humorous cultural tradition in general which lie behind the idea of the show. American culture is individualistic to a large extent (cf. Geert Hofstede’s research, e.g. 2001) and as such it has developed in its language the leading metaphor Life is Play, present in Western civilization for a long time, most notably in Shakespeare’s comedy *As You Like It*, where the metaphor clearly emerged:

> All the world’s a stage
> And all the men and women merely players;
> They have their exits and their entrances,
> And one man in his time plays many parts.
> (Act II, scene VII)

The extract is famously followed by the description of seven consecutive acts that human life comprises. Kövecses (2005: 184–189) discusses the metaphor as lying at the heart of American culture and language, quoting (after Lakoff and Turner 1989) such expressions as: *It’s curtains for him., The kid stole the show., He saved the show., He played a big part in my life., He turned in great performance., I'm improvising., It’s showtime., or You're on.* (ibidem: 185). Furthermore, he argues that this leading metaphor developed in America into that of Life is a Show (Entertainment) under the influence of sports culture, film, radio, television and mass communication as such. Programs (including newscasts) turned into entertainment shows (hence the notion of “infotainment”), and so did shopping as well as politics, especially elections, or even warfare as it is presented on television.

An American colleague of mine, renowned to be an excellent teacher (in addition to being an excellent researcher), once told me that he could not imagine teaching a class without at the same time “putting on a show”. Not only teaching but also dating and romantic relationships are imbued with the vocabulary and conceptual patterns of entertainment, especially those of spectator sports. (Kövecses 2005: 187–188)

The development of reality TV only emphasized the importance of this all-encompassing metaphor, and even though the metaphor was not originally American it definitely strongly influenced American television. The whole genre of talk shows emerged in America in the late 1950s, with such celebrities as Joe Franklin and Johnny Carson, and later David Letterman or Oprah Winfrey, running the shows in which they interviewed famous people in the atmosphere of infotainment or mocking, which in the course of time turned into a culture of its own.
Comedy has had a long tradition of using animals as vehicle of satire across different genres (from jokes to cartoons, comic strips, fairy tales and other stories as well as theatre plays, such as the earliest satyr plays; cf. Ewans 2014: 665–666), where animals were attributed human traits. This allowed to emphasize the stock comic features of humans, such as stupidity, pride, ugliness, promiscuity or greed. Puppetry performances, popular across different cultures, including ancient ones, included animals in the shows too. “Puppets provide a social critique and a letting off of steam. In complex societies, puppets draw on stratified class structures to express different humorous messages” (Sherzer & Sherzer 2014: 617). In *Muppets*, the individualist culture of America saw the opportunity to reflect upon the identity and self, as the show could be treated as a metaphor of self. It “in short, can be a prism through which we reflect on and gain a deeper understanding of our selves” as Haberkorn (2009: 25) argues. Specifically, the issues of self-contradiction, cognitive dissonance, normality and abnormality, and gender identity can be seen as raised there in an artistic manner. The self and the character roles are also separated because these are puppets separated from puppeteers. Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy are human beings which “just happen to be animals” (Tillis 1992: 129, after Haberkorn 2009: 29). Gender issues come up here too as e.g. Miss Piggy is portrayed as a transvestite of sorts (a female pig wearing women’s clothes).

Furthermore, “Jim Henson’s Muppets are hybrids of fools and monsters – *carnival incarnate*. They are a large and unruly family... stuffed animals or colorful, stuffed monsters” (Haberkorn 2009: 28). The show itself exists “in a universe of general benign absurdity [where] characters may explode once in a while, or turn into chocolate layer cake, but they recover in time for the next performance” (Finch 1981: 27). From another perspective *The Muppet Show* can also be seen, ironically no doubt, as a “docu-drama about a mental institution in which the inmates are encouraged to act out their neuroses while disguised as animals, vegetables or whatever happens to take their fancy” (Finch 1981: 28). Thus it constitutes a parody of a variety (vaudeville, music hall) show and is an example of meta-comedy – a comedy about a comedy. Meta-comedy or meta-humour in general is considered a symptom of sophistication in humour, because of the several layers of interpretation involved. Attardo’s (2001) discussion of meta-humour illustrates the layers very well, both in his discussion of meta-jokes (also called *third-generation jokes*), which target the joke genre as such (e.g. How many feminists does it take to screw in a light bulb? This is not funny!), and of meta-narratives in the film entitled *Spaceballs*.

in which the characters in rent a video tape of *Spaceballs* and fastforward through it up to the point in the plot in which the characters in *Spaceballs* rent a video tape of *Spaceballs* and then are astonished when, looking at the screen, they see themselves looking at the screen. (Attardo 2001: 94)
The meta-comedic, parodic nature of *The Muppets Show* explains why the presence of two hecklers (or mocking commentators) in the VIP box of the Muppet Theatre, where the performances take place, is so significant. Their perspective on the crazy events unfolding on stage tends to offer a rational perspective and bring the viewers back to the reality, but there are also many occasions when they take an opportunity to explore further the comic opportunities offered by the show. Statler and Waldorf are two hecklers named after the famous hotel chains\(^5\), which is another humorous move, making them more stock characters than individuals (posh and highly cultured by association) and pushing the absurdity of the show to a new level.

For the purpose of the analysis of Statler's and Waldorf's heckling exchanges, I have selected examples from a wide variety of available ones, based on their popularity and presence in Internet comments by the fans of the show. Specifically, the examples come from 50 original episodes (out of the total of 120\(^6\)) and 18 other films, videos and shows (all are listed the bibliography). For the sake of convenience, I have categorized the show material (over ninety exchanges) into three major classes according to the type of target, type of humour form or mechanism, and type of content, although by virtue of their nature these categories overlap to some extent. There can be no discrete distinction between form and content in language, and thus such distinction cannot easily be made in humour either. Still, such categorization helps to see various levels of humour analysis in their linguistic, generic and cultural context. The objective of the analysis is to identify typical aspects of the humour of the two hecklers, which are closely related to the type of humour of *The Muppet Show* as such, and thus can help explain the quick rise and continuing popularity of the show.

### 2. Types of target

Targeted humour is most common in the repartees of the two commentators, which is perhaps predictable given the fact that the two men play the role of hecklers. The types of targets vary, from generally targeting the show to targeting individual characters, both animal (or rather puppet) and human, to targeting each other or even themselves (self-deprecating humour). The section ends with discussing meta-humour – a special, sophisticated type of target.

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\(^5\) Actually, the name of one of the chains is Waldorf-Astoria and Waldorf has the wife named Astoria, who appears in one of the shows – with Dizzy Gillespie.

2.1. Humour targeted at the quality of the show

The hecklers’ comments deprecating the show are very common, which is predictable given the nature of the hecklers’ status. The classical questions that hecklers at a stand-up performance would ask are: “Do you know any jokes?” Or “When is the comedian coming on?” (cf. Evans 2010). Statler (S) and Waldorf (W) are also explicit about what actors and performers of any performance dislike most intensely, that is looking forward to its end (1), leaving the venue (2) or being or travelling somewhere else (3):

1. S: I guess that all’s well, ends well.
   W: Doesn’t matter to me, as long as it ends!
   (from The Great Muppet Caper)

2. S: Do you believe in life after death?
   W: Every time I leave this theater.
   (from the Rachel Welsh episode)

3. S: Well, Waldorf, they made it to Broadway.
   W: Yes, and I already bought tickets.
   S: Are they good seats?
   W: Sure are. They’re on the next train out of town!
   (from The Muppets Take Manhattan)

Sometimes they use more metaphorical put-downs, referring to the apparent damage they have sustained watching the show (4) or comparing the show to a downhill ride, thus suggesting it is becoming worse and worse (5):

4. S: Do they sell insurance for this show?
   (from the Kenny Rogers episode)

5. W: You know, the second half of this show reminds me of Aspen.
   S: Why Aspen?
   W: Cause it’s all downhill from here!
   (from MuppetFest)

Their criticism often takes the form of typical cynical heckles, as in the following two examples, when the particular skits are deemed not worth remembering (6), or when the speaker implies he does not care to understand the show (7). The exaggeration mechanism seems to underlie the comic value of these exchanges:

6. W: Doesn’t Bob Hope usually sing “Thanks for the Memories”?
   S: Why would he want to remember this?
   (from the Bob Hope episode)

7. S: The question is, what is a Mahna Mahna?
   W: The question is, who cares?
   (from the Juliet Prowse episode)
In order to dismiss the show, the hecklers sometimes use outside figures, as in 8, when a cow enters the commentators’ box and they teach it the “right” reaction, by coincidence similar to the sound the cow makes: when they succeed they enjoy it immensely:

8. Cow: Moo!
S: No! “Boo”!
Cow: Boo!
S: Hooray!
Cow: Hooray!
(from the Roy Rogers & Dale Evans episode)

Sometimes the criticism is somewhat more veiled, as in 9, using the indirect strategy of metonymically arriving at the correct interpretation of the adjective different (the special kind of difference):

9. S: Well, that was different.
W: Yep. Lousy...
Both: ...but different!
(from the Steve Martin episode)

2.2. Humour targeting characters of the show

Some characters bear the brunt of the commentators rage, and these include Miss Piggy. And so they generally objectify her, using various puns: in 10, they comment on the scenery, spoilt with a pig, in 11 they treat pigs as flying objects, while in 12, as Piggy leaves the house they refer to it as bacon which has run out. Finally, in 13, following a chase in the show, they express their dislike of Miss Piggy’s singing, bad as it is reputed to be:

10. W: Isn’t it lovely?
S: Yeah. Too bad they’re gonna spoil it with a pig.
(from Muppet Vision 3D)

11. W: (notices Statler wearing a hardhat) What’s the hardhat for?
S: I wanna be ready in case they start throwing pigs at us again!
(from the Kenny Rogers episode)

12. S: Is breakfast over?
W: No. Why?
S: I think the bacon just ran out.
(from Muppets From Space)

13. S: Oh, poor little guy. I hope he’s not hurt.
W: Well, at least he got the pig to stop singing.
(from the Kenny Rogers episode)

^ See also section 3 and 4 for puns and humor content.
The second target of the two hecklers is Fozzie the Bear, who is known to be bad at comedy, specifically at telling jokes. He is put down ironically as uninteresting (14), silly (15), not being able to say much (16) or needing some rest away from the theatre (after Kermit has announced that Fozzie cannot appear on the show; 17):

14. S: These two comics were made for each other.
W: Hm?
S: Yeah! The snowman’s ice cold and the bear’s not so hot!
(from A Muppet Family Christmas)

15. W: Hey, hey, hey! It’s that silly bear!
S: Time for the audience to go elsewhere!
(from the Jim Nabors episode)

16. Fozzie: Look, I’m gonna tell a joke and if they heckle – If you heckle me, look out ’cause I’m ready. Look out! That’s all I can say! Just look out, look out! That’s all I can say!
S: Yep, that’s all he can say all right!
(from the Charles Aznavour episode)

17. Kermit: Tonight we thought we’d give Fozzie Bear a rest.
S: You’re not giving him a rest – you’re giving us a rest.
(from the Bruce Forsyth episode)

Kermit himself, as the director of the show, often falls victim to the jokes of Statler and Waldorf, too. 18 is particularly carnivalesque, as they guess the absurd opening act obviously intended by Kermit as surprising:

Kermit: Er, cancel the opening act.
[a gorilla in a ballet costume walks across the stage complaining loudly in Chinese]\(^8\)
(from the Beverly Sills episode)

The Great Gonzo is often satirized as a weird character (he is supposed to have come from outer space) given to odd stunts which endanger his life. Thus the humour used in reference to him (e.g. in 19 and 20) is of the dark kind: 9

19. Kermit: The Great Gonzo will perform on bagpipes the Eine Kleine Nachtmusik from a flagpole, ten feet in the air? Uh, ladies and gentlemen, the Great Gonzo!
W: Hey, Gonzo should quit while he’s ahead.
S: Huh, Gonzo should quit while he’s alive!
(from the Julia Andrews episode)

In one scene (20), Gonzo asks for a volunteer to be hypnotized and then is to be asked to lift 5000 pounds’ weight. Thus a potentially life-threatening situation is involved again. Here the play on words is important too as

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9 See also section 3.2 for other black humour examples.
the source of the comic effect since the words *mind* and *matter* are used in
two different meanings. First of all, however, it twists the popular quota-
tion attributed to Mark Twain: “Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you
don’t mind, it doesn’t matter” and thus is allusive in nature:10

20. Gonzo: It’s just a question of mind over matter.
   W: That’s right, you don’t mind and we don’t matter.
   Gonzo: You’ll live to regret this.
   S: We intend to.
   Gonzo: I don’t understand you people. Immortality is up for grahams. But
   you don’t deserve it.
   W: No, but you do!
   (from the Cheryl Lad episode)

2.3. Humour targeting hecklers themselves and self-deprecating

The self-deprecating comments of Statler and Waldorf are highly diverse
and they allude mainly to their advanced age, thus being close to death
(21) and not very lively as well as prone to sleep during the day (22, 23) or
insomniac at night (24), plus to their ensuing general disorientation (25,
26).11 At the same time of course, they target the shows themselves as in
the previous section:

21. W: Say, Statler, do you think “The Muppet Show” will be any better live?
   S: At our age, it’s good to be around anything live.
   (from *The Muppet Show Live*)

22. S: Hey, you old fool, you slept through the show.
   W: Who’s a fool? You watched it!
   (from the Paul Simon episode)

23. W: Wake me when the show starts.
   S: It’s already been on a while.
   W: Oh, wake me when it’s over.
   (from the Florence Henderson episode)

24. W: This show is good for what ails me.
   S: What ails ya?
   W: Insomnia.
   (from the Paul Williams episode)

25. S: Well, I can relate to this film. Last night, when I got home, a complete
   stranger was in the living room.
   W: Oh, was she a ghost?
   S: No, I went to the wrong house again.
   (from *Statler & Waldorf From the Balcony*, episode 7)

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10 See section 3.1. on word play and 3.2. where more examples of allusions are provided.
11 See also section 4 for other references to death and self-deprecating comments.
26. S: They don’t write the old songs anymore.
   W: Nope, they just write new ones.
   (from the Jim Nabors episode)

27 is interesting as it shows how the content of the show, in this case the apparently non-existent banana sketch and the actual banana which appears as live character or as fruit on stage, is used in the comments, the banana at the point of the show being already associated with some stupidity – a veiled form of a put-down:

27. S: Well, how’d you like the show?
   W: Maybe I’m getting soft, but I loved it. Have a banana.
   [Waldorf then picks up a banana.]
   (from the Sandy Duncan episode)

2.4. Meta-humour

The category of meta-humour brings examples of dialogues which illustrate the self-contradictions that both the commentators fall into when reacting emotionally to the show. This is very much in line with one of the definitions of the term badaud, which has inspired the present volume, and which makes the onlookers somewhat lacking in judgement and personality, and gullible as well as somewhat conformist (http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/badaud). One could read 28 and 29 as meta-comments on entertaining shows which tend to evoke highly changeable feelings in the audience, and, consequently, on the volatile nature of the audience. In this way the self-awareness issue mentioned in the early discussion comes to the fore, very much reflecting the atmosphere at the Internet discussion fora of today:

28. W: That was wonderful!
   S: Bravo!
   W: I loved it!
   S: That was great!
   W: Well, it was pretty good.
   S: Well, It wasn’t bad.
   W: There were parts that weren’t pretty good, though.
   S: It could’ve been a lot better.
   W: I didn’t really like it.
   S: It was pretty terrible.
   W: It was bad.
   S: It was awful!
   S & W: Terrible! Eh, boo!
   (from the Mahna Mahna episode)

29. S: Brilliant!
   W: Ah, it was terrible.
   S: Well, it was good.
   W: Ah, it was very bad.
S: Well, it was average.
W: Ah, it was in the middle there.
S: Ah, it wasn’t that great.
W: I kind of liked it.
S: It was terrible!
W: I loved it!
S: Get ’em off!
W: MORE!
(from the Mahna Mahna episode)

The same instability of opinion applies to 30, where the two play grumpy old men and they tease each other in a mock-aggressive way and move from one extreme to another extreme in their volatile opinions:

30. S: What?! You’re a crook!
W: Oh, yeah? You’re a bum!
S: Well, you’re an old fool!
W: (gasps)
S: Of course, I mean that with the utmost respect.
W: That’s how I took it, which is why I called you a bum with a great deal of affection.
S: Thank you, old friend. By the way, very nice tie – I like it.
W: You oughta like it. I borrowed it from you 30 years ago.
S: What?! You’re a crook!
W: Oh, yeah? You’re a bum!
S: Well, you’re an old fool!
(from the Muppetisms)

Finally, the commentators’ negative opinions of the show combined with the encouragement to participate again, in the spirit of conformism, contribute to the sense of meta-comedy, and thus bring to mind some old Jewish jokes where what matters is the process and not the product12:

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12 The joke goes as follows: A rabbi is lying on his death bed, and his students are lined up at his side. The wisest student is beside the old rabbi, the second-wisest behind him, the third-wisest behind, and so on, down the length of the bed, into the hall, down the stairs, and out into the street where the simplest student is at the back of the line. The wisest student leans over and in a soft, reverent voice asks, “Great Rabbi, before you go to be with God, please tell us: What is the meaning of life?” The rabbi raises his head a little, slowly opens his eyes, draws a rattling breath, and with great effort says, “Life... Life is... is like... a river.” He shuts his eyes, dropping his head back onto the pillow with exhaustion. The wisest student turns to the student behind him and says, “The Rabbi says life is like a river!” That student turns to the one behind him and repeats this wisdom, and so on and so forth, out of the room, down the hall, down the stairs, and outside to the end of the line, until the second-simplest student turns to the simplest and says “The Rabbi says life is like a river!” The simplest student, realizing he has no one to who to repeat this wisdom, contemplates it. After a moment, he taps the student ahead of him on the shoulder and says “Excuse me, but... why is life like a river?” This message gets passed up to the front of the line, until the second-wisest whispers in the wisest student’s ear “Moishe wants to know why life is like a river.” The
31. S: This show is awful!
W: Terrible!
S: Disgusting!
W: See you next week?
S: Of course – unless I get lucky and break a leg!
(from the Don Knotts episode)

3. Types of humour forms/mechanisms

The issue of classifying humour has long history of failure, much longer than since the time when the famous Chinese classification of animals emerged, including those belonging to the emperor, embalmed ones, suckling pigs, innumerable ones, those drawn with a fine camel brush, those that have just broken the vase and others (cf. Borges 1964). Particularly, the 19th and 20th century researchers struggled with classifications, which were usually flawed with imperfections and inconsistencies (e.g. Sully 1902 or Esar 1952; cf. Chłopicki 1995: 48–56). Even commonsensical, linguistically oriented categories (pragmatic, semantic, morphological, syntactic, metalinguistic) tend to fail when applied to humour\(^\text{13}\), since they primarily focus on language and not on humour. In this section I classify the humorous extracts from The Muppet Show into verbal and situational (referential) humour (see Attardo 1994: 24–25, 95–96), and further subclassify the former into paronomasic puns, double entendres (cf. Freud 1905), metonymic puns (the genre I tend to see as typical of the Muppets), and visual puns (these border and overlap on practical jokes), while the latter include situational jokes mixed with verbal ones, allusive humour, and black humour, all of which tend to abound in the Muppets.

3.1. Verbal humour

Verbal humour was a category identified as early as the ancient times (e.g. by Cicero, cf. Morreall 1987) as opposed to situational (referential) ones. In this section I discuss purely phonetic wordplay and classical verbal ambiguity as well as the category which I called metonymic jokes. The section closes with a few examples of visual puns, which already border on the situational jokes.

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\(^{13}\) Cf. a linguistically oriented categorization by Debra Aarons (2012) and my review of the book – Chłopicki (2014).
Paronomasic puns, also known as cratylisms (see Sobkowiak 1991 and Attardo 1994: 152–154), are phonetic plays on words which use different meanings of words or expressions sounding similar, but not identical. 32 and 33 contain such plays (tenor, sinbad), both using the bad singing script\(^{14}\), and 32 utilizes the exaggeration mechanism too. 34, like 33, brings the bad pun (known as the groaner – Disney-dismal), which consists in corrupting the proper name\(^{15}\) and thus evoking a negatively loaded adjective (or expression):\(^{16}\)

32. S: That George Burns is a great singer!
W: Well so am I, Statler!
S: What?!
W: Sure! Hey, you wanna hear me sing?
S: Only if you sing tenor.
W: Tenor?
S: Ten or eleven miles away!
(from the George Burns episode)

33. S: Was that really Sinbad?
W: No, but it was certainly SUNG bad!
(from the Marty Feldman episode)

34. Fozzie: That’s what we call a Disney Joke!
S: No!! That’s what we call a dismal joke!!!
(from The Muppets at Walt Disney World)

In 35, the common noun steel is distorted into its homophone (steal), bringing along a shift of sentence structure and evoking a surprising comic script of a thief, pasted incongruously on the pig, which is emphasized by the mechanism of exaggeration – all resulting in quite a sophisticated joke. The dialogue in 35 is made additionally believable by the presence of the malfunctioning hearing aid known to be worn by Waldorf – “What?!”, he asks, apparently not having heard the question:\(^{16}\)

35. S: I like the steel Drums!
W: What??
S: THE PIGS’ STEEL DRUMS!!!
W: I believe it! They’ll take anything that isn’t bolted down!
(from the Bob Hope episode)

The category of double entendres is most typical of ambiguity-based wordplay as discussed in e.g. Freud (1905), Raskin (1985) or more recently in Delabastita (1993). Some categories of such puns have been proposed by researchers of computer-generated humour, esp. Ritchie (2003). The examples

\(^{14}\) The notion of script is used here in the sense of Raskin (1985), which is a chunk of semantic information, also known, esp. in cognitive linguistics, as a semantic domain.

\(^{15}\) See also section 4 for more examples of the use of proper names in humour.

\(^{16}\) See section 4 for the further discussion of such elements of content.
here fall into two categories: classical puns (36,37,38), where two meanings overlap on one word\textsuperscript{17}; or puns of a more syntactic nature where either idioms are twisted around (\textit{sue sb for the breach of contract} (39), \textit{call it a day} (40)), or one simple syntactic expression is used first (\textit{see sb}) and then it is completed by a phrase which changes the structure into an accusative with infinitive construction, thus specifying the meaning of \textit{see} as a verb of perception (\textit{see sb perform} 41). These verbal techniques usually serve the purpose of putting down the show or its actors (or even represent a form of black humour as in 38), just like those in section 2:

36. S: Well, how do you like the film?  
W: I've seen detergents leave a better film than this.  
(from \textit{The Muppet Movie})

37. S: (on Bean's reuniting with the other Muppets) This is a very moving moment.  
W: Yeah; I wish they'd move it to Pittsburgh!  
(from \textit{Muppet Vision 3D})

38. Fozzie: You can't stop the old Fozzie tonight! I'm really cooking! I'm one rare bear!  
W: Yeah. You're a square bear that ought to be served medium rare.  
(from the Lena Horne episode)

39: S: I'm gonna see my lawyer.  
W: Why?  
S: I want to find out if you can sue a show for a breach of taste.  
(from the Andy Williams episode)

40: W: Well, shall we call it a night?  
S: Might as well. Certainly wouldn't call it a show.  
(from the Cleo Laine episode)

41: Fozzie: A lot of these folks want to see me!  
S: Well, so do we.  
Fozzie: You want to see me perform?  
W: No, retire!  
(from the Ruth Buzzi episode)

Just like the double entendres tend to follow some predictable patterns (esp. literalization), similarly there is a group of humorous twists which use a scale along which they move in order to produce a humorous effect. I refer to this mechanism by the term \textbf{metonymic pun} because both the notion mentioned in the setup and that in the punchline belong to the same domain, e.g. entertainment in 42 and 43 and education in 44. Joke 44 pushes the show down the scale of educational activities, or perhaps re-

\textsuperscript{17} These meanings usually follow the pattern of literal/metaphorical opposition. It is referred to further as the process of literalization, a type of false analogy, also sometimes called semantization when it refers to proper nouns and is often a source of amusement (see also section 4 for further examples).
moves it entirely from it, by contrasting it with books, which are educational.\textsuperscript{18} 45 in turn ridicules the clichéd philosophical question about the life on another planet, as the scale of various kind of lives is evoked to make the joke (this gives it a tint of black humour, see also section 3.2):

42. W: Well, what did you think?
   S: Beats sitting around watching television.
   (from the Mahna Mahna episode)

43. W: Do you think we’ll be entertained tonight?
   S: Well I will... I brought a book!
   (from the Jane Stapleton episode)

44. S: So you think this show is educational?
   W: Yes, it will drive people to read books.
   (from the Connie Stevens episode)

45. S: I wonder if there really is life on other planets.
   W: What do you care? You don’t have a life on this planet.
   (from Muppets From Space)

The scales are different and more fictitious in the following examples, as in 46 the commentators move along the scale following the kind of logic which is known in humour studies as \textit{local logic} (cf. Ziv 1984) – this is the logic which works only for the case or joke in question.\textsuperscript{19} The local logic is invoked in 46, as \textit{naval experience} (the exchange follows the “In the Navy” song, sung by pigs) could theoretically refer to the situation when somebody is saving a rat from drowning, as water is involved, but then when one laughs at the aimlessness and absurdity of the enterprise, another strike comes as the situation is described further and then it turns out the rat was supposed to be saved by mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The strategy was known in ancient rhetoric as that of reduction to the absurd, which in this case seems to lead to the conclusion that the speaker had no naval experience to speak of, just like the pigs singing the navy song. In terms of a visual metaphor, often adopted as an analytical tool in cognitive linguistics, it could be understood as a two-stage close-up, when the speaker sees the situation more and more closely, perceiving more and more details of it. In 47, the process runs in the opposite direction as the notion of human generation is broadened in the punchline into a species (via the exaggeration mechanism), which is not necessarily human; thus the comic assumption is that the target of the show was to be a non-human audience and so it is of very low quality (see section 2.1 above):

\begin{enumerate}
\item The latter case would make it less metonymic, unless the scale is that of activities in general then, not just educational ones.
\item Schopenhauer (1957 [1819]) wrote about it too when he discussed types of incongruity between a concept and objects seen through it.
\end{enumerate}
46. W: Tell me Statler, do you have any naval experience?  
  S: Well I once saved a rat from drowning...  
  W: Really, how?  
  S: I gave him mouth-to-mouse resuscitation.  
  (from the Roger More episode)

47. W: Maybe we are the wrong generation for this kind of comedy?  
  S: No, the wrong species.  
  (from The Muppets at Walt Disney World)

The last category of puns, which borders on situational jokes, are **visual puns**, defined here as jokes, one of whose meanings is visual (cf. Hempelmann and Samson 2008: 615–617, who argue that in visual puns one visual element activates two scripts at the same time). It is highly effective as it is usually totally unexpected, as in 48, where a goat appears on stage as a result of Waldorf’s comic misunderstanding or rather mishearing of Statler’s request to give him his coat. In 49, the ambiguity of *rolling* becomes obvious as Gonzo’s motorcycle, present in the hecklers’ box and teetering on its edge, falls off the balcony. It is worth noting that the high position of the balcony over the theatre floor, where the two commentators are sitting, is prone for this kind of jokes – somebody or something is bound to fall off it during the show, or try to climb it:

48. S: Brrrr... It’s freezing in here. Waldorf, when you come back can you give me my coat?  
  [Waldorf brings Statler a goat]  
  S: Your hearing aid’s busted again.  
  (from the Paul Simon episode)

49. W: You know, this show is beginning to roll.  
  S: So is the motorbike.  
  [the motorcycle falls out of the box]  
  (from the Leslie Anna Warren episode)

### 3.2. Situational jokes

The second major category of jokes are situational jokes. It includes purely referential jokes (cf. Attardo 1994) whose funniness does not depend much on the language used, but more often than not they use some verbal techniques too. Furthermore, the references which they comprise are sometimes literary allusions and sometimes they use exaggeration and references to death and destruction, staying situational in the broad sense of the term (black humour).

And thus in 50, the comic effect is based on surprise, one of the basic effects, which in terms of logical mechanisms is sometimes referred to as

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20 See also section 4 for self-deprecating jokes.
juxtaposition and here perhaps – an almost situation (see the list of mechanisms in section 1). It is funny not to expect things, to be taken by surprise (cf. the so called Nerhardt effect, cf. Nerhardt 1970). The script which is funny here is known as that of lack of control, while being in control is its unfunny equivalent. The hecklers fire the gun at the actors, believing that they were shooting blank cartridges, and then comes the surprise. 51 is purely situational too, but the question which follows Statler’s comment seems to have a wrong addressee – it is not Statler that forces the two of them to keep coming to the show (see also example 90):

50. S: We didn’t miss them, we were shooting blanks.  
W: We were?  
S: Of course.  
[Statler fires the machine gun towards the ceiling and ceiling tiles drop]  
S: Well, some of them were blanks.  
(from the John Denver episode)

51. S: Finally we’ve seen them do a good show!  
W: Good! Can we PLEASE stop coming now?  
Both: Doooooooo-hohohoho!!!!  
(from the Liberace episode)

**Putting a show out if its misery** is the verbal wordplay in 52 that is based on the original expression *to put someone/animal out of their misery* by shooting them or stabbing them with the knife of mercy. It enhances the put-down effect, the joke at the expense of the quality of the show, via the literalization, or adapting the expression to the specific context. 53 in turn mixes up the situation of someone hearing or failing to hear specific words or the show itself, and understanding what the words mean – thus the meta-humorous effect is combined with targeting Waldorf as hard of hearing:

52. W: Let’s put this show out of its misery. [He and Statler then take out pistols and fire them at the stage.]  
(from *Muppet Sports*)

53. S: Well did you like that number?  
W: Speak up, my hearing aid’s busted.  
S: DID YOU LIKE THAT NUMBER?!  
W: I liked what I heard!  
S: What did you hear?  
W: “Did you like that number?”  
S: Ugh!  
(from the Marisa Berenson episode)

The next set of examples is different as 54–56 focus on the viewing area (whether it is the stage or the screen). 54 thrives on the semblance of generally applicable logic that helps the viewer to momentarily accept the argument that a screen saver is a type of TV program. The commentators mentally move along the scaled (range) of television programs, which are
accompanied by screens, and they include into the category that of a screen saver and treat it as indicating a program (the joke thus turns momentarily metonymic). 55 is based on the absurd assumption that the back wall could also be incorporated onto such a scale (the mechanism of exaggeration) and one could even enjoy watching it (or rather staring at it as should rather be said). 56 is also based on such a reevaluation of the upper end of the scale of prime seating, serving the need to indirectly criticize the show:

54. W: That was awful!
S: Well, it gets better if you wait.
W: Why’s that?
S: The screen-saver turns on.
W: That’s good. I love those fish.
(from *The American Woman Muppet Music Video*)

55. [Statler has his back turned to the camera]
S: Bravo! Oh, bravo! Wonderful! Just wonderful!
W: How would you know? You’re not even facing the stage.
[Statler turns around.]
S: Why did you have to tell me? I was having such a good time!
(from the Phyllis Diller episode)

56. W: These seats are awful.
S: Why? Can’t you see anything?
W: That’s the problem. I can see everything.
(from Muppet videos)

Another category of situational jokes which use the element of external cultural reality in order to make them more sophisticated is that of allusions to people or places. This uses the literalization mechanism which reanalyses the living (not dying) legend as the wounded one (57), makes Lewis Carroll physically turn in his grave (58) and makes Fozzie clean the Palace rather than play it (i.e. play at Broadway Theatre called the Palace) – this latter wordplay (59) uses the irregularity of the idiomatic expression, which normally should be: *play at the Palace, not play the Palace*, and selects the verb referring to unsophisticated activities that would fit the structure and be very simple too:

57. S: The legend of Robin Hood will never die.
W: Yeah, but it sure got wounded pretty bad tonight.
(from the Lynn Redgrave episode)

58. S: What’s that noise?
W: I think that’s Lewis Carroll turning over in his grave.
(from the Brooke Shields episode)

59. Fozzie: I’m good enough to play the Palace!
W: You’re not good enough to CLEAN the Palace!
(from the Rita Moreno episode)
Finally, the kind of situationality characteristic of the Muppets is often linked to **black humour**. The situations refer to partial destruction of the theatre (following some explosions during the show in 60), or to a sort of double entendre with situational content: to Fozzie potentially being a target to shoot at rather than a performer (61), to a supposedly bad YouTube video receiving hits in the literal sense of the word in order to be killed (62 – the hecklers self-referentially appear on many of the same videos that we watch; cf. Graham 2012: 248), or to the hecklers digging the grave of the show, rather than hitting the Digg button (the button apparently can teach you how to control electronic input). Apart from general punning, the mechanisms involved include simple juxtaposition (in 60), literalization (61, 62) and exaggeration (62, 63):

60. **S:** So, they blew up half the theater.
**W:** Well, at least they blew up the right half.
**Both:** THEIRS!
(from the Dudley More episode)

61. [Fozzie performing on roller-skates]
**W:** Hey, this is a great way for Fozzie to do his material!
**S:** Yeah, a moving target is harder to hit!
(from the Joel Grey episode)

62. **S:** How many hits did that thing receive?
**W:** Unfortunately, not enough to kill it.
(from Classical Chicken YouTube video)

63. **S:** Should we click on this “Digg” button?
**W:** Absolutely! Let’s keep digging until this thing is buried!
(from the Ballad of Beaker video)

4. **Types of humour content**

Types of humour content have been discussed among others by Raskin (1985: 113–114), who introduced the basic dichotomies which lie behind humour: sex/no sex, money/no money, high/low stature, life/death and **good/bad**. The latter was later hypothesized by Raskin to appear essentially in all jokes, thus became part of the definition of a joke, which necessarily involves some kind of value judgement at some of its levels. This is a disputable claim, esp. with regard to Charles Gruner’s (1999) famous claim that there are no jokes in which there is no superiority involved. Still, the genre of humour typical of the Muppets in general, and Statler and Waldorf in particular, does emphasize valuation. For instance, 64 brings the *heaven*/*bad* opposition present in the comment itself (*heaven* being the reference to the film *Just Like in Heaven*), just as in 65 and 66 where *dreams* and *nightmares*, and *money* and *nothing* are opposed, obviously related to the *good*/*bad* contrast, with *nightmares* and *nothing* referring to the low
quality of the show. 67 is less direct as it invokes the badness of the show and the bad singing in general via the technical difficulties of alligators not being able to devour more chickens, which displays some more black humour. Similarly in 68, the bad singing script is evoked via the metonymic contrast of singing and car-alarm. In its worth noticing the important role of highly colloquial American expressions in making the jokes sound vernacular, esp. get sb’s money’s worth, bunch of chickens, and save sb the cost of sth, which prepares the audience for the comic effect:

64. S: If this movie is just like heaven, I’m glad I’ve been a bad person.
(from Statler & Waldorf From the Balcony, episode 7)

65. S: I always dreamed we’d be back here.
W: Dreams? Those were NIGHTMARES!
(from the Jack Black episode)

66. S: We got our money’s worth tonight!
W: But we paid nothing.
S: That’s what we got!
Both: Doooo-hohohohoho!!!!
(from the Madeline Kahn episode)

67. W: Now why would they have a bunch of chickens singing Baby Face?
S: Because the alligators were sick.
W: That makes sense.
(from the Edgar Bergen episode)

68. S: I wish I could sing like that.
W: You do?
S: Yeah. It would save me the cost of a car alarm!
(from Muppet videos)

The specific kind of good/bad-related dichotomy, whose importance was emphasized in Raskin’s (1985) theory of semantic mechanisms of humor, is life/death. This is a scalar opposition as any reference to an illness or health problems resulting from old age also brings up this opposition. Such references are highly numerous in the show as the advanced age and various ailments of the hecklers are clearly in the foreground of their comments. They also tend to refer to their own deficiencies, which is known as self-deprecation (cf. Martin 2007: 47). The exaggerated references to age or death are very numerous, and either direct (69, 70, 71) or indirect – mentioning specific historical references, clearly too much removed into the past to be plausible (72, 73):

69. W: Why did we laugh at that terrible joke?
S: Well, either we’ve gone soft or we’re in the first stages of senility.
(from the Jim Nabors episode)

70. W: I’d like to get close to Connie Stevens, but I’m too close to something else.
S: What’s that?
W: 90.
(from the Connie Stevens episode)
71. W: That puppet looked so alive
S: Well that's more than I could say for you.
(from the Cleo Laine episode)

72. S: Now that really offended me! I was a student of Shakespeare!
W: You were a student WITH Shakespeare!
(from the Rudolf Nureyev episode)

73. S: How poignant, I remember being a teenager in love.
W: Yeah, but Queen Victoria wouldn't have you!
(from the Connie Stevens episode)

Self-deprecating references to various ailments come again and again too, and are mentioned either all at the same time (74) or individually (75, 76, 77, 78), esp. the need for the hearing aid (79, 80). The mechanisms involved to make the references humorous are false analogy (dissimilarity to Johnny Depp: 74) or false parallelism (75), literalization (76, 77, 78) or the “ignoring the obvious” mechanism, closer to practical jokes (79, 80):

74. S: That Johnny Depp is everywhere! What's he got that I haven't, besides youth, good looks, virility, fame, wealth...
   W: ...functioning kidney, gallbladder, hip...
   S: Alright! Alright! Alright!
   (from Statler & Waldorf From the Balcony, episode 2)

75. S: Every week, this show looks better to me.
   W: Every week, your eyesight gets worse!
   (from the Twiggy episode)

76. S: What's that song that Tony Bennett always sings?
   W: “I Left My Heart in San Francisco”.
   S: Big deal. I left my teeth in Minneapolis!
   (from the Tony Bennet episode)

77. S: That bit was breathless!
   W: Careful, you may not have many left.
   (from the Billy Crystal episode)

78. W: This has been an evening to remember.
   S: Why?
   W: I forgot.
   (from the Christopher Reeve episode)

79. S: Is your hearing aid fixed?
   W: No.
   S: Then how do you know what I'm saying?
   W: I don't!
   S: Oh.
   (from the Marisa Berenson episode)

80. S: Hey, Waldorf, I was wondering if maybe you... [continues to move his lips]
   W: Darn, I'd better get some new batteries for my hearing aid.
   S: Ha ha ha! I fool him every time! [Waldorf punches Statler on the jaw]
   (from the Juliet Prowse episode)
Among the mechanisms of particular significance in the hecklers rejoinders is that of exaggeration (mentioned a few times already), which very often works along an established or specially developed scale of little/much (thus is metonymic – see the discussion of metonymic puns in section 3.1 above). Specifically, this could be a scale of badness (81), scale of suitability (82) or scale of problems of the world (83):

81. W: They aren’t half bad.
S: Nope, they’re ALL bad!
(from *Weezer and the Muppets Go Fishin’* video)

82. W: You know, I don’t think this show is suitable for children!
Statler’s grandson: I don’t think this show is suitable for ANYBODY!
(from the Elke Sommer episode)

83. Irving Cohen (Martin Short): Gentlemen, you know the biggest problem with the world today?
S: They let this show back on the air!
(from the Martin Short episode)

The above-mentioned literalization mechanism, which could be considered a type of false analogy in Attardo’s terms, plays an outstanding role in the hecklers’ comments being their basic double entendre pattern, already discussed in section 3.1. Further examples are quoted below: they are of two types, with either regular words or proper names being interpreted literally or specifically for comic effect: and so catchy is taken to refer to a contagious disease (84), saying is limited to saying something offensive (85), bravo is identified to be a name of an audience member, and singing “Silent Night” is interpreted as staying silent (8721):

84. W: You know, the opening is catchy.
S: So is smallpox.
(from the Alice Cooper episode)

85. S: There’s a lot to be said for this program.
W: Too bad you can’t say it on a family show!
(from *Muppets Tonight*)

86. W: Bravo, bravo!
S: Why are you yelling bravo? Did you like it that much?
W: Nope; friend of mine, Joe Bravo, he’s sitting in the front row. Bravo!
(from *The Muppet Show* unidentified episode)

87. S: [to the rat carollers] You should sing “Silent Night”!
W: Not the song. Just stay silent all night.
(from *A Muppets Christmas: Letters to Santa*)

21 Actually, this could perhaps be taken alternatively to be the opposite process – that of metaphorization.
There is still another very common content thread, partially discussed before – that of alluding to the escape from the theatre as something desirable. In 88, the bunny is smarter than the hecklers because he has escaped, the show is life-threatening (in 89: this line is more like a tongue-in-cheek advertisement for the starting show, though, than a put-down), the hecklers demand for the doors to be unlocked, suggesting they wanted to leave earlier but could not (90), while 91 offers a different variant of the theme – the computer where Statler and Waldorf are watching the show has suddenly been blocked by the bad quality of the show and now it is personified as looking for the key, thus the hecklers must run away:

88. W: What’s all the commotion about?  
S: Waldorf, the bunny ran away!  
W: Well, you know what that makes him –  
Both: Smarter than us!  
(from Muppet Vision 3D)

89. S: Run for your life!  
W: This show is murder!  
(from the Liza Minnelli episode)

90. S: Alright frog, we watched the show.  
W: Yeah, unlock the doors!  
(from the Petula Clark episode)

91. W: That was so bad, it locked up my computer!  
S: Quick! Let’s get out of here before it finds the key! [both laughed] No, I mean it! [leaves]  
W: Ok. [leaves]  
(from the Ringing of the Bells Muppet Music Video)

Conclusions

To briefly conclude, several threads of the above argument need to be brought together. The Muppets are doubtless an American popular culture phenomenon which has successfully stood the test of time. Launched in the 1970s, the show was run and re-run, and then came back under several new guises, including numerous feature films, YouTube videos and special Muppet events. The focus of the present contribution has been on the nature of the interactions of the two famous hecklers, Statler and Waldorf, with the characters appearing on the show (both the puppets and numerous celebrities) as well as with each other. Their commentaries are mostly of critical nature, targeting either the show as such, specific characters, depicted events or themselves. The humour displayed in what they say is

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22 See section 2.1 where dismissing the quality of the show by the two hecklers was mentioned.
highly varied, including verbal and situational jokes, sometimes verging on slapstick. What stands out in terms of forms are various kinds of puns, especially what I referred to as metonymic puns (easy to understand even for non-sophisticated audience), while among the mechanisms underlying humour, exaggeration and literalization (a form of false analogy) dominate, with juxtaposition, ignoring the obvious and almost situations being present too, all of which tend to stay well within the limits of popular humour. The humour content focuses mainly on good/bad and life/death oppositions, which are well related to targeted, sarcastic and even black humour content, with little/much opposition corresponding to the exaggeration mechanism. The comments and the show itself display some degree of sophistication as well, mainly in the form of cultural allusions as well as the interaction with well-known artists, whose refinement clashes with the vernacularity of the puppets, evoking humour as well as offering the audience the meta-humorous, parodic experience and all contributing to strengthening the central American metaphor of Life is a Show.

The show perhaps predated its time, the sense of which is highly aptly grasped in the short ironic exchange of the hecklers, quoted below, which comes from one of the many online videos, where Statler and Waldorf wonder how well they fit the era of the Internet:

S: The internet is a completely different culture, isn’t it?
W: You said it. Everything here is immediately followed by sarcastic comments and nasty responses.
S: Yup, we’re finally where we belong.
(from Meh, Internet Trolling with Statler and Waldorf)

A meme example illustrating how much at home the two hecklers feel in Poland, where the show was fairly popular in the 1980s, appeared online just before I was finishing the present article. The meme appeared in response to a new government plan to build a hugely expensive central airport totally from scratch in the middle of nowhere, and has one of the hecklers ask a question:

What do we need more: a central airport or a central railway station?

and the other answers:

Most certainly a central lunatic asylum.

(http://joemonster.org/mg/189946,lastup,Panowie_moga_miec_racje)23

The meme constitutes a good closure of my discussion of the nature of the targeted, ironic, exaggerated humour of the Muppets.

See the drawing on the next page.

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– CO JEST NAM BARDZIEJ POTRZEBNE:

CENTRALNY PORT LOTNICZY CZY

CENTRALNY DWORZEC KOLEJOWY?

– ZDECYDOWANIE CENTRALNY

SZPITAL PSYCHIATRYCZNY

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11. Cleo Laine
12. Connie Stevens
13. Don Knotts
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15. Edgar Bergen
16. Elke Sommer
17. Florence Henderson
18. George Burns
19. Jack Black
20. Jane Stapleton
21. Jim Nabors
22. Joel Grey
23. John Denver
24. Julia Andrews
25. Juliet Prowse
26. Kenny Rogers
27. Lena Horne
28. Leslie Anne Warren
29. Liberace
30. Liza Minelli
31. Lynn Redgrave
32. Madeline Kahn
33. Marisa Berenson
34. Martin Short
35. Marty Feldman
36. Paul Simon
37. Paul Williams
38. Petula Clark
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Statler and Waldorf as Two All-American Hecklers in the Show of Life

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Résumé

Statler et Waldorf en tant que deux moqueurs au théâtre de la vie

L'article analyse les interactions de deux moqueurs du Muppet Show, Statler et Waldorf, avec les participants du spectacle dans sa forme originale et dans de nombreuses variantes ultérieures. On se concentre sur la diversité de l'humour issu de ces interactions, qui sont analyzées du point de vue de leurs buts, formes ou mécanismes et teneur. En particulier, les moqueurs se focalisent sur la qualité du spectacle, sur certains personnages et sur eux-mêmes, tandis que leur humour est tant verbal que situationnel, avec un rôle primordial des jeux de mots métonymiques et des mécanismes d'exagération, littéralisation et juxtaposition. Quant à la teneur, l'humour noir se distingue par les références d'autocritique à l'âge avancé et à la mort imminente des moqueurs mêmes. On traite le rôle significatif des deux moqueurs dans le contexte de la tradition du vaudeville américain et du one man show comique, ainsi qu'à la lumière des recherches sur la métaphore centrale américaine « La vie est un spectacle », en indiquant les raisons du succès, pendant de longues années, de ce spectacle populaire qui est devenu une icône culturelle.

Abstract

Statler and Waldorf as Two All-American Hecklers in the Show of Life

The paper deals with the interactions of two hecklers from The Muppet Show, Statler and Waldorf, with the participants of the show in its original form and many later variants. The focus is on the variety of humour resulting from these interactions, which are analysed in terms of their target, forms or mechanisms, and content. Specifically, the hecklers target the quality of the show, specific characters and themselves, while their humour is both verbal and situational, with a special role being played by metonymic puns, and the mechanisms of exaggeration, literalization and juxtaposition. In terms of content,
black humour stands out with the self-deprecating references to the old age and imminent death of the hecklers themselves. The significant role of the hecklers is discussed against the background of the American vaudeville and stand-up tradition as well as the research of the central American metaphor of *Life is a Show*, exploring the reasons of the long lasting success of the popular show, which have turned into a cultural icon.

**Streszczenie**

Statler i Waldorf jako dwaj prześmiewcy w teatrze życia

Artykuł dotyczy interakcji dwóch znanych komentatorów, gwiazdorów loży programu *Muppet Show*, Statlera i Waldorfa, w wersji oryginalnej i wielu kolejnych wersjach ich zabawnych rozmówek, i omawia bardzo różnorodne przykłady humoru, jakie te interakcje przynoszą, w odniesieniu do wyśmiewanych obiektów, form i mechanizmów humoru oraz samych treści rozmówek. W szczególności wyśmiewają oni jakość kolejnych przedstawień, poszczególne postaci oraz samych siebie, ich humor jest zarówno sytuacyjny jak i verbalny, a szczególną rolę odgrywają metonimiczne gry słów, jak również mechanizmy przeświadczenia, udosłownienia czy zestawienia. W kategoriach treści wyróżnia się czarny humor wraz z samokrytycznymi odniesieniami obu postaci do swojego starczego wieku oraz nadchodzącej śmierci. Rola dwóch prześmiewców omawiana jest w świetle tradycji amerykańskiego wodewilu i standupu, jak też badań na centralną amerykańską metaforę teatru życia, identyfikując przyczyny długotrwałej popularności tego programu, który stał się niejako ikoną amerykańskiej kultury.