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Short Assignment 2

PHIL2054, Emotion in the Arts

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Prompt 2

Dirk Eitzen writes on the topic of humor as an emotion in *Emotional Basis of Film Comedy*. Eitzen in particular discusses humor in film. While he tosses many ideas around, Eitzen attempts to reduce his thoughts to three theories of humor, with moderate success. These three theories are the incongruity-resolution theory, tension-relief theory, and superiority theory. These three theories are not mutually exclusive. Some apply in one case, but not another. The theories can also overlap in a given situation. While these theories attempt to explain the pleasure of humor, Eitzen has another theory regarding the importance of humor. Eitzen proposes that humor is the natural reaction to “socially induced stress.” Eitzen uses several examples to illustrate his ideas about different types of humor, such as The Rock, The Shawshank Redemption, and When Harry Met Sally. These examples help justify his three theories on the pleasure of humor, as well as the socially induced stress theory.

The first theory of humor is the incongruity-resolution theory. In this theory, humor comes from the result of ironic situations. Essentially, when we expect to see one thing on the screen, but see another, we are entertained. Eitzen correlates this theory especially to a simple solution to a complicated problem. Eitzen uses the example of Red being paroled at the end of The Shawshank Redemption as an example of the incongruity-resolution theory. We as the audience did not expect Red to be paroled, so when he unexpected was paroled, we take pleasure in the humor of the situation. The incongruity-resolution theory also explains why we may find it funny when someone suddenly slips and falls. We normally do not expect people to randomly fall, so when it does, we find it entertaining.

The next theory of humor is the tension-relief theory. This theory asserts that we take pleasure in humor because it releases us from emotional tension. This means that we appreciate humor because a joke amid a very tense scene in a movie gives us a break from whatever is happening on screen. The example Eitzen gives in this case is in The Rock, where the main characters banter about dead mercenaries while defusing bombs. Without this release from tension, the scene would be much less enjoyable. In a real-life example, we might try to tell a joke to break the tension when two of our friends are having a disagreement.

The last theory is superiority theory. This theory accounts for the fact that most humor involves a breach in social norms. This theory has multiple parts to it. We can use humor to distance ourselves from those who have broken social norms. This humor is derisive. When we laugh at a joke with someone, we form a social bond with them. We are now in a type of exclusive group with this other person. We feel somehow superior, even if there is no one else present, because of this social bond. The same applies with inside jokes. It is natural to want to be on the “in” side of an inside joke, or to be happy to be included on the inside joke while others are left out. There is no real reason for us to desire to be on the “in” side of an inside joke. The only thing to be desired is to be included in the social bonds people are forming. Humor serves as the device that allows us to form this bond.

Eitzen’s major point is that humor serves to relieve socially induced stress. Eitzen is correct in this assertion. This is easily seen in one of Eitzen’s example cases, When Harry Met Sally. In a scene described by Eitzen, one of the characters has on a fake orgasm in a crowded diner. For the characters in the film, humor serves to release socially induced stress. Other patrons of the diner laugh to distance themselves from the woman breaking social norms. For the audience, we laugh to break the tension and second-hand embarrassment at the scene. If everyone were to just sit watching the scene of the fake orgasm quietly, it would be awkward for us and cause socially induced stress. Even if we were watching the scene alone, we may laugh to keep ourselves from feeling awkward. Laughing with others watching the scene allows us to relieve the socially induced stress from being in an awkward situation together.