

John Smith's film, shot in 16mm, *Shepherd's Delight: An Ananalysis of Humour* (1980-84), with its deliberate, puerile misspelling in the title, highlighting the word 'anal' in analysis, comically upholds the joke to mock academic scrutiny. Smith challenges the truism that you cannot analyse a joke without destroying its humour by revealing how the process of analysis can itself be comical. He takes us through a range of comic forms in the course of the film, beginning with an absurd academic lecture, delivered by an intellectual, that attempts to authoritatively dissect the comedic basis of the proverb 'Red Sky at Night, Shepherd's Delight'. This analytic framework, which informs us how comedy itself is a means of demonstrating intellectual superiority, is then disrupted in a number of ways. The slow and labored dissection of the proverb is followed by a rapid turnover of quick-fire visual gags and puns, knowingly cringe-worthy. A sequence featuring a solitary and lonely man systematically drinking a bottle of whisky over the course of an evening and waking up with a hangover, prompts a return to the authoritative voice of the academic, who begins to reflect on how hangovers can be funny.

The 'anal' in analysis becomes a comic decoy and a specific point of reference in the one joke that is delivered in the film. We are asked to imagine that the audience at a party encounters the joke. A young man's confident delivery of the joke to camera is interrupted by a series of analytical text captions commenting on both details within the joke and the way he tells it. The joke involves an absurd situation in which two horses talking in a pub both recount how they each were losing a race until they felt a sudden pain in the arse that prompts them to win. Smith uses the anal reference to drive both the success of the horses in the race and instill anxiety in the audience as to where the joke might be heading. Ultimately the anxiety attached to the anal reference is abandoned as we are told how the talking horses' story is interrupted by a greyhound who tells them that he has also had the same experience. The punch-line of the joke,

completely switches direction and, rather than addressing the anal incident, instead registers the horses' shock that a dog has acquired language and could talk. Smith's film uses comedy to spoof the relationship between the body, language and theory, playfully mocking Freudian analysis.

The film also plays with the conventions of Structural filmmaking, using fixed framing, repetition and abrupt, interruptive editing techniques to montage comic juxtapositions of image and sound and foreground the construction of the film. This playfulness is particularly evident in Smith's treatment of language as an important analytic tool with the power to interpret the world, a power he simultaneously acknowledges, exploits and mocks. Drastic editing techniques are used to create language-based puns and jokes by reframing the text of consumer product labels.

In one sequence addressing alcohol consumption and its consequences, the label of a bottle of whisky is subjected to selective framing, at one point squeezing out the word 'ache' from the *Teacher's* brand name. The film's sequential format with its staccato, wisecracking rhythm has a destabilising momentum, as Smith peppers his film with visual and linguistic jokes. The didacticism of the academic's dry, relentless analysis of comedy is teasingly mirrored by Smith's focus on the label of the intoxicating bottle of spirit, which of course is a bottle of *Teacher's*.

Smith revels in colliding different systems together to imply certain parallels or compatibility. The analysis of comedy is simultaneously an analysis of filmmaking, each feeding off the other, and both reflecting on how meaning is constructed within a culture of consumption. He uses jokes to spoof and play with the language and authority of the academy. While his film explores comedy, the hammed-up depiction of comedy's analysis by academia might also be seen as a host for a playful reflection on contemporary debates about Structural filmmaking, semiology and theories of consumption. It was during the heyday

of Cultural Studies, that *Shepherd's Delight: An Ananalysis of Humour* was made. Many academics, particularly those associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, were acknowledging, through their analysis informed by continental critical philosophy, the political and cultural significance of popular culture. In the period shortly before Smith's film was made, a number of influential, and theoretically astute studies of consumer culture were published – in 1978 Judith Williamson's *Decoding Advertising* and, a year later, Dick Hebdige's *Subcultures: The Meaning of Style*. Material culture had become a legitimate object of academic study. Against this backdrop it is not unreasonable to see Smith's film as a work sharing similar concerns, though the relationship between consumerism and its theorisation was realised in a more comic, tongue-in-cheek manner. In one section of the film the label of *Comfort* fabric conditioner provides the most extended and absurd reflection on consumer culture. The product's introduction in the 1960s is said to have started our 'lust for comfort'. This is theorised in the film as symptomatic of consumerism's expansion in that decade based on desire and the impossibility of its satisfaction. With just enough grounding in reality for this to be convincing, it is proposed that the language of consumerism is a language of seduction: both are driven by desire and neither can be satisfied. The serious and intellectual demeanor of the lecturer gives plausibility to this incredible tale. Her analysis of an early *Comfort* label and the woman's two-fingered gesture, and its interpretation as a sexual innuendo, combined with the apparent suggestiveness of the pronunciation of the first syllable of the product's name 'Com', provide a parody of a form of Freudian-inflected and overtly sexualised semiology. The mannerism of intellectual credibility secures authority and believability, which ultimately take us to an absurd place.

Alcoholism is a sub-theme of the film, culminating in a sequence in which the filmmaker turns to camera and talks reflectively about the un-funny consequences of his struggle with drink

and how this has severely impeded the production of the film. Throughout his serious disclosure, he holds a mug that we assume contains tea or coffee, until the slapstick moment when he attempts to drink from it, only to spill its content down himself.

This accident cues the film's ending when, having returned to the academic's sober analysis of comedy, and just at the moment when the lecturer reaches for Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, a shepherd knocks her out with his crook. In this final act of violence against the body, it is the shepherd, much to his obvious delight, who is victorious. Despite all her academic authority, erudition and eloquence, the simple act of slapstick violence is enough to overpower and silence the intellectual's analysis of humour, and it is the shepherd who has the last laugh.