

The Le Gorafi satirical news website: the legacy of 'l'humour Canal+'

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In this presentation today I will talk about The Gorafi, a site of humorous information created on the model of the Onion in May 2012, during the French presidential campaign.

At first a discussion thread on Twitter, Gorafi progressively became a blog, then a Web site. From 2014 until June 2015, it came in the form of a humorous clip in *Le Grand Journal*, a French television program broadcast on Canal+. Most of the articles on the Web site, largely leveraged on the socio-digital networks, comment on the current facts, real or imagined, in an offbeat way, mimicking and twisting press and Web codes. Embodied on television by Pablo Mira, Gorafi presents an offbeat chronicle, which parodies the continuous news channels.

As such, Gorafi offers a remarkable example of Canal+ humour, using a wide range of media, but also developing a political satire, as *Groland* or *Les Guignols* also broadcast on Canal+. However, I would like to demonstrate it is also a good example to illustrate what one calls "l'esprit Canal" and its specific humour codes. I'll start with a short analysis of Gorafi's humour on its website and in its television chronicle. Then I will try to define "Canal+ humour style" and compare it to The Gorafi's one. I'll finish with an observation of Canal+ humour's legacy on French television.

1. Le Gorafi's website humour.

"Le Gorafi" is a play on words, a reference to the French national newspaper *Le Figaro*, known for its conservative editorial line. A quick analysis of its web site can reveal the specific Gorafi's humorous style.

It first occurs as a pastiche, an imitation of serious information websites especially newspapers' ones like *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* and *Liberation*... The website's layout looks classical: navy blue color highlights a white logo, column titles are quite the same as a newspaper's, the web site puts forward its latest articles... The right frames refer to applications, shopping articles or special editions of the Gorafi. Visitors can comment and react to articles on Facebook or

Twitter. A logo in the shape of a white speech bubble on a blue background specifies for every article the number of comments. The community of the Internet users / readers of the Gorafi is put forward systematically. This "documentary architecture" (Bonaccorsi, on 2013) thus imitates communication forms chosen by informational websites now completely turned to the socio-digital network communities. We can also find videos that illustrate news, a false subscription page, a fake horoscope, etc. It corresponds to what François Jost (Jost, on 1995, p. 166) names an "enunciative feintise", a pretence:

« The *feintise* does not affect the events or their narration. It is efficient only at representation level: a "trompe-l'oeil" we do not say that it is fiction, but that it feigns reality. » (our translation)

Gorafi's website plays on the gap between a form that pastiches most serious information websites and satirical contents. This *feintise* allows the authors to better criticize reality:

« Le paradoxe structural de l'humour (et la subtilité de son appréciation) repose donc sur le fait que celui-ci est nécessairement une construction discursive qui prétend n'en être pas une, afin de mieux critiquer le réel (son objet) ainsi mis en jeu et donc mieux le maîtriser (le dominer) de cette manière. » (MF, 2009, 313)

"The structural paradox of humour (and the subtlety of appreciating it) therefore relies on the fact that it is necessarily a discursive construction that pretends it is not, in order to criticize the reality it involves (its object), thus mastering (dominating it) better."

Gorafi's imitation of journalistic codes also appears in the writing style of the articles: the authors use an argumentative style, with false interviews. Gorafi's humour always plays with polysemy. In addition, it is often a way to criticize some sort of "parisiannisme". For instance, while most articles in newspapers refer to the place where the reported event took place, Gorafi separates Parisian articles from those written by journalists "beyond" the "ring road"!

The satirical purpose of this website is confirmed by the "about" heading. I quote and translate: "All the articles written here are false (until the contrary is proved) and drafted in a funny purpose. The use of names of personalities or companies is here for purely satiric purpose ". Same remark about the F.A.Q. section: some questions are obviously ironic like this one: "I have an idea of interesting

partnership for Gorafi and we could conquer the world" or this other "Question: "will we all die? " Answer: "Yep"

The Gorafi's humour arises frequently from the link between different thematic universes. When the headlines of Gorafi.fr title, for example on September 22nd, 2015: "Rugby: All Blacks becomes All Greys after a washing machine problem", a few days after the opening of the rugby World Cup, it illustrates what Patrick Charaudeau (on 2006, pp. 33-34) qualifies as "unusual incoherence". It is a play with resemblance between word forms to produce an amusing meaning.

Those links are sometimes near paradoxical incoherence, which consists in the inversion of universal logics. It could also be qualified as absurd (Ex : "The children organized baby-sitters fights at their homes" (Gorafi.fr, published on September 9th, 2015) or "Fatal accident : hit by a Vélib (a bike), a heavy truck ends up in the Seine ", (in August 7th, 2015). Here the logic of experience is turned around, reversed.

The Gorafi's success lies in short and funny titles and headlines that authors can then easily propagate on social networks. These humorous and short lines became so famous that Gorafi's authors were invited in "Le Grand Journal" of Canal + in May 2014, a free and access prime time program then hosted by Antoine de Caunes.

2. The humorous clip of Gorafi on Canal +.

First invited in *Le Grand Journal* on the 21st of January 2014, Pablo Mira, one of the Gorafi's authors was credited in *Le Grand Journal* since 25th of April 2014. He became a regular columnist since the 9th of May 2014. From September 2014 until June 2015, Gorafi's editorials occurred each Friday in *Le Grand Journal*. After that, Gorafi became a short chronicle in a program called "Ce soir Show" broadcasted during 2015 Christmas season. Its last television appearance was "L'année du Gorafi" broadcasted on January 2016.

I will only focus on the humorous clip broadcast in *Le Grand Journal*. Producers of this program then hosted by Antoine De Caunes, were looking for new talents to catch younger audience's attention. Indeed, Canal +'s audience for several years had been getting older, the average was between 45 and 55 years old according to Médias le Magazine.

Semi-close-ups of the commentator, launches of the images accompanied with a title banner in the colors of Gorafi's logo, plus a red banner at the bottom

showing false news in brief, contributes to identifying this clip as a pastiche of the informative genre. Gorafi's television clip uses the same humorous style as its web site : it relies on a gap between a serious form and satirical news and ironic tone. The Gorafi sequence was very close to the news broadcast proposed by *Les Nuls* on Canal+ a few years before.

A première vue, par exemple, le JT de Nuls ne se démarque pas franchement des journaux télévisés sérieux : son fond noir, la vignette ponctuant l'information, l'habillement de son couple de présentateur, leur bureau, tous ces éléments, y compris l'énorme mention écrite « L'Édition », pourraient aussi bien être utilisés par un vrai journal. Ce qui le sépare de ce modèle, c'est la nature des informations verbales, fondés (*sic*) sur des jeux de mots, des contrepèteries (le « prix de la guerre » du Golfe présenté comme un menu du restaurant Chez Saddam) ou des commentaires décalés sur les images (Jost, 2008, p. 9).

At first glance, for example, the « JT des Nuls » is not much different from serious news broadcasts : a black background, pictures in pictures accompanying the news, the two presenters' clothes, their desk, all these elements, including the “L'Édition” in big letters, could perfectly be used in a real news broadcast. What differentiates it from this model is the nature of the words used, based on plays on words, spoonerisms (the price of the Gulf war presented as the menu of “Chez Saddam” restaurant) or offbeat comments on images

Except the laughing audience in the studio and the incongruity of the news contents, the enunciative form imitates the most stereotypical lines of television news, in the purest spirit of Canal+ Channel. At this point, I need to define now what one calls “Canal+ spirit and humour”...

3. Le Gorafi, legacy of “Canal+ spirit”?

Yet, Le Gorafi really seems to have inherited Canal+'s humour. Indeed, if we try to understand it, we can examine its creators' definitions. Alain de Greef, for instance, Canal+'s program director from 1984 till 2000, was widely influenced by American television channels experiences, especially HBO or Showtime. He considered free programs as publicity for subscription: access prime time programs on Canal+ were considered as “shop windows” to attract audience and future subscribers for the pay channel which built its economy on sports and movies. In an interview he gave to Virginie Spies for a French scientific

newspaper, he explained how important it was for him that humorous programs gave “food for thought”: “(...) to each truth, there must be a contradiction”. He confessed the disappointment he felt against news and cultural programs broadcast on main channels. Thus he conceived the idea of satirical programs which function was to be a humorous “echo” or mirror to serious news : that was the project he had when creating “Les Nuls’ Journal” with Alain Chabat, Bruno Carette, Chantal Lauby and Dominique Farrugia, a chronicle that occurred in *Nulle Part Ailleurs*, a program then hosted by Philippe Gildas. For him, parodies and playing with real television images were the foundation of critical distance with real news. And when he created *Les Guignols de l’info*, opposing *Le Bêbete show* broadcast on TF1, he proposed to the audience a satirical criticism of French politics, modeled on *Le Canard Enchaîné*, a French satirical newspaper. In his creator’s mind, Canal+’s programs were clearly designed to target a specific audience called by advertising agents “les décallés”: mostly Parisian people, characterized by counter culture. *Groland*, *Les Nuls*, *Les Guignols de l’info* allowed Canal+ to establish its reputation. Programs broadcast on this channel have to be different from others (that’s the meaning of « Nulle Part Ailleurs » - literally nowhere else-, access prime time program before « Le Grand Journal »). And despite the changing title of this program, the formula broadcast in 2000 was the same : a serious part with prestigious guests, and its mirror, named “Le petit Journal”, hosted by Yann Barthes.

4. What remains of Canal +’s Humour on French television ?

The decreasing audience of Canal+ programs during the last years can be explained by different reasons. The liberty arising from this specific audience at the beginning of the channel had to change when success occurred. What Isabelle Veyrat Masson, a television history professor, qualified, speaking of *Nulle Part Ailleurs*, as a rejection of “Dad’s TV and serious spirit”, was condemned by the audience success. It led producers and hosts to be more “polite”, especially in a time when each little act broadcast on TV is now commented on socio digital networks.

As Canal+’s audience was getting older, and its teams more professional, the derision joking and jolly fellows of the beginning couldn’t endure. Canal+, facing economic difficulties and more competition from digital TV channels, could not maintain “l’esprit Canal”. Ordering someone to be funny in such a context is what we call in French “une injonction paradoxale” (a paradoxical injunction).

We find different vestiges of Canal+ humor on today French television programs. The most obvious is Quotidien (Daily), Yann Barthès' Program broadcasted on TMC (a TF1 group's Channel), based on "Le Petit Journal" of Canal +. It is an information program, with a humorous tone. It is also broadcast on the first channel as a short clip after the official news bulletin. But it should be noted that counter culture and news criticism seem to have lost their ferocity. Especially to delight the large audience of these channels. To illustrate this point, we can observe Touche pas à mon poste (Don't touch my television), a C8 (Canal+ channel) program broadcast in access prime time, and hosted by Cyril Hanouna. It is presented as a media program, with humorous style, parodies. But because of its family audience, the satire is no more political and dividing... It is popular.

In facts, The Canal+ spirit was conceived to be dividing according to its creators. And now this targeting is much easier on thematic channels (as "Comédie") or on the Internet, where Le Gorafi's news now circulate.

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