

The Laughing Policeman

Do funny policemen make the public feel more or less secure about the real thing? Diana Bretherick investigates.

Cultural criminologists are not known for their interest in humour. Other areas and aspects of cultural representations of crime and criminals have, certainly in recent years, begun to attract more academic attention but comedy has been largely neglected, probably due to its popularity which tends to relegate it to low cultural status. This article will begin to address this neglect by discussing comic portrayals of the police service with particular reference to three contemporary British television comedy series, *The Thin Blue Line*, *The Detectives* and *Operation Good Guys*.

There are many examples of comic representations of the police in popular culture dating back to the earliest years of cinema, with the stereotyped foolish patrolmen such as Mack Sennett's *Keystone Kops* (1912). This image has survived in both film and television portrayals particularly in situation comedies such as *Coppers End* (1971), *The Growing Pains of PC Penrose* (1975), *Rosie* (1977-81), *The Fuzz* (1977), *Spooner's Patch* (1979-82), *The Front Line* (1984), *Mornin' Sarge* (1989) and *Duck Patrol* (1998). (Lewisohn 1998.)

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Although comic representations have been neglected to date in cultural criminological study, police drama has been analysed. In particular Robert Reiner (1994 and 2000) and later Frank Leishman and Paul Mason (2003), have explored this genre. Reiner comments upon the "core myth of law and order" where crime is portrayed as a serious threat to not only property and person but also to social order (Reiner 2000). However this is contained by the fictional forces of law and order who are represented as being essential, valuable and indeed pivotal institutions in our society. Their criminal adversaries are worthy foes defeated by the dedication and prowess of the law enforcers (ibid pp148-9). It has also been argued that the image of the British police officer has become established as a cultural icon which is now "a powerful condensing symbol for the nation" (Loader 1997) and is "central to the production and reproduction of order and security" (ibid p. 3).

To what extent can these assertions be maintained about comic representations of the

police? How is this core myth of law and order effected when the representation is comedic? Can the 'laughing policeman' retain his identity as a cultural icon and what effect might he have on our feelings of order and security in relation to fear of crime? Could such representations reduce public confidence in this and other criminal justice agencies? Discussion of issues such as realism, representation and narrative in relation to examples of the genre will help provide answers to these questions.

The extent of realism portrayed can vary considerably. In *The Thin Blue Line* reality rarely intrudes. It has a fairly conventional 'sitcom' format featuring elements of farce interlaced with gentle humour. It is clear that we are not watching real characters but clichéd versions of reality such as the pompous, precise, pedantic but intelligent and verbally dextrous, uniformed Inspector Fowler (Rowan Atkinson) and the less intelligent, inarticulate plain clothes detective, Inspector Grim (David Haig), who sees himself as a man of action.

The Detectives contains realistic elements with a sometimes farcical flavour. The crimes featured are believable although this is often countered by

the casting of well known faces such as Jimmy Tarbuck as a surprisingly convincing arms dealer in the episode 'Teed Off'. Despite the quality of his performance we know that he is essentially a comedian and this reassures us. The three main police characters are, as in *The Thin Blue Line*, somewhat clichéd. The exasperated and reasonably eloquent senior officer Superintendent Cottam (George Sewell) oversees the plodder, Louis (Jasper Carrott), and the self appointed inactive 'man of action', Briggs (Robert Powell), both of whom are largely incompetent.

Operation Good Guys is the most realistic of the three given its spoof documentary format. The characters bear a reasonably close relationship to their counterparts in police drama but are placed in farcical situations. The senior officer DI Beach (David Gillespie) constantly reminds us that he has hand picked a 'crack' team but events demonstrate that the opposite is the case.

Indeed this is the common theme, that of the inept, stupid, bungling copper, which, as we have

seen, dates back to early cinema. Despite the prominence of this theme we are not encouraged to despise the characters, all of whom are likeable. We may be permitted to poke fun at them but we are not invited to challenge them as symbols of authority as a truly negative portrayal would. There are no 'bad coppers' because that would provide a challenge to authority and would, as a result, kill any element of comedy. A corrupt police officer is no laughing matter. It is interesting to note that all three comedies focus on incompetent police officers. However all the characters also have in common a desire to catch the 'bad guys'. They are usually successful in this enterprise despite their ineptitude.

An exception to this is the more realistic *Operation Good Guys* where the criminal mastermind is often seen to be laughing at them. Even here there is no direct threat of violence. We are constantly assured by DI Beach, that their adversary 'Smiler' McCarthy is a master criminal but we see little evidence of this. Even drug dealers are portrayed as unthreatening and placid. The unrealistic portrayal of criminals coupled with their apprehension provides us with security and does not therefore encourage an enhanced fear of crime. We are reassured as we are in the police drama where, although the violence portrayed may be more realistic, the criminal is almost always caught. In the comic representations, even where the criminal is not caught, our confidence in the police is not undermined because the portrayals are not sufficiently realistic. It is difficult to take seriously an arms dealer when he is played by a well known comedian. Our potential fear is therefore diffused by casting, characterisation or lack of threat and our attitudes to the police are therefore unthreatened by comic representation.

The image of the British police officer as a cultural icon and "a powerful condensing symbol for the nation" is perhaps somewhat dented by such portrayals but can still be "central to the production and reproduction of order and security." Our comfort and reassurance with regard to crime and society's fear of crime is untouched by comedy as criminals are either apprehended as they are in drama or so unrealistic or unthreatening as to be laughable rather than frightening. Our confidence in the police service is untarnished by the viewing of comic representations. Although inept and bungling, comedy police officers are usually dedicated and focused on catching criminals. We may laugh at them but we are also encouraged to admire them, therefore leaving our confidence in the real thing untouched. The core myth of law and order as referred to by Reiner, whereby the criminals are defeated by the prowess and dedication of the police officer is, to some extent, maintained in comedy. The prowess is somewhat questionable but the dedication is evident. Perhaps then one might even argue that comic representations of the police service are more realistic than dramatic ones. After all, in

reality the police may not always catch the criminal but it isn't often for the want of trying.

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References

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Television series:

The Thin Blue Line — written by Ben Elton, two series transmitted from 1995-97.

The Detectives - written by Steve Knight and Mike Whitehill, five series and a special transmitted from 1993 to 1997.

Operation Good Guys - written by Dominic Anciano, Ray Burdis and Hugo Blick, three series transmitted from 1998-2000.