

# ENTERTAINMENT IN THE MEDIA. PARODY IN “HIGH ANXIETY” BY MEL BROOKS

MARIA PIWIŃSKA

Instytut Dziennikarstwa i Komunikacji Społecznej  
Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski Jana Pawła II

## ABSTRACT

### **Entertainment in the media: parody in “High Anxiety” by Mel Brooks**

The study shows parody as a way of fulfilling entertainment function in mass media. The way the parody operates in film is presented on the basis of “High Anxiety” by Mel Brooks. By means of film analysis the author indicates many levels on which parody can operate, such as: the choice of actors, creation of characters, special effects and other elements of film language.

**Keywords:** parody, comedy, entertainment, use of mass communication, Mel Brooks, “High Anxiety”, Alfred Hitchcock

Entertainment is one of the most favoured functions of the media nowadays. Mass media, and film in particular, were quick to exploit its potential to fulfil the function. The Lumières themselves seemed to discover the comic potential of the medium as early as in “L’arroseur arrosé”. Comedy films as an example of pure entertainment were present from the very beginning of the development of the cinema. Further development from silent films to talkies gave directors more devices to convey the comic meaning. One of the ways to entertain through

✉ Adres do korespondencji: Instytut Dziennikarstwa i Komunikacji Społecznej Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego Jana Pawła II, Aleje Raclawickie 14, 20-950 Lublin; [maria.narecka@gmail.com](mailto:maria.narecka@gmail.com)

the medium of film is to employ parody. Furthermore, parody appears to be pure entertainment as it does not require an original storyline. It can use *pastiche* of other films as a point of departure. In this paper the devices to introduce parody in film will be examined. In order to achieve this goal we will carry out an analysis of "High Anxiety" by Mel Brooks. The film was released in 1977, just before the eighties, when the parody played a dominant role in the comedy cinema (McCabe 2005, p. 45). Thus, it can serve as an illustrative example of preliminaries of thinking of parody as entertainment in comedy movies.

In order to show how parody operates in the medium of film a few terms need to be clarified first. Parody in this paper is understood as a kind of *pastiche* which has a comic dimension (Drabble, Stringer 2003, p. 564). Thus, the term "parody" will be more specific when compared with *pastiche*. Nevertheless, its definition will be based on the definition of *pastiche*, which dates back to the second half of 18<sup>th</sup> century and is found in "Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers", a general encyclopaedia edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. According to Louis de Jaucourt, the author of the entry, *pastiche* is a painting created "*dans la manière*" or "*dans le goût*", which means "in the manner" or "in the taste" of another artist. The gist of the definition is that *pastiche* imitates the style, "the hand" of the artist but cannot imitate his imagination and spirit. Thus, what is essential is the imitation of the form i.e. the style and the technique of a particular artist. While *pastiche* imitates the style for various reasons (e.g. to perfect one's style or to play with someone else's style), parody is considered to have comic dimension. Film's specificity allows for parody to operate on diversity of levels.

### *The choice of actors and their characterization*

The concept of the character in film is quite different from the one we find in literature. Due to medium specificity this is not only a factitious construct that the viewer deals with but also a real person who acts the role of a particular character. Understandably, the director's choice of an actor can depend (for now neglecting the acting skills) on his or her appearance and physique, facial movements, and many others. The US film industry, in which the "stars" are the most desired actors for films, seems to prefer actors whose looks match the role very well (Abrams et al. 2010, p. 343). This kind of performance, called personification, is set beside impersonation, more often attributed to the theatre. The latter is characterized by the actor's attempt to play his or her role in the most psychologically realistic manner using his or her imagination. To be more specific, while impersonation is about acting the role, personification is about identity which matches the role played by the actor. In Richard Dyer's terms, in personification the actor is a "perfect fit" for his or her role (qtd in: Abrams et al. 2010, p. 343). Since in Hitchcock's films many a time the cast consist of stars, it is essential to take notice

of constructing the characters in terms of the choice of the actors and their characterization while analysing Mel Brook's "High Anxiety".

Hitchcock claimed that the actors' performance is a part of the whole design of the film and that they should conform to the director's vision of a character. When accused of having said that the actors are like cattle, he replied "What I probably said was that actors should be *treated* like cattle" (Adair 2002, p. 121) meaning that it is the director and the camera which determine the final outcome of the shooting. Although Hitchcock did not leave much space for actors to interpret their roles, he was very particular in choosing a "perfect fit" for his characters. He cooperated with several stars in more than one of his films. Grace Kelly, Ingrid Bergman, or Cary Grant are the actors who continually reappeared in his movies, reinforcing their "star" status. Moreover, Hitchcock's characters, played by handsome well-clad men and sophisticated blondes contribute to a distinguished aesthetics of his films. The close attention that the director has always paid to the actors' characterization affords an opportunity to refer to for many directors, among whom is Mel Brooks.

To begin with, not unlike Hitchcock, Mel Brooks chooses quite famous actors, at least in terms of comedy films. He rather chooses the accomplished comedians, such as Madeline Kahn, Harvey Herschel Korman, Howard Morris who are "perfect fits" for their comic roles. Many a time he cooperates with his actors more than once, making them the stars of his own series of movies, among others: "The Blazing Saddles" (1974) with Kahn and Korman, "Young Frankenstein" (1974) with Cloris Leachman, "History of the World: Part 1" (1981) with Leachman, Ron Carey and Howard Morris. Brooks himself takes also part in all of those films as an actor, and plays the main protagonist's role in "High Anxiety".

The physical appearance of the chosen actors, together with their performance and characterization make up the characters reminiscent of these that the viewer comes across in variety of Hitchcock's films. Beginning with the protagonist played by Mel Brooks, Dr. Richard H. Thorndyke is a character which is composed from at least three Hitchcock's films. In the opening scene in which a plane is about to touch down, the viewer is shown the faces of the people inside the plane. The dramatic facial expression of the protagonist is already saying that the protagonist suffers from acrophobia, and his facial movements are an exaggerated version of James Stewart playing John "Scottie" Ferguson in "Vertigo" (1958). Furthermore, Brooks is wearing a suit and a hat, the latter very similar to the one worn by Stewart in "Vertigo". However, there is a series of events that Richard encounters which begins with him coincidentally being stopped by a "police officer", who turns out to be an exhibitionist. This event together with some other "adventures", such as getting unintentionally involved in a murder, are the proof that another character that is imitated by Brooks is the protagonist of "North by Northwest" (1959). Another proof of this is the name of the protagonist Richard H. Thorndyke, which is a parody of Roger O. Thornhill. Moreover, H. in Richard's name is, as he mentions in the conversation with Victoria Brisbane, for "Harpo".

This name, as we discover later on in the dialogue, refers to Adolph "Harpo" Marx, a clown style influenced American comedian, which can also emphasise the comical character of the protagonist. The name gives the viewer the "textual" signal that the reference is being made to a particular film. Another hint of this kind is "North by Northwest corner", which is the spot where the protagonist sets a meeting. Finally, the film's setting in a psychiatric institute and the theory of psychoanalysis which is applied to the protagonist, are the obvious allusions to the psychological mystery thriller "Spellbound" (1945).

Another character which brings to mind "Spellbound" is professor Lilloman, whose name is comically mispronounced as "Little Old Man" in accordance with his appearance. Played by comic Howard Morris he shares characteristic features with Dr. Alexander "Alex" Brulov played by Michael Chekhov in "Spellbound". Short, with beard and moustache, he is Thorndyke's teacher, as Alex was a teacher for Constance in Hitchcock's film. Nevertheless, Lilloman is another character who combines features of more than one of Hitchcock's characters. His performance is reminiscent of a scientist Gustav Lindt played by Ludwig Donath in a movie entitled "Torn Curtain" (1966). Morris imitates the German accent characteristic of Ludwig Donath, which also fits very well the characterization of a psychoanalyst, because it reminds of Austrian origins of psychoanalysis.

The characterization of the figures discussed so far, although "compiled" from more than one Hitchcock's characters, remain unchanged throughout the film. However, there are some characters which make reference to specific films by the way they are dressed in a particular scene. Victoria Brisbane, played by Madeline Kahn, in some scenes wears a grey suit, similar to the one Kim Novak wore in "Vertigo". Nurse Diesel in turn, played by Cloris Leachman, and clad in black dress, resembles Mrs. Danvers in "Rebecca" (1940). The overall image is also achieved by her hairstyle and performance, which conjure up an uptight, distanced woman capable of insanity. Interestingly, Cloris Leachman, famous for her beauty, played a role in an episode of "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" (the episode "Premonition"). In "High Anxiety" conversely, she personifies a not very handsome nurse, who seems to be more disturbed than the patients she takes care of.

### *Hitchcockian character types*

Hitchcock's films can be defined by having some character types, which the viewer can find in the director's works. To mention only the most prevalent, we can distinguish: "the Hitchcock blonde", a man with a disturbed relationship (usually with his mother), and, if that is the case, a restrictive mother (Dick 2000, p. 239). The last two, as closely connected to each other will be discussed together.

As she is present in each and every film of the author, "the Hitchcock blonde" type almost defines his films (Johnson 1984, p. 60). The Hitchcock blonde is a sophisticated young woman, elegant and well-dressed, with her hair always

done regardless of the situation. She is a real lady, with impeccable manners. However, cold on the surface, she can be very affectionate inside. Sophisticated blonde represents sexual subtlety. As Hitchcock himself admitted “The more left to the imagination, the more the excitement” (qtd in: Johnson 1984, p. 60). In this way he claimed, suspense is like a woman, its presence is built on mystery. In the interview by Truffaut, the French director interpreted Hitchcock’s preference of subtle blondes which can surprise with the passionate personality as a contrast between the “inner fire and the cool surface” (qtd in: Johnson 1984, p. 60). Thus, Hitchcock’s blonde is essentially characterized by the mystery which revolves around her. She can also, as Johnson suggests, evoke some fear in men, as in “Notorious” (1946) (Johnson 1984, p. 65). The fear is many a time provoked by the male character’s troubled relationship with his mother, which we will examine in detail later on. Therefore, Hitchcock’s blonde has the power to “enchant” men, but what is also noticeable, she usually plays the role of a victim. As the director used to say: “Blondes make the best victims. They’re like virgin snow that shows up the bloody footprints” (qtd in: Dougherty 2008, p. 131). Their delicate beauty makes the women seem vulnerable and contrasts with the terror of crimes in Hitchcock’s movies.

Apart from the choice of the actress, which was mentioned before, Mel Brooks makes use of all the characteristics of the Hitchcock blonde to create the character of Victoria Brisbane. As the movie is a comedy, he often uses those characteristics with exaggeration, to caricature the Hitchcockian character. As a consequence, Victoria has an enormous amount of blond hair and is elegantly clad. In accordance with Hitchcock’s principle, her clothes are moderate, and leave a lot to the imagination. Brooks went even further, complementing her wardrobe with a pair of gloves and a hat. However, the viewer, having identified the type, soon realises Brooks’s humorous approach. Seemingly subtle, Victoria “gracefully” spits and lights the cigarette with a gun-shaped lighter. As the action unrolls, the viewer observes that Victoria’s clothing is used to parody Hitchcock’s characters’ sophisticated elegance. A case in point is Victoria’s costume which matches exactly the pattern on her car.

Apart from the appearance which obviously makes reference to Hitchcock’s films, the creation of Victoria’s personality is based on exaggeration of Hitchcock’s character. The woman’s captivating sexuality hidden under cold surface is being clearly referenced in “High Anxiety”. In the first scene with Victoria, in which she kisses Thorndyke so as not to let the cleaning lady recognise her, the protagonists literal reaction is “[...] You sure blow hot and cold”. This statement clearly shows the opposition between the cool surface and the inner fire emphasised so often in Hitchcock’s films. This inner fire is shown in several other scenes. For example, in the call box scene when Victoria gets excited at the sound of the groans, or in the “High Anxiety” song scene when, similarly, she shows delighted facial expression at the whip-sound of microphone cable hitting the floor. Furthermore, women’s power over the man is clearly

shown in the first scene with Victoria. To assure security to her visit she gives over a dozen of orders, which make her look domineering: "get away from the door, get away from here, be quiet [...], don't move, go inside, go to your room, the drapes, close the drapes [...], close the other one, get down, lower [...] come here, get up, sit down, not there, here [...], there". In this manner she makes Thorn-dyke crawl, which symbolically shows her power. At the same time, not unlike Hitchcock's blondes, she is a victim in that her father is a prisoner in the institute for the mentally ill. However, this is not the reason for which she is treated like a victim by the characters. Her father being mistaken for the person who behaves like a dog, Victoria is referred to as "The Cocker's Daughter" and pitied by Thorn-dyke, Lilloman, and others. To sum up, the elements of Victoria's characterization including appearance, behaviour, and feelings that she provokes, match these which are used in Hitchcock's films. Nevertheless, her exaggerated characteriza-tion mocks Hitchcock's characters at the same time.

One of the recurring themes in Hitchcock's films is a son-mother relationship. The characters of sons and mothers are highly diversified throughout Hitchcock's filmography, still they share some features. Hitchcock's mothers play usually very important roles in their sons' lives. They might be good companions as in "North by Northwest", or possessive, as in "Strangers on the Train" (1951), "The Birds" (1963), they can be also the most important to their sons, as in "Psycho" (1960). According to Krzysztof Loska, the sons of overprotective mothers, as the "products" of momism, are narcissistic egocentrics. Immature and irresponsible, they are capable of manipulating other people and to treat the life as a role to play (Loska 2002, p. 229). The son's dependence on his mother makes him also unable to take action in his life.

The motif of son-mother relationship is also present in "High Anxiety". Although the mother appears only in a short flashback at the end of the film, the viewer finds out that she, together with the father, is the reason for Thorndyke's phobia. The character of the mother is emphasised in the sequence of psychoana-lysis that Thorndyke undergoes. Put on the hypnosis Thorndyke screams: "Falling falling ma ... mama falling!" referring to mother's influence on him. Thus, even if Brooks uses the motif very light-heartedly, it still bears the mark of characteri-zation *à la* Hitchcock. As Thornhill in "North by Northwest", Thorndyke makes a perfect actor, as in the scene of passing through the gate at the airport. Due to the fear of heights he is also incapable of taking action unless he fights it at the end of a story. Nevertheless, even when he saves Victoria's father it is still her who takes action and proposes to Thorndyke. The film ends with fulfilment of two male fantasies, referred to by Johnson while discussing "The 39 Steps" (1935): being propositioned by a beautiful woman and the honeymoon night" (Johnson 1984, p. 62).

### *Plot devices*

The story in "High Anxiety" is structured chronologically (with only one flashback at the end of the film) and is mainly driven by the main protagonist's actions. As the characterization of Thorndyke is mostly based on the character of Roger O. Thornhill, the viewer can anticipate a picaresque story similar to one in "North by Northwest". Indeed, the protagonist of "High Anxiety" is taking a part in a series of coincidental events which get him involved in all kinds of trouble. However, apart from a resemblance that the narrative bears to the one of "North by Northwest" the plot consists of the hodgepodge of themes and events which originate in Hitchcock's films. Furthermore, Brooks parodies Hitchcockian plot devices and mechanisms of suspense building.

We will begin with the resemblance that "High Anxiety's" plot bears to "North by Northwest". The reference is introduced at the beginning of the film when Thorndyke is halted by the "police" just like Thornhill in Hitchcock's film. Further references which push the action forward are an unjust accusation of a murder and the escape provoked by this event. As a result the protagonist, together with Victoria (like Thornhill and Eve in Hitchcock's film) have to hide from the police, which, in turn, explains the performance at the airport. In the airport scene, Thorndyke and Victoria, who are going through customs, find a way out of the situation by behaving "loud and annoying" as the protagonist of "North by Northwest" does in the scene at the auction. This scene in "High Anxiety" brings to the mind one of the themes in Hitchcock's oeuvre, described, among others, by Loska (Loska 2002, p. 279). The theme in question is the motif of life understood as a performance, in which man has to pretend, because life is like a role to play. This motif was made particularly striking in the auction scene mentioned beforehand, or in the theatre scene in "Torn Curtain". Brooks's film contains a couple of themes explored thoroughly in Hitchcock's films. Therefore, we find (following Loska's enumeration of motives) a motif of a search for a lost man (Victoria's father) as in "Psycho", a motif of a sinister mystery from the past (memory of the parents) as in "Under Capricorn" (1949), an unjustly accused man as in "The Lodger" or "Spellbound" (and "North by Northwest" already mentioned), *voyeurism* (Victoria does not want to be seen, Thorndyke is hiding) as in "Notorious" or "Psycho", and many references to others. The use of many themes which are recurrent in Hitchcock's films adds up to what we can call *pastiche* of Hitchcockian style, which, in "High Anxiety", is undoubtedly comic in tone.

On the level of events, the references to Hitchcock's movies are even clearer. The narrative, although based on the cause-and-effect relationship, is a hodgepodge of events taken from the films such as (in the order that they appear in "High Anxiety"): "North by Northwest", "Spellbound", "The Ring" (1927), "Family Plot" (1976), "Psycho" (which will be discussed in a part devoted to montage), "The 39 Steps" (1935), "The Birds" (1963), "The Wrong Man" (1956), "Dial

M for Murder" (1954), and "Vertigo". In order to see the techniques whereby the sequences taken from Hitchcock's films are introduced, we will look in detail at one of them, namely, "Family Plot" sequence.

The event which originates from "Family Plot" is a car sabotage in which Wentworth dies. Dick Van Patten, who plays the role of Wentworth is driving his car after being released from the institute, when suddenly he turns on the radio which is playing way too loud. Immediately it turns out that the radio is broken and he must pull over to do something about it. It is then that Wentworth realises that he is trapped in the car. Eventually, he dies from cerebral haemorrhage. Although in "Family Plot" nobody dies, the event is quite similar in that the characters in the car (Blanche and George) were "supposed" to be killed. George is driving a car which turns out to be a trap, with broken accelerator and brakes. What differs the scenes is that Wentworth is driving at night, which is rather reminiscent of a drunk drive of Thornhill in "North by Northwest". Thus, the source of the event and its imagery are taken from two Hitchcock's films. Nevertheless, while in Hitchcock's film the scenes have an element of suspense and drama, in "High Anxiety" the car sabotage scene is rather exaggerated. Wentworth's death is motivated by the music played too loud. Because of the absurdity of the sabotage the light tone of a comedy is maintained. Just like the car sabotage scene, the other occurrences of hodgepodge also, incessantly refer to other works and constitute the integral part of a linear narrative.

So far we have discussed the narrative structure which is inspired by a picaresque story, with a medley of themes and events. However, Brooks goes even further in an imitation of Hitchcockian narrative, that is he introduces the elements of creating suspense, Hitchcock's *tour de force*. Although the film is a comedy, which means that suspense is not what is principally anticipated, it uses the mechanisms of suspense building. Dramatic music in the moments of expectation of something dreadful to come has the particularly important role in the process of the building of suspense. The example is the moment Thorndyke is told about his predecessor's murder, which will be referred to in the part focused on the sound in "High Anxiety". To show the mechanism without focusing on the sound yet, the scene of examining the patient at the institute will be analysed now.

As Seymour Chatman suggests, there is a considerable difference between surprise and suspense, on the basis of which we can define suspense. Thus, surprise is rather an unexpected shock while suspense is built on the hints that the receiver of the work of art gets. He or she anticipates what is going to happen and what is going to happen is certain rather than surprising. What is uncertain is the way that what is going to happen will be achieved. Therefore, at the moment of climax "we know what is going to happen, but we cannot communicate this information to the characters" (Chatman 1978, p. 59). The director of "High Anxiety" mocks the mechanism of creating suspense most clearly in the scene when Thorndyke examines a patient, whom he considers to have recovered from the alleged psychosis. From the beginning of the film the viewer gets the hints

that the institute does not function in a proper way and that the patient are kept in the hospital because of the profit they bring. When asked to bring one of the patients, Dr. Montague gets very nervous and breaks the pencil he is holding, which proves that he does not want Thorndyke to intervene in the matter. The patient comes in and behaves in a normal way, he shows no symptoms of a mental illness. However, to maintain the illusion of the patient's being ill, Montague hits him violently with a paper clip which causes the sharp pain in his neck (which was the symptom of his nervous breakdown when he first came to the institute). When the patient begins to scream, Montague (right behind Thorndyke's back) starts to scare him with his false vampire teeth. Thorndyke does not notice Montague's acts and sends the patient away ordering to give him a big sedative. Thus, the viewer has larger knowledge of what is going on in the institute. As expected from the beginning, Thorndyke wants to discover the truth about the institute and the viewer anticipates that he will (the means is still unknown). When there happens to be occasion to do so, one is tempted to communicate to the protagonist that he should turn around and see that he is being fooled. Oversimplification of the mechanism of suspense makes it another source of humour. As Hitchcock was a master of suspense, we can also interpret the title "High Anxiety" as referring to the mechanism. As Chatman mentions, anxiety is necessary part of suspense (Chatman 1978, p. 59), anxiety which makes the reader anticipate what he knows is going to happen.

Apart from the title, there is another literal reference to one of Hitchcock's plot devices. When Thorndyke checks in at the hotel, instead of a room on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor he gets one on the 17<sup>th</sup>. When he asks the concierge why they changed a room the reply is: "We had 201 all set for you, sir. But a Mr. «MacGuffin» called and told us to change it to the 17<sup>th</sup> floor." Thus a term MacGuffin, popularized by Hitchcock, is "personified" and becomes Mr. MacGuffin in accordance with Hitchcock's view that MacGuffin, as a device to move the story forward, can be any one thing or any person. Its unique aim is to propel the events along. According to an anecdote attributed to Hitchcock and cited in William Hare, this is not important whether a MacGuffin is a physical object or not, it merely "is" and makes the action going:

"What have you here?" one man asks.  
 "Oh, that's a MacGuffin," his companion replies.  
 "What's a MacGuffin?"  
 "It's a device for trapping the lions in the Scottish Highlands."  
 "But there aren't any lions in the Scottish Highlands."  
 "Well, then, I guess that's no MacGuffin" (Hare 2007, p. 13).

In Hitchcock's films MacGuffin takes the form of a variety of things (such as the necklace in "Vertigo"), persons (such as late Mrs. De Winter in "Rebecca"), or ideas (such as the reason for attacks in "The Birds"). Brooks calls an unknown person MacGuffin to underline that this is not important who the person is. More to the point, as the "name" is outspoken by the concierge, it draws attention to the

fact that Brooks refers to the plot device and reveals the self-conscious status of the film.

Finally, what emphasises the self-consciousness of "High Anxiety" is the mocking of the presence of a typical Hitchcock's "signature". In all Hitchcock's films there is a cameo shot which shows the director himself on a film set. The shots do not attract attention, as Brigitte Peucker suggests they are not a part of a narrative but rather show the double status of the image ("Hitchcock as a character and Hitchcock as Hitchcock") (Peucker 1995, p. 132). As Brooks plays the main role in his film, his own cameo shot would be useless. However, he uses an actor who resembles Hitchcock a lot, and makes him an extra, whose role is to make a phone call in a call box. As he stands in the way of a character of a murderer in the film, he is pushed aside and treated as if he was not noticed. In this way, his role is treated as unimportant. Nonetheless, the viewer notices him and makes associations with Hitchcock's "signature".

### *Special effects, camera movements, sound and editing*

The elements of "language" proper to the medium of film, together with the characters, and the narrative of a film contribute to Hitchcock's particular style. Alfred Hitchcock, known for his taste in unusual techniques of shooting, introduced some innovative ways of presentation in his films. Brooks uses one of Hitchcock's technique to show this component of the style of the British director. Namely, Brooks mocks the glass ceiling/floor technique. This very distinctive technique was used by Hitchcock in his early film "The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog" (1927). In the movie a newly come nameless "Lodger" moves in the Bunting's house. Suspicious of a new resident, the Bunting family gathers downstairs just below the room of the Lodger. Startled by a sudden move of the chandelier, Mrs. Bunting, her daughter Daisy and the policeman who courts the latter start staring at the ceiling. The ceiling fades into transparency and we can see the Lodger pacing up and down his room. As Adair mentions, this is surely not what the family "really" sees, this is rather a representation of what they imagine. Since "The Lodger" is a silent movie, the scene could also replace the sounds of the footsteps. In order to shoot the scene Hitchcock had a platform of glass built and positioned the camera underneath (Adair 2002, p. 31). As a very innovative technique at the time, it attracted a lot of attention.

As the technique can only be associated with Hitchcock, its imitation is representative of the director's special effects. Mel Brooks mocks Hitchcock's technique placing the camera under the glass table at which Nurse Diesel together with Dr. Montague are having coffee. Just as in "The Lodger", the technique is used at the moment which announces some sinister action to come (in "High Anxiety" Diesel and Montague are plotting against Thorndyke) and the viewer overlooks the "suspected". However, the scene in "High Anxiety" is, unlikely this in "The

Lodger”, deprived of mystery concerning the intention of the people involved (the viewer is certain that Diesel and Montague mean to harm Thorndyke). The effect of the shooting through the glass is trivialised by showing an ordinary activity. The actors are taking and putting down the tableware which disturbs the view. As a result, the viewer cannot see the face expressions clearly, so that Diesel and Montague’s plotting is “shrouded in mystery.”<sup>1</sup>

Another technique which introduces comic elements is the deep field photography “through the window”. It is used twice in Brooks’s film, and the camera is moving inside in one of the scenes and outside the room in the other. In the first the institute’s staff is having the dinner. The camera is positioned outside the dining room, and it tracks forward towards the room. Surprisingly though, when it reaches the window, the camera breaks it and attracts attention of all of the people in the room. Similarly, at the end of the film, in the scene of Thorndyke and Victoria’s wedding night, the camera is retreating through the window. This camera movement is also reminiscent of the opening shot in “Psycho”, in which camera zooms in on the hotel room (in “High Anxiety” the shot is a reverse, the camera zooms out the hotel room). This time not only does the camera break the window but also we can hear the voices of the “director” and the “cameraman” quarrelling with each other:

Director: Nice shot. Pull the camera back slowly.

Cameraman: We’re going too fast, we’re going to hit the wall. Now, what do we do?

Director: Never mind. Keep pulling back. Maybe nobody will notice.

These instances show clearly the comic use of the camera movements in the film. But what they also draw attention to is the process of making the film. The viewer, as well as the actors, becomes aware of the presence of the camera, and the people behind it. The conversation above underlines the artificiality of the scene. It draws attention to the medium to the point that apart from the means of shooting (the camera) it involves also not even one, but two people from the filming crew. This deep level of self-consciousness emphasises the play with the viewer, which is carried out during the course of the film.

Taking into consideration the self-conscious elements of “High Anxiety”, such as camera movements, we can assume that Brooks’s film is actually a metafilm in some respects. Another proof in favour of this statement is the use of sound in the film. As many others, Abrams distinguishes between diegetic and non-diegetic sound (in the same way as Genette distinguishes extra-diegetic and intra-

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<sup>1</sup> Glass ceiling technique is not the only element of cinematography which can be attributed to a particular moviemaker. Another example in the film is the camera moving through the window. The technique is usually associated with Orson Welles, and more specifically “Citizen Kane” (1941). An illustration of this camera movement (mentioned in Abrams) is a scene in which the protagonist’s parents are having a conversation with Mr. Thatcher in the foreground, and their son is playing in the snow in the background. The tracking shot begins outside, and the camera is moving to the inside through the window and the doorway. The cameraman (Gregg Toland) then shoots the whole picture including the foreground and the background at the same time, employing the deep focus.

diegetic narration). The sound which is called diegetic belongs to the world presented in the film, whereas non-diegetic sound originates from the world outside the narrative of the film (Abrams et al. 2010, p. 183–184). In "High Anxiety", although Brooks parodies the traditional sound effects, music, and voice-over, the viewer is prone to think that he or she hears non-diegetic sounds. In the scenes mentioned in the analysis of the camera movements, the viewer can see the process of breaking the windows, and hear the dialogue in the wedding night scene. More importantly, he or she hears the loud noise of glass cracking, which reinforces the effect of the crash. Thus the concept of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds are mixed up. The viewer is made to think that he hears the non-diegetic sound of breaking the window and the voices of filmmakers, which stresses the "meta" element of the film. Another instance when the sound "interferes" with the action is when Brophy tells Thorndyke that the late head of the Institute, whose post Thorndyke is going to take over, was a victim of a "foul play". In this moment which arouses interest in the viewer, the dramatic instrumental music appears. However, to the viewer's surprise, it turns out that the characters can hear the music as well. After a while Brophy and Thorndyke who travel by car to the institute observe a coach with "Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra" which plays inside passing by. The scene is a parody of the sinister music which usually accompanies the moments of suspense in film. At the same time, as the actors are "self-aware" (they know that they play the role in the film), it draws attention to the artificiality of the medium and more specifically to the musical component. Again, if the elements of metafilm are present it is but for the comic objective of the film.

Parody of Hitchcock's style would never be full in a comic film with so many references as "High Anxiety" without an imitation of the most famous sequence in Hitchcock's films, if not in the film history, namely the shower scene from "Psycho" (1960). The scene is a perfect example of formalist montage, which, undoubtedly, Hitchcock owes to Soviet Montage. The sequence of the murder, lasting only 45 seconds, is composed of 78 cuts edited together (Hare 2007, p. 255). The shooting of the scene is believed to have lasted 7 days. The shower scene shows the murder of a young woman Marion Crane (played by Janet Leigh) by whom the viewer believes to be an old lady (and is in fact her son). Due to the very short shot duration and rapidity of editing the scene is very dynamic. The variety of angles edited together evoke the "frenetic rhythm of the stabbings" (Abrams et al. 2010, p. 182). The montage creates thus an atmosphere of uneasiness, if not madness. However, Hitchcock rather plays with the viewer's imagination than shows directly the cruelty of the murder. The scene is bloodless (in the sense that the Marion is not shown bleeding), and there is only one shot that shows the knife touching the skin of the actress (also bloodless). The terrifying effect of a scene is achieved by montage of the shots which are in majority extreme close-ups. The shots make the reader "feel" the murder, without showing directly the stabs and cut flesh.

Mel Brooks in “High Anxiety” offers the viewer a parody of this sinister scene. He uses the same type of editing and, although not as many as Hitchcock, a lot of short duration shots. The scene beyond any doubt is less complex in its cinematography. However, it renders very well the sequence of the shots, being a shot-by-shot imitation at times. Brooks, like Hitchcock, uses extreme close-ups and close-ups to show the murder. He also uses the shots of a shower from exactly the same angles as Hitchcock does. The scene ends in an extreme close-up of the eye of Thorndyke as the parallel scene in “Psycho” ends with a dead eye of Marion. As an actor, Brooks exactly re-enacts the sequence, with the obvious difference that the shower scene is not a scene of a murder. In the parody this is an evidently over-irritated bellhop who “stabs” the protagonist with a paper. Thorndyke falls in the shower and the viewer can see some tinted water (black with the newspaper’s ink) going to the drain. Just after the shot of an eye ending the sequence, the protagonist proclaims “The kid gets no tip”. Another prominent difference that makes Brooks’s shower scene comic is the actor himself, who replaces Hitchcock’s attractive actress. The beginning of the shower scene from “Psycho” is, although suspenseful, agreeable because we observe a woman taking sensuous shower. In “High Anxiety” all we get is a middle-aged man lathering himself eagerly to maintain his personal hygiene. Apart from these comic contributions to the scene, Brooks is clearly imitating a particular scene from “Psycho” and the technique of montage applied to it by Hitchcock.

### *Conclusions*

We have seen that parody operates on different levels of the film. We have analysed the choice of actors and their characterization in “High Anxiety” which refer to those of Hitchcock. Further on, the narrative and relevant plot devices have been analysed. The cinematography analysed embraces special effects, camera movements, sound, and editing. All these, together with the characters, narrative and plot devices constitute a specific style of the author, the way the director “writes” the film. On the basis of the elements analysed we have seen how many means of referring to Hitchcock’s style Brooks utilizes in his comedy. The plentitude of these references and allusions prove the complexity of the work and show its self-conscious status as well. We are also able to see that parody provokes an intertextual play within the medium. In “High Anxiety” Brooks entertains the spectator with allusions made to Hitchcock, as well as with the manner in which they are presented. Full of humour, the comedy mocks and plays with Hitchcock’s style. Parody of Hitchcock’s works provides the base for Brooks’s film.

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## STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł przedstawia parodię jako jeden ze sposobów wypełniania funkcji rozrywkowej mediów. Na podstawie „Lęku wysokości” Mela Brooksa pokazuje funkcjonowanie parodii w filmie. Analiza wskazuje parodię na wielu poziomach filmu. Wśród nich są: dobór aktorów, kreacja bohaterów, efekty specjalne i inne elementy języka filmu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** parodia, komedia, rozrywka, funkcje mediów, Mel Brooks, „Lęk wysokości”, Alfred Hitchcock