"I'm Indiana Jones!":

- Intertextuality and humor in 'How I Met Your Mother'

Bachelor's thesis

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Intertekstuaalisuus eli tekstienvälisyys on osa kirjallisuuden tutkimusta. Termi tarkoittaa sitä, että yksikään teksti ei ole rakentunut tyhjiössä, vaan siihen ovat vaikuttaneet muut aiemmin kirjoitetut tekstit. Tekstit siis viittaavat toisiinsa jatkuvasti, vaikka aina näitä viittauksia ei lukijat huomaakaan. Intertekstuaalisilla viittauksilla on kuitenkin yleensä jokin tarkoitus uudessa ympäristössään. Ne voivat esimerkiksi korostaa jonkin asian merkitystä, kehottaa lukijoita huomaamaan eroja tai yhtäläisyyksiä kahden tekstin välillä tai ne voivat saattaa jonkin asian naurunalaiseksi.

Tämän kandidaatintutkielman tarkoituksena oli tarkastella laadullisten tutkimusmenetelmien keinoin erityisesti populaarikulttuuriviittauksia amerikkalaisessa komediasarjassa How I Met Your Mother (suom. Ensisilmäyksellä). Löydettyjä viittauksia analysoitiin huumorinluomisen näkökulmasta ja näin koetettiin löytää vastauksia kysymykseen millainen virka intertekstuaalisilla viittauksilla oli sarjan huumorin luomisessa. Tutkimusaineisto koostui yhteensä 26 viittauksesta jotka kerättiin 16 jaksosta sarjan 5., 6. ja 7. tuotantokausilta.

Tutkimustulokset osoittivat, että monet viittaukset hyödynsivät sekä visuaalisen viittaamisen että sanallisen viittaamisen keinoja, joskin muutama täysin visuaalinen viittaus löydettiin myös. Viittauksia elokuviin löytyi ylivoimaisesti eniten, toiseksi eniten oli viittauksia televisio-ohjelmiin ja loput viittaukset olivat sekalaisia viittauksia mm. kirjallisuuteen ja sosiaaliseen mediaan. Viittauksista oli mahdollista poimia neljä tärkeintä huumoria luovaa seikkaa: inkongruenssi, rinnastus ja vertailu, ylemmyyden tunto sekä parodia. Kategorioissa oli kuitenkin havaittavissa päällekkäisyyksiä, esimerkiksi huumoriteorioissakin vallalla oleva inkongruenssi, eli asioiden yhteensopimattomuus tuli esiin monissa viittauksissa.

Asiasanat – Keywords intertextuality, humor, allusion, How I Met Your Mother

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Muita tietoja – Additional information

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1. INTRODUCTION

'No text is an island' is an expression most likely familiar to anyone who has studied literature. The expression basically means that every text interacts with other texts, even though readers may not always even recognize the references every time they occur. These *intertextual references,* however, often convey some sort of significance and purpose in their new context, whether it is to emphasize the meaning or importance of a specific occurrence, to invoke comparison between the two texts, or even to create humor by, for example, ridiculing the original text. The expression 'no text is an island' itself includes an intertextual reference to a well-known quote from poet John Donne (1624), "No man is an island".

The purpose of this thesis is to examine intertextual references, and more specifically popular culture allusions, in the American comedy TV-series *How I Met Your Mother*. In addition to simply identifying the references, I will analyze how the show creates its humor by using said references. Although some studies have investigated intertextuality in advertising, such as Hitchon & Jura (1997) "Allegorically speaking: Intertextuality of the postmodern culture and its impact on print and television advertising" and O'Donohoe (1997) "Raiding the postmodern pantry: Advertising intertextuality and the young adult audience", few have looked at intertextuality and pop-culture allusions specifically in television series. In addition, to my knowledge intertextuality in television has not been studied from the point of view of humor. I chose the TV-series *How I Met Your Mother* because it uses a great deal of intertextual references to contemporary popular culture. Even though *How I Met Your Mother* shares many similarities with other sitcom series, for example *Friends*, it has managed to bring something new to the genre as well, and that is, in my opinion, the style in which the show uses pop-culture allusions to create humor.

This study is divided into three main sections. First, I introduce the reader to the theoretical background that is relevant to my research. I will define what is meant by intertextuality and allusion, discuss the broad concept of humor and how intertextual references and parody function in creating humor, and finally discuss some common features of the situation comedy genre. Then I will present my research questions, and explain my data collecting process and methods of analysis. Finally, I will present my analysis, after which follows the conclusion.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The basis of my research lies in the field of discourse analysis. The term 'discourse' varies in its definitions, and it is used in many disciplines to refer to slightly different things. For example, as Mills (1997: 3) puts it, a linguist talking about the 'discourse of advertising' is referring to something rather different to a social psychologist talking about a 'discourse of racism'. Yule (2006: 124), however, uses the definition "language beyond the sentence" for 'discourse', which means that discourse analysis is not concerned with the components of language as much as it is with the use of language in text as well as in conversation.

In this chapter I will introduce the main concepts and terminology relevant to my research. Firstly, I will clarify what intertextuality is and then I will focus more on one form of intertextuality, namely allusion, which is a main concept in this study. Secondly, I will discuss the broad concept of humor, especially intertextual and allusive humor as well as parody. Thirdly, I introduce situation comedies and their characteristics and briefly discuss how *How I Met Your Mother* reflects the genre.

2.1 Intertextuality

Intertextuality is one of the central concepts in literary theory and yet, according to Allen (2000), it is a term more difficult to define than one would imagine. While the term 'intertextuality' was first coined by Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s, the theory of intertextuality has its origins in the groundbreaking work of the Swiss linguist Saussure in the early twentieth-century. Intertextuality, therefore, emerges from theories that emphasize the systematic features of language in establishing the relational nature of meaning and texts, but also from theories which are concerned with language use within specific social situations, as Bakhtin's work suggests. Combining these two theories, Saussurean and Bakhtinian, Kristeva was able to produce intertextual theory. (Allen 2000: 2-3).

Montgomery et al. (2007: 161) describe intertextuality as emphasizing "the idea that texts are not unique, isolated objects" and that they are, in fact, constructed out of numerous other texts which may be both known and unknown. Talbot (1995: 45) explains that basically the term implies that texts contain, are part of and are constituted by the societies that produce them. Norrick's (1989: 117) definition of intertextuality is useful, i.e. "Intertextuality occurs any time one text suggests or requires reference to some other identifiable text or stretch of discourse, spoken or written", since it

points out clearly that intertextuality does not concern only written discourses and texts but can be studied in spoken discourses as well. According to Talbot (1995: 55), the function of intertextuality is to introduce history and heterogeneity – diversity in character, structure or composition (Cassell Concise English Dictionary 1994) – to the text. Norrick (1989: 118) also points out that while in scholarly texts intertextuality is often made as conspicuous as possible, in everyday communication we tend to borrow freely from sources usually left unnamed.

Intertextuality is also closely linked to genre. According to Montgomery et al. (2007: 161-162), genres involve a degree of intertextuality as well, since texts draw on existing genre conventions that separate them from other genres. Montgomery et al (2007: 161-162) talk about texts belonging to "intertextual families". For example, poems draw on existing poetic conventions to distinguish them from prose, news articles draw on news article conventions to distinguish them from fiction, and so on. Intertextuality, therefore, depends on the readers' knowledge of genre conventions and cultural texts in general in order to have a meaning and an effect on the reader (Montgomery et al. 2007:163). For example, according to Montgomery et al. (2007: 165) intertextuality in children's literature can often be seen happening at two levels: fairytale conventions (such as the formulaic opening "Once upon a time") that children recognize and more complex intertextual references to previous works of literature that adults recognize and appreciate, but which go unnoticed by the younger readers. Children do not have to recognize these intertextual relations in order to enjoy the stories, but adults reading them may find some additional meaning.

2.2 Allusion

Allusion is one form of intertextuality (Montgomery et al. 2007: 161). Montgomery et al. (2007: 156) define an allusion as making an implicit or explicit reference to some other text within one text. Explicit reference means that an actual quotation is made and it is usually signaled by quotation marks, while implicit allusive reference uses no signals to indicate that an allusion is being made. In an implicit verbal allusion, the original wording is also sometimes changed to suit the new context. Talbot (1995: 49) further defines allusion as deliberately reusing a fragment of an earlier text. It is important to note, considering my research, that allusion is not confined only to literature, but can be found in almost every cultural and artistic form (Montgomery et al. 2007: 158). Thus, music may allude to earlier music and even literature, and films and TV shows allude not only to previous films and other TV shows but to music and literature as well.

According to Montgomery et al (2007: 156), allusion functions as a means of giving a text a cultural

and literary framework. Allusions can therefore be used simply to add cultural value to a text, which can serve to flatter readers or viewers who spot them and make them feel superior to those who did not notice the references (Montgomery et al. 2007: 156-157). Montgomery et al (2007: 157) also point out that allusions which refer to, for example, pop songs, films and television – in other words, popular culture allusions – can serve to position readers or viewers who recognize the allusions in relation to the new context. For example, by recognizing the pop-culture allusions, the viewer of a certain television show is positioned as the target audience of that medium – as in being a person of a certain age and possessing a certain range of cultural knowledge (Montgomery et al. 2007: 157).

Montgomery et al. (2007: 157-158) recognize four main ways in which texts can allude to other texts. First, they can make a verbal reference to another text, as in, for example, using similar phrasing. Second, they can use epigraphs, the use of which often suggests that some sort of significant relationship can be found between the source text and the alluding text. Third, the allusion can be made through the names of characters. The use of well-known character names often suggests some similarity between the original character and the new one, although it can also encourage readers to look for significant differences. Finally, the choice of titles is one way for a text to allude to another text. For example, William Faulkner's The Sound and The Fury (1929) is an explicit allusion to Shakespeare's Macbeth (1606).

Since allusions signal a relationship between texts, it is important to know how to read them. Usually this involves trying to find the similarities and differences between the texts that are momentarily connected by an allusion (Montgomery et al. 2007: 159). Montgomery et al. (2007: 160-161) suggest three key steps to analysing allusions. The first step, quite obviously, is to recognize that an allusion has been made. Sometimes the allusion is made so clear that readers cannot miss it; for example, the writer might state outright that an allusion was made, as was the case with my example of the intertextual reference in "no text is an island" in the introduction. Implicit allusions are, however, more difficult to detect and they rely largely on previous knowledge of the text being alluded to. Montgomery et al. (2007, ibid.), however, continue to point out that noticing an allusion is not as dependent on chance as previously suggested, but it is "often possible to detect the presence of an allusion because it will usually stand out in some way from the text that surrounds it – perhaps through differences in style or register".

The second step in analysing allusions is to trace the allusion. Montgomery et al. (2007: 161) recognize the Internet, a simple Google search for example, as the most useful and obvious way to trace an allusion. That is, of course, unless the source text happens to be familiar already. However,

one might still have to pay a trip to the library for further research, and if all else fails, Montgomery et al. admit that sometimes tracing the allusion is simply a matter of educated guesswork. The third and final step involves becoming familiar with the source text. One has to carefully study the section of the source text that is being alluded to, but also pay attention to the text as a whole to be able to work out the significance of the particular section. This final step includes trying to work out the similarities and differences between the two texts.

2.3 Humor

The concept of humor seems obvious to most of us and if asked to describe the term one would most likely use words such as 'funny' and 'laughter' without even thinking about it too much. Many theorists, however, argue that the term 'humor' is not as easy to define and understand as one would initially imagine, at least not for research purposes. For example, Attardo (2009: 3) says that not only have researchers found it impossible to agree on the category divisions of the term 'humor' (such as "comic" vs. "ridiculous"), but it has also been difficult to find "a pretheoretical definition of 'humor' in the most general sense". Smuts (2009), however, distinguishes humor and the comic in that humor is a response to a specific kind of stimulus, whereas the comic can be regarded as professionally produced source of humor. Attardo (2009: 3) continues to point out that the question whether humor is undefinable altogether has also been raised several times. According to Attardo, the issue lies in the question "What counts as 'humor'?"

Herkman (2000: 369) explains that many humor theoreticians both in Finland and elsewhere have studied humor from two different perspectives: structural and formalistic. The presumption has been that laughter is generated by the structures and forms of humorous performances, in other words, by the comicality of the performance. The ways in which comicality is structured are the automation of characters and functions, repetition and changes in status, for example degradation (Herkman 2000: 369). Herkman (2000: 370) points out, however, that the most common way of creating comicality is through incongruity. The term includes ambiguity, logical impossibility, irrelevance and inappropriateness (Smuts 2009). According to Herkman, all things comical are essentially based on combining surprising elements together, placing something familiar into an unfamiliar surroundings, or acting in an unconventional way.

Smuts (2009) lists incongruity as one of the three identifiable humor theories. The other two are superiority and relief theories. Superiority theory suggests that humor arises from a "sudden glory" that is felt when one recognizes his or her own supremacy over others. Relief theory on the other

hand sees humor as a way to release or save energy generated by repression. According to Smuts, the incongruity theory is, however, the leading approach in humor research. Still, Smuts points out that this division is an over simplification since some scholars have identified more than 100 different types of humor theories; some theories focus on the object of humor, while others are mainly concerned with the characteristics of the response, and then there are theories that discuss both. In conclusion to this, it seems evident that there is no simple and no correct answer available to the definition of the term 'humor'.

Priego-Valverde (2009: 166) offers a definition where she defines humor as a term that refers to "a variety of types of utterances which have made the participants laugh and which, consequently, may be regarded by the participants as humorous, although this judgment may be correct or incorrect." She therefore seems to suggest that humor is a subjective experience and that if one person finds an utterance humorous it does not mean that other people find it as such. In addition, Norrick (1989: 118) points out that humor does not depend only on funny stimulus, but also the audience, the situation and cultural context play an important role. Priego-Valverde has in her definition adopted the term 'humor' as a generic term and she says that majority of researchers who study humor in interaction have chosen to use the generic term as well. I find this definition clear and satisfactory for my study as well, since it describes rather well the nature of humor in situation comedies. In other words, humor in situation comedies is also quite subjective.

2.3.1 Intertextual and allusive humor

Intertextual humor depends on the audience's ability to recognize the source text (Norrick 1989: 118). Although Norrick (1989: 123) says that in many cases in order for the laughable incongruity – in other words the inappropriateness, irrelevance or ambiguity of the situation – to appear, identifying the source may not be enough, but the audience needs to first recognize the reference as such. However, in order for intertextual humor to work in the first place, Norrick (1989: 120) says that it has to presuppose "a performer and an audience with shared knowledge of some preexistent stretch of discourse." In the act of creating the humor, the performer then demonstrates knowledge of the source in a successful telling and the audience's laughter demonstrates their ability to access the appropriate knowledge and to connect it to the current discourse in a new way. Intertextuality therefore stresses the interactional aspect of humor. (Norrick 1989: 120).

Norrick (1989: 117) describes intertextual jokes as aggressive toward the audience in that they challenge the audience to recognize made references. The purpose of telling intertextual jokes is not,

however, to embarrass hearers or point out the performer's superiority. Instead, according to Norrick (1989: 118), the purpose is to discover relevant social data about the hearers, namely data on their attitudes, beliefs, group membership, and so on. Naturally, if the intertextual reference goes completely unnoticed or the audience fails to understand the meaning and relevance of it, it creates no humor (Norrick 1989: 127).

Allusive jokes function much in the same way as intertextual jokes, since their use also challenges the audience to recognize the source text (Norrick 1989: 117). The intertextual reference in allusive jokes is concentrated on the punch line and the audience is expected to respond to it with laughter (Norrick 1989: 117).

2.3.2 Parody

As was mentioned earlier, intertextuality is closely linked to genre and parody is one of the ways in which intertextuality occurs specifically through genre (Montgomery et al. 2007: 163). Montgomery et al. (2007: 163) say that parody is a sub-genre which relies upon intertextual relations with other genres to create the desired effect. Norrick (1989: 131) explains that parody counts as an intertextual relation since it involves an original text and a caricature of it. In parody, "certain characteristics of the source text are maintained or accentuated while others are varied" (Norrick 1989: 131). Ross (1998: 48) explains that parody cannot exist without the original work, but continues to point out that parody can still be original and creative.

Parody is sometimes viewed as an extended allusion (Norrick 1989: 132-133). Raskin (1985, as cited by Norrick 1989: 122) sees allusion as sometimes taking the form of parody, and Nash (1985, as cited by Norrick 1989: 122) also agrees that wherever allusions occur some excursion into parody is possible and that the parodic line often begins with an allusive point. Norrick, however, seems reluctant to call parody simply an extended allusion (1989: 132-137). In Norrick's (1989: 132-133) view, allusion is not typically funny, while parody in general aims at humor. However, Norrick (1989: 117) also says that even though parody aims at humor, it does not require laughter as a response from the audience the same way as, for example, allusive joke does. Norrick also points out that many of the ways in which allusion creates humor are not compatible with extension into parody at all. For example, parody lacks the surprising suddenness of allusive jokes. Furthermore, Norrick (ibid.) separates parody joke from parody, explaining that even though they both borrow from recognizable sources, only parody focuses on the source for extended humorous effect. Parody joke on the other hand cites the source briefly for a witty effect.

Parody differs from intertextual and allusive humor in that it usually announces its source text and therefore does not challenge the audience to identify it but rather invites the audience to ridicule it (Norrick 1989: 129). Parody also relies on a much longer intertextual reference, not simply on a single punch line like jokes. In order for parody to work it has to establish a noticeable congruence with the original work (Norrick 1989: 132). According to Ross (1998: 49) the purpose of parody can range from a playful imitation to harsh satire, and it can also sometimes be viewed as a celebration of the success of the original work.

2.4 Situation comedy

Situation comedy, also known as 'sitcom', is a popular television show genre which, according to Feuer (1992, as cited by Sippola 2010: 7) has easily identifiable salient features. These easily identified and defined features include a half-hour format, recurrent characters and so-called "closed" narration which means that each episode is in principal a story of its own (Valenius 2000: 164). Valenius continues to explain that typically there is a mix-up of some kind at the beginning of an episode which is then through several other, usually humorous, misunderstandings solved within the 30-minute frame. Sitcom series are, however, typically based on an initial idea of a situation, for example a close group of friends or an extended family, and the episodes follow the same group of potentially humorous characters (Ross 1998: 89).

The main characters in a sitcom remain essentially the same throughout the series, and only little character development takes place (Ross 1998: 89). Ross (1998: 89) continues to say that fundamentally the humor in sitcom series is generated from the comic possibilities of distinct character types interacting with each other in varying situations, which is also why there might not necessarily be actual gags or lines that are funny in isolation. Analysing the humor in sitcoms therefore requires taking the humorous potential of the actual situation into account as well (Ross 1998: 89). One of the most distinguishing features of sitcoms is also the use of laugh tracks which according to Mills (2009: 42) help viewers recognize moments as being funny.

Hartley (2001: 66-67) distinguishes two main types of sitcom: "the drama of family comportment", taking place in home environment (family sitcoms), and "the drama of sexual exploration", taking place in the workplace (workplace sitcoms). Hartley also acknowledges hybrid forms of these two types, combining both the family comportment "living together, couch-centric" characteristics and workplace "sexual exploration, flirt-centric" characteristics together. According to Hartley, *Friends* was a classic example of this hybrid form. Feuer (2001: 69) points out that in shows intended for

younger viewers, a close group of friends can substitute for a traditional nuclear family, and according to Feuer (1992, as cited by Sippola 2010: 9), the basic setting of sitcom has indeed undergone a shift in focus from the nuclear family to "families of unrelated adults". In my opinion, *How I Met Your Mother* with its close family of unrelated adults could be a newer example of the hybrid sitcom form.

3. THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1 Research questions

The purpose of this qualitative study is to analyze intertextual references to popular culture in the American sitcom series *How I Met Your Mother*. I aim to answer the following research questions:

1)   What types of intertextual references are used?

2)   How do the intertextual references function in creating the humor in the show?

3.2 Data

How I Met Your Mother, known in Finnish television as *"Ensisilmäyksellä"*, is an American television comedy series which premiered in 2005 and is currently airing its 7th season. Seasons consist of 22 to 24 episodes and each episode is around 20-25 minutes long. The show is very popular in the US and it has been acknowledged with multiple Emmy Awards and Golden Globes nominations. It is also shown all around the world. (*How I Met Your Mother* homepage and Internet Movie Database).

The show is set in Manhattan and follows the lives of five close friends: Ted Mosby, Marshall Eriksen, Lily Aldrin, Barney Stinson and Robin Scherbatsky. It is narrated through flashbacks from the future when Ted tells his children in the year 2030 about the events that led him to meet their mother. The identity of the mother is, however, kept a secret from the audience this far in the series. The episodes are most often separate, individual smaller stories which supposedly, however, add something new to the main storyline and move it forward. Much like in sitcoms generally, the humorous content in *How I Met Your Mother* is also often generated by very distinguishable character types and their interaction together. In *How I Met Your Mother*, however, the humor is also often created by intertextual references.

I chose *How I Met Your Mother* as my data because I found its use of intertextual references interesting and clever. Even though intertextual references naturally occur in many works of television, in my opinion *How I Met Your Mother* has made the regular use of intertextual references one of its trademarks, especially toward the later seasons of the series. For this reason I decided to look at intertextual references in seasons 5, 6 and 7. I chose episodes randomly until I had enough data for this study. In the end I gathered intertextual references from 16 episodes, approximately 5 episodes from each season.

3.3 Methods

I gathered my data by watching randomly selected episodes from the chosen *How I Met Your Mother* seasons, and with the help of English subtitles available on http://www.tvsubtitles.net I was able to transcribe extracts which contained intertextual references. In some cases I had to describe the scene in my own words because there were very little or none verbal communication to transcribe. In total I transcribed 26 extracts with intertextual references and made preliminary notes on them.

In analysing the allusions, I followed the three main stages that Montgomery et al. (2007: 160-161) propose (see section 2.1.1). First, I had to recognize any allusions that were made. Many of the allusions were easy to recognize either because the sources were familiar to me or because the allusion stood out in some way from the surrounding scene. In tracing the more unfamiliar references I relied on Internet searches, which Montgomery et al. (2007: 161) recognizes as the most obvious and easiest way to trace allusions. I, for example, wrote *"you're writing checks my vagina can't cash"*, which is a quote from season 6 episode 6, into a Google search and thus found that the original line is *"Son, your ego is writing checks your body can't cash"*, a famous line from the movie *Top Gun* (1986). Finally, I familiarized myself with the original works the best I could in order to be able to analyse the significance of the reference in the new context.

After transcribing what I thought was an adequate amount of data, I identified the nature of the allusions, in other words, were the allusions implicit or explicit and whether they were verbal or visual. Many of the allusions, however, overlapped in these definitions, for example, an allusion may have been both verbal and visual. I also analyzed the extracts more thoroughly from the point of view of humor, trying to find answers to my research question concerning the function of the intertextual references in creating the show's humorous content. In order to do this I had to analyze

what exactly made the scenes in which the allusions occurred funny. To help me with the analysis I considered the three identifiable humor theories that I discussed in section 2.2: the incongruity theory, superiority theory and relief theory. I considered the significance of the allusions in the scenes and the meaning that they tried to convey in their new contexts. I also considered the possible effect these references may have on the viewer.

4. ANALYSIS

In this chapter I will present and discuss my findings. I will first identify and categorize the references in order to answer my first research question about the types of intertextual references that are used. Then I will focus on my second research question concerning the humor aspect of the references by presenting four main humor categories and providing examples from the extracts.

I found altogether 26 intertextual references from the 16 episodes that I looked at. I divided the 26 transcribed allusions into three main groups:

- Allusions to movies

- Allusions to television

- Allusions to popular culture phenomena

Out of the 26 intertextual references that I transcribed, 16 were references to movies, six were references to television, and finally I was able to identify four other popular culture references. It was possible to detect both verbal and visual allusions, although most of the references made use of both. There were, however, three purely visual references which therefore did not have any verbal indications to the original source. It is understandable that purely visual references do not occur often since they are probably the most difficult references to identify for most viewers.

In my data, most of the allusions were to movies. One reason for the common use of movie references could be that movies tend to be universal. Especially major budget films and critically acclaimed films are normally distributed to many countries all over the world, and they are therefore accessible to an exceedingly wide audience. Thus, it could be assumed that the writers of *How I Met Your Mother* want to use allusions to movies because they are easier to recognize than, for example, allusions to television shows which more rarely air on television channels all over the world.

There were altogether six identifiable references to television shows in my data. As was mentioned above, the fewer amount of allusions to television shows could be explained by two factors, which are, however, connected: firstly, it may be that television shows do not get distributed to foreign countries as often and as widely as movies and secondly, it is more difficult for the audience to recognize references to television shows. Identifying allusions to television shows becomes increasingly more difficult when the reference is made to an older television show that is no longer being aired, as for example in Extract 3.

The last group includes allusions to sources that did not fit into the previous two categories. These allusions are to, for example, literature, music and social media which can be described as having become popular culture phenomena. In other words, they have spread all over the world into people's lives, for example, into their expressions such as Extract 12, or they have simply become famous and well-known all over the world, as for example the novels by Stieg Larsson that Extract 4 refer to. Allusions to popular culture phenomena are rather difficult to detect because they are extremely depended on the individual viewer's knowledge of multiple aspects of popular culture. In my data I was able to detect only four popular culture phenomena references.

I was able to find four main categories in which to place the intertextual references according to their humorous effect or function. The categories are:

- Incongruity
- Comparing and contrasting
- Superiority
- Parody

The first and third categories are directly linked to the humor theories presented in chapter 2.3. It should be noted, however, that the division between the categories is not strict and the categories overlap to some extend. For example, comparing and contrasting can be seen as creating humorous incongruity by combining or contrasting two or more unexpected or surprising items together. I will now deal with each of these categories separately and provide examples of the transcribed extracts to further illustrate my analysis.

4.1 Incongruity

As was established earlier in section 2.3, incongruity means the ambiguity, logical impossibility, irrelevance or inappropriateness of utterances and can therefore function as a means of creating

humor in, for example, everyday conversations. Even though the following extracts could be examples of any of the following categories as well, I chose to use them to illustrate in this case the different aspects of incongruity.

The first extract illustrates best the logical impossibility aspect of incongruity, and it is also a good example of a purely visual allusion in which no verbal and no explicit references to the original source are made:

> Extract 1 (Season 5, Episode 19 – 'Zoo or False'):
>
> Marshall, Ted, Lily and Barney are at Robin's workplace where Robin is about to do a live television interview about Ted and an Empire State Building model that he made. There is also a monkey on the set as well as a man with dolls. Before Robin can start her interview with Ted, the monkey gets out of his cage, hops up on the table where the dolls are and grabs one small doll. Then the monkey climbs up the Empire State Building model as everyone in the room stare at him in awe. The monkey is at the top of the model building holding the doll in its hand and as his trainer tries to get him down, the cameraman starts to through paper planes at the monkey.
>
> Ted: Is this really happening?

Visual allusions like the one in Extract 1 are rather difficult to identify and trace unless the viewer is already familiar with the original source being alluded to. In this extract *How I Met Your Mother* is imitating a famous scene from a cult movie *King Kong* (1933, 1976 and also in 2005), in which a giant gorilla kidnaps a beautiful actress and flees up to the Empire State Building. Small airplanes then circle around the gorilla, shooting at him and trying to get him to come down. The absurdity of this scene that even the character Ted recognizes, and the realization in the audience's mind that the chance of a scene like this happening in real life is nearly impossible, is what makes this allusion amusing for the audience. It is, however, those viewers who are able to recognize the original source that are able to fully appreciate the imitation.

The next extract includes references to literature as well as a movie. The literature references are used to characterize the movie in question:

> Extract 2 (Season 6, Episode 20 – 'The Exploding Meatball Sub'):
>
> Ted: The main character is a young spoiled prince thrust into leadership after the death of his father. It's obviously a modern-day retelling of *Henry IV*!
>
> Zoey: Are you kidding me? It's *Don Quixote* – the classic quest story with the hero-jester and his long-suffering manservant!
>
> Ted: Okay, clearly, when we're watching *Tommy Boy*, we're watching two different movies.

The humor in this extract comes from the fact that the references to William Shakespeare's play *Henry IV* and De Cervantes's *Don Quixote* suggest that the debate Ted and Zoey are having concerns some cultivated topic, but instead they are talking about a comedy movie called *Tommy Boy* (1995). For the audience, *Tommy Boy* was not what they were expecting, and therefore the surprising inappropriateness of the allusion creates humor in this case. In addition, viewers who are familiar with or have seen *Tommy Boy*, will understand that Ted and Zoey are over-analysing the movie, which will add to the humorous effect.

In the next extract, recognizing that an allusion was made in the first place was only possible due to the irrelevant nature of Barney's utterance:

> Extract 3 (Season 6, Episode 4 – 'Subway Wars'):
>
> Barney is at a restaurant and he has just finished eating a steak. He stands up and starts faking a heart attack by grabbing his chest and making sounds that indicate that he is in pain. Before dramatically collapsing on the floor he exclaims: Elizabeth!

Since there are no characters named Elizabeth in *How I Met Your Mother* nor has there been any mention of the name Elizabeth previously, it becomes evident that Barney's utterance must refer to an outside source. The use of the laugh track further supports this conclusion and leads the viewer to think that there might be a deeper meaning to Barney's utterance. Searching for "Elizabeth + heart attack" together on Google, the results pointed me towards an old television show *Sanford and Son* (1972-1977). In the show there was a recurring gag in which the main character would fake a heart attack and call out for his late wife Elizabeth. Without knowing what Barney's utterance refers to, it seems out of context and irrelevant, but after finding out the original source the viewer gains new insight into the scene, and also appreciates its attempt at humor more.

The final example in this category includes allusions to literature. When describing the girls Ted has previously dated the characters use the same formula that was used in the translated titles of Swedish author Stieg Larsson's Millennium-novels *The Girl Who Played with Fire* and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets' Nest*:

> Extract 4 (Season7, Episode 3 – 'Ducky Tie'):
>
> Ted: Oh, guess who I ran into. A girl from my past. Any guesses?
> Lily: Stella.
> Barney: Zoey.

Marshall: Karen?

Lily: The girl who beat you up.

Barney: The girl who ruined a photo with Slash!

Marshall: The girl who made you get the butterfly tattoo?

Ted: You make it sound like I've dated a series of Stieg Larsson's novels.

In this extract the last lines by Lily, Barney and Marshall can be seen as being ambiguous since they can be interpreted as both descriptions of Ted's previous girlfriends and as references to an outside source, which is in this case the Millennium-trilogy by Stieg Larsson. In this extract the humor concentrates on Ted's final punch line which also includes the explicit allusion. It is, however, up to the viewer to make the connection between Ted's reference to Stieg Larsson's novels and the previous lines by Lily, Barney and Marshall. In order for this allusive joke to work properly it is expected of the audience to be able to recognize the similarity between the descriptions of Ted's previous girlfriends and the actual titles of the novels.

4.2 Comparing and contrasting

Comparing and contrasting can be seen occurring to some extend in all of the example extracts in the other categories as well, and as was mentioned earlier, this category overlaps with, for example, the incongruity category. Essentially comparing and contrasting includes combining two or more unexpected items together, and inviting the audience to look for similarities and differences between them for a humorous result.

In the first example all the main characters are sitting at their regular booth in MacLaren's Pub. Prior to this extract it is told that Ted is going to start as a college professor the following day. As they are sitting at the table, Marshall gives Ted a large gift pack:

Extract 5 (Season 5, Episode 1 – 'Definitions'):

Marshall: It's just a little something that we got for you that used to belong to my favorite professor of all time.

Ted opens the package and looks inside.

Ted: A fedora.

Ted pulls out a brown fedora hat and puts it on. Then he takes out another item from the package – a whip.

Ted [excited]: I'm Indiana Jones. I'm Indiana Jones!

This is both a visual and a verbal allusion to the famous movie character Indiana Jones played by

Harrison Ford in four *Indiana Jones* (1981, 1984, 1989 and 2008) movies. Indiana Jones is an archeology professor who, in addition to teaching, gets into exciting adventures while trying to locate hidden archeological artifacts. The character is known for always wearing a brown fedora hat and carrying a whip, and therefore when Ted pulls out the brown fedora from the package along with the whip it functions as a visual allusion to Indiana Jones. The allusion becomes verbal when Ted exclaims excitedly that he is Indiana Jones. The viewer can see Ted's boyish excitement at the thought of becoming like his childhood hero, and indeed the allusion invites the viewer to see the similarities between Ted and Indiana Jones. The humor, however, is created in the audience's realization that the only similarity between Ted and Indiana Jones is that they are both college professors, while Ted seems to think that being a college professor means being as adventurous and exciting as Indiana Jones. The audience, however, is expected to know the difference.

In the next extract, which is from the same episode as the previous one, Barney explains to Ted how to keep a girl from becoming a girlfriend:

> Extract 6 (Season 5, Episode 1 – 'Definitions'):
>
> Barney: How do you keep a girl from becoming your girlfriend? Simple, the rules for girls are the same as the rules for Gremlins.
>
> Ted: "Gremlins"?
>
> Barney: Gremlins. Rule number one. Never get them wet. In other words, don't let her take a shower at your place. Number two. Keep them away from sunlight. I.e. don't ever see them during the day. And rule number three. Never feed them after midnight. Meaning she doesn't sleep over and you don't have to eat breakfast with her ever.

The allusion here is explicit and it invites the viewer to see the surprising similarities between the handling of women and the handling of the 1984 fantasy-horror movie creatures called *Gremlins*. In the original movie the gremlins were malevolent creatures that required specific care or otherwise they would die, multiply themselves or turn into monsters. Barney seems to suggest in this scene that women are similar to gremlins, and if the rules are broken, the result will be catastrophic. In other words, if the rules are broken women will become girlfriends, which to Barney seems to mean the same as monsters. The humorous effect comes from combining two surprising elements together; women and gremlins. Although knowing what the gremlins are helps in understanding the humorous comparison, this scene may appear humorous even without the previous knowledge of the original source that the scene is alluding to. The rules that Barney presents and their explanations are unconventional as dating rules and therefore appear funny to the audience.

Extract 7 is an example of allusion in which the original name has been modified but the original source can still be rather easily traced. Barney explains some of the ways in which he has tricked women into bed with him:

> Extract 7 (Season 5, Episode 8 – 'The Playbook'):
>
> Barney: The more advanced maneuvers, like the Mrs. Stinsfire.
>
> The scene cuts to a room full of young women, apparently college students.
>
> A sorority woman: Now Kappas, after our disciplinary hearing for lewd behavior last semester, we have been assigned a new housemom. I'd like you to meet Mrs. Stinsfire.
>
> Barney, dressed as an elderly woman, enters: Hello, girls!

Barney's fictitious female name Mrs. Stinsfire – a combination of Barney's last name Stinson and the original Mrs. Doubtfire – as well as his elderly woman costume are references to a movie called *Mrs. Doubtfire (1993)*, in which Robin Williams plays a divorced father who dresses up as an elderly woman so that he can become his children's nanny. A viewer who is able to recognize this allusion can therefore also recognize the similarities in the purpose of dressing up as an elderly woman. In both the original movie *Mrs. Doubtfire* and in Barney's hoax the purpose of pretending to be a woman is to get closer to someone. The underlying end result is, however, different in these two, and that is what creates the comical effect in this scene.

In the following example Marshall compares his own workplace to a known movie saga and its villains:

> Extract 8 (Season 6, Episode 3 – 'Unfinished'):
>
> Ted: I do not want to work for GNB again. Those guys are evil. No offense, Marshall.
>
> Marshall: Dude, none taken. Yes, GNB is, the Empire from Star Wars. But the Death Star's gonna get built either way. And don't you think the architect of the Death Star is pretty psyched to have that thing on his space resume? I mean yes, his design was flawed in the sense that a single bullet fired into a particular vent would explode the whole thing.
>
> Ted: For all we know, that was the contractor's fault.

As he is trying to convince Ted to accept the designing job for GNB, Marshall uses direct references to *Star Wars* as metaphors for his employer and their upcoming project to build new headquarters. These references to the main villain of the *Star Wars* saga also concretize the characters' opinion about the GNB and these comparisons also make this extract humorous. In addition, the characters play a joke on the expense of the events that took place in one of the *Star Wars* movie in which the Death Star vessel exploded due to a single bullet fired into the right place. In case the viewer is not

in any way familiar with the *Star Wars* movies, he or she might have to familiarize him-/herself with at least the basic idea of the movies in order to understand the significance of the references.

The episode surrounding the next extract takes place at Marshall's father's funeral. Robin has adopted a role in which she can provide grieving Marshall anything he needs during the day, from cellphone charger to liquor. Anything that Marshall or anyone else needs from her, she has got it in her purse:

> Extract 9 (Season 6, Episode 14 – 'Last Words'):
>
> Ted: You're like Mary Poppins if her magic purse was also filled with drugs.
>
> Robin: "If"? Ted, the kids in that movie jumped into a painting and spent 15 minutes chasing a cartoon fox. "Spoonful of sugar..."? Grow up.

This explicit allusion to the 1964 Disney classic *Mary Poppins* invites the audience to see the movie in a cynical way, as Robin seems to suggest that what in the movie is called a "spoonful of sugar" may not be sugar at all, and instead Mary Poppins' purse might really have contained drugs as Ted jokingly suggests Robin's purse contains. Robin's line draws attention to the absurdity of the events in *Mary Poppins*, making a scene in the movie sound ridiculous and possible only if the characters were on drugs, therefore imagining it all. Robin also seems to suggest that Ted is being immature for still believing in the innocence of *Mary Poppins*. An adult audience is likely to be able to understand what Robin is suggesting as well as be able to appreciate the more realistic look at the classic movie and find the humor in it.

4.3 Superiority

According to the superiority theory of humor, when a person feels a sudden sense of superiority over others it can create humor or amusement. The following examples of intertextual references can be particularly difficult to recognize for most viewers, therefore making it possible for the minority group who notice and recognize them to have a sense of supremacy over the "ignorant majority". Naturally the intertextual references carry a deeper meaning to the viewers who recognize them, and being able to recognize the references may give viewers a sensation of being a part of an exclusive group that the joke is targeted at.

The first extract in this category is an example of an implicit allusion in which the original wording has been modified to fit the new context:

Extract 10 (Season 6, Episode 6 – 'Baby Talk'):

Lily: I guess, but, dude, you're writing checks my vagina can't cash.

Since there are no explicit references to the original source, this type of allusion is difficult to both recognize and trace. This particular line, however, can be recognized as an allusion by considering its structure and style. In other words, it stands out because it seems somewhat out of place in a regular conversation. The structure seems rehearsed and solid, as if it could be a common phrase. Furthermore, the use of laugh track after the line suggests that there was something in Lily's utterance that the audience should be able to detect and find amusing. An Internet search revealed that this line is indeed a modification of a famous line from the movie *Top Gun* (1986); "Son, your ego is writing checks your body can't cash." Thus, in this scene the original wording of the phrase has been changed to better suit the new context concerning delivering babies, giving the original quote a new more humorous meaning. These types of allusions can leave the viewer rather disconcerted if he or she is not able to identify the reference and trace it back to the original.

The following example is again a very short implicit allusion which can be difficult to recognize for a viewer who is not familiar with the latest films:

Extract 11 (Season 7, Episode 2 – 'The Naked Truth'):

Barney [in a French accent]: If I were only casting the White Swan the role would be yours.

This allusion is directed to viewers who have seen the movie *Black Swan* (2010), since Barney's line is almost an exact quote from the movie. For viewers who have not seen the movie this reference will most likely go completely unnoticed, but for viewers who recognize it, it is a fun detail and recognizing it gives Barney's line a subtext which helps understand the laughable incongruity that the allusion has when Barney uses it to pick up women versus the original use in the *Black Swan* movie.

The next example first led me to think that it was an implicit reference to a movie called *Scary Movie* (2000). I found out, however, that the original source is a Budweiser beer commercial (aired from 1999 to 2002) to which *Scary Movie* also refers to in one of its scenes.

Extract 12 (Season 6, Episode 3 – 'Unfinished'):

Robin: How long ago did you take that class?

> Lily: I don't know. It was around the time when everyone was going "Wazzuuuup!"

The purpose of this reference is to demonstrate how long it has been since Lily last took the karate lesson Robin is referring to, and therefore its humorous effect depends on the viewers' knowledge of this particular popular culture phenomenon. The viewer is expected to go through a complicated process in order to fully understand the function of the reference. First one must recognize that the expression "Wazzuuuup!" is referring to the beer commercial, and also remember the fact that the commercial started a trend where people would use the expression from the commercial as a part of their everyday expressions. Then one must have at least a general idea of when the commercial aired in order to be able to understand the time that has elapsed since Lily took the class. Through this process of recognizing the allusion the viewer must evaluate the humorous effect of the reference, either finding it successful and amusing in conveying Lily's indirect message, or finding it meaningless and unnecessary.

Another example containing a popular culture phenomenon reference that can be categorized under the superiority theory could also be found. The next example is a reference to a social media forum Twitter in which users may tag their posts by using the hashtag (#) mark before the word(s) they want to tag their post with:

> Extract 13 (Season 7, Episode 3 – 'Ducky Tie'):
>
> Barney: Duck, duck...gross. Hashtag burn, hashtag duck tie slam, hashtag Stinson rocks. What else
>   is going on?

Twitter has become a major phenomenon especially in the U.S. but it has not yet achieved very great popularity for example in Finland. While many American viewers may be able to recognize this reference to the Twitter service, fewer viewers in Finland can make this identification. Therefore those who are familiar with Twitter and how the service operates can experience a sense of superiority over others because they understand the reference and why it is funny. Barney uses the written posting style of Twitter in a spoken conversation which appears unusual and therefore amusing.

4.4 Parody

Even though the viewer may not be able to identify what the original source that is being alluded to is, he or she can often still recognize that an allusion has been made. As Montgomery et al. (2007:

160) point out, it is possible to detect an allusion because it stands out in one way or another. As was also mentioned earlier, in parody some aspects of the original source are often accentuated, which not only usually makes a parody humorous but also makes it stand out. Extract 14 is a good example of an allusion which stands out from the scene surrounding it due to the sudden change in style. In other words, the style of the scene differs from the overall comical style of the episode by being more dramatic in this case.

In this example Ted has been teaching Barney how to date Robin correctly. Barney is, however, complaining that this "course" that Ted is giving him has not taught him anything, after which Ted gives Barney a pop-quiz. Surprisingly, Barney is able to give Ted all the correct answers:

> Extract 14 (Season 5, Episode 3 – 'Robin 101'):
>
> Ted: But I guess you are right. You haven't learned anything. Sorry to have wasted your time.
>
> As Ted is about to walk out of the classroom, Barney stands up on his chair.
>
> Barney: Oh captain, my captain.
>
> Ted turns around at the door and they gaze at each other in dramatic silence as the theme song from *Dead Poets Society* plays in the background.
>
> Ted: How good was *Dead Poets Society*?
>
> Barney: I know right! The end, tears.

This reference may classify as parody if we consider Ross's (1998: 49) definition of parody as a playful imitation of the original source. The scene begins with an implicit reference when Barney stands up on his chair and utters the quotation "Oh captain, my captain". This scene is almost an exact imitation of a scene in *Dead Poets Society* (1989), with the exception that in the original scene the student stands up on his desk. In this particular scene that *How I Met Your Mother* is parodying, the students use the "Oh captain, my captain" line to show support to their favorite English teacher who has recently been dismissed. The audience of *How I Met Your Mother* can therefore see the significance of this reference in this new context: Barney admits that he was wrong about not having learned anything and shows appreciation and respect to Ted in the same way as the students in *Dead Poets Society* showed to their teacher. The dramatic moment is, however, broken when the characters switch back to their usual selves and explicitly point out the reference. This change back from drama to comedy also adds to the humor in this scene. If, however, the viewer fails to make the connection between Barney's first line and Ted's explicit reference to the movie in the end, the scene will most likely seem odd and absurd, therefore failing to create the desired humorous effect.

The next extract is another good example of the way *How I Met Your Mother* uses an intertextual reference in a new and unusual way to create a different end result:

Extract 15 (Season 6, Episode 16 – 'Desperation Day'):

Barney is standing in the MacLaren's Pub watching people as if he is on the prowl. The image that he sees is in thermal vision and all the women in the bar are shown in red. Barney focuses on one particular woman and after choosing his target he makes a clicking sound.

The extract can be seen as a parody, since it imitates a certain characteristic of the original *Predator (1987)* movie but at the same time alters it to serve a different purpose. In the original *Predator* movie the Predator creatures have thermal visions which show all living creatures in red tones and help them hunt for their preys in extreme conditions. The Predators also communicate by making a similar clicking sound as is heard in the *How I Met Your Mother* scene. In this scene, Barney is therefore portrayed as having similar, almost animal characteristics as the Predator while he is "on the prowl" for the next woman he will try to date. Since this scene uses no verbal references to the *Predator* movie it is entirely up to the viewer to recognize the reference. Although it is rather evident that the scene refers to some outside source, finding out what the original source is might be difficult without any previous knowledge. If the viewer cannot recognize the reference, the scene will most likely seem pointless. The episode, however, makes multiple references to the movie Predator, so that an acute viewer might be able to connect the references together.

The last extract alludes to a television series implicitly. In this scene Barney hears that an ambulance will not take him to the hospital that he intended to be taken to:

Extract 16 (Season 6, Episode 4 – 'Subway Wars'):

Barney: Downtown hospital, please. It's right by Gregor's Steakhouse. Take the FDR, and maybe crank up some smooth jazz.

Paramedic: Uh, we're required by law to take you to the nearest hospital, which is St. Luke's-Roosevelt. Uptown.

Barney: Oh, no.

The screen splits into five smaller screens which display all of the other characters and their current situations.

The scene parodies a stylistic feature of a popular action television series *24* (2001-2010). The show was known for its split screen technique which allowed it to show what was happening in different places with different characters at the same time. The split screen technique gives a rather dramatic effect on the scene which creates an amusing contrast between *How I Met Your Mother*'s general middlebrow atmosphere and the dramatic effect familiar from the TV show 24.

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate the intertextual references that occurred in the American sitcom television series *How I Met Your Mother*, and how the used references functioned in creating the show's humor. *How I Met Your Mother* was chosen as the data due to its frequent use of intertextual references in its jokes. Altogether 26 transcribed intertextual references were gathered for this study from 16 episodes from the show's seasons 5, 6 and 7.

At the beginning I established what was meant by some of the central concepts relevant to this study, such as intertextuality, allusion and humor. Especially humor proved to be a difficult and complex term to define, since it seems that researchers have not found a single, all-inclusive definition for it. According to Smuts (2009) there are, however, at least three identifiable humor theories which are incongruity, superiority and relief theories, out of which the incongruity theory is the leading approach in humor research. It was also said that humor is above all a subjective experience, and what one person may find funny, someone else may not.

Analysing the intertextual references showed that most of the references were allusions to movies. The second highest number of references was to television and finally the rest could be categorized under popular culture allusions. My analysis showed that most of the allusions made use of both verbal and visual references, although a couple of purely visual allusions could also be found. Most of the allusions also made use of both implicit and explicit references, in other words they began as implicit references and made the allusion explicit later on. The most difficult allusions to recognize and trace were the ones that did not explicitly identify their source at all.

It was possible to detect four main categories in which to place the example references according to what their humor function seemed to be: incongruity, comparing and contrasting, superiority and

parody. It must be noted that the categories overlapped in many occasions although I chose to use one extract in only one category at a time. For example, although most of the examples I used fell under the comparing and contrasting category, incongruity could be seen as one of the humor creating causes in one form or another in most of the intertextual references I analysed. The superiority effect came into operation especially in references that were extremely difficult to recognize without any previous knowledge of the original source. Few examples of parody could also be found, in which *How I Met Your Mother* seemed to use parody to reinforce, for example, a character's personality as in Extract 15 or the desired dramatic effect of a scene as in Extract 16. In general, the intertextual references were used in situations where they appeared in new, unconventional and surprising ways which resulted in potentially humorous situations.

It must be noted that investigating intertextuality in a television series is rather subjective, since recognizing the references depends largely on individual's personal knowledge of culture. Therefore someone else conducting this study might find references from the episodes that I did not notice. In addition, the limited length of a bachelor's thesis only allows to scratch the surface of the relationship between intertextuality and humor in *How I Met Your Mother* or in situation comedy shows in general.

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