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Buffalaxed superdiversity: representations of the other on YouTube

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Abstract

In this article, we investigate how the oriental Other – increasingly a diversifying being – is represented in the context of translocal YouTube culture. More specifically, we look at videos which through subtitling and editorial commentary entextualize and resemiotize the figure of the Other to western audiences. We will take a close look at three typical ‘buffalaxed’ videos and investigate how each of these constructs images of the Other that are both divergent from the image transmitted in the source video as well as quite ambiguous and multi-layered. On the basis of our analysis, we will argue that while the videos repeat and remodify aspects of the stereotypical and discriminatory Western heteronormative metanarratives of the Orient, they also depict the Other in ways in which his/her otherness is no longer the simple anti-thesis of ‘Us’ – the western subject – but, occasionally, aligned with or even very much like ‘Us’.

INTRODUCTION

Social media provide Internet users with a range of affordances for discourse practice, social (inter)action, and cultural production. Through these affordances, topics that interest the participants – political issues, cult phenomena, and mass-mediated popular cultural products, for example – are appropriated in various ways. If enough people with shared interests and agendas chip in, their contributions may grow into veritable memes which multiply, mutate, and spread on social media in a pandemic way. One infectious meme like this is the genre of *buffalaxed videos*¹, which have recently mushroomed

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¹ The term *buffalax*, was originally the alias of the editor who first started producing videos of this kind. Later the term was adopted by others as the label for the whole genre.

on YouTube as an outcome of an outburst of interest in the creation and sharing of humorous and subversive representations of the oriental Other.

Typically, buffalaxed videos are parody versions of snippets of motion pictures, TV broadcasts or musical performances which are originally in a language incomprehensible to most westerners and which feature such Others as Bollywood characters or oriental pop singers. Their production involves giving the video “subtitles for what it sounds like” (*Urban Dictionary*) in the buffalax producer’s own language. More specifically, in order to create new content, s/he uses the so called mondegreen or soramimi² technique – a technique which consists of a deliberate mishearing of something said or sung – to provide the original footage with new subtitles in his/

² For more information, see e.g. the Wikipedia articles for Mondegreen and Soramimi (a Japanese originated word used explicitly for multilingual mondegreens).

her own language which are as closely homophonic as possible with words said or sung in the original footage. Thus, a new video is created, with new meanings generated not only via the subtitles but also through their co-occurrence and juxtaposition with the original image and audio.

The resemiotized Others in buffalax videos are interesting also because in their own way they highlight the ways in which social media practices are increasingly characterized by processes of superdiversification. This they do in at least three interrelated ways. Firstly, social media constitute forums for activities and interactions by individuals and groups who are themselves superdiverse, in other words, diverse across a wide range of variables (Vertovec 2007). In this sense, social media spaces can resemble superdiverse urban social spaces which Susanne Wessendorf (2011: 7), for example, has described as locations in which diversity has become 'commonplace'. These social spaces that Wessendorf studied, such as the London Borough of Hackney, are characterized not only by a multiplicity of different ethnic and migrant minorities, but also by differentiations in terms of migration histories, religions, educational backgrounds, legal statuses, length of residence, and economic backgrounds among mixed populations consisting of ethnic minorities, migrants, and host society populations with varied social and cultural backgrounds. In such spaces, complex diversity and patterns of social relations and interactions across categorical and traditional boundaries are experienced and perceived as a normal part of social life.

In many respects, the relations and interactions on social media by individuals with varied and complex identities are a good example of this kind of superdiversity. However, besides functioning as a superdiverse social space, social media illustrate superdiversification also because in them language use, communication, dissemination of information, and mediation of cultural practices and products increasingly feature mobility, plurality, heterogeneity, and poly-centricity of semiotic resources and normativities through and with which participants

express themselves and communicate with others. Within them, communication and interaction are often multimodal and linguistically and discursively heterogeneous, such heterogeneity serving participants as a means for indexing identifications which are not organized on the basis of local, ethnic, national or regional categories only, but which are increasingly translocal. In social media practices, participants are thus orienting not only to their local affiliations but also to groups and cultures which can be distant but with which they share interests, causes or projects. (Leppänen 2009, 2012.)

The third sense in which buffalaxed videos can be seen as an exemplification of superdiversification is that for translocal YouTube meme cultures they offer a discursive space and a set of semiotic resources with which they can strive to make sense of and evaluate their experiences relating to superdiversity. In the case of buffalaxed videos, the aspect of superdiversity they centre on is the oriental Other. What makes the oriental Other superdiverse, rather than simply an embodiment of traditional western racist dichotomies of 'Us' and 'Them', is that the Other, as featured in mediated popular culture, is no longer easily classifiable as a member of a familiar and recognizable social, cultural or ethnic category, but something much more challenging, complex, and nuanced.

It is this third dimension of mediated superdiversity that will be the specific focus in our article. With the help of three examples from buffalaxed videos and the audience commentary they have given rise to, we wish to show how participants in the translocal buffalax activity culture on YouTube make sense of and represent the superdiversifying oriental Other. In our analysis, we will investigate how subtitling and its combination and juxtaposition with the original footage are employed by buffalax producers to create new semiotic and interpretative potential. We will show how the Other – whose language is incomprehensible to westerners but who has become an increasingly recognizable and proximal figure to them through popular culture, media, and everyday encounters – is made to speak to western audiences in ways that may index a range of different stances.

YouTube: CONVERGENT AND DIVERGENT MEDIA PROSUMPTION

The reason why YouTube has become such a popular platform for the production and consumption of media content has a great deal to do with its capacity to offer a multi-dimensional space for mediated cultural activities and products. This, on the one hand, allows interconnections and intertwining of a range of media platforms and products, and, on the other hand, offers relatively free and non-moderated opportunities for staking a niche medium for specific groups and interests. In other words, YouTube is characterized by a mixture of convergence and divergence.

While new technologies tend to give rise to occasional hypes on how they can open up entirely new opportunities for communication, empowerment, and agency, it is important to remember that they are not entirely new – similar opportunities, practices and forms of agency have existed before the new technology emerged. This is true of media convergence as well: as early as some thirty years ago, it was argued by Ithiel de Sola Pool (1983: 58) that, thanks to “the habitability of digital electronics”, the historically separated modes of communication (e.g., conversation, theater, news, and text) were becoming one grand system. Likewise, with the increase and diversification of media services and technologies – newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations, programs, networks, information services, video games, and video tapes – also media divergence was visible as early as in the 1970s and 1980s. Well before the 1990s, mass media had already evolved into a segmented and diverse “blip culture” consisting of short, modular blips of information – adverts, theories, shreds of news, for example (Toffler 1981: 182).

In this on-going process of de-massification, the internet and YouTube represent, nevertheless, the next step. These technologies have enabled and brought about a veritable explosion of the amount and complexity of remixing and mashupping media products and outlets. As one of the most popular online video broadcasting platforms and social media, YouTube is a case in point: it is not only a medium in which people watch videos, listen to music, broadcast their

own videos and archive their audio-visual material (see e.g. Burgess & Green 2009; Snickars & Vonderau 2009), but it also provides a forum for DIY cultures to flourish, for commercial media conglomerates to promote their products, and for niches and memes to breed, multiply, and diversify.

As an example of convergence culture (Jenkins 2008: 274), YouTube is a forum in which different media, producers, amateurs, professionals, consumers, uses, and ideologies come together and in which the boundaries and borderlines between them are blurred. It fosters active participation: as there is no clear distinction there between production and consumption, consumers can be active in the creation and circulation of new content (Jenkins 2008: 3; see also Burgess & Green 2009: 10). Many YouTube users are, in fact, ‘prosumers’ (see Toffler 1981), at the same time consuming YouTube and other media and producing their own video content using their own computers and mobile phones. With developments like these, we are clearly moving from traditional one-directional ‘read-only’ media consumption towards a ‘read-write’ culture (Hartley 2008, as cited in Burgess & Green 2009: 48). Prosumption is also one of the characteristics of buffalaxed videos: while they often originate in specific media contexts, they are transferred to and embedded within other mediated spaces. These include, firstly, the producer’s own computer with the help of which the original footage is modified with such techniques as subtitling or bricolage in ways not unlike professional film editing. Secondly, the edited product is published on YouTube, where it can be viewed, discussed, and evaluated in ways that may resemble watching and discussing videos with your friends. Thus, convergence is at the heart of the entire buffalaxed enterprise.

However, as was suggested above, YouTube is also a divergent media environment. On it, individuals and groups representing different traditions and backgrounds can find their own communicative and socio-cultural niches. These can range from closely knit virtual communities of practice – which may be defined by such common denominators as shared origins, culture, lan-

guage, or ethnicity – to virtual meeting places of people loosely connected through some shared interest or issue. The divergence of YouTube is also apparent in how its content is remediated (Bolter & Grusin 2002; Grusin 2009) in other media forms and outlets. The same content can be dealt with in a range of genres – in video blogs (vlogs), instructional videos, presentations, shreds, uploaded and digitized snippets from TV and film, and spoofs (mocking imitations), just to mention a few. The divergence of buffalaxed videos shows particularly in the fact that they represent the favored genre for a segment of the YouTube audience that is interested in its particular ways of crafting, sharing, and appreciating ‘exotic’ footage. This is also one of the reasons why buffalax producers are willing to be involved in this type of voluntary and non-salaried late modern cottage industry and its rather laborious and time-consuming processes of remediation and editing: they have an enthusiastic audience who value their products and the opportunities they create for commentary, discussion, and interaction and, who, through their appreciation of the cultural products also accord social and cultural capital to the successful buffalax editors.

YouTube HUMOUR AND (LIQUID) RACISM

The prevalent YouTube culture tends to be playful and affective entertainment rather than, say, an example of critical-rational debate and deliberation in the sense of the Habermasian public sphere (Burgess & Green 2009: 103). Often, the humor they provide is quite conservative and geared towards supporting and preserving the dominant social order, traditional authority, and gender and racial hierarchies, while discouraging and denigrating diversity and difference (Jenkins 2008: 292-293). Again, the humor in buffalaxed videos partly fits in this picture. It often focuses on social and cultural groups and cultures which are seen as being in some way distinct from the hegemonic groups and cultures. In representing these groups, the videos can recycle conventions of nationalistic or ethnic humor which, to use Christie Davies’s (1996: 4) words, are invariably aimed at the “pinning of some undesirable quality on a particular ethnic group in a comic way

or to a ludicrous extent”. While doing so, Davies (1996: 312) argues, ethnic humor contributes “to a people’s sense of their own identity and character”, thereby reinforcing the sense of “vicarious superiority” of the person voicing the humor.

As a cultural practice the representation of the Other can have material, social, cultural, and personal consequences for those who end up as in- and out-groups (see e.g. Raisborough & Adams 2008: 3). The consequences of disparaging humor can create and enforce hierarchies of value and have an impact on those who have access to resources with which distinctions and categories are created. In addition, voice – possibilities and resources for communicative and social agency – can be unevenly distributed among participants (Jenkins 2009; Burgess & Green 2009: 81-82). While in technologically advanced and affluent countries even young children can be quite knowledgeable and capable of sophisticated forms of participation in mediated contexts such as YouTube, in other contexts, due to a lack of technological resources or know-how, not everyone has the opportunity to fully take part in buffalaxed activities. In more concrete terms, this may have the result that those identifying with the buffalaxed oriental Others do not have the capacity to buffalax back.

From this perspective, buffalaxed videos could well be seen as an example of “disparagement humor” which “denigrates, belittles, or maligns a social group” (Ford & Ferguson 2004: 79), and which serves as a weapon of marking boundaries and building hierarchies of value (Billig 2005; Raisborough & Adams 2008). In the same way as for example Beverley Skeggs (2005: 969) has argued in regard to the representation of class on TV, the representations of the Other in buffalaxed videos are also typically made “through cultural values premised on morality” – where the lack of hegemonic moral value is a crucial attribute often assigned to the Other. Further, as YouTube and, in particular, the buffalaxed genre, are taken by many as providing simple fun, the platform makes it possible to mount cultural representations in ways which are not politically correct – the pretext being that after all, it is all just ‘harmless’ entertainment, and nothing serious.

A similar point has also been made by Angela McRobbie (2005: 104) who has argued that in the current “post-politically correct times”, mocking discourse has become accepted by both media industries – TV comedy, for example – and their audiences in “the space of relaxation and enjoyment provided by the media and entertainment”.

However, explicitly denigrating and disparaging humor is not the only material buffalaxed videos draw on and recycle: in fact, they seldom simply repeat the traditional dichotomous and stereotypical conceptions of what are taken to be the inclusive and exclusive groups and cultures. Rather, as is perhaps typical of what has been referred to in more general terms as “multicultural humor” (Rainbird 2004), they foreground multiple possibilities for interpretation, and include an implausible element without which they would otherwise be considered serious or simply nonsensical. At its best, YouTube can even function as a site for cosmopolitan cultural citizenship (Burgess & Green 2009: 79). As a great deal of YouTube content originates in people’s everyday lives, it creates affordances for people to represent their identities and perspectives, engage with self-representations by others, and reflect on cultural difference (Burgess & Green 2009: 81). Within the buffalaxed activity culture, traces of such orientations are occasionally present as well. For example, the discussions the videos give rise to sometimes reveal that the original footage is seen as an instance of globally shared culture, rather than being an example of narrowly defined nationalistic or ethnic culture.

Because of their ambiguity, buffalaxed videos could also be considered as examples of what Simon Weaver (2010) has called “liquid racism”. Along the lines of the term “liquid modern” (Bauman 2005), the notion of liquid racism refers to situations and societies in which the conditions directing and shaping people’s actions change so rapidly that their ways of acting do not get to evolve into habits or routines before the conditions change again (Weaver 2010: 678). What is typical of liquid racism is that it uses recognizable embodied and culturally racist signs, but at the same time includes various layers of meaning, which make multiple interpretations possible

(Weaver 2010: 679). For example, in liquid racism the forms of racism purported may be so subtle and deeply nested in familiar and ‘natural(ized)’ meta-narratives about diversity, that they can be interpreted as only humor – as not racist at all. And if according to these familiar meta-narratives something is regarded as being humorous only, the responsibility of interpretation shifts to the recipient, which easily leads to judging the recipients as having no sense of humor if they find the humor somehow problematic (Howit & Owusu-Bempah 2009: 48).

BUFFALAXED VIDEOS IN FOCUS

In this article, we will investigate three buffalaxed videos as typical representatives of their genre. The first one of them is *Crazy Indian Video... Buffalaxed!* (a.k.a. *Benny Lava*) – the American video after which the genre of ‘buffalaxed videos’ was quickly dubbed, and which became a viral meme imitated and copied in many of the later videos. In addition, to show how buffalaxed videos quickly emerged as a translocal activity culture, we will subsequently look at two Finnish videos, *Nilin hanhet* (‘The Geese of the Nile’) and *Terojen Koettelemus* (‘The Trial of the Two Teros’).

Although the Finnish videos are produced by editors based in Finland and in Finnish, in many respects they resemble the trendsetting *Benny Lava*: as will become clear below, their overall goal as well as the ways in which they modify their original footage are very similar to *Benny Lava*. At the same time, all three videos also highlight the variation and diversity of the buffalaxed genre and its reception. In this sense, they are examples of the perennial translocality of YouTube. While they align with the globally convergent presumption culture, they also have their proximal audiences and dimensions of meaning that are more apparent locally. For example, *Benny Lava* – partly because its subtitles are in English – is truly a global product. At the same time, as we will show below, it is clear that its primary intended audience is North-American, whose social, cultural, and mediated reality has for a long time been saturated by superdiversity.

The two Finnish cases, in turn, illustrate the ways in which the buffalaxed format has been

domesticated for Finnish audiences. That they are subtitled in Finnish is the clearest indication of this, but, as will again become clear in our analysis below, they also align with the Finnish context in more subtle ways. Most significantly, they show how, in a time when Finland is slowly transforming from a relatively homogeneous society into a more diversified one, social media offer Finns new means with which they can make sense, discuss and tackle the diversity they increasingly encounter both in different societal contexts and via mediated channels. The two videos could, in fact, be argued to be quite different responses to the fact that diversity is knocking at the doors of Finnish society and culture. One of them ridicules a real-life Kurdish singer, a man resembling the Kurdish refugees and migrants Finns can nowadays occasionally encounter in their daily lives, and the other video parodies mediated Others, Hindi characters in a popular Bollywood film. In the discursive niche provided by the buffalaxed video phenomenon, the Finnish videos thus engage in semiotic reworking of both real-life, and mediated, cultural diversification in ways which partly draw on elements of established stereotypes, but which also go beyond these.

Our analysis of these videos draws eclectically on insights provided by sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, discourse studies, film studies, and the study of fan culture (Leppänen 2009, 2012). We approach the videos as semiotic phenomena within the social, cultural, political, and historical context of which they are part (Blommaert 2010: 3) undergoing, through buffalaxing, transidiomatic mobilization (Jacquemet 2005) and entextualization (Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Silverstein & Urban 1996: 74), whereby they are decontextualized from their original cultural and media context (Indian film and Middle Eastern music videos) and recontextualized within another context. This process crucially involves resemiotization (Iedema 2003: 40; Leppänen et al., forthcoming) in the form of mondegreen subtitling and editorial commentary whereby the original material is re-interpreted and re-mediated via another media context to new audiences.

We will, in particular, pay attention to the fea-

tures and meanings of the homophonic subtitles, and the ways in which they are combined and juxtaposed with the original visual and audio footage, and show how the new video text emerging from this discursive and linguistic mashupping is a heterogeneous construct (Leppänen 2012), an ambivalent parody, indexing through the mobilization of varied semiotic resources different ideological stances towards the Other. In addition, to gain insight into how the actual audiences position themselves in relation to the buffalaxed videos and the ways in which the Other is represented in them, we will also investigate audience comments on each video.

THE SUPERDIVERSE ORIENTAL OTHER IN BUFFALAXED VIDEOS

Benny Lava: Setting the scene for buffalaxing the Other

Benny Lava (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYwS9k1ZexY>) is a resemiotization of a song and dance number from a South Indian Tamil motion picture *Pennin Manadhai Thottu* (2000). The film depicts a romance between a famous heart surgeon Sunil (Prabhu Deva) and Sunitha (Jeya Seel) who seeks his help for a child with a heart problem. Eventually it turns out that the two had been in love in college but that the man had deserted her at a crucial time. This misunderstanding is finally overcome and the two protagonists are united again.



An advertisement for *Pennin Manadhai Thottu*

Indian film has fans outside India as well: audiences around the world have become familiar with and keen on the conventions of Indian

romantic dramas. At the same time, their difference from the western, particularly mainstream Hollywood romantic drama is something that puzzles many western viewers. The ways in which aspects of romantic relationships are dealt with in song and dance are remarkably different from, for example, the conventions of mainstream Hollywood romantic drama. Likewise, their highly indirect and implicit means of hinting at love, erotic tension and desire may appear as quite alienating to western viewers who are used to more explicit presentations. One of the effects of the western viewers' increasing familiarity with Indian romantic film has also been that it has brought Indian characters, closer to western viewers and highlighted through fictional cinematic representation their complexity and ambiguity as representatives of the Other.

The original video depicts a song and dance scene with a large group of young women and men on a green mountain slope. The song and dance number represents the flirtation and wooing going on between the two main characters. The lyrics of the Tamil song *Kalluri Vaanil* in the original film, their English translation, and the buffalaxed subtitles can be accessed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyp7D2Nzib0>.



The leading couple with their entourage

The original lyrics are almost entirely in Tamil, with the exception of occasional English expressions (“Eyebrowwai male thookki”, “Urgent aa / operation”, “I love you endraayae...”), some of which refer to the characters' lives and the settings (e.g. “college”, “stethoscope”). The buffa-

laxed video picks up some of these contextual elements – for instance, it also depicts the characters as students falling in love. The lyrics also describe the characters' romantic and erotic feelings, but do so with quite indirect means: there are, for example, poetic comparisons (“As Haiku, poetically she said I love you”) and metaphor (“dolphins”, “springs”, “floods”). A similarly covert description of the romantic relationship is conveyed through the dancing. There is no physical contact between the romantic couple; instead, there are suggestive looks, symbolic gestures, and a great deal of whirling and circling around each other.

In contrast to the original, the buffalaxed lyrics are very explicit in their sexual references (e.g. “I told a high school girl...I love you inside me”), allude to sodomy (“Who put the goat in there?”) and to the sexual fetish of peeing (“i like to swim in his beeeeejaaaaayyy!”). These kinds of transformations of the metaphoric, indirect, and poetic expressions of feelings in the highly moderated Indian romantic films into almost pornographic declarations of sexual desire are, in fact, a recurrent discursive strategy in buffalaxed videos. As explicit breaches of the taboos underlying the cinematic narration of the original story they also constitute one of the sources of humor in them.

The subtitles are not, however, the only means for creating humor in buffalaxed videos; another means is the way in which they are combined and contrasted with the image, music, singing, and dancing in the videos. This is also evinced by audience comments – many of them repeat some of the particularly transgressive lines, with iconic indications that they find them extremely funny. As an illustration, consider the following:³

- HA HA! my fav line is “Now poop on them Oliver!!!!” LOL!
- hahahahahahahaha i love to see you pee on us tonight wTF:P
- Haha “I’ll lay a friend of yours.” :)

³ All the audience comments have been collected between January and May 2011 from the YouTube site in which the video was published. To protect the identity of the commentators, their aliases are not given here.

In addition, buffalaxed videos contain many references to western phenomena, names, places, and cultural products. For example, the lyrics of *Benny Lava* include several English names (“Ed”, “Benny”, “Oliver”, “Donna”), expressions (“punk”, “Fucking A”), and an American place name (“Seattle”). Such insertions function to recontextualize the video and the story depicted in it as if it were simultaneously taking place in an Indian location with Indian characters, as well as within an American context. Along with the sexually explicit language, these recurrent multiple localizations of the video content contribute to the fact that the exotic and foreign story begins to appear as comically understandable to a western audience.

This too is very apparent in audience comments: on the one hand, they voice half-serious bafflement (“Who is Benny Lava? After listening to the song around 50 times, I’m still a bit unsure”), and, on the other, foreground how the juxtaposition of the oriental and the western is seen as a comic one. For example, viewers have made comments in which Prabhu Deva’s looks and dance style are compared to American artists (e.g. “indian george michael lol”, “He thinks he is crossed between George Michael and Michael Jackson...”). That such comparisons are, however, not simply humorous becomes apparent when one remembers that both of these singer-dancers have been depicted in the media as sexual Others. The foreignness and strangeness of the male protagonist here is thus accentuated by implying that this ethnic Other identifies with a sexual Other of the same ethnicity – a recurrent feature, as we will see with our two other examples, of many buffalaxed videos.



The male protagonist Sunil (Prabhu Deva)

Another typical feature in buffalaxed videos is the incoherence and absurdity of the new stories emerging in them. As the driving force behind the new subtitles is to transcribe the otherwise incomprehensible original lyrics according to what they could sound like in the video editor’s own language, the outcome is necessarily fragmented. In addition to the large number of ‘transgressive’ references to drugs, sex, homosexuality, and bodily functions, as well as double-entendres (e.g., “You need a bun to bite Benny Lava!”) in the lyrics, another key characteristic is indeed that they do not add up to a coherent whole as a text. This is because they basically consist of a list of nonsensical one-liners which are completely detached from the video content and from each other. Each new line rarely, if ever, refers to or links up with the previous ones. Consider, for instance, the following:

“Have you been high today?
I see the nuns are gay!
My brother yelled to me...
I love you inside Ed

My looney bun is fine, Benny Lava!
Minor bun engine made Benny Lava!”

A very typical audience comment is, in fact, a reaffirmation that this kind of nonsensicality and incoherence is highly comic – an example being: “It veri funny.... It really sound like english.... Thnx to this, alot ppl will smile n laugh ...”

On the whole, then, the buffalaxed video transforms the oriental Others into culturally incongruous figures: it transfigures their image and identity and shows incomprehension of their values and communication code. The Others in the video still remain characters from a recognizable Indian romantic film, but they also acquire new attributes that disrupt the uniformity of their moral and cultural identity. That said, it could nevertheless be argued that, while these ways of representing the Other can clearly be considered as disparaging and denigrating, they are not necessarily entirely negative. As also witnessed by the massive audience commentary on *Benny Lava*, for the fans of Indian film the buffalax industry – in exactly the same way as fan fic-

tion and fan art in general – is also an expression of their attachment and appreciation of the cultural object (see also Leppänen 2009, 2012). The entextualization and resemiotization practices so typical of fan cultures, in this respect, are a sign of active prosumption – of searching for new ways of re-crafting the cultural product which are not always derogatory and problematic, but which also accentuate and add to its appreciation. This is nicely encapsulated by one of the commentators of Benny Lava when s/he wrote that “The funny thing about these faux translations is I end up fucking loving the songs!”

***Niilin hanhet*, ‘The Geese of the Nile’: The ambivalent Other**

Our second example, *Niilin hanhet*, ‘The Geese of the Nile’ (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lo_edXUIrT8), is a buffalaxed video produced by a Finnish young man. The original music video used as the basis for ‘The Geese of the Nile’ was published on YouTube in October 2008, and it was soon followed by its buffalaxed version. Until the buffalaxed version became a YouTube hit in Finland, and the band performing in it was located by the Finnish media, the band members were completely unaware of their sudden YouTube fame. In an interview in a Finnish newspaper, the singer, Ebdo Mihemed, let out that both videos had been tremendous surprises to the band (*Helsingin Sanomat* 2009).

Mihemed and his band come from Syria: while they are not national celebrities, they are popular performers in weddings in their home region around Aleppo. The original song performed by the band is called *Pênzedî Zêde* and it represents a typical folk song type of the Anatolia region and its neighboring areas (Aaltonen & Kärjä 2010: 6). It is a traditional Kurdish wedding song in which a young girl asks her mother for the permission to marry the man she loves, instead of marrying a man who has been arranged for her. The video is basically a straightforward recording of a live performance of this song in a restaurant.



Ebdo Mihemed and the new lyrics

As with the previous example, the original lyrics and their translation into English, as well as the buffalaxed Finnish lyrics and their translation into English can be found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lo_edXUIrT8.

In Finland, the buffalaxed video has been a real hit: in a country with some 5.4 million inhabitants, it has been viewed more than 2.6 million times (August 2012). The new lyrics show somewhat more coherence than those in *Benny Lava*, but, again, there is no real narrative. For example, the new lyrics have no connection whatsoever to the content of the original song, the reason being they were subtitled without any knowledge of what the original song is about. Again, the buffalaxing was done on the basis of what the lyrics sound like in the video editor’s own language – in this case, Finnish. For instance, the lyrics label the singer/protagonist as “Pensseli-setä” (‘uncle push broom’; originally *pênzedî zêde*). This name suits the purposes of the buffalaxed lyrics perfectly, because it also functions as a reference to the singer’s moustache, a feature which for many Finns appears to be a highly characteristic feature of Middle Eastern men. Another descriptive attribute given to the singer in the lyrics is “meisseli-setä”, ‘uncle jackhammer’, a slightly different transcription of the original words, and it likens the man metonymically to his penis (in vernacular Finnish the word “meisseli”, literally a screwdriver, can function as a euphemism for the penis).

The sexual theme of this characterization is further accentuated in the song with the help of descriptions of the protagonist’s sexual activities: the subtitles claim that he is saying such things as ‘stick[ing] it’ ‘in my own ass’, ‘stick[ing] the

geese of the Nile' 'in my own ass', and (as perhaps another sexual act) sticking 'a banana into the mouth'. Homosexuality and sodomy are thus, once more, suggested in the representation of the oriental Other. Further, he is also depicted as dangerous ("hazardi", a 'hazard') and as being engaged in other shady and absurd activities. For example, he is subtitled as describing himself as someone who 'bites', who 'drinks whisky', and is interested in expensive cars ('Mer-Mercedez Benz') and money ('million'). Clearly, all of these descriptions are geared towards denigrating the Middle Eastern man by recycling some of the racist, Islamophobic and homophobic prejudices voiced in Finland. He is thus represented as an uncivilized and immoral beast.

What is noteworthy in this connection is that so far Finland has had relatively few immigrants and refugees. One indication of this is that the number of people with a foreign background ranges between 120,000 and 200,000 (Statistics Finland 2012) – which, at the most, is only about 3.7 per cent of the whole of the population. However, immigrants with a Middle Eastern background are beginning to be visible in Finnish society, particularly because there are many kebab and pizza restaurants that are run by them. That some Finns already have strong and prejudiced opinions about Middle Eastern people (often referred to as "ähläms"⁴ – a well-known derogatory term in Finland) is illustrated by comments such as the following:

- Mercedes million... This is true. Namely a Mercedes is the ähläm's dream car. xD There they have these the geese of the Nile and other things such as bananas and kebab... But this is good this Geese of the Nile, xD for Real!⁵
- I'd fancy some kebab

At the same time, as is witnessed for example by the recent success of the populist *Perussuomalaiset* party (who call themselves *The Finns* in English) – which markets itself as a party critical of

⁴ A mock word derived from the Arabic greeting "Ahlan wa Sahlan", 'welcome'.

⁵ All the originally Finnish comments have been translated into English by the authors and are here given in their translated form only.

immigration – the political climate in the country has become distinctly more xenophobic. Aggression towards immigrants has increased and the coverage regarding immigrants even in the public media is often quite negative. Some of this negativity is certainly evident in the buffalaxed video and also in its reception by Finnish viewers (see also Aaltonen & Kärjä's 2010 discussion of the polarized reception of 'The Geese of the Nile').

However, as quite a few of the audience comments illustrate, the reception of the video was not exclusively mocking and racist. Comments like the following were also quite typical:

- This is a good guy. Don't you fucking call him bad or a clown. Mihemed rule!s
- I must say that Mihemed handled the job in quite a bueno way:)

In fact, the video became hugely popular in Finland. As a result, Mihemed gained instant celebrity status. He was subsequently invited to Finland not once, but twice, to tour around the country, and even gave several performances on national television. The Finnish media also became very interested in Mihemed, and in 2009 and 2010 published several articles about him. Since he did not speak Finnish or English, the articles rarely cited him verbatim or gave him much opportunity to voice his own opinions. In this sense, he was basically treated as an object with little active agency himself. Nevertheless, many of the newspaper articles written about him represented him in very positive terms, as a friendly, warm and hard-working character who really did not mind the derogatory humor in the buffalaxed lyrics of his song. For instance, one of the Finnish newspapers described his views as follows:

The likeable and easily approachable, 43-year-old singer is aware of the connotations of the songs he sings. These don't worry him. In an elegant way, he turns the situation to his advantage. "Every language has words that gain new meanings in other languages. It only produces accidental humor which people find funny." (*Ilkka*, February 14, 2010, transl. by SL)

Publicly, at least, Mihemed considered the problematic humor of the buffalaxed video accidental,

thus sidestepping the issue whether the origin of his popularity was really quite deliberately racist and xenophobic, and whether his ascension was not only spurred by the recognition of his qualities, but also by his depiction as an indecent and peculiar object. At the same time, the fact that as a Middle Eastern man he unexpectedly became a celebrity created a real opportunity for him as an artist. In another interview in a Finnish magazine *Seiska* (November 12, 2009), he commented on this by saying that “in our country, there is no freedom of the press. I didn’t know anything about YouTube, because in our country we are not allowed to use it. The possibilities for circulating music are very limited.” His celebrity status thus gave him an opportunity to make Finns see him as a real person and allowed him to introduce traditional Kurdish music to Finns, talk about the lack of freedom of speech in Syria, and record his first-ever album – which was something that he had not been able to do previously during his 20-year career as a professional wedding singer.



Eبدو Mihemed and an advertisement for his album *The Best of Pusselisetä* ('Uncle Push Broom')

Hence, the buffalaxed video which represented the oriental Other as a morally dubious figure, a homosexual and a sodomite, also made the real-life performer, singer Mihemed, a well-loved and celebrated figure in Finland, at least for some time. In a way, this kind of ambivalence in the

representation of the Other can be argued to effectively foreground the issue of what may be happening to the Other in superdiversifying social and cultural settings: in them, the traditional classificatory ideological apparatus which segments the complexity of the social world into mutually exclusive compartments of the Self and the Other is beginning to look distinctly outdated, giving impetus to new conceptualization which are more liquid in nature – and, in their liquidity, equally problematic in new ways.

Terojen koettelemus, 'The Trial of the Two Teros': Othering Them and Us

The relevance of the traditional classificatory system is also brought into sharp focus in our third example. This popular Finnish buffalaxed video (1.6 million viewings) *Terojen koettelemus*, 'The Trial of the Two Teros' (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RradOrYKF8U>), depicts a scene from a popular 1975 Bollywood action adventure film *Sholay* ('Fire'), by Ramesh Sippy. *Sholay* tells the story of two convicts who are hired to capture a ruthless bandit. The film is generally considered one of the greatest classic films in the history of Bollywood, which is why it is well-known outside India as well. In this scene, the two main characters are driving an old sidecar motorbike in the countryside, vigorously singing a song called *Yeh Dosti* ('This Friendship'), a literal celebration of their friendship. Their trip is interrupted by the sight of a pretty young woman on the side of the road, and they decide to toss a coin to decide which one gets to woo her. The original lyrics and their translation into English, as well as the buffalaxed Finnish lyrics and their translation into English can again be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UvMUArtaEA>.



The new punchline: *Tero Saatana, s'olet gay* ('Damn, Tero, you're gay')

In the buffalaxed version, the original story about the two men's everlasting friendship is transformed into an exalted depiction of homoerotic love. This love story is built with the help not only of new subtitles, but also through the combination of the subtitles with the joyful, happy, and uplifting melodies of the song and the cinematic narrative which, even in the original, could be interpreted as suggesting a homoerotic subtext. The buffalax editor thus manages to suggest to viewers the interpretative possibility that this video really is a homoerotic love story. Again, in the same way as in the two other examples discussed here, the representation of these two men may indicate that in cultural representations of the Other – especially the male Other – there may, in fact, be a tendency to view ethnic otherness as also sexual otherness.

More specifically, the lyrics drive home this interpretation by their sexually explicit lexical choices. For example, the two men are depicted as having 'fucked' and being 'gay'. In addition, the refrain, "Tero saatana, s'olet gay" ('Damn, Tero, you're gay'), amplified by jocular and emphatic swearing, energetic singing and expansive body language, reinforces the impression that these two men are indeed celebrating their homosexuality here.



'I'm gay, this is OK'

Part of the humor of the video also derives from the way in which it recontextualizes and resemiotizes aspects of western-style biker films as part of a coming out story. Here, these include the motorbike and a sense of liberation from the norms of the society. Within this frame, the two men keep looking and smiling at each other

fondly, holding hands and opening themselves up to the world. They appear to be proud of what they are, and, in the same way as in the original – a celebration of male bonding – now seem to be celebrating their mutual erotic love. At the same time, it also seems clear that their homosexuality is here viewed from a western heteronormative perspective: in their unrestrained confessional delivered in an ancient sidecar motorbike, the characters do appear rather silly. For one thing, they bear no resemblance to western homoerotic cult biker icons (such as Tom of Finland characters). Perhaps because of this incompatibility with homoerotic imagery, the video has given rise to comments which also question the sexual orientation of the characters: 'this isn't a gay film, they just sound like they are gay'.

Another scene of the buffalaxed video which also subverts the heterosexuality of the two men apparent in the original film features a brief encounter with a young woman. The original scene has no dialogue or lyrics, but the buffalaxed video has added subtitles which assign new meanings to the encounter (e.g. 'the sexual orientation of the two Teros is put to the test / This woman will turn even a queer into a straight guy'). Like the practice we know from silent films, the subtitles thus function as narrative commentary steering the interpretation of what we are seeing in the scene in a particular direction.



'This woman will turn even a queer into a straight guy'

This episode is followed by dialogue, again introduced by the buffalax editor: 'Let's toss a coin: tails I get laid, heads you'. In this scene the men turn their attention to the woman and no longer to each other. The woman gives the men a leering look, and they toss the coin to decide which

of them gets to approach her. The interpretation of the original and the subtitled lyrics is the same: to get the girl.

However, whereas the original film depicts this scene entirely without dialogue, the buffalax lyrics, in the same way as our two other examples, again employ sexually explicit language (e.g. 'tails I get laid, heads you'). The coin tossed lands sideways. The men turn their heads to the woman as the decision is now handed over to her. She disappears into the wilderness, becoming unattainable. When the male characters look disappointed at what happened, the subtitled narrative plays with idioms that tie the interpretation back to the topic of being gay. The subtitled narrative states that 'banging ladies is for straight guys anyway' ("akkojen köyriminen onkin heterojen hommaa"), reversing the discriminatory Finnish idiom that if something is stupid it is 'a job for gay guys' ("homojen hommaa"). The episode is thus narrated as a temporary and futile aberration from heterosexuality, and is quickly backgrounded by the continuation of the two men's jubilant journey.

The theme of homosexuality is also approached in the video from the perspective of Nordic men. One of the instances where this becomes evident is the fact that one of the characters is named "Tero", using a very common Finnish male name. In this way, it could be argued, some of the otherness of the Oriental man is projected onto the Finnish man as well. In other words, while the two characters are represented as the unequivocal Other, for example by subtitling them as speaking in ways in which immigrants and foreigners are often taken to speak Finnish,⁶ they are also represented as the Finnish Self, blurring the distinction between the Self and the Other. Hence, also the Finnish (man) can be the Other – as far as his sexuality is concerned. This interpretative possibility was noticed by the viewers as well, some of them implying that also their lifeworlds include a number of 'Teros' (e.g. 'One of my friends is called Tero...').

⁶ Examples of this include doubling the length of consonants: e.g. [sa:tana] becomes [sa:t:ana] and the [ä] sound becomes an approximation between [a] and [ä], e.g. [tämä] becomes [täm:ä]).

Another example of the sexual othering of the local man was the way in which several viewers compared the two Indian characters to Swedes. Thus, for example, the highest rated comment the video got on YouTube described it as the 'national folklore of Sweden'. Another viewer pointed out that 'these are the Aryan cousins of Swedes from the bend of the Indus'. While such comments as these link the video with the notorious tradition of Finnish ethnic humor which takes all Swedish men to be homosexuals, once again, they also resemiotize the difference of the Oriental man so that it is made to characterize Otherness on another scale, in reference to the closest neighboring Other of Finns, the Swedish man.

In sum, in the same way as in the case of our two previous examples, the humor of this video arises from its subversion of the original story contents and its characters. Even those who have not seen *Sholay* can safely assume that it does *not* deal with homoerotic love, and humor is evoked when we realize that a celebration of homoerotic love would indeed be extremely out of place or abnormal in a Bollywood film (see e.g. Morreall 2009: 68). As we already saw in connection with *Benny Lava* and *Pensselisetä*, the explicit (homo)sexualization of the Oriental Others makes the men depicted in the videos quite incongruous.

However, perhaps due to the uplifting and exalted tone set by the music and the activities on the screen, the representation of the Oriental Other in the video is, once again, not altogether problematic. In fact, many viewers have interpreted the video as a coming out story and have used their YouTube comments to celebrate the characters' ride to freedom: for example, there are comments like 'I wanna be gay too if they have so much fun:)' and 'this joy of coming out doesn't cease to delight me'. In addition, some of the most prejudiced and hateful comments by viewers have been flagged as inappropriate by other viewers. YouTube viewers have thus wanted to background the overt racism and homophobia present in the reception of buffalaxed videos such as 'The Trial of the Two Teros', in support of the story about coming out and liberation.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have suggested that YouTube, as a particular example of convergent and divergent social media culture, is engaged with superdiversity in three ways. We argued that it is (1) a forum for activities and interactions by individuals and groups who may themselves be superdiverse, (2) a site where language use, communication, dissemination of information and mediation of cultural practices are marked by plurality, heterogeneity, and poly-centricity of semiotic resources and normativities, and (3) a discursive location where the superdiversifying Other can be represented and investigated.

The last of these was the focus of our analysis: we have showed here how buffalaxed videos, as an example of a particular translocal YouTube activity culture, take issue with the superdiverse Other with the help of parodic and humorous transformations, produced, most often, by western video producers, of oriental film and video footage. The reason why the Other has become a recurrent topic for this kind of semiotic work, we have argued, has to do with the fact that s/he is someone who can no longer be readily categorized with traditional classificatory schemes. The Other, an increasingly visible and proximal figure in real-life, mediated and online contexts, is characterized by diversity across a range of variables. And this complex and shifting diversity calls for new semiotic, re-interpretative work.

Further, we have suggested that for many people, and in fact for entire activity cultures, YouTube offers affordances for semiotic work focusing on the Other. In the case of buffalaxed videos, these affordances have a great deal to do with their entertainment function. In this sense, and along the lines suggested by McRobbie (2005), our analysis confirms that also buffalaxed videos can well be seen as one particular example of the post-politically correct entertainment sites in which it has become acceptable to mock and denigrate, in the name of humor.

With the help of three cases we showed that the representation of the Other in YouTube tends to be heterogeneous and ambiguous. In making multiple interpretations possible, they could be taken to illustrate what Weaver (2010) has

referred to as liquid racism. On the one hand, we traced ideological stances which recontextualized and resemiotized well established derogatory, disparaging, denigrating, and discriminatory discourses about the Other. The Other was depicted as a multifaceted negative being: as a nonsensical, naïve, immoral, over-sexualized, homosexual, and perverse figure. We also showed that s/he was represented as a fundamentally incongruous creature in the sense that the new lyrics gave him/her a voice that was systematically in conflict not only with the language, messages of the original footage and the culture it springs from, but also with the conventions, values and norms shaping the depiction of the characters and the stories that they were part of in their original contexts. For example, in all of the three videos implicit, indirect, and symbolic descriptions of the characteristics of the Other, his/her culture, and, in particular, his/her emotional, romantic, and erotic attachments were consistently converted into pornographic descriptions of his/her sexuality and sexual actions. Further, the contents of his/her messages were presented as absurd ramblings not adding up to a coherent story. Such incongruity was also seen as being responsible for much of the humor and parody of the buffalaxed videos.

Another interesting issue rising from our analysis was that in the buffalaxed videos that were examined the Other was primarily seen as male. There might be a number of explanations of why this should be the case, and the phenomenon deserves further study, but for our purposes here, it is particularly interesting to note that the male Other was depicted not only as an ethnically and culturally different creature, but also as the sexual Other – as a hyper-sexualized heterosexual man, a homosexual and a sodomite, often embodied in one and the same figure, making his otherness multiply over-determined. We concluded that in cultural representations of the male Other there may even be a tendency to conflate and fuse together ethnic Otherness with sexual Otherness.

Such over-determined Othering may, in fact, reflect extremely deep-rooted, primal anxieties surrounding the ways in which Otherness can be

encountered and dealt with emotionally and psychologically, but, again, for our purposes here, it is more relevant to note that such complicated patterns of Othering may also mirror the enormous difficulties involved in any human attempts at genuine interaction with and understanding of other humans who are for some reason conceptualized as different. In some way, in the encounter with the Other, we may be wired, as Kristeva (1991: 191-192) has argued, to deny our own difference, the stranger within us⁷. In the light of this conceptualization, what we fear in the Other is the uncanny way in which his or her strangeness reminds us of our own Otherness.

However, our conclusions are not entirely pessimistic. While traditional western metanarratives of the Other were made use of and recontextualized and resemiotized in our materials, we often also detected polyvalence and ambiguity both in the ways of representation and reception of the Other.

Firstly, in some instances, it was not entirely clear who the Other was. Interestingly, the (sexual) Otherness of the oriental man in our third example was also projected onto the local man, the Finns and the Swedes. While in some viewers' comments this was suggested in a derogatory way, in others it remained ambiguous, and in still others it was considered a positive thing: sexual Otherness can be a feature of the Self, and it is not necessarily a sign of immorality or corruption. Secondly, as our analyses showed, the videos also give rise to multiple interpretations and debates. Thirdly, we noted how the at times quite disparaging depictions of the Other could, nevertheless, lead to a deeper appreciation of the original source product, to opportunities for the Other to speak in his own voice, and, as in our second example, even to acquire celebrity status, which was, admittedly, partly based on the problematic, ridiculed representation in the buffalaxed video, but partly on the audiences' appreciation of the singer and his music.

⁷ In a similar vein, Cameron and Kulick (2003:122) have argued that homophobic talk can be both a performative enactment of the speakers' own heterosexuality, and an indication of the fear of the possibility of their own homosexual desire.

In sum, we hope to have shown how buffalaxed videos can be seen as complex discourse in that they represent the oriental Other in a way that is not easily decodable. While the videos repeat and resemiotize aspects of the stereotypical and discriminatory Western heteronormative metanarratives of the Orient, they also depict the Other in ways in which his/her Otherness is no longer the simple anti-thesis of 'Us' – the western subject – but, occasionally, very much like 'Us'. To a large extent, we think that buffalaxed videos thrive on the tension between disparagement, on the one hand, and ambiguity and polyvalence, on the other. The question whether they only provide humorous entertainment for audiences, or whether they are at the same time seen as disparaging and discriminatory sometimes remains unresolved. After all, as Freud has reminded us in his discussion of the psychodynamics of jokes (as cited in Billig 2009: 34-35), in spite of the fact that we may think that we are laughing at the cleverness of a joke, in reality we cannot be quite sure whether we might be laughing because of its tendentious aspects, or, as in the case of buffalaxed videos, because we are enjoying its discriminatory aspects.

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