

Laughing across Frontiers. *L'Auberge espagnole* (Klapisch, 2002) as Cultural Mediator of / for a Borderless Europe¹

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Abstract

Released in the thick of 'Europeanization' processes like Maastricht (1992) or Bologna (1999), Cedric Klapisch's largely humorous film, *L'Auberge espagnole* (2002), which centres on the chaotic flat-share experiences of a group of European students on a university exchange in Barcelona, has invariably been classified or categorised as a comedy, and as such, exposed to the criticisms of scholars and reviewers who tend to see in it no more than an over optimistic, lighthearted, simplistic portrayal of current realities. Rather than add to the number of analysts who accuse the filmmaker of crafting a purely entertaining story, crammed full of clichés and stereotypes, my aim in this paper is to *vindicate* Klapisch's use of the comic as an enticing coder or conveyor of cross-cultural *meanings* respecting ourselves and neighbouring others in a 'united' Europe.

Keywords: *comedy, Klapisch, Europe, 'cultural translation'*

If, as Harish Trivedi asserts, 'cultural translation' signifies interpreting one culture to another, rewriting the foreign and 'carrying it across' from its original context towards the receiving culture², then cinema, based as it is on the production/construction of imaged stories aimed at attracting ever-wider and more heterogeneous audiences, can be looked upon as a translator *par excellence*.

On this understanding, the premise of this paper is that 'translation' has always been the condition of screen traffic. Even so, it is important to remember that although much of the appeal of cinema derives from the medium's potential to offer life-like representations of familiar predicaments, films are *not* literal transpositions of real life unto a screen. On the contrary, as Theodor Adorno pointedly signalled in his essay entitled "Cultural Criticism and Society", cinema is no more than an industrially organised, artistic *re-construction* of reality – an autonomous type of artwork, but one that is simultaneously engaged with the external conditions into which it is placed for exhibition and consumption³. Although Adorno's piece was historically and culturally specific, his words still ring true, especially his insistence that the study of any

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² Harish Trivedi, "Translating culture vs. cultural translation", in *Translation - reflections, refractions, transformations*, eds. Paul St-Pierre and Prafulla C. Kar, 281; 282 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007).

³ Theodor Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber, 23 (London: Neville Spearman, 1967).

particular film must concurrently engage with the artistic qualities of the film itself and the context in which it is received. This context extends to its formulaicness, or generic foundations. Given that film genre conventions somehow *dictate* the specific ways in which visual narratives communicate or ‘translate’ cultural realities into a language understood by large audiences⁴, it is highly surprising that the comedy status of *L'Auberge espagnole*⁵ – a film so evidently crafted to amuse, entertain, and provoke enjoyment – should (as far and as I can appreciate) only have been treated by academics, critics and reviewers as a side-issue, if not a fault-finding feature in/of the film.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to challenge an all too easy reading of *L'Auberge espagnole* as a mere ‘feel good’, entertaining comic piece. After briefly commenting on the way lived experience as a ‘crossbreed’ European citizen and spectator may have influenced my *own* critical stance vis-à-vis the film, my aim is to approach *L'Auberge espagnole* by initially focussing on Comedy as a concept and a genre. From there, and by means of a detour into the Cultural Translation stance advocated by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere⁶, I shall concentrate on how comedy nowadays might usefully be thought about as a distinctive cultural mode. Finally, by centring attention on various of the comic devices used in the film and, more importantly, by drawing on theoretical insights from Thomas Hobbes and Sigmund Freud, I propose to focus on the ‘not-so-comic’ implications camouflaged beneath this amiable representation of multilingual and multicultural Europe

It was from one of my daughters that I first heard about *L'Auberge espagnole*. She was very enthusiastic about the film since, as she told me, it so amusingly reflected some of the experiences she had lived through as an Erasmus student in France. If the film awakened in her warm memories of cross-border mobility, independence and companionship, the sensibility it stirred up in me had more to do with that feeling of foreignness that keeps cropping up in those Europeans who, like myself, have travelled over to another member state, settled there, learnt the language and adapted to the way of life, but who find that full integration into and acceptance by the host community can never actually be gained. Apart from dissimilar cultural baggage, little details like accent, or even an odd turn of phrase or a mere slip in intonation tend to mark one out as ‘different’ and hence, as not *really* from here. My own emotional investment in this film is, or has therefore been, quite different from my daughter’s: she is a Spanish-born youngster who has had the opportunity to travel abroad and mix with other European students, whereas I (a French-born citizen, educated in Britain and, through marriage, now a Spaniard by adoption) feel I belong to none of these places and, at the same time, that I am from all these places at once. Thus, from our distinct generational and subjective standpoints both my daughter and myself have found or recognised in *L'Auberge espagnole* an entertaining dramatisation of personal experiences in cross-cultural and transnational cohabitation.

⁴ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999).

⁵ Cédric Klapisch, *L'Auberge espagnole*, 2002, Film. For a detailed outline of Cédric Klapish’s filmography, see Sylvie Blum-Reid, “Away from Home? Two French Directors in Search of their Identity” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 26 (2009): 1-9.

⁶ Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1998).

Indeed, much of the action in the film takes place in a communal flat in Barcelona populated by students of various nationalities. Thanks to major exchange programmes such as *Erasmus* (1986), *Lingua* (1989), *Tempus* (1990), *Socrates* (1995), and more recently the implementation of the Bologna process, all these youngsters are making the most of a year's study abroad to, by the same stroke of hand, learn to cope with linguistic and cultural diversity in a confined apartment space which soon reveals itself to be a miniature model of/for contemporary Europe.

We meet the main character, Xavier (Romain Duris) as a French student who, having almost completed his degree in economics, is looking for work. He is assured by an influential friend of his father's that a good job will be awaiting him if he gains working knowledge of Spanish. Determined not to pass up the opportunity, he enrolls on an Erasmus exchange programme and heads for a year's study in Barcelona, despondently leaving behind his loving girlfriend Martine (Audrey Tautou). Upon arrival, and after initial problems in finding lodging due to the housing shortage in Barcelona, he ends up sleeping on the sofa in the flat of a young, newly-wed, French couple he met at the airport. Fortunately, in next to no time he is able to move in to an apartment already crammed full of international students - namely a young English woman, a German, an Italian, a Scandinavian and his Spanish girlfriend. Once accepted as a member of this mini, international community, Xavier's very nationalistically bound ideas and attitudes are slowly but surely challenged in a positive way by the diverse personalities of his housemates, including his loyalty to Martine. Unable to meet the obnoxiously high rental fee demanded of them, the group is soon joined by Isabelle (Cécile de France), from francophone Belgium. She turns out to be a lesbian who instructs Xavier in how to please a woman. He puts her explicit sexual lessons to good use in seducing his initial host, Anne-Sophie (Judith Godrèche), who continues as bored, lonely and un-adapted as ever. In this off-handish way, the film depicts the ups, downs and limelight experiences of daily 'convivencia' or cohabitation of so-called 'overseas' students in foreign surroundings. The group even finds itself putting up with British Wendy's (Kelly Reilly) brother William (Kevin Bishop), a loudmouthed, abrasive character who sets everyone on edge with his xenophobia and offensive prejudices. The film ends with Xavier returning to France a changed person - a person who, having acquired a much more plural sense of community and self, sees himself as a foreigner in his own country.

Now, if the success of *L'Auberge espagnole* raised some critical and scholarly interest, the categorisation of the film as a comedy has also led to it not being taken entirely seriously⁷. In my view, the fundamental flaw in many (however erudite) analyses of *L'Auberge espagnole* is that they obviate the particular *modality* of Comedy, in the sense in which the term can be used to suggest "ways of situating messages in relation to an ostensible reality"⁸. Thus, in an attempt to counter the criticisms of scholars and reviewers who tend to see in the film no more than an over optimistic,

⁷ Olivier Béguin, "L'Auberge Espagnole: Interculturalism in the European Melting Pot" in *Critical Issues in Multiculturalism*, eds. Diane Powell and Fiona Sze (Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press, February 2004), volume 8, 71-82; Elizabeth Ezra, Antonio Sánchez, "L'Auberge espagnole (2002): transnational departure or domestic crash landing?" *Studies in European Cinema* 2-2 (2005): 137-148; Jane Warren, "Giving voice to Multilingual Europe in Contemporary European Cinema", in *Multilingual Europe: Reflections on Language and Identity*, eds. Jane Warren and Heather Merle Benbow (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008)107-126.

⁸ Geoff King, *Film Comedy* (London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2002), 9.

light-hearted, simplistic portrayal of current realities, my aim in the following sections is to *vindicate* Klapisch's use of the comic as an enticing coder or conveyor of cross-cultural *meanings* respecting ourselves and neighbouring 'others' in a 'united' Europe.

The first obstacle one comes up against when embarking on an analysis of the comic is the impenetrability of the term 'Comedy'. We might all agree that the obvious quality and/or basic principle of comedy is that it makes us laugh but, after centuries of discussion and disquisitions on how (in what ways) and why (for what particular reasons) Comedy achieves its effect, there is, to this day, little consensus about what exactly constitutes Comedy⁹. More often than not conceived as a giant and very imprecise 'umbrella-term' that encompasses anything from the psychology of jokes and humour to the vast array of comedy-related categories such as farce, wit, laughter, puns, incongruity, parody, satire, and so on, Comedy turns out to be so infinitely modifiable in its meanings and purposes that, as Geoff King remarks in the introduction to his monograph on film comedy, "no single adequate theory of comedy" has ever been put forward "despite various efforts to produce an all-embracing account"¹⁰. On this view, it seems that those scholars who, in a sweeping manner, categorise *L'Auberge espagnole* as a comedy or as pertaining to the comic genre (with no further explanation) give the film a fixity that eludes the notoriously slippery nature of Comedy. For this very reason, I prefer to leave aside genre conventions and concentrate instead on the "comic modes – or manners of presentation"¹¹ – in which *L'Auberge espagnole* approaches key issues respecting language and identity in contemporary Europe.

The question of Language is, of course, fundamental in communication transfer and exchange of knowledge and understanding. Despite long-standing differences in opinion among theorists as to whether language is part of culture or not, the fact is that traditional assumptions about translation being little more than a linguistic transaction between two languages have come to be replaced by a view of translation as a complex *negotiation* between cultures. This new understanding has brought with it major shifts in focus – Translation Studies now finding it has some common ground with Cultural Studies, and vice-versa¹². It is therefore from a very *cultural* perspective, that I propose a view of *L'Auberge espagnole* as an astute exercise in "the ways in which texts [can] become cultural capital across cultural boundaries"¹³.

Although it is clear that the more one looks at a film, the more there is to see, at a glance, it would seem that several comic strategies are simultaneously at work in *L'Auberge espagnole* – namely, the cultural power of untranslatability; the comic effects of mistranslation; incongruous representations of reality, and the laughter that emanates from a feeling of superiority. Focus on these different devices will help determine how and why, they each in their own way facilitate the transmission of certain feelings over others.

Without any doubt, the first and most striking aspect of the film is the *untranslatability* of its title, precisely at a time when the European Community was

⁹ Robert W. Corrigan, "Introduction: Comedy and the Comic Spirit", in *Comedy: meaning and form*, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 1-13; John Morreal, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (New York: SUNY Press, 1987); King, , *Film Comedy*, 4.

¹⁰ King, 5.

¹¹ King, 2.

¹² In *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*, Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere detected two crucial phases in the evolution of Translation Studies which they aptly described as "The Cultural Turn in Translation Studies" veering, in their own words, to "The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies".

¹³ Bassnett and Lefevere, 138.

leading an all-out campaign to promote linguistic and cultural diversity through educational exchange programmes. According to the director, the choice of the very French expression “L’Auberge espagnole”¹⁴ as title for the film was a calculated cultural pun, aimed at highlighting both the temporality of Erasmus stays and the confusion stemming from the mix of cultures and languages. As Klapish explained in an interview for *The Guardian*:

In French it means Spanish hostel, but it also refers to a mess. Spanish hostels in the 19th century didn’t have restaurants, so all the nationalities had to bring their own food and eat together. It was all about cultural difference, and sharing.¹⁵

“Mess” is quite definitely a key theme in the film¹⁶, ranging as it does from those insufferable, Erasmus enrolment, bureaucratic requirements, to the chaotic, day-to-day, living arrangement in the “Spanish apartment”, right through to the final, subjective shots of Xavier nostalgically browsing through a pile of photographs, as a personal voice-over narrates or “translates” his stream of thoughts:

I am not that. Nor that. No longer that. But I'm all that. I am him, him, him I am her, her..I am French, Spanish, English, Danish. I am not one but several. I am like Europe, I am all of that ! I am a real mess!¹⁷

The point I am getting at, following Sylvie Blum-Reid’s thesis¹⁸, is the subtle way in which the film’s title comprises in a nutshell both an announcement of its plot-line and a tongue-in-cheek comment upon itself as a national cinematic product. Indeed, if we meet the protagonist, Xavier, as an ambitious, bigoted and self-centred youngster from Paris, he is shown to return home after a year’s absence a changed person, now able to recognise and embrace the multifaceted nature of his own, French identity. In like manner, although the very culturally-specific title *L’auberge espagnole* stamps the film as perhaps exceedingly *French* in essence, one soon discovers that the purpose of the visual narrative is precisely to throw bridges across cultures and cultural practices!

Rather like Xavier, who ends up rejecting the idea of a single cultural and individual identity, the film itself evidently proved difficult to categorise outside France. As Ezra and Sánchez explain, if the original French, “auberge,” underlines the transient nature of Xavier’s residence in Spain, and the word “espagnole” mixes together French and Spanish cultures, the film reached Spain under the title, *Una casa de locos* (madhouse), the stress being laid on the chaos and schizophrenia of “convivencia” or cohabitation.¹⁹ In the United States, the film became known as *The Spanish Apartment*.

¹⁴ In the *Larousse dictionnaire moderne: Français-anglais-anglais français* (1960), the term ‘auberge’ is defined as: “hostel: inn; public house”.

¹⁵ Quoted in Warren, 109.

¹⁶ Warren, 109.

¹⁷ “Je ne suis pas ça. Ni ça. Je ne suis plus ça. Ni ça. Ni ça. Ni ça. Et je suis tout ça. Et je suis lui, et lui, et lui, et lui aussi. Je suis elle, elle, elle et elle aussi. Je suis, français, espagnol, anglais, danois. Je suis comme L’Europe. Je suis tout ça. Je suis un vrai bordel.”

¹⁸ Blum-Reid, 1-9

¹⁹ Ezra and Sánchez, 138-139.

In this new translation, the hustle-and-bustle of *collective* (however temporary) space-sharing, implied in the term “auberge”, was replaced by a cosier (i.e. a private apartment) and more individualistic approach to travel and cohabitation. This was not the interpretation in Canada where the film was released as *Pot Luck*, which suggests “a more hospitable, if improvised, view of the experience of cultural exchange.” Even in Britain, one of the contemplated titles for the film was - not surprisingly, according to Ezra and Sánchez²⁰ - *Europudding*, a way, they argue, of reinforcing British scepticism regarding the European project.

In a sense, it could be contended that this startling assortment of interpretations respecting the film’s title and its subject matter is, in itself, a comic illustration of the workings of cultural translation. Interestingly, the issue of how the same word or phrase can be read or understood differently according to context and/or culture is accommodated within the film in what turns out to be one of its most hilarious scenes. The phone rings. The camera remains fixed on Wendy who takes the call. The spectator is thus only offered her point of view during the brief oral exchange. She manages to understand that the person calling is Xavier’s “maman” but, incapable of expressing herself in French, she has recourse to the list of set phrases in various languages hanging by the phone. For all the linguistic incompetence demonstrated in her laborious enunciation of the message, it seems that “maman” has grasped the fact that Xavier is at the “Faculty,” which she refers to as simply “la Fac.” The unexpected burst of humour comes in/with Wendy’s startled expression at hearing what *she* understands as “fuck” spoken out by a companion’s mother!

With this example, I propose to dig further into the question of comedy as a conveyor of cultural meanings; or more concretely, since this very short scene is a case in point of gross *mis*-translation, of the ways in which comedy transcends geographical and cultural barriers by allowing laughter to spring from the *recognition* of perceived realities. But let me start in a roundabout way. Clearly the film, *L'Auberge espagnole*, is firmly rooted in real life, but as a humorous *re*-construction of a certain actuality, it is also shaped by the interaction of various comic modes, among which fantastic imagery and incongruous juxtapositions play an important part. Bearing this in mind, it is interesting to recall that, after a fairly psychedelic credit presentation, the plot jolts into motion with a number of short and apparently unconnected scenes that together come to form a kind of hieroglyphics of something intense going on. Over and above the jerky, bizarre editing of the film’s opening sequences, a poised, matter-of-fact, male voiceover starts relating the story in French. By means of this off-screen narration, spectators soon realize that the puzzling mosaic of vignettes they are initially ‘hit with’ is no more than a cinematic device establishing a film-computer screen interface between two different time periods: the writing of a novel based on recollections of an Erasmus stay in Spain and most importantly since it turns out to be the film’s main plot-line, the lived experience and consequences of deciding to absent oneself from home for one year. Hence, by the time we reach the scene dramatising the linguistic clash between “fac” and “fuck,” we are already well acquainted with Xavier. So much so that we are hardly aware any longer of the repeated ‘collisions’ between the young man’s voiceover reminiscences and the visual renderings of the experiences he describes, as when Xavier is shown bustling through the labyrinthine corridors of a huge office building in accelerated time, or when, upon being informed of all the documentation he is expected

²⁰ Ezra and Sánchez, 139.

to provide for his Erasmus application, all kinds of forms, certificates, documents suddenly take on a life of their own and start multiplying in disorderly fashion until they almost cover the screen. In both these instances, and precisely because the comedy is so emphatically *visual*, no skill in foreign language is needed to grasp the full meaning of the surreal representations of managerial or bureaucratic jungles. Laughter is provoked by the incongruity of the perceived reality and simultaneously by the juxtaposition of congruity and incongruity. Indeed, have we not all, at some point in our lives, found ourselves lost in, or searching our way through mazes of officialdom? Comedy thus arises out of both the recognition of a lived reality and the outlandish representation of this very same reality²¹. But the important point here is that, for laughter to occur, this comic mode depends on an unspoken consensus or shared agreement among spectators about the social world in which we find ourselves. In other words, however distorted, exaggerated or even surreal some of the scenes in the film may be, they presuppose a social world that is *shared*, despite linguistic and cultural diversity. In this respect, the use made by Kaplish of comedy is key to understanding the director's take on Europe since it helps underpin his view of the union as one, big, congenial community, able to laugh at the petty inconveniences of daily life.

If, as I have just claimed, comedy has the power to connect or bond people across frontiers, the flipside of the matter is decidedly less amiable, especially if laughter is seen to emanate, not so much from incongruous takes on our *common* European identity, as from a sense of cultural distinctiveness or even superiority over others. From this optic, I would argue - against criticisms that the film does not include any true clashes²², that *L'Auberge espagnole* is, on the contrary, peppered with representations of discord and minor cultural conflicts. We have for example, the scenes that emphasise the sense of foreignness and exclusion Xavier is exposed to when, upon arrival in Spain, he is shown dragging a huge suitcase along the streets of a strange city in search of a place to live and being almost physically assaulted by a group of brats who tell him to go back to his own country. In a sense, it might be argued that the whole point of this episode is to convert the - up-till-now - not too likeable, pushy, egocentric Xavier into an object of laughter and thus elicit comedy by means of his humiliation. Thus, from the perspective of superiority theory developed by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, it would seem that comedy ensues from our experiencing "some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the inferiority of others". Or the scene might be considered funny because we enjoy what Nietzsche calls "the guiltless pleasure of another person's misfortune." (*Schadenfreude*)²³ Whatever the nuance or inflection, the fact is that superiority theory has to do with how we engage with characters. In this respect, the film uses a string of devices to make the viewer feel superior not only to Xavier, but to the group of youngsters he ends up living with. In the case of Xavier, the set-up (the social situation) is familiar enough for us to understand exactly how awkward and unfair the turn of events really is. Xavier's desire to find a living place is understandable enough and we recognize his vulnerability. After suffering the indifference – if not

²¹ Rupert D.V. Glasgow, *Madness, Masks and Laughter: an Essay on Comedy* (Cranbury, NY; London; Mississauga, Ontario: Associated University Presses, 1995), 85.

²² Béguin, 77.

²³ These condensed summaries of Thomas Hobbes' and Friedrich Nietzsche's explanations of laughter are taken from Simon Critchley's book, *On Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) and Jacob Isak Nielsen's web-page, "There's something about comedy theory", accessed March, 2011 and April 22, 2012, pov.imv.au.dk/Issue_26/section_1/artc8A.html.

downright rejection - of natives, he is shown embarrassingly occupying the sofa in the home of the French couple he met at the airport. Living through such discomfiture in these foreign surroundings, he certainly earns our sympathy but, precisely because of our superior perspective, we do not *feel* his mortification or anguish. This basically is the reason why spectators' pleasure is guiltless.

Soon however, the opportunity of sharing a flat with other Erasmus students presents itself. But before gaining acceptance into the "auberge espagnole" which gives the film its name, Xavier finds himself having to undergo a kind of "interview" presided over by all flatmates. Around a table and in the typical, half-lit interior of homes in warm countries, all eyes (camera focus) are fixed upon him. Therefore visually, vital, non-verbal information is being "translated" or put across to the audience respecting the interviewee's state of mind. Desperate to be accepted as a member of this student community, Xavier's facial expressions (smiles that mask his insecurity), his tone of voice (conciliatory; in agreement with everything said) and body posture (tense, expectant) all denote his uncertainty as to which approach or attitude he should adopt as the best way to sway the final decision in his favour.

The comic twist in the scene comes from the formal 'tête-à-tête' with the potential newcomer immediately veering to a rather acrid interchange between members of the already formed group. During the conversation, divided opinions and cultural clashes spark up like fireworks, leaving Xavier - the person supposedly 'being examined' - hardly able to get a word in edgeways! The fact that the meeting goes haywire because of squabbling amongst the examiners invites - especially in European mongrels like myself - an amused, even if somewhat patronizing, view of these youngsters as too entrenched in their own, national subjectivities for true convergence to ensue²⁴. In a sense therefore, comedy here not only tells me something about who I am but also about the place I live in. Indeed, bearing in mind that the flatmates are not persons but personifications of 'social types', an infinitely wider vision of the difficulties entailed in cross-cultural, cross-nation relationships surfaces. In other words, by way of stereotypical shortcuts, Klapish manages to reflect, in miniature, some of the workings of the European community. Thus, just as internal conflict in the international group of students is contained because of their need to recruit a new roommate in order to pay the rent, so too are many of the geographical and cultural differences and clashes between European member states repressed and consensus reached for the common good or financial well-being of the Union.

Nor is the complicated question of numerous European languages left aside in Klapish's comic take on convergence and cultural diversity in the EC. Significant in this sense is the short scene that dramatises the very real and sensitive issue of the official language in Catalonia. Surveying the scene in terms of a descriptive scenario, what we are presented with is a group of Erasmus students in the Faculty of economics, attending a class and unable to understand what is being said because the professor is speaking in Catalan. However, if the same scene is apprehended as a comically constructed narrative, what immediately stands out is the jarring inconsistency of a course on (no less than) the future of *world* capitalism being delivered in a (however official) *regional*

²⁴ Alessandro, the Italian, is dead against a Frenchman sharing the flat. In an attempt to appease mounting tensions, Danish Lars reminds his flatmates that nationality was not to be made an issue. Also wanting to re-establish 'good vibes', the German student, Tobias, tries to re-conduct the dialogue by asking Xavier what he expects his life will be in five years' time. His ridiculous question provokes yet another explosion of heated reactions from his companions.

language, especially in view of the fact that most people in Barcelona are bilingual in Catalan and Spanish. In this respect, the intimate connection established in the film between language and local / national identity, humorously depicted as an unexpected hitch or obstacle encountered by foreign students in Barcelona, must be recognised as another call for the Hobbesian laughter of superiority. Indeed, focus on the predicament of these Erasmus undergraduates confronted with a professor in Spain who refuses to teach them in Spanish, invites a view of linguistic divides as a ridiculous pretension in an ever more globalised world and unified Europe.

Apart from the brief reference to cultural disputes and tensions between Catalan and Castilian speakers in Spain, *L'Auberge espagnole* seems bent on presenting multilingualism as a key factor in producing intercultural understanding. Notable in this respect is the range of different languages used in the film: French, English, Spanish and Catalan, with “snippets of other languages thrown in the mix (Danish, Italian, and German.)”²⁵. This said, although almost all the apartment dwellers are bilingual, if not trilingual²⁶, the fact is that the members of the diminutive international community communicate mostly in English. Considering the real-life importance of the language in Europe, most critics tend to view the linguistic dominance of English in the narrative as quite normal. My contention here again is that in analyses of the type, the film is apprehended as if it were a crystal-clear window onto reality, no attention being paid to the comic strategies employed by Kaplish to make us respond in certain ways. In short, although I do not dispute Jane Warren’s assertion that “congeniality is the main principle of European multilingualism in the film”²⁷, I do believe a closer look into the workings of comedy may help reveal more complex - and maybe not so “congenial” - nuances in the message conveyed to the public. Indeed, let it not be forgotten that, under the cover of gaiety and levity, comedy also has the potential to indulge in what André Breton called “ferocious pleasantry”²⁸. Following the theoretical perspective that can be traced back to Sigmund Freud’s conception of humour, it seems that the overall concordance among thinkers and philosophers of this school of thought is that comedy – provoking laughter – is, in civilised societies, the only acceptable or tolerable way in which human beings can release their irrepressible urge towards aggression. But the underlying ethical implication of binding laughter with aggression is, as Konrad Lorenz remarks, that the process invariably “creates fellow feeling among the mockers and defines the object of laughter as ‘outsiders’. Laughter promotes a bond and simultaneously draws a line”²⁹. Viewed from this angle, and coming back to Wendy’s allegedly hilarious mangling of a second language and her misinterpretation of “fac” as “fuck”, it appears that a notoriously critical subtext materialises amidst the puns, directed at the long-known incapacity of ‘Brits’ to speak any language other than their own. Comedy here is evidently been used as a socially acceptable medium whereby an invisible line or division is being drawn between *authentic* Europeans and ‘Brits’.

²⁵ Samuel Amago, “Todo sobre Barcelona: Refiguring Spanish Identities in Recent European Cinema” *Hispanic Research Journal: Iberian and Latin American Studies* 8, no. 1 (2007): 19.

²⁶ Both Soledad (Cristina Brondo) and her Danish boyfriend, Lars (Christian Pagh) speak at least three languages. As a native Catalan, Soledad is evidently bilingual in Catalan and Spanish, and she ‘gets by’ in English, while Lars is fluent in Danish and English, and making progress in Spanish.

²⁷ Jane Warren, “Giving voice to Multilingual Europe in Contemporary European Cinema”, in *Multilingual Europe: Reflections on Language and Identity*, eds. Jane Warren and Heather Merle Benbow., 110 (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

²⁸ André Breton, *Anthologie de l’humour noir* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1966), 19-21.

²⁹ Frances Gray, *Women and laughter*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), 25.

Camouflaged in laughter, the ferocious potential of comedy is pushed that much further in the presentation of Wendy's brother, William (Kevin Bishop), characterised as an obnoxious 'little islander', whose lack of linguistic and intercultural knowledge and understanding clearly places him "on the periphery of the group in the apartment, and of Europe as a whole"³⁰. Viewed in this light, comedy is a battlefield where the relations between a consolidated in-group and those considered tangential to the formation may be articulated - through laughter - in an unthreatening, and hence socially acceptable way.

We might even ask ourselves how the division, comically established in the film between those who 'belong' and those who do not, is 'translated' or deciphered in different national contexts. At a glance, it seems that Klapisch's stereotyping of the British through the characters of Wendy and William, invites U.K spectators to laugh at themselves in the recognition of their lengthy history as 'awkward partners' in the European Union. On the other hand, and no less importantly, if comedy tells us something about the society we live in, it also, as I have already claimed, provides information about who we are and how we stand or position ourselves in a given societal organisation. In this respect, although I consider myself an eager cosmopolitan, my out and out enjoyment of Wendy and William's debasement (even though William is somehow 'redeemed' at the end of the film) has also served to pull me up short in front of myself by bringing to light or showing how prejudices I would rather not hold continue to have a grip on my sense of who I am³¹.

To conclude. *L'Auberge espagnole* is clearly a film shaped in the spirit of a new understanding of culture and language. As such, the true star or main protagonist in Klapisch's film is undeniably Erasmus, the 'study-abroad' programme in which Xavier participates and whose aim it is to open hearts and minds to a bigger world beyond petty regional or nationalistic concerns. Indeed, the more the viewer knows about the multiple languages and cultures presented in the film, the more the comic references to our changing environment make sense. Curiously however, comedy as the chief defining characteristic of the film has not deserved much critical attention. In view of this, my analysis of *L'Auberge espagnole* has centred on comedy as a visual and verbal medium that facilitates both playful and critical, cross-border communication. From this perspective, the untranslability of the French title, misunderstandings and clashes between cultures and languages, surrealist representations of our lived reality, as well as less pleasant truths about ourselves and our relation to others, all serve the process of intercultural encounter in Europe by reshaping thoughts and 'translating' them between nations in the universal language of laughter.

³⁰ Warren, "Giving voice", 114. For a more detailed analysis of Britain's historical trajectory as an 'odd one out' member of the EC, see George Stephen, *An Awkward Partner: Britain in the European Community* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998).

³¹ Want of space prevents me from following up this argument respecting other nationalities i.e. Germany, Italy, Spain

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Râzând dincolo de granițe. *L'Auberge espagnole* (Klapisch, 2002) ca mediator cultural al unei Europe fără frontiere

Lansat chiar în timpul unor procese de „europenizare” ca cele de la Maastricht (1992) sau Bologna (1999), filmul plin de umor al lui Cedric Klapish, *L'Auberge espagnole* (2002), are în centru experiențele haotice de împărțire a unui apartament ale unor studenți europeni aflați într-un schimb de experiență la Barcelona. Filmul a fost invariabil clasificat și categorizat drept comedie și, prin urmare, expus criticilor și recenziilor care n-au văzut în el mai mult decât un portret simplistic al realităților curente. Scopul analizei filmului depășește acuzele aduse regizorului de către recenzorii care susțin că avem a face cu o poveste pur distractivă, plină de clișee și stereotipii. Consider că utilizarea umorului de către Klapisch funcționează ca un cod sau, mai degrabă, ca un transmțător de referințe transculturale ce sugerează respectul de sine și respectul celuilalt într-o Europă „unită”.