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**CfP:** “The Pragmatics of Cringe Humor on the Screen and on Digital Media”

**Venue:** Auditorium St Charles 2 (to be confirmed), University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, France

**Date:** 4-5 May 2023

**Research labs:** EMMA, Études Montpelliéraines du Monde Anglophone, University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3; Centre Interlangues, Texte Image Langage, University of Burgundy

**Conveners:** Dr. Lynn Blin (EMMA, University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3), Dr. Virginie Iché (EMMA, University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3) & Dr. Célia Schneebeli (Centre Interlangues - Textes, Images, Langage, University of Burgundy)

**Keynote speaker:** Pr. Marta Dynel (Łódź University, Poland and Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Lithuania)

**Website:** [https://cringe\\_humor.sciencesconf.org](https://cringe_humor.sciencesconf.org)

**Deadline for submission:** November 20, 2022 (Proposals of around 400 words—along with a short bio-bibliographical notice, no longer than 100 words—to be sent to [cringehumor2023@gmail.com](mailto:cringehumor2023@gmail.com))

## The Pragmatics of Cringe Humor on the Screen and on Digital Media

#*cringe*

This conference intends to examine the pragmatics of cringe humor in the English language on the screen (in sitcoms, TV series, filmed stand-up comedies, films etc.) and on digital media (in audiovisual, textual or multimodal forms). “Cringe humor” should not be taken as yet another coinage to be added to the long list of terms already used to account for humorous phenomena (as Attardo puts it (2020, 8), “there is no reason to coin a new term if there is a perfectly good one already”). Indeed, Schwind uses the expression “embarrassment humor” (2015) and Schwanebeck, in his introduction to his special issue devoted to painful laughter (2021), refers to the expression “cringe humor” along with Moore’s “comedy of discomfort” (2007). However, the widespread use of “cringe humor” since the success of Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant’s BBC mockumentary sitcom, *The Office* (BBC Two, 2001-2002) as well as of the hashtag #cringe on digital media pleads for retaining this term over others. “Cringe humor” points to the specific embodied reactions to cringeworthy/humorous contents found both on the screen and on digital media, i.e., “an involuntary inward shiver of embarrassment, awkwardness, disgust” (OED), “shudder and discomfort” (Schwind 2015, 67), “psychic unease” or “physical pain” (Duncan 2017, 37), and even “intense visceral reaction” (Dahl 2018, 19).

Cringe humor has originally been associated with the small screen (the best known examples being *The Office* BBC Two, 2001-2003; *The Office* NBC, 2005-2013; *I’m Alan Partridge* BBC Two, 1997-2022; *South Park* Comedy Central, 1997-; *Da Ali G Show* Channel 4, 2000; *Curb Your Enthusiasm* HBO, 2000-; *Louie* FX, 2000-2015; *Nighty-Night* BBC Three, 2004-2005; *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* The CW, 2015-2019; *Haters Back Off* Netflix, 2016-2017...) and stand-up comedies (with stand-up comedians such as Louis CK, Dave Chappelle, Lisa Lampanelli, Margaret Cho, Hannah Gadsby). These sitcoms, TV series and filmed stand-up comedies (and others) can all be analyzed through the lens of cringe humor because of their sensitive subject matter (sex, sex orientation, gender, race, disability, aging, mental health, death, ...), their form (in particular, their repeated use of silence, pauses, the absence of laugh track, the use of extreme close-up shots, the

direct addresses to the audience whether on screen or beyond the screen...) and/or the type of awkward relationship created with the viewers, often based on “differentials in perception and affect among filmmaker, subject, and spectator” (Middleton 2014, 26).

Cringe humor seems to be less typically associated with the big screen, but many documentaries have been said to have taken “the awkward turn” (Middleton, 2014)—Rob Reiner’s 1984 *This is Spinal Tap*, Michael Moore’s 1989 *Roger and Me*, Larry Charles’s 2006 *Borat* being three examples of such cringey mockumentaries—and movies (in particular black comedies) do include what Schwanebeck calls “cringe elements” (2021)—Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 *Dr. Strangelove*, Todd Solondz’s 1998 *Happiness*, Jason Reitman’s 2005 *Thank You for Smoking*, the Coen brothers’ 2008 *Burn After Reading* and Roman Polanski’s 2011 *Carnage* specifically coming to mind.

Cringe humor seems to have expanded into various directions on the Internet and social media, where a multitude of cringeworthy but humorous content can be found:

- YouTube channels such as Miranda Sings, the cringe-inducing alter-ego of actress Colleen Ballinger, or multiple channels specializing in reaction videos, pranks and FAIL videos,
- Twitter accounts such as “cringe worthy tweets”, “images that are unbelievably cringe”, or more simply Twitter posts which bear the hashtag #cringe,
- blogs and micro-blogs (for instance Tumblr blogs or more specialized blogs such as Awkward Family Photos, People of Walmart) that collect pictures presented simultaneously as funny and cringeworthy,
- humorous content websites (Cheezburger, Bored Panda, BuzzFeed) that list “awkward moments” in life and embarrassing anecdotes or ideas that people share with their community of viewers for the sake of entertainment,
- satire and parody websites (such as *The Onion*) where cringe humor borders on black humor and / or the politically incorrect,
- “RoastMe” subreddit, where users post selfies for other users to “humorously mock or humiliate” them with a “well-timed joke, diss or comeback” (as defined in the “about” section of RoastMe).

The conference is predicated on the idea that two levels of communication (at least) need to be taken into account when one analyzes discourse mediated on the screen or computer-mediated discourse, and that cringe humor may pervade all these interactional levels. Film discourse relies both on the “inter-character/characters’ (communicative) level” and the “recipient’s (communicative) level, on which meanings are communicated to the viewer” (Dynel 2011, 49). Brock terms these levels Communicative Level 2 (the level of the characters’ communication) and Communicative Level 1 (the level of the collective sender’s communication with the viewer) to emphasize the primacy of CL1 over CL2 in terms of what he calls “real level of communication” (2015, 30). Thus, film discourse can comprise interactions that some characters deem cringeworthy and humorous and/or communicate in a cringeworthy/humorous way with the viewers.

Computer-mediated communication may involve more communicative levels, with, notably, YouTube videos including the additional level of comments (Dynel 2014, 50), on which third parties may interact in a cringeworthy/humorous way with the speaker and other parties regarding the cringeworthy/humorous content posted. Blogs, micro-blogs and content websites sometimes involve initial interactions between two or more speakers, which are later discussed in the comment section, to emphasize their humorous side, to reject them as too cringey or to exchange jibes with other Internet users—playfully “roasting” them but sometimes going as far as “burning them” (Dynel 2020).

Cringe humor relies on a delicate balance between the negatively connoted “cringe” and the positively connoted “humor”. What does it take then to turn cringe into humor and make the awkward become funny or vice versa? According to the Incongruity-Resolution model of humor (Suls 1972, 1983, Shultz 1972), humorousness relies upon unexpected associations that go against “our normal mental patterns and expectations” (Hye-Knudsen 2018: 15). What is more, according

to the Benign Violation theory (Warren and McGraw 2015), which builds upon the incongruity theory, the violation of our expectations that is necessary for humor “must have a negative valence instead of simply departing incongruously from one’s expectations or mental patterns, hence why slipping on a banana peel is often considered humorous while winning the lottery is not.” (Hye-Knudsen, 2018: 15). However, most violations do not make people laugh. The Benign Violation theory holds that to remain humorous, those violations have to remain benign, which is why they stop being funny if they are too threatening, too aggressive, or too serious. Yet, if they are too benign, do they still make people cringe? One of the goals of the conference will therefore be to determine when cringe humor fails or succeeds and to identify the “felicity conditions” for cringe humor on the screen and on digital media (pauses, intonation, facial expressions, illocutionary force markers online such as emoji, emoticons, GIFs...)—and whether these (or some of these) felicity conditions hold for both media or are media-specific.

The conference will also address the issue of the politeness of cringe humor in English (or lack thereof) on the screen and on digital media. Humor has been interpreted as one of the strategies of politeness, speakers engaging in humorous interactions claiming common ground, which can be seen as a form of positive politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987, 103-104; Attardo 2020, 274). However, cringe humor seems to complicate and potentially destabilize interactions at all communicative levels. If cringe humor is meant to “enhance the rapport” with the other speaker and/or the audience (see Spencer-Oatey 2000, 2005 on “rapport-management”), how can we account for its physical manifestations? If, alternatively, cringe humor unintentionally or deliberately aggravates the rapport with the other speaker/the audience, how can we account for its success? Is cringe humor meant to create “an in-group perception for the speaker and the addressee(s)” or “an out-group division between the speaker and (some members of) the audience” (Attardo 2020, 277)? In other words, what (mis)alignment between the speaker and the addressee(s) is involved in cringeworthy and humorous content, and to what effect? Are addressee(s) expected to empathize with the target of cringe humor (and bond with them—in keeping with what Billig after Goffman (2001, 27) calls the ‘nice-guy’ theory of embarrassment) or sneer at them (and distance themselves from them as highlighted by Kanzler) or both? Do addressee(s) tend to approve or disapprove of the speaker’s use of cringe humor on CL1, and for what reason(s)? Do they feel cringe humor is meant to reinforce and perpetuate stereotypes or denounce and satirize them (Tsakona 2017)? Can there be, therefore, such a thing as an ethics of cringe humor?

The following topics and questions may be approached, the list not being exhaustive:

- cringe humor vs. failed humor (Bell 2015): the felicity conditions of cringe humor in English language on the screen and on digital media,
- the discrepancy between the presence of cringe humor between characters (CL2) vs. the lack of cringe humor on the recipient’s level (CL1) or vice versa,
- the cumulated effect of the presence of cringe humor on both CL2 and CL1,
- the dissemination of cringe humor from the initial post on digital media to the comment section and its pragmatic effects on the various speakers involved
- the (im)politeness and ethics of cringe humor on the screen and on digital media—whether on CL2 or CL1, or both,
- the distancing/bonding effect of cringe humor; cringe humor and empathy,
- comparative approaches: cringe humor on the big screen/small screen vs. computer-mediated cringe humor,
- multimodal approaches to cringe humor,
- diachronic approaches to cringe humor: is present-day cringe humor more rapport-aggravating or rapport-enhancing?

- the impact of the mode of diffusion (cinema, TV screen, VOD, streaming sites, website, social media) on the type of cringe humor and/or the reaction of the addressee(s),
- the reception of cringe humor: generational / gendered / sociocultural / historical perspectives.

**Deadline for submission:** November 20, 2022

**Notification of acceptance:** January 10, 2023

**Proposals** of around 400 words (along with a short bio-bibliographical notice, no longer than 100 words) to be sent to [cringehumor2023@gmail.com](mailto:cringehumor2023@gmail.com)

**Language of the conference:** English

A selection of papers will be considered for publication after double-blind peer-review.

**Registration fees:** 50 euros (30 euros for PhD candidates)

**Advisory Board:**

Salvatore Attardo (Texas A&M-Commerce, USA)  
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