

## DUMB BLONDES AND DEMOCRACY

*Stanoy Stanoev*

**Abstract:** The jokes about dumb blondes, thinking only of sex, are very popular in the international joke repertoire. From the perspective of the ancient misogynous narrative tradition they are perhaps the most radical part. In Bulgarian everyday communication the jokes about dumb blondes began to be spread during the second half of the 1990s and are still popular today. In Western democratic societies the creation and spreading of jokes about dumb blondes is a logical consequence from advanced social and economic development which brings forth more and more women onto the public stage and the sphere of employment, and gives them the chance for individual accomplishment. The socio-cultural situation in Bulgaria, after the fall of the communist regime, in relation towards women is a bit different – characteristic for it is a discredited emancipation, obvious aggravating and extension of sexist discourses, male domination over public life and professional activities, feminization of poverty, a tendency to return to patriarchal values in private life. Despite the diverse contexts in both cases, jokes about dumb blondes represent an adequate strategy for the adaptation to the deep social change which challenges, in many ways, female and male identities.

**Key words:** dumb blonde jokes, femininity, identity, masculinity, post-Socialist transition

Since the beginning of the 1990s a new protagonist appeared in international jokelore and is still popular nowadays (Oring 2003: 59). What is more, it could be claimed that jokes about dumb blondes have established their stable place in most of the national joke repertoires – being an indispensable part of almost every printed or Internet collection of jokes. Dumb blonde jokes can also be found in the respective rubrics of the press. In Bulgaria these jokes began spreading as early as during the second half of the 1990s. In spite of the great popularity of the jokes about dumb blondes nowadays, such jokes were not registered during the 1997 year project in the Institute of Folklore, “Contemporary State of Bulgarian Joke Telling”, the aim of which was to document jokes within the different contexts of their firsthand telling. Likewise, it is indicative that these popular joke figures were still absent from the popular thematic collections, issued by the Florir Publishing House during the years 1993–1998, categorized on the principle of the joke protagonists<sup>1</sup>.

Bulgarian material is not an exception from the international joke repertoire, the message of which, concerning the dumb blondes, could be summarized in one sentence: they are dumb, and fit for thinking of only sex (Oring 2003: 59–62). A more detailed study would probably find out similar schemes, plots and even completely identical texts, this being self-evident in the Internet Age:

- Who are the dumb blondes with a record number of dumb actions?
  - The earliest to wake up in the morning.
- (Sega, January 27, 2001: 18)

A conversation taking place between two dumb blondes:

- Yesterday I went to do a pregnancy test.
  - What about the questions, were there difficult ones?
- (Dimitrova 2004: 41)

- How can you catch the attention of a dumb blonde for two hours?
  - You give her a sheet of paper with a message on both sides: “Look at the other side”!
- (<http://blondinki.hit.bg/site/blond1.htm>, last accessed on 27 Nov 2009; not available any more)

- Why do dumb blondes always smile in the rain and lightning?
  - They pose for pictures...
- (<http://www.crossroadbg.com/blondinki.html>, last accessed on 30 Nov 2010)

- Why is a dumb blonde carrying a mattress at the bus stop?
  - She has brought all necessary documents for a job interview.
- (<http://vicove.gbg.bg/index.phtml?tid=20&oid=150&sid=&did=&search=&offset=171>, last accessed on 30 Nov 2010)

- Why don't dumb blondes go to church to pray?
  - Because kneeling down they automatically open their mouth.
- (Sega, January 27, 2001: 18)

- Why do dumb blondes wear close fitting skirts?
  - So that their legs would not go apart.
- (Dimitrova 2004: 41)

The majority of researchers perceive the figure of the dumb blonde as a collective feminine protagonist. This protagonist is very well known from the context of the comic narrative tradition, however he possesses certain distinct features. On the one hand, blondes are a group stigmatized as dumb (Thomas 1997: 278). Societies – traditional as well as modern ones – obviously feel the constant necessity to have such a figure in constructing their identity, no matter whether dumbness is attributed to social, regional, ethnic or other groups (cf. Davies 1990). At the same time, the widely common interpretation of the feminine protagonist completely matches the very old misogynic narrative practice presenting dumbness, sexual aggressiveness and vanity (Moser-Rath 1978; Wienker-Piepho 1998: 29; Dobрева 1993; Weigel 2006). The dumb blondes are just another example of this. The fact is that, in this specific case, we are dealing with a more universal character, reaching beyond the specific national, regional, social and other identities, which could be explained with the processes of globalization striving at maximum general identification figures. On the other hand, a protagonist characterized in this way is novel. What is more important, the aforementioned tradition has never before interpreted the feminine character in such a radical and non-dubious way.

According to Sabine Wienker-Piepho, scientists understand jokes as social signals and indicators for the state of the respective society or group (Wienker-Piepho 1998: 28–33; see also the literature cited in the quoted article). It could be added that the longer or shorter longevity of a certain protagonist and its popularity could be reckoned as indicators for the significance and the status of the spheres which it represents within the social and cultural context. Wienker-Piepho claims that the jokes about dumb blondes are an inevitable expression of the more general situation where extremely intensive sexist conversation is frequent in the media, both printed and electronic, and in oral communication. In turn it indicates the specially strained gender relations that are typical of the present day.

The reasons for creating the dumb blonde jokes are to be found in the greater activity of the feminist movements and especially in more and more obvious appearance of women on the public scene (Oring 2003: 63; Thomas 1997: 278). As in the cases of other social groups being subjected to joke attacks, these processes make them more and more visible in the social space (Thomas 1997: 278, see also cited literature). Women take part in all professional spheres, including the highest levels of governance, and phenomena such as a woman President or Prime Minister are by no means exotic ones. Charlotte Weigel thinks that these social changes have brought about more intensive telling of misogynous jokes, evidencing a heightened conflicting potential in male attitudes (Weigel 2006: 21). In the light of persistent masculine

hegemony, the misogynous jokes including those about dumb blondes project the greater anxiety of men afraid of a threat to their social position. Such fears are nothing new as the fear of losing masculine power could be found all along the history of gender relations and misogynous prejudices – from the stereotype about sexual dissipation implicating loss of the partner to the protagonist of a shrewish and disobedient wife and up until the relatively harmless characteristics of feminine vanity or even positive characters such as the maniacally neat and clean housewife, posing a threat to masculine financial control (Weigel 2006: 145–161). Again this fear brings forth the appraisal of feminine virtues such as chastity and obedience. Beyond all this is the constantly faltering and faltered masculine identity which strives to and undertakes their liberating and rehabilitating strategies.

As Weigel claims, in the case of dumb blondes the fear is dual. Together with advancement in the “masculine space” of professional awareness and success in public careers, women have also physical and sexual appeal, this being an inevitable potential to exert power and pose an ever greater challenge to men’s hegemony (Weigel 2006: 295). The depth of attack inherent in the texts shows the degree of masculine vulnerability:

- What to do to lighten up the eyes of a dumb blonde?
- Stick a flashlight in her ear.  
(<http://www.crossroadbg.com/blondinki.html>, last accessed on 30 Nov 2010)
  
- What is the benefit of driving with a Blonde companion in the car?
- You can park at a place for disabled people!  
(<http://blondinki.hit.bg/site/blond1.htm>, last accessed on 27 Nov 2009; not available any more)
  
- What do Blondes in line form?!
- An Air corridor!  
(Dimitrova 2004: 50)
  
- What is a Blonde skeleton in a closet?
- The last year’s winner in hide-and-seek!  
(<http://blondinki.hit.bg/site/blond1.htm>, last accessed on 27 Nov 2009; not available any more)

In nowadays’ environment when the contemporary woman is actively present in “masculine” dimensions, the jokes about dumb blondes are frequently a

“reminder” that these are not the blonde’s sphere of expression. Jokes can very willingly turn to a notorious stereotype about the qualities of women as drivers:

Traffic cop stops a car for exceeding speed, the driver being a Blonde.

– Do you know why I stopped you? – asked the traffic cop.

The Blonde answered smiling flightily:

– Can I guess? You aren’t married?

(<http://vicove.gbg.bg/index.phtml?tid=20&oid=150&sid=&did=&search=&offset=41>, last accessed on 30 Nov 2010)

A Blonde and her date in the car.

– Darling, would you look out of the window to see if my blinker is on?

– Yes, no, yes, no yes, no, yes, no...

(<http://vicove.gbg.bg/index.phtml?tid=20&oid=150&sid=&did=&search=&offset=61>, last accessed on 30 Nov 2010)

It is the same desperate naiveté the Blondes seem to demonstrate in the computer world:

– Why has the Blonde put draperies on her screen?

– Because her computer has Windows.

(Sega, January 27, 2001: 18)

– How can you know that a Blonde has worked on a computer?

– There are traces of corrector on the screen!

<http://blondinki.hit.bg/site/blond1.htm>, last accessed on 27 Nov 2009; not available any more)

Charlotte Weigel draws attention to one more fact, which has been left unnoticed in interpreting the jokes about dumb blondes. The greater amount of texts has been constructed according to the scheme “question–answer” (*Rätselwitze*). The author emphasizes the special atmosphere of trust and mutual engagement between the joke-teller and the listener, which characterizes this form as a condition for more and more complete relation to and internalization of the basic stereotypes in the jokes (Weigel 2006: 160). This is an issue with one more perspective as it relates to the nature of such a construction, which practically is a play on knowledge. The riddle dialogue is known to be a very ancient construction for a community to accept and acknowledge its members based on shared awareness about the social and cultural context. When the joke begins with the questions “Who...”, “Why...”, “What...”, “How...”, etc. the

punchline of the traditional structure of joke is being left out. The main emphasis is placed immediately on the problem of knowing basic truths and meanings and their lack of alternative as belonging to a certain culture (Stanoev 2005: 21–27). Thus, according to the presence of a riddle-structure “question-answer” in the texts dedicated to one or another protagonist, its significance and identification value among other joke protagonists could be measured indirectly.

The choice of the Blonde is not a coincidence. Jokes manipulate an image already constructed in the masculine system of values and not just lately. As Marina Warner claims in her book “From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers”, the fair color of hair and beauty have been conceptually connected in the visual and literature images even from antiquity, and it has lasting use since the 17th century up to the present day (see Thomas 1997: 285). The fair hair suggests purity and infantile innocence (Oring 2003: 63). This image still exists being broadly propagandized in public space during the 1920s, however, new connotations were brought to it – of sexual lust and temptation (Thomas 1997: 279), which in a far-fetched perspective suggests the idea of feminine fertility (Weigel 2006: 295). The combination between infantile innocence and sexual playfulness, attraction and even expertise began to characterize the Hollywood model embodied perhaps most completely by Marilyn Monroe (Thomas 1997: 279).

Thus, the target of jokes’ ridicule was precisely chosen. In the dumb blonde, the ideal of the feminine principle is coming under attack, attacking, in turn, the idea of women’s presence in culture. All socially despised qualities are attributed to women (Weigel 2006: 295). Concerning the stereotypes about dumb blondes, Elliot Oring writes that from the idea about innocence to the concept of dumbness there is but just a step (Oring 2003: 63). The joke would readily overcome this, and under the circumstances of unstable masculinity, the traditionally established parameters of masculine identity demonstrate some kind of “paradigmatic resistance”, binding the stereotype of feminine attractiveness with the universal figure of the Fool, who has always had the potential to differentiate between the own and alien, cultural and uncultured etc., and in this sense has always provided a clear and unproblematic existence.

No matter how insistent the texts are in suggesting purposive and consistent misogyny, still only the context of joke-telling may prove if, and how far, their inherent tendency is really actual (Thomas 1997: 280; Oring 2003: 58–59). This is an established principle referring not only to the texts discussed here.<sup>2</sup> Jeannie B. Thomas traces the reception of jokes about dumb blondes in a different situation of joke-telling (Thomas 1997). She has found that the attitude to them can be broadly uneven – from complete denial to liking them –

according to where, when, and for whom the texts are being told. This is confirmed also by the great popularity of the dumb blonde jokes and the misogynous jokes in general both in oral telling and in the media – in spite of the political correctness that contemporary society is striving for (Wienker-Piepho 1998: 28). In this perspective, jokes about dumb blondes can be openly and not dubiously aggressive. They can be perceived also as the series of comic texts to entertain a group of people also acknowledging the fact and satisfaction with significant social phenomena, such as the fulfillment of women in other walks of life beyond the household. The jokes about dumb blondes obviously have a much more serious potential of meaning than the unambiguous attack on women, which in turn establishes a much broader horizon of interpretation.

This is also the perspective of Elliot Oring, reflecting on the jokes about dumb blondes in his book “Engaging Humor” (Oring 2003: 58–70). Like many researchers, he also accounts for the fact that the dumb blonde jokes appear and circulate in a period of radical extension of the political and economic role of women in the USA. Oring also shares some doubts regarding such an explanation, raising the following issues: could the blondes be perceived as a collective image of women; why – on condition that these jokes are a response to similar social processes – are the dumb blondes chosen for this aim; why is the combination of dumbness and promiscuity being ridiculed. The scientist starts from the conviction that joke cycles do not especially ridicule the particular groups they seem to target. These groups are more like signs which keep the discourse on certain ideas and values typical for the present. Oring argues that the dumb blondes merely represent a type of contemporary women rather than a generalization of the latter. This allows him to concentrate on the particular image and find its meaning. Thus, he connects the stereotypes of dumbness and promiscuity to the traditional female image but such characteristics are incompatible with social expectations about the new positions of women and their presence in the professional world as a place of rationality, effectiveness and organization. This is a world opposite to everyday life, which requires intelligence, competence and asexuality. Actually, the jokes play with established values and manipulate these in order to re-establish them as values and outlines of our world.

Oring supports his conclusions with examples of joke cycles, which ridicule female protagonists and are created by contrasting the values of the modern world with traditional ones. The author presents jokes about Brigham University coeds, characterized as extremely unattractive and using education for the sole purpose of finding a husband. The jokes about the English girls from Essex ridicule the misbalance between the standard of life and professed everyday values. Parallel examples can also be found in Bulgarian joke-telling.

Thus, women getting involved in professions perceived as “masculine” had obviously brought about jokes for the physical unattractiveness of the female students in the Technical University of Sofia. I was able to copy down such jokes in 1986–1987. Here is one of them:

There are two first year women students at the Technical University. They found lodging but had to tidy up. They went shopping for some minor items and bought two small brooms. The shop assistant packing the items looked at the brooms and asked:

– Would you have them packed or do you want to ride them immediately?

(AIF I No. 169: 7)

Elliot Oring offers a plausible answer to the questions where from and why the jokes about dumb blondes appear. The more serious advantage of his interpretation is in the fact that he is not content with the interpretation about the specific contradiction between the two genders but looks for a deeper content in the joke texts. Behind the misogynous attack, that seems to be the main aim of the jokes about dumb blondes, there are the reflections and adaptive strategies toward significant social processes, concerning the existing order of values and ethics.

In his insightful research on contemporary women entitled “The Third Woman”, Gilles Lipovetsky (2003) qualifies the intensive extension of female employment as a new historical period in the development of democratic societies. If before the feminine professional activity has been perceived as something extraordinary, secondary and even carrying the brand of moral debasement, it changes its basic meaning and now turns into a legitimate aim and normal condition of feminine existence, a source of personal accomplishment and recognition. Appearance of women in the labor market on such a mass scale brings about multiple effects, referring to their social significance, identity, the relations between the genders and family hierarchies. On the one hand, their striving to acquire social status according to their labor and personal talent brings forth inevitable tensions in a world subordinated to the “masculine” competitive merit-orientated values (Lipovetsky 2003: 324). On the other hand, family and motherhood are still highly valued in the feminine scale of values. Now the chance is that they are found and established in a new way in the perspective of the new individualistic attitudes and egalitarian tendencies of family bonds (Lipovetsky 2003: 362–376).

In this sense the jokes about dumb blondes attempt to be reversing this development by drawing it back to the female voiceless state in the public space and with regard to the self-awareness of women – both when this voice-

less state manifests itself in the diminishment of the social and cultural positions of women and when it appears under the disguise of a cult of the housewife, sacrificially devoted to her home and family (Lipovetsky 2003: 336–344). This strategy hides significant compensatory potential for masculine supremacy. At the same time, we cannot but agree that feminine protagonists are an extremely “appropriate” subject for joke manipulation, since fundamental prejudices are especially concentrated there. Thus the jokes about dumb blondes have the potential to mark deep social changes in a more general perspective.

The interpretation that Elliot Oring offers is especially relevant within the context of post-socialist transitions, when the existing values are radically redefined and society transfers to a new normative order. At the same time, the dispositions and necessities popularizing the image of dumb blondes are difficult to understand if we do not trace their pre-history.

Socialism as a specific modern project (Eisenstadt 1992), was successful and also unsuccessful in accomplishing its ambitious visions. These contradictions are indeed visible in the attitude towards women. I would differentiate between *ideological* and *technological* causes for these contradictions. The first ones include the initial statements of the communist doctrine about equality between the genders in labor relations and the public sphere while leaving intact the gender differentiation of their roles at home and in the family (Daskalova 2009: 3). This perspective became a constant refrain in the ideological statements of socialism, being permanently dominated by the image of the woman as a persevering worker, public figure and mother (Goncheva 2001).

The problems deepen even more when we observe the socialist reality as it is. This relates to the second group of questions, the technological ones, which turn the idea of female emancipation into one of the great socialist myths (Daskalova 2009: 6). The scholars define the totalitarian type of government as a specific combination of modern means and mechanisms to exert power and the traditional patrimonial way of their functioning (Eisenstadt 1992: 28; Kabakchieva 2001: 75). This specific feature is the foundation of the intensive creation and spreading of political jokes during socialism and it defines, to a great extent, their treasure of protagonists and themes (Stanoev 2009). Social dynamics stands on the intensive personalization of the institutions (however modern their concepts may be). Important regulators of social life become related to features such as kinship, friendship, personal contacts, personal alleys and indebtedness (Benovska-Subkova 1993). It would be somewhat of an exaggeration to expect that such a social and cultural situation would substantially change the traditional pattern of gender relations. On the contrary, it can only additionally reaffirm it, especially in the context of private and family life.

The result of all this is well known and has been frequently been pointed out by scholars. The theses about the exceptional burden of women during socialism refer to their compelling need to combine both spheres that had become relatively separate in the culture of modernity – the home-related, professional and public activities (Brunnbauer 2000: 153; Daskalova: 8; Luleva 2003: 10). On the one hand, female professional labor was of high status, women were well represented in politics and obtained good education (Brunnbauer 2000: 152). On the other hand, the domestic concerns and child rearing were almost totally managed by women according to their well preserved traditional values. Moreover, there was a chronic deficiency of goods and services, so that the opportunity to consume, en masse, goods and benefits was highly valued and found to be crucial for female individualism and gender equality (Lipovetsky 2003: 330–333). This situation, both complex and sad, has been very well reflected in one of the jokes from socialist times:

The English woman. She has behind herself her noble origin, on her left side – good children, on her right side – a devoted husband, on her head – a small hat, in front of her – bright future.

The French woman. She has behind herself wild past, on her left side – her husband, on her right side – her lover, on her head – a big hat, in front of her – endless adventures.

The Bulgarian woman. She has behind herself the anti-fascist struggle, on her left side – social duties, on her right side – chores, on her head – her children and her husband, in front of her – an extended economic plan.

(Vasilev 1991: 72)

The broadly proclaimed emancipation of women during socialism was a project of social engineering and not an authentic movement initiated by the logic of social, economic and cultural development. This emancipation does not enrich the female individual with potentially better choices, but just places the female's rights and duties in the public and political sphere (Brunnbauer 2000: 152). Thus, her value is dubiously established between the recognition of her doubtless social merits and the doubtful consequences of a masculine behavior forced upon her by authorities (Luleva 2008; Goncheva 2001: 424).

Seemingly, the described situation offers men unobstructed peace, but in reality it hides the hurt masculinity (Vodenicharov 2001), affected firstly in the sphere of professional accomplishments and social engagements, perceived as a “masculine” dimension before, being now penetrated by a new, grand and ambitious competitive force, while the regulations and principles guiding this sphere of behavior are not always subject to free choice and professional com-

petence (Vodenicharov 2001). Likewise, private life is not safe either; however, the author tries to argue that the patriarchal feature therein has remained intact. Now it is appropriate to mention that the blonde is not the first female protagonist who allows the description of radical social transformation through jokes. The mother-in-law figure, for example, has been developed for decades and is permanently present in the joke repertoire even nowadays; attacks on her are not built on her dumbness:

A man goes in a drug-store.

– Have you got arsenic?

– Yeah, but you need a prescription. Have you got one?

– No, but I have brought a picture of my mother-in-law.

(<http://gadmrusna.hit.bg/bg.htm>, last accessed on 27 Nov 2009; no longer available)

Behind such texts, a more tentative analysis would discover the complex transformations the kinship relations, family and domestic life undergo through in modernity (Stanoev 2008). The wife is a central protagonist in these domains, and scholars researching the family life, such as Jack Goody, reasonably warn that the role of women as managers of the household and their further independence in participating in the life of capitalist societies should not be underestimated (Goody 2005: 184). What socialist societies contribute by themselves is again the all penetrating eye of the state and the party which controls even the internal family relationships (Vodenicharov 2001: 400; Brunbauer 2000: 152). The situation is very well characterized by A. Luleva, who writes that socialism develops a weakened masculinity, depriving it of all its props: property, power in the public sphere, family authority and autonomy (Luleva 2008).

All changes in social life, politics, economics, culture etc. which started with the fall of the communist regime aimed at associating Bulgarian society with the standards and values of modern democracies. Phrases such as “Let’s become a normal society/normal state”; “Let us be like other civilized nations”; “Let us live like white people” were frequent in the political discourse especially during the first years of independence and had been repeated for long periods of time like mantra by the politicians (Luleva 2005). At the same time, the main pathos of change came from the idea to correct the distorted notion of modernity. This brought about an increased status of values and norms from pre-socialist times as, for example, in the sphere of economy, the urban and rural private property that had been nationalized half a century ago was now returned to the rightful owners on a large scale. Parties and leaders, forbidden previously by the socialist authorities, came back into politics. In a symbolic perspective, festivities and rituals from the pre-World War II feast calendar were restored; old names of streets were reassigned, etc.

Relating all this to the issues dealt within this paper, the time seemed to have come, when the man should become male again and the woman – female. In the outlined socio-cultural context this should mean blocking the women out from the area of public activities and driving them back to the traditionally separate roles including private spheres (Luleva 2003: 5–9; Brunnbauer 2000: 154; Kasabova 2005: 134), while for men it meant triumphant restoring of their position of supremacy paradoxically stamped by the sign of modern European values (Luleva 2003: 12; Brunnbauer 2000: 151), such a tendency puts a series of obstacles both for men and women in constructing stable identities.

The democratic changes in Bulgaria got a start in a situation in which women celebrated their active presence in social life. The years of transition continuously brought to the public scene many women who worked at crucial positions for the reformation of society and politics. For example, a woman held the office of Prime Minister, even though only in a temporary government within the pause between two parliamentary elections. In the situation of the potentially possible and active communication between the citizens and the government, the media reaffirmed the female image as one who solves important issues in the social policies and spheres of business, in the party constructions or international relations (Kasabova 2005).

In this background it might sound strange to say that women lost much during the years of transition (Luleva 2003: 5; Brunnbauer 2000: 151). Such statements declared by many scholars studying women in post-socialism are difficult to refute, being supported by serious sociological, ethnological and statistical researches (Luleva 2003; Brunnbauer 2000). They account for the gradual discrimination of women in the labor market and professional realization, unequal payment, loss of social benefits, inequality in social security, lack of clear policies of the parties to include women in social life, insufficient political representation, and feminization of poverty (Luleva 2003; Daskalova; Brunnbauer 2000; Kasabova 2005).

All these have been accompanied by markedly sexist talk, which seems in line with the assumption that gender separation has been undifferentiated and unclear before (Luleva 2008). This can also be clearly traced in the political, nationalistic and media discourses (Kasabova 2005). The stereotypes could be traced even in the cases aiming at broader penetration in the issues of the female world and restoring a feminine character which had been somewhat neglected during socialism. But it all resulted in a masculine perspective upon construction of female identity (Luleva 2003: 3–4). Thus in the situation of chronic economic crisis and emancipation, discredited by the former regime and value marked patriarchal relations, orientation towards traditional gender roles could turn out to be both compulsory and a cherished life project

(Luleva 2003: 12). And as already mentioned, this pattern had also not lost its actuality during socialism times.

Unluckily, we have no specific contextual observations about the way how dumb blondes' jokes are perceived in these conditions. They are extremely popular at the moment both in oral joke-telling and in the media, and their social justification is not at all questioned. On the contrary, the popularity of the jokes about dumb blondes is relevant with regard to the silence in society as to the problems of women, which in turn is acknowledged as a symptom of eventual agreement regarding the established gender hierarchy (Luleva 2003: 1). Such a state of affairs corresponds to the observations of Charlotte Weigel, according to whom at the end of the 1970s, the misogynous jokes were being acceptable and even appealing to women. This fact conceals the women's desire to adapt to a world founded on the principles and values of male superiority, the striving to maximally reach the male position of authority probably with the idea of it being shared (Weigel 2006: 320).

Not less dramatic is also the state of male identity. The described situation really opens new horizons for the position of men to be reaffirmed and extended. Yet it also places them in a situation of high expectations which they have to live up to and the results are by no means positive.

On the one hand, even if the socialist emancipation was dubious, and the conditions of feminine labor in post-socialist period were bad, and women stepped back to a certain extent to their traditional dimensions of home and family, studies show that a professional career was still valued by women as an individual accomplishment and was not only a matter of economic pressure after emancipation (Luleva 2003: 13). The same economic situation also raised complex problems concerning the expectations of men to act as the main agents of family survival.

On the other hand, complex transformations began concerning redefining and hierarchies of masculinity in the male world (Luleva 2008). For example, during socialism, the representatives of intelligentsia were usually situated at the higher stages of masculinity (Luleva 2008). It would be expedient to remind that they were the ones who laid the foundations of the new political order. The following social developments of market economy brought forth its new heroes – men of entrepreneurship and market initiative. These men introduced new values based on the ideology of success, whereas the discourse of its achievement is a hard and merciless fight. Their attitude towards women springs from the culture of machismo, professing strong masculinity and reserves, and a secondary place of women as an attribute serving this masculinity (Luleva 2008).

Thirdly, the “authentic male” sphere of professional accomplishment could be very conditionally accepted as an example of fair and honest competition of abilities and ambitions. Especially during the first years of transition, economic success was a part of an unequal start and the result of often dubious and even criminal business activities, traces of which led to the financial resources of former communist elites.

The post-socialist joke telling reacts quickly to the newly formed and materially prospering social group of the entrepreneurs, such as the jokes about the New Russians. In the Bulgarian variant these are the so called *bortsi* (‘wrestlers’). These are former sportsmen, often elite ones. At the very beginning of the changes towards democracy, they founded security and insurance companies which became emblematic of organized crime in Bulgaria. The façade usually hid racketeering, stolen car trade, prostitution, etc. In a relatively short time, the *bortsi* affirmed to be a significant economic power, not uncommonly connected with representatives of the political power (more on the history and characteristics of this phenomenon see Nikolov 1997). In everyday vocabulary the name *bortsi* was used together with *mutri* (‘mugs’), which associated them immediately with the idea of rough physical power, arrogance and, naturally, dumbness:

- How does the brain cell of a wrestler feel?
  - Lonely.
- (AIF I No. 261: 49)

- Why do wrestlers drive so fast?
  - Not to forget their destination.
- (Iunashko pleme 1995: 23)

Part of the image of this economic success was the publicly known relations of *bortsi* with the modern beauty agencies and competitions. The word denoting the girlfriend or wife of the *borets* (‘wrestler’), positioned next to the male figure, was smartly combined in ordinary speech from *mutra* and “mistress”. The so called “*mutresses*” shared both the money and stupidity of the *bortsi*:

- The wife of a bodyguard visits a psychotherapist:
- Doctor, my husband thinks he is a grand piano!
  - Bring him here for examination!
  - Impossible! Only to bring it down the third floor would cost me seven thousands!
- (Iunashko pleme 1995: 11)

In the light of these texts the jokes about dumb blondes obviously did not appear from nowhere. Remembering again the interpretations of Elliot Oring, it could be argued that society was already clearly articulating the thought of obvious discord between the cherished and propagated modern values and stagnant everyday practices in the perspective of an honest labor ethos. In this sense the jokes about dumb blondes found a fertile soil because the society was impatiently waiting for more and more new images to describe the processes of radical change.

While the *bortsi* and “*mutresses*” epitomized stupidity, post-socialist everyday life did not lack a sexual perspective, which is the second very important component in creating the image of the dumb blondes. The so called “pop-folk culture” points towards it and is a complex phenomenon, based on the author’s instrumental melodies, songs and folk music with elements of pop and jazz, but all these united by the vitality of a Balkan-Oriental music rhythm. The world of meanings in this culture is related to small everyday human joys and excitements with the texts being full of love thrills and longing, open sexual jests, gastronomical pleasures and good wine, with machismo appraisal of wealth and beautiful women etc. The names of the singers, prevailingly women, their outward vision and scenic performance, are in full accord with the songs’ messages – purposeful erotic effect and no less challenging behavior.

Having started as half-legal since socialist times with live performances at fairs, weddings and entertaining enterprises, and spreading demo cassettes, with time this culture gradually developed into a greatly popular powerful industry (Dimov 2001), producing not only music but images as well; however, the first steps of the pop-folk culture were attacked by some of the pop and rock artists, who identified the relevant Oriental tint and the simple texts with backwardness, banality and low aesthetic quality. In spite of this, the compensatory and renewing potential of pop-folk, in relation to “high” culture and everyday strife, could not be denied (Ivanova 2002: 133–149). For this reason it continues to offer its symbolic world full of hedonism, strong men and women, longing for their love, protection and sexual power. This is a world offering shelter from everyday problems and stating examples of value for femininity and masculinity for the greater part of Bulgarians.

\*\*\*

The jokes about dumb blondes can obviously be popular and beloved in diverse cultural contexts. Their appearance in the modern democratic societies is a logical sequence from the advancing social and economic development which brings more and more women to the public stage and gives them the chance

for individual accomplishment. During post-socialist transitions, conditions are created and spread where tendencies of development seem to go in the opposite direction. But in both cases the jokes about dumb blondes are an adequate and convenient strategy for adapting to the important social changes which challenge the feminine and male identities in many ways. Will the women in Western democracies ultimately find the cherished equality, which way could Bulgarian women take – of authentic advance towards such equality or would they turn back to the patriarchal dimension? I believe the joke-telling will again take notice and demonstrate.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I would point out that some of the editions are specifically dedicated to women and sex in the jokes. See: Jokes 1993; Jokes 1994; Jokes 1995a; Jokes 1995b.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. an example of the political jokes by Bausinger 1958; Warneken 1978; Albrecht 1986.

## REFERENCES

- AIF = Archives of the Institute of Folklore. Sofia.
- Albrecht, Richard 1986. Der 'Flüsterwitz' im Dritten Reich. *Fabula*, Vol. 27, No. 3/4 pp. 308–319.
- Bausinger, Hermann 1958. Schwank und Witz. *Studium Generale*, Vol. 11, pp. 699–710.
- Benovska-Subkova, Milena 1993. Arkhaichni modeli i totalitariz"m. [Archaic Cultural Patterns and Totalitarianism]. *B"lgarski folklor*, Vol. 4, pp. 3–14.
- Brunnbauer, Ulf 2000. From equality without democracy to democracy without equality? Women and transition in southeast Europe. *South-East Europe Review for Labour and Social Affairs*, Vol. 3, pp. 151–168.
- Daskalova, Krassimira 2009. *Bulgarian Women's History and Socialist Myths*. [http://www.cwsp.bg/upload/docs/history\\_and\\_myths\\_en.pdf](http://www.cwsp.bg/upload/docs/history_and_myths_en.pdf), last accessed on 20 Nov 2010.
- Davies, Christie 1990. *Ethnic Humor Around the World: A Comparative Analysis*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Dimitrova, Viktoriia 2004. *Vsichki vitsove, koito triabva da znaete*. [All the Jokes You Have to Know]. Sofia: Trud.
- Dimov, Ventsislav 2001. *Etnopopbum"t*. [The Ethnopolop-boom]. Sofia: B"lgarsko muzikoznanie.
- Dobreva, Doroteia 1993. Pazi, Bozhe, ot zhenska belia! Obraz"t na zhenata v b"lgarskata anekdotichna traditsiia. [God, save us from women's mischief! The image of the woman in Bulgarian joke tradition]. *Literaturna mis"l*. Vol. 3, pp. 65–81.

- Eisenstadt, Shmuel N. 1992. The Breakdown of Communist Regimes and the Vicissitudes of Modernity. *Dædalus*, Vol. 121, No. 2, pp. 21–41.
- Goncheva, Maria 2001. Zhenstvenostta kato tema i metaforichnost v totalitarniia i posttotalitarniia pechat . [Feminity as a topic and metaphor in the totalitarian and post-totalitarian press]. In: E. Tacheva & I. Nedin (eds.) *Tia na Balkanite*. [She on the Balkans]. Dokladi ot mezhdunarodna konferentsia. [Proceedings from the International Round Table “She on the Balkans”]. Blagoevgrad, pp. 417–424.
- Goody, Jack 2005. *Evropeiskoto semeistvo*. [The European Family]. Sofia: Lik.
- Iunashko pleme 1995. *Iunashko pleme*. [Hero Tribe]. Sofia: Trud.
- Ivanova, Radost 2002. *Kultura na krizata – kriza v kulturata*. [Culture of Crisis – Crisis of Culture]. Sofia: Akademichno izdatelstvo “Marin Drinov”.
- Jokes 1993 = *Vitsove za seksa*. [Jokes about Sex]. Sofia: Fliorir Publishing House.
- Jokes 1994 = *Vitsove za seksa. Chast vtora*. [Jokes about Sex. Part 2]. Sofia: Fliorir Publishing House.
- Jokes 1995a = *Vitsove za semeini*. [Jokes about Married Couples]. Sofia: Fliorir Publishing House.
- Jokes 1995b = *Vitsove za zhenite*. [Jokes about Women]. Sofia: Fliorir Publishing House.
- Kabakchieva, Petya 2001. *Grazhdanskoto obshchestvo sreshchu d’rzhavata. B’lgarskata situatsiia*. [Civil Society against the State. The Bulgarian Situation]. Sofia: Lik.
- Kasabova, Aneliia 2005. Feminiz”m ili zhenstvenost. Ideal”t za „uspialata“ zhena po materialii ot b’lgarskata presa (1990–2003). [Feminism or femininity. The ideal of the “woman of success” in Bulgarian press (1990–2003)]. *Vsekidnevната kultura na b’lgarite i s”rbite v postsotsialisticheskiiia period*. [The Everyday Culture of Bulgarians and Serbians in the Post-Socialist Period]. Sofia: Etnografski institut s muzei, pp. 133–141.
- Lipovetsky, Gilles 2003. *Tret’ia zhenshchina*. [The Third Woman]. St. Petersburg: Aletheia.
- Luleva, Ana 2003. Polov red i transformatsiia. [Gender Order and Transformation]. *B’lgarska etnologiia / Bulgarian Ethnology*, Vols. 2–3, pp. 96–109. [http://www.cwsp.bg/upload/docs/gender\\_order\\_BE.pdf](http://www.cwsp.bg/upload/docs/gender_order_BE.pdf), last accessed on 20 Nov 2010.
- Luleva, Ana 2005. Dzhend”r-ideologii i prekhod. V t”rsene na normalnostta. [Gender-ideologies and transition. In search of normality]. In: *Vsekidnevната kultura na b’lgarite i s”rbite v postsotsialisticheskiiia period*. [The Everyday Culture of Bulgarians and Serbians in the Post-Socialist Period]. Sofia: BAN Etnografski institut s muzei, pp. 108–115.
- Luleva, Ana 2008. M”zhestvenostite na prekhoda. Kriza ili preotkrivane na patriarkhata. [Krise der Männlichkeit und/oder die (Neu-)Erfindung des Patriarchats – der Fall der bulgarischen postsozialistischen Transformation der Geschlechterverhältnisse]. In: S. Scholz & W. Willms (eds.) *Postsozialistische Männlichkeiten in einer globalisierten Welt*. Berlin: Verlag, pp. 163–214. <http://www.cwsp.bg/htmls/page.php?category=445&id=976>, last accessed on 20 Nov 2010.
- Moser-Rath, Elfriede 1978. Frauenfeindliche Tendenzen im Witz. *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, Vol. 74, pp. 40–57.
- Nikolov, Jovo 1997. Organized Crime in Bulgaria. *East European Constitutional Review*. Vol. 6, No. 4. <http://www1.law.nyu.edu/eecr/vol6num4/feature/organizedcrime.html>, last accessed on 30 Nov 2010.

- Oring, Elliot 2003. *Engaging Humor*. Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Sega = *vestnik "Sega"*. [Newspaper "Now"]. <http://www.segabg.com>, last accessed on 20 Nov 2010.
- Stanoev, Stanoy 2005. *Vits"t i negovite poslaniia*. [Jokes and Their Messages]. Sofia: Akademichno izdatelstvo "Marin Drinov".
- Stanoev, Stanoy 2008. Mann und Frau in bulgarischen Ehewitzen. In: W. Dahmen & P. Himstedt-Vaid & G. Ressel (eds.) *Grenzüberschreitungen: Traditionen und Identitäten in Südosteuropa. Festschrift für Gabriella Schubert*. Wiesbaden: Harasowitz Verlag, pp. 593–603.
- Stanoev, Stanoy 2009. Totalitarian Political Jokes in Bulgaria. In: A. Krikmann & L. Laineste (eds.) *Permitted Laughter. Socialist, Post-Socialist and Never-Socialist Humour*. Tartu: ELM Scholarly Press, pp. 185–207.
- Thomas, Jeannie B. 1997. Dumb Blondes, Dan Quayle, and Hillary Clinton: Gender, Sexuality, and Stupidity in Jokes. *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 110, pp. 277–313.
- Vasilev, Kiril 1990. *45 godini vitsove. Smekh"t sreshchu nasiliето*. [45 Years of Joke Telling. Laughter against Violence]. Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press.
- Vodenicharov, Petar 2001. Borba sreshchu m"zhestvenostta v komunisticheskata d"rzhava? [Fighting masculinity in the communist state?]. In: E. Tacheva & I. Nedin (eds.) *Tia na Balkanite*. [She on the Balkans]. Dokladi ot mezhdunarodna konferentsia. [Proceedings from the International Round Table "She on the Balkans"]. Blagoevgrad, pp. 395–404.
- Warneken, Bernd Jürgen 1978. Der sozialkritische Witz als Forschungsproblem. *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, Vol. 74, No. 1, pp. 20–39.
- Weigel, Charlotte 2006. *Der frauenfeindliche Männerwitz: Textanalysen und psychologische Überlegungen zu seiner Entstehung und Wirkung*. Schriftenreihe gender studies 4. Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač.
- Wienker-Piepho, Sabine 1998. Böse Zungen im Gelächter der Geschlechter. *Kuckuck. Notizen zu Alltagskultur und Volkskunde*, pp. 28–33.