
ISLAMOPHOBIC EXPRESSION IN ROCKY – A DISCUSSION OF SATIRE, TASTE, AND THE LACK OF REACTIONS

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Rocky is a Swedish, so-called autobiographical comic strip written and drawn by Martin Kellerman, first published in the free newspaper *Metro* in 1998. It has become a highly successful strip and is now published in several major dailies, in collected editions, and in its own magazine. *Rocky* has also been translated into other languages, for example English and Norwegian. Thematically, *Rocky* can be regarded as an independent continuation of Swedish writer-artist Charlie Christensen's *Arne Anka* strip, which in turn was published between 1983 and 1995 (but has since [2004–] been resumed).¹ All characters in *Rocky* are anthropomorphic animals. Like *Arne Anka*, *Rocky* comments on his life and current events through an unceasing stream of imprudent and offensive effrontery. More often than not, but not always, *Rocky* himself becomes the butt of the joke by following a somewhat clever comment with something that backfires on him.

On November 2, 2010, Björn Wiman, the cultural editor of one of the most widely read Swedish newspapers, *Dagens Nyheter* (roughly *The Daily News*, henceforth *DN*), removed a *Rocky* comic strip from the paper's online strip archive.² The removed strip had been published in the print edition on August 28 the same year. In the strip, the main character, *Rocky*, rants about how the "Jews at Bonniers" – one of the dominant publishing houses in Sweden and owner of *DN* – are to blame for the women in his life being mean, because his misfortune increases "their cash flow" (nr. 2434, fig. 1).

¹ *Arne Anka* is intentionally drawn as Donald Duck (called *Kalle Anka* in Swedish). The strip also makes use of Donald Duck's excitable nature, but also adds to it a large dose of cynicism.

² This is not the first time *DN* has removed a *Rocky* strip. Cause for removal is, according to Kellerman (2008, 747), "most often because they are afraid of being sued by famous people." After Wiman's decision, and possibly as a consequence of it, *DN* removed another strip (published December 10, 2010), this time because it alluded to antiziganism. Wiman claims to have had nothing to do with this, according to *Sydsvenskan* December 10, 2010.



Fig. 1: © Kellerman

Wiman maintained that the strip should never have been published (either in print or online), but that the regular staff of the comics desk was absent at the time and that web-publication is automated. Further, he specified that the reason that the strip was removed was because it alluded to “anti-Semitic expressions,” and not because of its author’s alleged anti-Semitism. In the occasionally heated debate that followed, Wiman opined that, among other examples, Swedish artist Lars Vilks’ cartoons depicting Muhammad as a “roundabout dog”³ (which *DN* published) are of a different kind, since they “make fun of a made-up religious figure, namely Muhammad,” and that people who were offended by them can be grouped together with people who would get upset by someone mocking Santa Claus.⁴ That it is reasonable to perceive Vilks as alluding to, or playing with, Islamophobic “expressions” (for example by fitting one of his “roundabout dogs” with a bomb belt) was nowhere discussed.

Wiman has in interviews been careful to separate hate speech and critique of religion. Where religion is concerned, Wiman called for “more and coarser religious satire, regardless of religion,” as early as a March 10, 2010, interview in

³ In 2007, Swedish postmodern artist Lars Vilks drew a series of images combining the then-popular Swedish practice of placing uncommissioned statues of dogs at the center of roundabouts with the supposed image of Islam’s prophet Muhammad. The ensuing debate was similar to the discussions during the 2005 Danish cartoon crisis, but not as widely covered in the media.

⁴ Kulturnyheterna 2010.



Göteborgs-Posten.⁵ The distinction between hate speech, which is illegal, and critique of religion, which is a right, is important to maintain. The problem is that it is not easy to do so. Throughout history, many have chosen critique of Judaism as a way to agitate against Jews or, for that matter, to criticize Judaism harshly, which has had the effect that Jews have been made suspect.⁶ This pattern is now clearly being replayed in relation to Islam and Muslims, not least in Sweden, for example in the discourse of the Sweden Democrats, a Swedish nationalist party elected into parliament in 2010.⁷ It does not follow from this that all critique of religion has an agitating function or effect, or that it is only ever furtive hate propaganda. Many of the most outspoken critics of religion are people who are squaring off against “their own” tradition or who are critical because of political or scientific convictions that are not necessarily rooted in racism or xenophobia. In the latter cases one can expect a general critical attitude toward all religions; a fixation on only one religion or religious group is in this context illogical.

Björn Wiman’s actions in *DN*’s name have led me to consider a few seemingly simple issues that this article will discuss. The first is whether *DN*’s publication of *Rocky* has contained Islamophobic “expressions” or played with Islamophobic ideas that are not critiques of religion, but that can be understood as claims about Islam or Muslims as a collective and which *DN* has not removed as they did with the strip containing anti-Semitic “expressions.” If these expressions have been present, the next question becomes: How should we understand the fact that nobody seems to have reacted to them? This question is more general than whether *DN*’s editorial staff has reacted or not. The final question regards satire and representation: What possibilities do we have to analyze stereotype-based humor without falling into condemnation, moralism, and prohibitionism, while

⁵ Viksten & Magnusson 2010.

⁶ Bachner 2004, 19f.

⁷ Otterbeck & Bevelander 2006; Bevelander & Otterbeck 2012; Modood 2006, 57.



at the same time avoiding a limp acceptance of all types of representation in the name of humor?

ISLAMOPHOBIC CONCEPTIONS IN *ROCKY*?

For this article, I have surveyed the 750-page *Rocky 10 år: Samlade serier 1998-2008* (*Rocky 10 Years: Collected Comic Strips 1998-2008*), most of which have been published by *DN*. I have marked every mention of Muslims, Islam, Osama bin Laden, “Fattwas” (intentionally misspelled), and anything else that can be said to connote Muslims or Islam (including the drawn, non-verbal). I found forty-three strips in total.⁸ The references are evenly distributed throughout the entire period and are often reflexive of their immediate contemporary context, as is the strip in general. For example, when Iraqi political leader Muqtada as-Sadr is visible in the media, he also pops up in the strip (e. g. strip no. 1648, “That’s just sneaky shit, shooting a missile into a preschool because you suspect that Muqtadr al Fayed is part of the substitute labor pool”).⁹

It is easy to establish from a careful reading that the strip occasionally refers to stereotyped conceptions about Muslims that can be said to allude to Islamophobic “expressions,” to paraphrase Wiman.¹⁰ Islamophobic expressions would include stereotypes concerning Muslim men and Islam as particularly prone to the oppression of women, violence, terrorism, or backwardness, and Muslim women as suppressed, traditional, and voiceless. Whether these strips convey, coquette with, or make fun of these expressions will be discussed below, but what can be said with certainty is that strips that allude to Islamophobic ideas have been unreflexively printed in *DN* (and several other dailies) over a

⁸ *Rocky 10 år: Samlade serier 1998-2008* contains roughly 2,000 strips in different formats.

⁹ Translated from the original: “Nu är det bara sneaky shit, skjuta en robot in i en förskola för att man misstänker att Muqtadr al Fayed är med i vikariepoolen.”

¹⁰ For example: strip no. 30; 1396; 1399; 1599; 1761; 1765; plate 189.



period of years. *Rocky* also contains allusions to racist (e. g. no. 26), sexist,¹¹ homophobic (e. g. no. 44, 1023), and anti-Christian (e. g. no. 1047) conceptions that will not be analyzed here.

That *Rocky* contains racist and sexist “expressions” does not automatically mean that the strip supports these ideas. Strip number 2434 (quoted in the introduction) contains manifestly anti-Semitic conceptions. The Bonnier family is presented as Jews who control the media, and, according to a cultural stereotype, they manipulate their surroundings to make money. Kellerman here uses well-established stereotypes that help readers orient themselves and prepare for the humor and the turnaround to come. In doing this, he is of course connecting to what Wiman calls “anti-Semitic expressions.” If the reader has not encountered these ideas before, they are disseminated further, and if the reader has encountered them before, they are repeated. But for readers who know how to decode the comic strip genre, the ideas are ridiculed. It is *Rocky*’s reasoning that becomes ridiculous, but in its stupidity also funny, at least for some readers, if obviously not for all.

Rocky’s references to Muslims are not one-sided. There are strips devoted to mobilizing already-circulated prejudices and stereotypes. In many cases there is passing mention of something that can be connected to Muslims or Islam. But any reading is complicated by *Rocky*’s ambiguous style. When *Rocky* says what he says below (fig. 2), what reading does the strip invite? This strip, incidentally, was published in the daily *Sydsvenskan*’s comics section a few weeks after Wiman made his decision to retract strip 2434 and the debate was in full swing.

¹¹ It is pointless to give examples here. Sex and relationships are a recurrent theme in the strip and this naturally opens up for the exercise of sexist conceptions.



Fig. 2: © Kellerman

Caption: "You can't even go somewhere else! There's monsoon rains all over Thailand, and all the neighboring countries are Muslim and want to cut the head off every blond cartoonist they can get their hands on!" (Nr. 1396)¹²

At first glance, reading would seem to indicate that Kellerman is having Rocky react to the aggressive protests brought on by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*'s infamous 2005 Muhammad caricatures: this is Rocky fighting back. That Muslims as a collective are humorless is a conception that also appears in a few other strips (no. 479, 1399, 1761). Being accused of lacking a sense of humor is, according to social psychologist Michael Billig, a harsh indictment about a personal shortcoming in our own time.¹³ At the same time, one cannot disregard Rocky's personality as a comic strip character. He is completely attitude-incontinent and lacks verbal impulse control. His foot, as it were, is perpetually bound for his mouth. It is by giving voice to all sorts of prejudices, but also to a general small-mindedness, jealousy, cowardice, self-pity, blaséness, and any number of other negative characteristics, that Rocky is defined as a character. He is *supposed* to say the wrong thing; it is Kellerman's job to stick his finger in the air and supply Rocky with the right wrong things to say in relation to his

¹² Translated from the original: "Man kan inte ens åka någon annanstans! Det är monsunregn i hela Thailand, och alla grannländer är muslimska och vill skära huvudet av alla blonda skämttecknare de kan komma över!"

¹³ Billig 2005, 11.



readership. With this in mind, another possible reading presents the above as yet another typical example of Rocky's folly that finds its humor in that it consciously exaggerates. Rocky is mad about the weather and reacts in the same way he always does: he goes off the rails.

Strips 1360 and 1361 (fig. 3) constitute something of a declaration of policy in this vein. In the first strip, we see Rocky and his friend Gonzo waiting for a plane. Rocky is annoyed that everything is taking too long. He takes this as an opportunity to complain about Indian men who "are ugly and who pour acid on their wives if they are unfaithful, while they themselves go to three-year old prostitutes every day!"¹⁴ The panel background depicts a couple – a woman with her hair covered and a man – who are being urged to hurry up. In the second strip, Rocky whines about people who rush to board their plane instead of taking it easy. Eventually, his friend tires of the tirade and says:

Gonzo: "You just condemned a whole people for always being late for their flights, and now you condemn your own race for trying to board too quickly! How do you want it?"

Rocky: "Can't you be racist against all peoples?"

Gonzo: "No, you have to pick one or two, and it can't be your own..." (1361).¹⁵

¹⁴ Translated from the original: "är fula och håller syra på sina fruar om de är otrogna, men själv går de till treåriga prostituerade varje dag!"

¹⁵ Translated from the original:

Gonzo: "Du dömde just ut ett helt folkslag för att de alltid är sena på planet, och nu dömer du ut din egen ras för att de försöker komma på för fort! Hur ska du ha det egentligen?"

Rocky: "Kan man inte vara rasist mot alla folkslag?"

Gonzo: "Nej, man måste välja en eller två, och det får inte vara ens egen..."



Fig. 3: © Kellerman

Kellerman here lets Rocky articulate the misanthropy he often flirts with and shows through Gonzo's acerbic reply that all of it is exaggerated. But the above analysis builds on knowledge about the genre and is possibly a projection of my own reading of Kellerman's authorial intentions. The collected edition from which the material for this article is drawn contains a preface in which Kellerman writes:

Finding humor at the expense of others has always been a successful recipe for a hearty laugh. It is no fun at all when someone else finds humor at your own expense, but it might just be the contradiction in this that makes it so fun. Or it is simply more fun to be an asshole than someone who makes oneself out to be Gandhi when they are really just as big an arse as everyone else. The things we are not allowed to joke about have a tendency to be the things we laugh at most. And it does not get any less fun when some Practical Pig type sitting next to you closes his eyes and proclaims that this is not something you can laugh about.¹⁶

¹⁶ Kellerman 2008, 15. Translated from the Swedish original: "Att göra sig lustig på andras bekostnad har alltid varit ett lyckat recept på att få sig ett gott skratt. När någon annan gör sig lustig på ens egen bekostnad är det ju inte ett dugg roligt, men det är kanske just det motsägelsefulla i det som gör det hela så roligt. Eller så är det bara roligare att vara ett asshole än någon som målar upp sig själv som Gandhi men egentligen är ett lika stort arse som alla andra. Allt man inte får skämta om har en tendens att var det man skrattar mest åt. Och det blir inte mindre roligt av att en Bror Duktig-flur som sitter bredvid sluter ögonen och förkunnar att det där får man minsann inte skratta åt."



Kellerman lets Rocky balance between being a punchline and being an “asshole.” Just as with Arne Anka and Donald Duck before him, the pendulum swings back and forth and more often than not hits the protagonist over the head, as it passes from one end to the other.

Notwithstanding the reading above, the fact remains that in *Rocky*, Islam and Muslims are commonly represented as signifiers of intolerance, violence, oppression of women, and the different. But, with a few exceptions, Muslims do not exist in Rocky’s everyday life. Hip-hop Muslims appear in two strips and are then made to appear either as hypocrites or as simply ludicrous (no. 479, 917). In the latter example it is actually Mange, one of Rocky’s closest friends, who asserts his right to be a Muslim and take the name Jamaal, saying that “you’ll just have to freakin’ take me for who I am”.¹⁷ Mange’s Muslimness is never returned to in later strips.

In the forty-three strips found in the survey of *Rocky 10 år*, the most commonly recurring Islamic referents are Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida, who together figure in twelve strips of the period. The jokes are most often built by using Osama or al-Qaida as punching bag or an object of comparison (no. 1295: “not even al-qaida abandon as many bags as he”¹⁸), which also applies to the strip’s mentions of Muqtada as-Sadr (no. 1024, 1648) and the Taliban (no. 831 and 1049, where Rocky calls Norwegians “damned alp-Talibans” in connection with a discussion about a Norwegian ban on pornography).¹⁹ The mention in the strip of these people and groups does not in any way suggest that Muslims in general are represented. But the things they are made to represent (violence, intolerance, fundamentalism, oppression of women, the radically different) are in actuality the same things that Muslims or Islam are made to represent when more general

¹⁷ Translated from the Swedish original: “du får fan ta mig för den jag är”.

¹⁸ Translated from the original: “inte ens al-qaida lämnar lika mycket väskor som han”.

¹⁹ Translated from the Swedish original: “värsta fjälltalibaner”. Cf. Reinsch-Campbell 2012, which discusses references to World War II in *Rocky*.



references are employed. The choice of themes is not surprising, but typical. Humor researcher Simon Weaver notes that in Anglophone contexts, the most common themes for jokes are Muslim names, suicide bombing, 9/11, oppression of women, Muslim sexual difference (bestiality being the preferred theme), ownership of small shops, and Muslims being reactionary.²⁰

Some of the above mentioned jokes appear also in *Rocky*. In strip no. 30 a man in New York tells Rocky that his neighbors are Muslims, so there are no problems with thugs in his building. Rocky's reply: "So I'm staying [...] in a house full of people who think I'm a devil! And you're saying this to calm me down!"²¹ At another date, Mange is infuriated with women in general: "I'm gonna become a real male chauvinist pig! Girls don't want a nice guy who is thoughtful and faithful, because then they get bored! 'I'm not feeling any butterflies in my stomach anymore!' I'm growing a beard, getting a bamboo cane and a burka, and then I'll show 'em butterflies! I'm gonna become mullah Omar up in this Mutherfucker! [sic]" (no. 1235).²² In no. 189, Rocky speaks negatively about going to see a soccer game live instead of watching it on TV. "And I want a commentator and not some damned sausage-fed expert who stands bellowing fattwas against the ref behind you while he shampoos your hair with beer foam!"²³ A final example: Rocky and his girlfriend Maja are parked on the couch and Rocky wants to go to bed (unnumbered strip, page. 730). Maja replies, "You're only after sex!"²⁴ To which Rocky counters: "You say that like I'm trying to steal your vital organs and sell them on the black market. What's wrong with sex?"

²⁰ Weaver 2013, 491.

²¹ Translated from the Swedish original: "Jag bor alltså [...] i ett hus fullt med folk som tycker att jag är en djävul! Och det här säger du för att lugna mig!"

²² Translated from the Swedish original: "Jag ska fan bli en riktigt svinig mansgris! Tjejer vill inte ha en snäll kille som är omtänksam och trogen för då tycker de det är tråkigt! 'Jag känner inget pirr i magen längre!' Jag ska skaffa skägg, bambukäpp och burkha så ska de fan få se på pirr i magen! Jag ska bli mulla Omar up in this Mutherfucker!"

²³ Translated from the Swedish original: "Och så vill jag ha en kommentator och inte då en jävla korvgödd expert som står och brölar fattvor mot domaren bakom en medans han schamponerar ens hår med ölskum!"

²⁴ Translated from the Swedish original: "Du vill bara ha sex!"



Are you a Shia Muslim?”²⁵ There is not really any focus on Muslims or Islam in these strips. Rather, Muslims here serve as a point of reference for intolerance, oppression of women, violence (the reference to *fatwas* above should in all likelihood be read as a reference to death sentences), and ultimately of difference.

But there are also strips that make direct reference to Islam and Muslims. One such strip has already been presented (the one where Rocky sours on the weather). One that works with the same theme, produced just days later, is number 1399 (fig. 4). The strip comments more directly on the protests against *Jyllands-Posten's* Muhammad cartoons:

Rocky: “Just because some Danish morons drew professor Muhammed they’re out to kill every damn tourist! What is wrong with Muslims?”

Dan: “Christianity ain’t too cute either! There are lots of examp...”

Rocky: “Yeah yeah yeah. But does their foreign ministry warn them not to go to Europe when they’ve halal-butchered Belgian peace activist on the telly? Does anyone in Brussels fire shots into the air or throw eggs at the Iraqi embassy? No, so clearly Islam is a retard religion.”²⁶

²⁵ Translated from the Swedish original: “Du säger det som om jag ville ta dina vitala organ och sälja på svarta marknaden! Vad är det för fel på sex? Är du shiamuslim?”

²⁶ Translated from the Swedish original:

Rocky: “Bara för att några danska krattor ritat professor Muhammed ska de ha ihjäl varenda jävla turist! Var är det för fel på muslimer egentligen?”

Dan: “Kristendomen är inte så gullig heller! Det finns många exemp...”

Rocky: “Ja ja ja. Men varnar deras UD dom för att åka till Europa efter att dom halalslaktat belgiska fredsaktivister på teve? Är det nån i Bryssel som skjuter i luften eller kastar ägg på irakiska ambassaden då? Nej, alltså är islam en muppreligion!”



Fig. 4: © Kellerman

Kellerman here shows that he will not refrain from joking about Islam and Muslims just because there is a threat level connected to doing so. In the strip, Rocky goes on one of his usual tangents about how bad things are – in this case Islam. His brother Dan, who is lying on the bed, shushes him, after which the next panel flashes forward into the future where someone bellows in a made up language while burning Rocky in effigy.

It should be parenthetically noted that mockery of Muslims and Islam in comic strips is not a new phenomenon in Scandinavia, and rarely a dangerous practice. For example, the aforementioned *Arne Anka* comic has a strip from March 1995 wherein Arne takes on the role of a hard-bitten scandal- and gossip tabloid editor who vows to not let the Muslim pilgrims who had recently died in a tragic ferry accident in the Red Sea escape his scrutinizing gaze. A headline reads: “The deceased Muslims’ sexual habits.” To this text is added an image of a man dressed like a classic oil sheikh having sex with a camel, and a long and thin minaret having sex with a domed mosque.²⁷ Jokes of this type are fairly common. Leafing through collections of caricatures by, for instance, Danish duo Wulffmorgenthaler or Swedish caricaturist and comic strip artist Hans

²⁷ From the collected volume Christensen 2001, 172.



Lindström, one finds a flood of commentary that makes use of stereotypes of Islam or Muslims to score comedic points.

It is common for Kellerman to make Islam and Muslims stand for something that is manifestly different, as in strip no. 1074 (a woman in *niqab* in Municipality Adult Education signals how low Rocky's brother has sunk) or in the expression "satellite dish Ali in Hagalund" (no. 741), a comment that Others immigrants in the projects who would rather consume media from their country of origin than Swedish media.

There are also a couple of strips that are different in that Kellerman has Islam, Muslims, or Muslim characters stand for an alternative or a fantasy world. To give an example, Rocky suffers from age-related unease in connection with "millennium anxiety" and comes up with the brilliant idea that, "if I become Muslim I can postpone my millennial angst for another 580 years! By that time even I should have been able to find a nice girl and make a career" (no. 176).²⁸ No value judgment about becoming Muslim is made in this strip.²⁹ The fairy tale theme is best captured in a comment in strip 245, where Tommy asks Rocky (in a sauna), "Ok, how about this... The Prophet Muhammed is reincarnated in my body and I can grant you any wish?"³⁰ Again, there is no real evaluation in the strip's use of Islam. There is certainly a sense of exotification where tales of jinn are intermixed with Muhammad as prophet, but even if this is bound to offend some readers it is difficult to regard this as falling into an Islamophobic discursive pattern. A strip that ends with Rippo saying that Muslims are "not particularly known for their sense of humor,"³¹ actually starts with Rocky saying

²⁸ Translated from the Swedish original: "om jag blir muslim kan jag skjuta upp min millenieågren i 580 år! Vid det laget borde t.o.m. jag ha hittat en bra tjej och gjort karriär."

²⁹ A poster on p. 156 functions in a similar way: "Next year I'm gonna celebrate alternative Ramadan instead!" ("Nästa år firar jag banne mig alternativ ramadan i stället!").

³⁰ Translated from the Swedish original: "Okej, men så här då... Profeten Muhammed reinkarneras i min kropp och jag uppfyller vilken önskan som helst?"

³¹ Translated from the Swedish original: "inte speciellt kända för sitt sinne för humor".



something positive: “What a nice Mosque they’ve gotten!,”³² referring to a newly constructed mosque in central Stockholm.

If one reads *Rocky* as an ironic provocation strip, it is possible to see the protagonist’s conscious fatuity as critique. But if one reads *Rocky* without this genre-acceptance, the strip appears to be actively connecting with Islamophobic conceptions. This double readability points to a problem with the reading of deliberately “vulgar” literature. If the strip is read with faithfulness to the genre and with the acceptance that what is said might not necessarily be the message, the ability to write the unexpected, the outrageous, which thereby becomes clever, takes center stage. On the other hand, if the genre is denied this privilege and the strip is read against stated intentions, a pattern emerges in which Islam and Muslims are fairly consistently used as a baseline for the negative, the culturally abortive, and for that which is not included in the strip’s “us.”

Furthermore, it is possible to envision two versions of the former reading. The first version has the reader expecting intentional social and conventional critique in *Rocky*, which seems to be a common practice among friends and acquaintances with whom I have spoken about this. The strip offers numerous examples of critical social commentary (see for example no. 831 about SÄPO, the Swedish Security Service, and no. 1092 about the war in Iraq). In the second version, *Rocky* is read as being deliberately offensive without any intention apart from being outrageous, a reading that Kellerman himself suggests in the quote above. He seeks out the forbidden to provoke laughter. This situation is commented in the strip itself. One can read the last two comments in strip 1294 (fig. 5) as Kellerman communicating with his readers:

³² Translated from the Swedish original: “Snygg moské de har fått!”



Fig. 5: © Kellerman

Mange: "Oh man, you're going to hell for that joke..."

Rocky: "And you're coming with me for laughing..."

The second type of reading, denying the genre-specific, is common in racism studies that deal with discourses. By stipulating what can be claimed to connect with racist stereotypes and expressions, it is a simple matter to proclaim someone or something as racist without any respect for genre or, in the worst cases, for context. Here too, there are many differences between different studies, between careful scholarship and what is best considered as protectionist activism. The more careful school usually separates racist ideologies from racist discourses.³³ Those who consciously adhere to racist ideologies can, of course, unproblematically be labeled racist even if they do not classify themselves as such. But those who through speech acts connect with racist discourses can do so for several reasons, sometimes with racist motivations, but also through linguistic ineptitude, repetition of habituated and unreflected clichés, irony, or even in anti-racist artistry. Regardless of intention, however, we can as researchers define certain statements as relating to racist discourses.

³³ A trend in research, often inspired by Essed 1991 and van Dijk 1993, with the aim of revealing racist discourse, inspired many studies during the 1990's and early 21st century.



Take as an example *Tintin in the Congo* (1930) and its representations of the Congolese. These representations doubtlessly connect with racism. Hergé himself was belatedly ashamed of the comic. He tried to rework it (1948), but the new edition did not manage to escape the conceptual world in which the original was drawn. The artist explained his work by saying that, at the time he made it, he did not know better.³⁴ In other words, it was not through conscious intention that Belgian colonization was celebrated, but rather through strong contemporary discourses that were also present in, among other things, the *Tarzan* movies, in lax Belgian news reportage, and in official propaganda.³⁵ Hergé was not producing propaganda, but neither could he resist racist conceptions that he had internalized; he did not even see the problems in his representation until later. But all older representation does not fall in the same trap. Even if descriptions and words that today sound bad historically have been used, one should not read anachronistically. Linguistic conventions undergo rapid changes and there is plenty of European travel writing from the Congo, and from Sub-Saharan Africa, that is not comparably racist in the sense *Tintin in the Congo* is, even if the terminology used to describe the world is hardly the one we would choose today.³⁶ No matter how much we twist and turn our reading, however, it is inescapable to conclude that *DN* (and other dailies) has not, over the years, pre-empted publication of *Rocky* when it has alluded to Islamophobic “expressions.”³⁷

³⁴ Farr 2001, 22.

³⁵ Hochschild 2002.

³⁶ See for example L. Berg 1997; Hochschild 2002.

³⁷ Since the empirical analysis for this article was performed, another collected volume of *Rocky* has appeared: Kellerman 2013. To ensure that his general use of references to Islam and Muslims has not changed in the years covered therein (2008–2013), I have read through its 500 pages. Roughly the same pattern emerges, with the major difference being that ordinary Muslims do not feature at all. Violent Islamic organizations (like the Taliban, al-Qaida) are still referred to regularly, to express emotions connected to female oppression and violence.



WHY ARE THERE NO REACTIONS TO THIS REPRESENTATION?

Kellerman's treatment of Islam contains much that could be potentially upsetting to Muslims, but this has not (to date) become an issue; and so far nobody else, such as *DN*'s cultural editor, has interceded. Perhaps the Muslims who might be upset by the possibly offensive content do not read *Rocky*, or perhaps Muslims who read the strip have been socialized into its reading well enough that they can laugh at it rather than be upset. Indeed, it is a far too widely spread myth that Muslims always react activistically when they are disappointed with a representation. Considering for instance the number of Bollywood and Hollywood movies that for a long time have used Muslims as villains, it would be a full-time job to be an outraged activist.³⁸ It would be interesting to conduct a reception study to better understand the reading of popular culture containing different types of renderings of Muslims or Islam, both among Muslims and non-Muslims. Some minor studies have been made, like ethnologists Åsa Andersson, Magnus Berg, and Sidsel Natland's investigation of readings of *Not without my Daughter* by non-Muslim Norwegians and Swedes,³⁹ but a major in-depth study is still lacking.

But the question remains: why did *DN*'s Björn Wiman notice that *Rocky* alluded to "anti-Semitic expressions," but not Islamophobic ones? One guess would be that it was a question of perception. Wiman's eye had been trained to regard the anti-Semitic as vulgar and offensive, while he had not developed the same sense for the Islamophobic. In this, Wiman was not alone, but rather typical.

Knowledge about what can be regarded as Islamophobic "expressions" had simply not had a similarly widespread impact in 2010. Since 2010, awareness of Islamophobic expressions has spread somewhat in Sweden; likely because of the reoccurring criticism in the media of the nationalist political party the Sweden

³⁸ See Shaheen 2009; M. Berg 1998; Hirji 2008.

³⁹ Andersson, Berg & Natland 2001.



Democrats' quite open Islamophobic positions (in their own terminology called Islam criticism). This leads into the article's final question, about the issue of analysis of humor and representation.

HUMOR, REPRESENTATION, AND DISTINCTION

Pierre Bourdieu's discussions about language, taste, and distinction contain a number of keys for continued thinking about how some things can pass as funny while others are considered problematic or inappropriate. Bourdieu writes about how official language is fetishized by the ruling classes (not least through education) and how a distance to the vernacular (vulgar) and the dialectal is created and maintained through distinction and censure.⁴⁰ The distinction in itself is important – there is supposed to be a difference and this difference is supposed to be cultivated, for example through advanced language use, tight grammar, and a particular intonation. The linguistic distinction can then be used to support and legitimate social divides according to which the uneducated need not bother even glancing toward the more refined salons. This distinction is effectively upheld by censure. This happens both through social institutions (such as schools, correct language in the media) and through individuals who act as a linguistic police force. Through these means it is possible to uphold the distinction between the good, fetishized language and the vulgar, by stigmatizing certain expressions as symbolically shameful. Bourdieu advances similar arguments about taste.⁴¹ Ultimately, he means to say that distinction, language, and taste are keys to understanding how cultural capital is accumulated and how this legitimizes and co-creates boundaries between different social classes. Cultural capital also helps create expectations and, with that, markets where taste and language can be offered for sale, coupled with physical goods or actions that

⁴⁰ Bourdieu 1984a; 1991, 52f.

⁴¹ Bourdieu 1984b, 181f.



serve to include or exclude. In order to participate – whether as consumer or as producer – one must master the set of regulations about the expected, and then follow it or challenge it.⁴² In Bourdieu's vision, subcultures and countercultures become implicated in the overall market and must in turn negotiate with it to declare their independence, which thus by definition becomes a fiction.⁴³

Bourdieu's theories were developed in French society in the 1970s and 1980s, long before the emergence of social media, the partial collapse of public and private, and the vindication of popular culture through the embrace of its icons by the taste police. In fact, comics was for Bourdieu an example of a subculture that stands outside legitimate culture.⁴⁴ Comics' cultural standing, however, is something that has since partially changed. It is, then, not entirely obvious that parallels can be drawn between Bourdieu's social theories and *Rocky* as a cultural expression and the inability to react to Islamophobic expressions that dominated Swedish culture at the time of publication of the *Rocky* strips in question, but I see a clear opportunity to be inspired. It is difficult to think that *Rocky* could have been produced and could have reached its level of success in Sweden if the media climate had not changed to the point where journalists think it is ok to ask a politician if he shaves his scrotum. There is a long line of development that cannot be investigated further in this article, but phenomena like Monty Python, provocational art, and bully-TV can stand as symbols for how a vicious, snappy, provocative, and raw humor has become broadly accepted in the public sphere and in the dominant mainstream media, and not just in private spheres, college circles, or in underground movements and media.

A complex relationship to stereotypes can develop when raw and biting humor is produced and interpreted within a well-defined taste community. Some

⁴² Bourdieu 1984b.

⁴³ Bourdieu 1984b, 23f.

⁴⁴ Bourdieu 1984b, 24.



stereotypes, assuming that they are kept within a taste community, can be used in a way that people outside the community might regard as highly prejudiced. But within the community, it is possible to maintain the contention that one is ironically playing with stereotypes and relating to them in an ambiguous manner. In my personal reading of *Rocky*, this happens constantly. *Rocky* mobilizes stereotypes that I am already familiar with and the characters in the strip comment on them without trying to eradicate them. Because everyone gets a go, there is a preferred reading within the taste community I belong to that allows even those who become the butt of a joke but are part of the community to nonetheless appreciate the strip. The obvious sexism and narrow-mindedness becomes laughable and part of the strip's humor. It is part of the meaning-making process that the cartoonist, the cartoons, and the conversation, as well as the audience, all share and understand. The humor arises in slippages and in unexpected fissures.

But what happens when *Rocky* is no longer an underground phenomenon that must be sought out, but instead something that is distributed by news dailies like *DN*, whose culture pages are the most prestigious in Sweden? There is an imminent risk that a sporadic reading that does not accept or even knows about the preferred reading instead makes visible the stereotypes in the ways they are commonly used in society. Other orders of taste take over.

Simon Weaver discusses Sacha Baron Cohen's extremely successful Ali G character as a sort of "liquid racism," a vague and multifaceted representational art that resists easy classification. Baron Cohen is said to have both reintroduced racial representation into mainstream humor but also, through irony and double meaning, to have "advanced cultural criticism, which will likely make older forms of race representation in comedy far less likely."⁴⁵ *Rocky* is characterized by a similar multifacetedness hidden under a seemingly simple surface. Kellerman

⁴⁵ Weaver 2011, 174.



seems to be a child of provocative humor. Reading *Rocky* over time, one sees how Rocky evolves as a character, not simply growing older, but also that the humor becomes less fixated on shocking. Kellerman's humor grows more subtle. This does not mean that he nowadays refrains from raw humor, only that he is more rarely overexplicit. Just as with Ali G, part of *Rocky*'s humor lies in that someone who signals that he does not belong to the cultural elite or the establishment is speaking publicly without respecting good taste (for example by speaking or spelling poorly or by having the "wrong" opinions). It becomes unclear who is the object of humor: perhaps it is the disciplined elite that becomes the laughingstock by reading (or, in Ali G's case, seeing) things it would rather suppress.⁴⁶ Research has shown that it is possible for ethnic and racial humor to both reinforce and reduce prejudice. The outcome is not given.⁴⁷

To be able to maintain the position that one represents a better taste, some form of distinction must be upheld. The problem with *Rocky* is that it does not fit well with good taste, but is nonetheless disseminated through its channels (in this case *DN*). In those channels, "expressions" that allude to stereotypical attitudes toward Muslims and prejudiced conceptions about Islam fly under the radar and are not perceived as challenging.

CONCLUSION

It is fair to say that *Rocky* occasionally alludes to Islamophobic expressions. The strip is a satire that often exposes the main character as a quibbler and makes use of techniques similar to those used in the Ali G character, described as liquid racism by Simon Weaver. Phrased differently, *Rocky* uses Islamophobic expression but does not necessarily send an Islamophobic message to the reader. As Kellerman's use of Islam and Muslims fluctuate, even though some

⁴⁶ Cf. Weaver 2011, chap. 7.

⁴⁷ Saper 1995.



stereotypes reoccur in similar ways, *Rocky* does not lend itself to a simple analysis; it is provocative and vulgar in form, but is it offensive and reactionary or subversive regarding prejudice? From an open-minded reading it is impossible to tell. Instead, different taste communities are likely to read the comic differently, and depending on the sensitivities of respective community, some jokes and rants will cross boundaries. Interestingly, the frequent use of Islamophobic expressions has, as of this writing, not caused any public commotion, not even when other stereotypes in the strip were discussed.

Rocky is published in the most prestigious of dailies in Sweden, even though the strip clearly challenges 'good taste' by frequent (conscious) misspellings, racist and sexist slurs, and other bigotry. The discussion about *Rocky* was started by the anti-Semitic expressions used, not the Islamophobic. I argue that this is related to the dynamics of public discussion in Sweden in which Islamophobic expressions were not (and still seldom are) seen as quite as outrageous as anti-Semitic ones among the guardians of good taste. Rather, Islamophobic expressions were unremarked upon, and neither Muslims nor non-Muslims have cared to bring them to public attention.

The situation has changed somewhat in the years since the period 1998-2010, due to the bluntness of Islamophobic expressions used by the Sweden Democrats, a populist party now in parliament, who frequently conjure up an Islamic enemy as a threat to Swedish or European culture and identity. In public debate, good taste is slowly renegotiating its relation to Islamophobic expressions. A future study of the reactions to Islamophobic expressions, concentrating on the period 2015 to 2020 is likely to have other results.



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