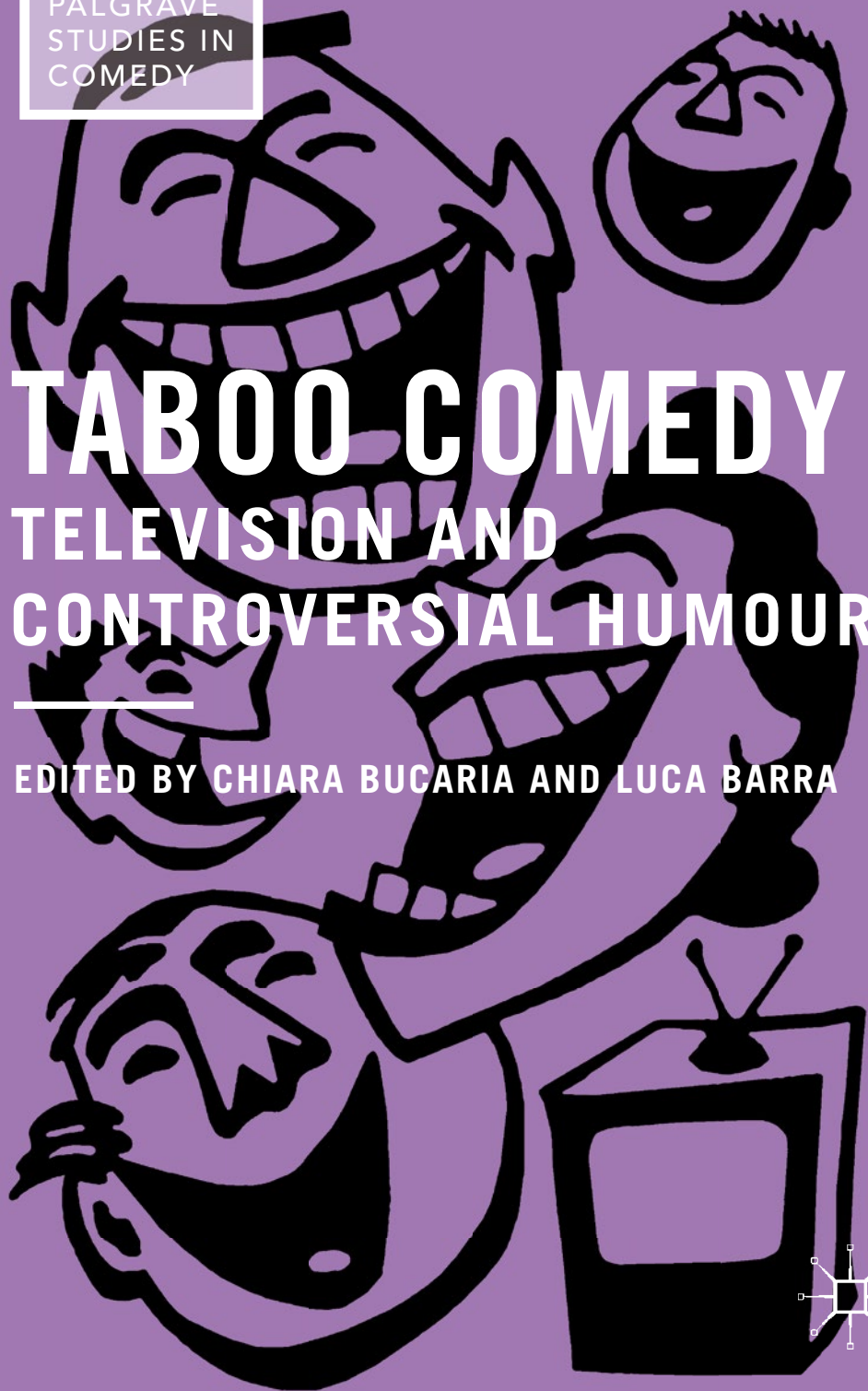


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TABOO COMEDY

TELEVISION AND CONTROVERSIAL HUMOUR

EDITED BY CHIARA BUCARIA AND LUCA BARRA



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Taboo Comedy

Television and Controversial Humour

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Taboo Comedy on Television: Issues and Themes

Chiara Bucaria and Luca Barra

MAPPING TABOO COMEDY ON TELEVISION

When *Sex and the City* and *Six Feet Under* premiered on the US cable channel HBO in 1998 and 2001 respectively, they were saluted as ground-breaking shows because of—among other reasons—their unconventional, often-humorous, and explicit treatment of subjects such as sex, death, homosexuality, and illness. Since then, the use of humour containing taboo references has become more pervasive in Anglo-American television programming. From *Inside Amy Schumer* and *The League of Gentlemen* to Super Bowl commercials, stand-up comedy specials, and new generation, single-camera sitcoms, forms of edgy, transgressive, dark, and even taboo

This chapter was prepared jointly by the two authors. However, Chiara Bucaria is mainly responsible for sections ‘Mapping Taboo Comedy on Television’ and ‘Taboo Comedy and Humour Studies’ and Luca Barra for sections ‘Taboo Comedy and Television Studies’ and ‘A Large and Complex Field of Study’.

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humour have in the last few years increasingly become part and parcel of both television programming and the viewing experience. Even unsuspected network family sitcoms are slowly but surely pushing the envelope of what constitutes acceptable material for comedy. Although, especially in the USA, the divide between network and cable television remains a sharp one, there is a noticeable trend towards a more extensive use of this kind of edgier comedy even in more widely available programming, which at least partially moves beyond the classic “least objectionable programming” and “mainstream” imperatives and tries to better respond to ever-changing media and television landscapes. From the heavy sexual innuendos of sitcoms such as *Mom* to paedophilia and incest jokes in *American Dad*, from late-night talk shows to *Comedy Central Roasts*, both traditional network shows and more niche cable productions are now rife with humorous references to subjects that were once reserved for comedy clubs at best, which makes taboo comedy a topical and relevant object of study for both Humour and Television Studies.

From a terminological standpoint, this kind of comedy has been in turn referred to—among others—as ‘tasteless’, ‘outrageous’, ‘gallows’, ‘abusive’, ‘gross’, ‘sick’, ‘cruel’, ‘edgy’, ‘transgressive’, ‘aggressive’, ‘dark’, ‘disturbing’, ‘rude’, ‘offensive’, ‘politically incorrect’, ‘quirky’, ‘offbeat’, and ‘explicit’, to encompass a whole range of intensity. The number of terms that are variously used both in academia and the press to refer to this kind of comedy/humour is perhaps indicative of the many nuances that it can take on and of its slippery and elusive nature. However, faced with the task of having to choose a title for this collection, we selected *taboo* and *controversial* as our two focal points. ‘Taboo’ is hopefully evocative enough to immediately conjure up examples of and issues concerning the intended subject, whereas the choice of the term ‘controversial’ reflects a conscious effort towards terminological neutrality. As opposed to adjectives such as ‘offensive’ and ‘rude’, for instance, ‘controversial’ appears to allow for less of a disapproving stance, thus mainly accomplishing a description of what the effect of this kind of comedy usually is, i.e. creating controversy on its appropriateness vs. inappropriateness. Although most academic literature and even journalistic discourse on controversial comedy often mention the ‘fine line’ between humour and offense and have sometimes veered towards a call for a more responsible and ethical use of taboo humour (e.g. Lockyer and Pickering 2005), we argue that a similar angle is beyond the scope and intention of this volume. In fact, this collection is meant to present scholarly research on issues concerning and arising from the

use of controversial comedy in different forms of television programming without necessarily offering value judgements on it. This specific intention is reflected in the following chapters, which tackle taboo comedy from a multiplicity of different approaches and points of view.

More specifically, under the umbrella phrase ‘taboo humour’ we mean to encompass the whole spectrum of comedy themes and subjects with which potential audiences might struggle because of its unconventional and at times intentionally shocking nature. Partially based on Allan and Burridge’s (2006) classification of taboo in language, these include the following thematic categories:

- dark humour: humour about death, sickness, and disability;
- sexual humour: humour relying on explicit sexual references, situations, or practices;
- racial, ethnic, and minority humour, including sexist, homophobic, transphobic humour, and humour directed at the elderly;
- gross-out/sick humour: humour relying on references to faeces (scatological humour) or other bodily fluids, and other traditional Western taboos such as incest and cannibalism;
- sacrilegious/blasphemous humour: humour targeting established religious beliefs and dogmas, and the ministers of those religions;
- physical appearance humour: humour involving deformity and other, non-normative traits, such as being overweight, short, or bald.

The possible intersections of these categories are obviously theoretically infinite, as are the potential thematic overlaps among these spheres of taboo humour and the gamut of linguistic modes used to express them. However, albeit purposely broad, they represent a useful starting point to approach the variety of taboo comedy in current television programming.

Beyond the themes that taboo comedy touches upon, an analysis of the different forms of controversial humour on television cannot overlook the fact that its production, appreciation, and reception are not stand-alone occurrences, but need to be interpreted in light of specific cultural, industrial, and even political tensions, e.g. the value attached to the appreciation vs. rejection of taboo, edgy, and politically incorrect comedy in certain cultural and political circles, personal sense of humour and taste, and the contexts of production, reception, and distribution of comedy based on controversial subjects and language. Also, how do the constant changes in the media landscape—such as the existence of multiple and

niche platforms on which television content is available—affect the use of taboo humour? Does niche programming necessarily correspond to a greater use of taboo subjects and—potentially—comedy? Are controversial language and themes necessary elements to achieve the status of quality television (Akass and McCabe 2007)? Furthermore, how does the use of politically incorrect language for humorous purposes relate to the possible regulatory intervention of institutions or authorities in order to prevent the use of this kind of humour? And what are the ways in which TV production and distribution cultures position themselves and willingly or unwillingly interact with such topics? What are the boundaries—if there are any—between acceptable and unacceptable comedy?

In an attempt to discuss—if not provide answers to—the issues raised by the subject matter in this collection, the next two sections will address some of the themes and issues related to taboo and controversial comedy from the points of view of the macro disciplines of Humour and Television Studies, respectively.

TABOO COMEDY AND HUMOUR STUDIES

The potential for humour in a number of different contexts in human life and society has in itself been responsible for a wide range of different approaches to the study of humour and comedy, which makes Humour Studies an exceptionally interdisciplinary field. While many of the chapters in this collection delve into theories of humour and comedy in more detail, it might be useful here to look in broader terms at the ways in which some of those theories and concepts try to respond to the tensions addressed by taboo comedy.

One way in which existing humour scholarship can be valuable is in its contributions to the discussion of two central and recurring themes in the discourse on controversial comedy in general: on the one hand, the production and reception/appreciation of taboo humour and, on the other hand, the tension between the unacceptability or inappropriateness of taboo comedy and the legitimacy of humour addressing any sphere of human life.

As far as issues relating to the production and reception/appreciation are concerned—in other words, how and why people create and/or appreciate taboo comedy—some theories of humour in general have been commonly used to illuminate the dynamics and the mechanisms at play in this kind of humour. Two of the theoretical frameworks that have been most

commonly associated with controversial humour are superiority theory and incongruity theory. Superiority theory—which is usually associated with Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes—addresses the more negative and aggressive components of humour, claiming that laughter is triggered by a feeling of superiority experienced by people towards an object, a situation, or a person. A further contribution of superiority theory to the theorization of taboo humour, however, can be found in Plato's description of the ambivalent emotions originating from observing other people in distressful situations. Plato's view is also often considered as a forerunner of the ambivalence theory of humour, in which humour is seen as deriving from the perception of two opposite emotions. The connection between incongruity theory and taboo humour, on the other hand, seems to lie in the fact that, similarly to incongruous humour in general, taboo humour usually juxtaposes either content (death, disability, etc.) with a seemingly inappropriate form (comedy, jokes, farce, etc.) or two contrasting situations (bad timing, inappropriate circumstances), with a typical example being gallows humour, in which humour is created in stressful, oppressing situations. Support for the incongruous nature of taboo humour is also found in the Freudian concept of 'displacement' (Freud 1963), which implies a shift of emphasis that allows the teller of the joke to disguise the joke's aim and to reveal it at the most unexpected moment, thus acting as a subverter of expectations that is paramount for the dynamics of taboo humour (Colletta 2003: 28–29).

Indeed, psychoanalytic theory has contributed a number of concepts aimed at an understanding of the darker aspects of humour, with Freud being one of its key figures. In terms of the production of jokes, Freud identifies a number of different jokework techniques—such as displacement, condensation, and unification—and further distinguishes between innocent (or non-tendentious) jokes and hostile (or tendentious) jokes. In non-tendentious jokes pleasure derives purely from the aesthetic enjoyment of the cognitive technique involved, whereas tendentious jokes express unconscious, aggressive instincts that are temporarily allowed to be directed against someone or something. As Colletta notes, these jokes allow individuals to successfully circumvent 'the obstacles to desire that society and education have erected' (2003: 29) and serve to appease what would normally be considered aggressive or socially unacceptable desires. Colletta compares this function of tendentious jokes to that of dark humour, which in a similar way allows for 'rebellion against oppressive circumstances and liberation from pressure' (2003: 29).

As explored by research in psychology, key to an understanding of why people produce and appreciate taboo humour is also the idea of humour as a coping mechanism. Partially echoing Freud's theory claiming that the surplus energy that is not associated with negative feelings when people find themselves in distressing circumstances is instead released through humour and laughter, more recent empirical studies have explored the function of humour as a moderator of life stress and as a tool to improve the quality of life (Martin and Lefcourt 1983; Lefcourt and Martin 1986; Martin et al. 2003). Although these studies mainly address the use of humour in general, it isn't difficult to hypothesize a more specific correlation between coping and taboo humour. Particularly, some see the use of dark humour in and by minority groups—for example among women and ethnic minorities—as a device to overcome situations of distress and oppression. Typically, some kinds of Jewish humour have been interpreted as direct expressions of this function of dark humour, as have the so-called disaster jokes (Smyth 1986; Oring 1992; Kuipers 2011), which in the digital age now appear in a matter of minutes after a catastrophe or calamity and which according to Oring (1992) speak to notions of 'decency' and 'unspeakability' as they deal with situations that go beyond their content and concern, more in general, their capability of conjoining 'an unspeakable, and hence incongruous, universe of discourse to a speakable one' (Oring 1992, 35).

Finally, similarly to dead baby jokes (Dundes 1979, 1987), disaster jokes—the more recent incarnations of which appeared in the wake of the 2015 and 2016 terrorist attacks in Europe—beg the question of what factors affect the appreciation vs. rejection of dark or taboo humour. Humour research has investigated a number of factors that seem to play a role in individual humour preferences, such as gender, age, class (Kuipers 2006), and even mood at the moment in which the humorous stimuli are provided (Martin 1998; Ruch 1998). For instance, with the help of their Humour Style Questionnaire, Martin et al. (2003) have identified four possible humour styles—'affiliative', 'aggressive', 'self-enhancing', and 'self-defeating'—which seem to indicate, both in terms of humour production and appreciation, the existence of individual preferences. Aggressive humour is the preference that would more closely resemble an appreciation for taboo comedy.

The second of the two broad themes mentioned previously, the unacceptability/inappropriateness of taboo comedy, is at the centre of a long-standing debate when it comes to popular culture and one that concerns

the attempt to identify the fleeting boundaries of taboo or ‘offensive’ comedy. This debate, which ultimately comes down to the tension between the appropriateness of taboo comedy and the legitimacy of humour addressing any sphere of human life and freedom of speech, can be framed in terms of the pragmatics of humour. Similarly to all other forms of human interaction, instances of humour do not occur in a vacuum but have a context of delivery, which includes specific participants—who delivers the humour/comedy? who is the audience?—and a specific communicative setting. However, the crucial relationship between the content of comedy and the context in which it is delivered is not always given the relevance that it deserves as an interpretive tool. Often when we talk about the inappropriateness of something, we fail to see that the concept itself is relative, since it always implies reference to a specific context (appropriate for whom? in what situation?). Inappropriateness as an attribute is relative and not absolute, just like taboos tend to be relative and not absolute. When University College London professor Tim Hunt made what was perceived as a sexist joke at the World Conference of Science Journalists in 2015, and when presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and New York City mayor Bill de Blasio engaged in a racially charged joke at a fundraising event in April 2016, controversy soon arose at the international level. However, in denouncing the unacceptability of these attempted jokes not many made explicit the importance of the context of interaction and delivery of the intended humorous content. In other words, while it might have been acceptable for an African-American comic to deliver the same joke on *Coloured People Time* (CP Time) at a comedy club, the fact that two white, prominent, political figures used the joke at a public event raises several issues concerning power and hegemony, which are only partially mitigated by the fact that Bill de Blasio, who delivered the CP Time line, is married to an African-American woman.

Particularly, in the interactional context of comedy involving in-group/out-group and centre/periphery (Davies 1990) dynamics—such as, but not limited to, racist/ethnic, homophobic, and sexist humour—it seems crucial to take into consideration the directionality of humour, i.e. who the sender and the recipient of the humorous message are, which can significantly contribute to determining the underlying reasons why taboo humour is perceived as generally inappropriate when delivered by a member of a majority group addressing a minority group, whereas the opposite is generally considered less problematic.

In the debate on the use or abuse of taboo humour, this tension has recently been encoded in the ‘punching down’ vs. ‘punching up’ dichotomy, with the former ultimately implying an alignment with existing hegemonic structures and the latter trying to expose socio-economic inequality, or metaphorically punching the perpetrators and not the victims. The concept of ‘punching up’ is similar to what Krefting refers to as ‘charged humour’, the idea that ‘charged humour relies on identification with struggles and issues associated with being a second-class citizen and rallies listeners around some focal point be that cultural, corporeal, or racial/ethnic similarities’ (Krefting 2014, 5). On the other hand, echoing the sentiment of many detractors of ‘punching down’ humour, Krefting sees the comedians who purposely use taboo content as merely employing a rhetorical device mainly based on shock value and devoid of any political or social critique, a generic ‘anti-political correctness’ stand in the name of free speech. By contrast, many comics, including Jerry Seinfeld and Chris Rock, have been vocal about the effect that political correctness has had on the appreciation of their comedy routines, particularly on US college campuses, where—in part because of the polemic involving trigger warnings (Hume 2015)—a large portion of students seems to react strongly to humour based on sensitive issues. The tension between the use of taboo humour and the legitimacy of making fun of any facet of human life and society is still very much at the centre of the debate, with comedians being scrutinized in their comedy routines not just on stage but also on social media, and sometimes being forced to apologize for seemingly ill-advised jokes. Furthermore, the discussion is complicated by the subtlety and complexity of the intention of the speaker and their delivery. Since, as Gournelos and Greene note, ‘we can never be quite certain who is laughing, how they’re laughing, or why they’re laughing [...]’ (2011, xviii), one might legitimately wonder whether using politically incorrect humour is an effective way of breaking taboos and exposing hypocrisy or whether it simply perpetuates crass stereotypes on—among others—racism, misogyny, homophobia, rape, and mental and physical disability.

Lastly, we would be remiss if in an overview of the factors affecting the perception of the appropriateness of taboo humour we didn’t mention the significance of culture-bound aspects. Just like the appreciation of controversial comedy may depend on factors such as age, gender, and personality traits, the likelihood is worth mentioning that—for a number of historical, political, and religious reasons—certain cultures may display a higher or lower tolerance for humour based on subjects and language perceived as

taboo. For instance, Hofstede et al.'s empirical research (2010) seems to point to the existence of recognizable national traits and values according to categories such as uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and gender roles, which, when applied to humour, in turn would explain why some cultures have a higher appreciation for humour based on nonsense or incongruity. Moreover, these categories, together with a country's historical background, may also explain why certain kinds of taboo comedy are more tolerated than others within the same culture.

TABOO COMEDY AND TELEVISION STUDIES

As mentioned above, humour always originates from a specific context, and controversial comedy is no exception. Therefore, when taboo material is included in a television show, the jokes—as imagined by performers and producers, and then properly embraced by audiences—often need to take into account not only the nature and structure of the wordplay or the specific references employed, but also the specific traits of TV as a language, a technique, and a medium. In some ways, a clash is constantly developed and managed between the ‘exception’ constituted by humour and the regularity of ‘current’ television, often resulting in a stronger comedic effect. Taboo comedy does not completely fit inside the small screen, its rules and its schemes, and this conflict makes it more difficult and powerful at the same time. From a perspective grounded in Television Studies, it is useful here to outline at least some of these challenges, irregularities, and (explicit or implicit) contrasts, highlighting three different continuums that have emerged as particularly relevant, both historically and more recently. These contrasts define a complex field of relations where controversial comedy can be positioned and, in fact, constantly positions itself: a field that is incessantly modified by the stretching of boundaries or by the changes occurring in the TV industry and in society at large.

The first continuum is the one between mainstream and niche. On the one side, television has been—and mainly still is today—a mass medium, offering its shows, series, imageries, and stars to the largest possible audience, and trying to build and engage a wide, invisible community made up of different and geographically spread out people. The very nature of broadcasting, in fact, implies the simultaneous transmission of its messages to a wide, undifferentiated public. As a consequence, two of the staples of television are, on the one hand, the traditional logic of L.O.P.—the ‘least objectionable programming’, a common denominator aimed at not

hurting the sensitivity of the majority of the audience—and, on the other hand, the more general need not to exclude or leave out anyone from the pleasures of television viewing for both editorial and commercial reasons (Gitlin 1983; Mittell 2010). Controversial humour constantly struggles and engages with such basic assumptions, pushing to expand the limits of the medium, and at the same time adopting those limits as a major device to obtain laughter and success. Consequently, the informal rule that implies that the target of television is the largest possible audience acts as a constraint that taboo comedy always has to abide by (or somehow address), in some ways diminishing the power and extent of this kind of humour. Moreover, this rule constitutes a shared and acknowledged trait defining the medium, which performers must (and want to) accept, adapting their comedic material to this specific kind of audience. At the same time, once again, this rule provides controversial comedy with an irresistible and unlimited tension to push these boundaries, to overturn the general assumptions and expectations of TV audiences, to constantly expand the limits of what it is possible to say, show, and perform on television. Thanks to this tension, taboo comedy is able to follow the rules and break them at the same time, to include fresh and original perspectives into a common ground of habits and repetitions. Controversial humour on network and mainstream television breaks boundaries, and in doing so it also adjusts to them. On the opposite side of the same continuum, cable, satellite, and digital outlets offer a wider space for taboo comedy. By definition, they break and expand the limits of what can be represented, redefine humour inside a logic of ‘quality television’ and premium programming targeting specific niche audiences, and therefore are able—and somewhat proud—to create distinction and to stimulate controversy. Even in those cases, however, complete freedom is not possible and not allowed, in part because boundaries and constraints constitute a fundamental part of what makes taboo comedy work. Nevertheless, thematic and niche channels become a prolific space for controversial humour, often normalizing it and using it as a positioning and promotional tool, as a rhetorical and marketing device. However, in both cases—the breaking of a general rule for mainstream networks and the more regular presence on targeted platforms—the spaces dedicated to provocative comedy enjoy an exceptional status and a sort of ‘double-standard’, offering a hint of revolution in a generally fixed context. Even in the most ground-breaking cases, TV comedy is taboo only as long as it remains suitable to the medium it is inserted into.

The second continuum involves the tension between reality and imagery, truth and carefully built representation. Taboo comedy plays a role in the perpetual television balance between the informative role of ‘showing the truth’—e.g. in the news—and the symbolic reading and manipulation of such reality—e.g. in entertainment genres or fiction. On the one hand, controversial humour is a way to directly expose what happens in the world, to engage with the truth, to confront and to respond to a reality that is already in place. Here television breaks the fourth wall to show a more complex, varied, and truthful depiction of aspects we are used to hiding or forgetting. On the other hand, this kind of comedy necessarily exaggerates, distorts, and deforms such reality—for example through hyperbole, irony, detachment, and emphasis—thus highlighting the inauthenticity behind representation. Television humour exposes the truth, often recurring to artificiality. As it has been highlighted for comedy genres (Marc 1996, 1997; Gray 2008), parody (Thompson 2011) and satire (Gray et al. 2009; Meijer Drees and De Leeuw 2015), as a result of its immediacy, familiarity, and liveness, television plays a double role in strengthening the effect of the truth, while at the same time clearly revealing the tricks and production effects, the reality of its artifice. Moreover, TV comedy—including taboo humour—often does not take a clear position but indulges in a fruitful duplicity, seemingly able to provide both a liberal and a conservative approach to reality and its changes. Taboo humour can be ‘relevant’, opening the space of the small screen to unseen and unnoticed social issues with a progressive stance, and can also be a way of mocking and demonizing such issues, ridiculing the idea of a progressive stance (Marc 1997; Mills 2005, 2009; Dalton and Linder 2005; Morreale 2003). In their long-lasting fight, both politically correct and controversial humour on TV become ways to establish a point of view. These struggles and negotiations between different perspectives—by comedians, producers, networks, and all the other parties involved—confirm this crucial power of comedy to frame, shape, and present a ‘biased’ reality.

The third continuum contrasts long-term programming and one-off events. The majority of TV shows are serialized, spanning over multiple episodes across a single season and over multiple seasons year after year, and furthermore expanding with spin-offs, sequels, remakes, collections, reruns, and on-demand libraries. This is another fundamental feature of television and broadcasting (Kompere 2005), and its result is a frequent repetition of the same text, or at least of similar contents, models, schemes, patterns, and jokes. While TV comedy in general is often reinforced by its constant reiteration, by consolidating the viewers’ affection

towards on-screen personalities and by introducing sitcoms and comedy shows in daily or weekly familiar habits, such repetition constitutes a great challenge for subversive humour. In fact, what appears to be innovative, unexpected, and revolutionary when it is first shown on TV, ends up being less powerful once it is inserted in a cycle of slight modifications and constant reruns. The infringement of taboos—or the provocative challenge of shared topoi, clichés, and stereotypes—is therefore incisive in its first occurrences, but the unexpected divergence from the norm is soon diminished by repetition. The ground-breaking role of sharp sitcoms or stand-up comedy shows follows here a process of domestication and accommodation, transforming ‘real’ taboo humour into a weaker—yet closer, more familiar, and more immediate—form of comedy. Revolution becomes the (new) norm, and the constant flow of programming plays an important role in this transformation. By contrast, controversial comedy appears to enjoy an easier and less compromised space in stand-alone events, one-off shows or guest appearances, where the strength of taboos is not weakened by everyday regularity. In this scenario, censorship, control, and polemical discourse, both on television and outside the box, are a good way of ‘even-tizing’ the linear and repetitive series of episodes, highlighting a deviation from the norm and putting a single moment of television—‘worth watching’, or even impossible to watch—in the spotlight.

The three fields of opposite forces briefly outlined here encompass some of the issues that arise when taboo/controversial humour is included in television programming, thus following the rules, constraints, and the strengths of this medium and its language. All these underlying topics challenge the definitions of taboo comedy: the obvious need to interact with large numbers of people, the pressure to abide by certain boundaries and to stress them, the tension between the effect of reality and its complex construction, the always-present yet hidden framing of such reality, the repetition of episodes, seasons, and reruns, and the breaking of this usual scheme with events and once-in-a-lifetime television bits. These can help understand the complex, sometimes contradictory, yet very interesting presence of taboo comedy across a large number of TV shows and networks.

A LARGE AND COMPLEX FIELD OF STUDY

This edited collection provides an exploration of the phenomenon of taboo comedy and controversial humour on television. Throughout these essays, the topics briefly addressed in this chapter—the definition and the status of this kind of jokes and laughter, its roles and effects, and the complex

relationship with the medium—are deeply scrutinized and analyzed from different perspectives, and with the help of a large number of examples. Some chapters adopt a mainly historical approach, focusing on important moments in television—as well as social—history, while other chapters adopt a more contemporary stance, highlighting how current television is permeated and shaped by multiple contradictory forces. The range of topics includes different kinds of taboos, involving religion and sex, nationality and ethnicity, death and politics, gender and disgust; however, despite the differences in the objects of analysis, as well as in research methods and historical/critical approaches, some common traits emerge throughout the book, including the role of public service, the responsibility of commercial television, the space for regulation and censorship, excess and its (im)possible limits, the specificities of comedic performances, comedic stardom, and television's layered relationship with its audiences.

To give an order to such rich and complex material, two main criteria have been adopted. The first one is geographical. Although both the book's authors and approach are global, the majority of examples and case studies refers to the US and UK television systems. It is a deliberate choice, for a number of reasons: firstly, the wealth of these media environments provides the most solid grounds and the best structural conditions for the development not only of controversial humour on television, but also of an on-going discussion of and debate on the various issues involved; secondly, the global circulation and distribution of US and British TV shows and stars provide an easier 'common ground' and a shared framework for readers, who will at least have some familiarity with the examples provided and can engage with the case studies; lastly, both the US and the UK television systems are important models for other countries in developing, modifying, and regulating taboo humour. A second criterion has to do with TV genres, which constitute the first level of organization and structure for these essays. The first section of the volume features essays involving scripted programming and fictional shows, especially comedies—including sitcoms—and dramas; the second section focuses mainly on non-scripted and non-fiction genres, with insights on stand-up comedy, variety shows, commercials, and the vast category of factual programming, reality and life-style shows. It is worth mentioning that we have adopted the traditional distinction between scripted and unscripted shows, although we are aware that it is indicative of specific industrial conventions rather than actual writing, production, and consumption practices.

Part I of this book opens with an essay by **Christie Davies**, which critically and historically analyzes the ‘culture wars’ that took place in the UK behind the scenes of the BBC comedy department. With constant references to archival documents and TV scripts, Davies explores the oscillations of comedy programmes between censorship and creative freedom, highlighting the internal and external forces at play, the slow emergence of politically correct policies, and the constant connections between TV comedy and secularization. **Kristen A. Murray** discusses the role of dark humour and the different perceptions of death through television comedy, as depicted in a large number of series and sitcoms approaching the end of life in multiple ways. Death is a fundamental aspect of our lives, yet it is a topic increasingly removed from general discourse. However, by joking about and laughing at funerals, corpses, hospitals, drugs, ageing, and sanity, drama and comedy series help audiences to correctly and playfully deal with this issue. Dark humour is also used by contemporary society to express and hide its deepest feelings. The following chapter, by **Carter Soles**, selects three US and Canadian TV series (*Arrested Development*, *Trailer Park Boys*, and *Party Down*) as interesting examples of the constant cultural appropriation of race by white-male-oriented comedy. Indulging in the fantasy of a post-racial society, these cult shows actually exploit different races and cultures, adopt racist stereotypes on African-Americans and Latinos, and project the weaknesses of the dominant group onto a derisive approach to blackness. In the process of recognizing and exposing racism, these shows contradict their own goals, and fall into a different kind of racism. **Matt Sienkiewicz** adopts a psychoanalytical approach, using US series *Archer* as a tool to engage with Freudian theory. Animated comedies are able to include complex and subtle elements into a larger pleasurable text, and become a good way to express the most repressed elements of the human psyche. *Archer*, in particular, has set the oedipal fixation as a constant background narrative, thus allowing viewers to read the text and its context as dreams in the dreamscape, with both an author-centred approach focused on producers and a reader-centred point of view exploring the audience and its feelings. In the last chapter in Part I, **Kyle Conway** explores Canadian sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie* and its role in humanizing Muslims through its characters and in erasing differences within the national community. Following a critical production studies approach, by means of interviews with professionals involved in the making of the series, Conway reflects on how minorities sitcoms constitute an entry point to television—albeit through a ‘narrow door’—in some

ways leaving out negative emotions and other parts of the human experience. Conway's analysis of regulation, commercialism, and media logics helps in understanding the different possible levels of multiculturalism, and explains the on-going persistence of taboos and stereotypes.

Part II of the volume opens with a chapter by **Philip Scepanski**, which in some ways acts as a link between the two sections of the book. Scepanski investigates the comedic reactions that followed the 9/11 attacks and that contributed to reinforcing the distinction between 'us' and 'them', especially against Muslims. With an overview of animated sitcoms followed by a meticulous analysis of stand-up comedy shows by Carlos Mencia and Jeff Dunham, Scepanski demonstrates how the racist depiction of the other, often with the excuse of laughing at the enemy, reinforces cultural and political conservatism, justifies xenophobia, exploits fear for commercial purposes, and works as a strategy for viewers and advertisers. **Evan Elkins** analyzes the long-lasting conflict between politically correct comedy and free speech, and investigates the appropriateness of joking on taboo topics. Elkins explores the censorship of some stand-up comedy routines on US networks in the early 1990s, including Andrew Dice Clay and Martin Lawrence on *Saturday Night Live* and the well-known case of Bill Hicks' performance which was edited out of the *Late Show with David Letterman*. A tension between different logics ends up both celebrating and chastising controversial and potentially offensive comic material. **Ethan Thompson** selects a Comedy Central show, *Tosh.0*, in an attempt to offer a better understanding of the relationship between convergent television, younger male demographics, and the boundaries of what is socially acceptable in comedy. Through an analysis of the structure of the show, Thompson highlights the 'post-politically correct' approach adopted by the programme, the multiple occasions for viewer participation (and ridicule, if not humiliation), and the recurring jokes on sexuality and race/ethnicity. A figure of 'contemporary trickster' clearly emerges, which accepts racial and sexual identities as unproblematic, and thus challenges and crosses traditional boundaries. The chapter by **Elsa Simoes Lucas Freitas** focuses on television commercials and the ways in which taboo humour works—or struggles—in advertising. After a close analysis of the structural elements involved and of the similarities between jokes and commercials, Freitas investigates how advertisers trade the viewers' attention for the entertainment value of the ads. Through the examples of Super Bowl commercials and Portuguese campaigns involving offense, grossness, or sexual innuendos, it becomes clear how taboo humour is an

effective yet potentially risky practice. **Delia Chiaro** shifts the focus to reality television, lifestyle and factual programming, and analyzes the UK show *How Clean is Your House?* to discuss the various functions of laughter in response to shocking yet comical situations involving filth and dirt. The ironic detachment and the funny reaction to embarrassing moments are textual devices punctuating the narrative of the show and directly connecting with the audience, thus reinforcing the appeal of the programme. Lastly, **Brett Mills** explores the difficulties for authorities to regulate and recognize humour, as well as to apply the ‘special freedom’ granted to the genre in specific circumstances. By commenting on examples from some controversial episodes of BBC’s *Top Gear*, including jokes on race, nationality, and sexuality, Mills highlights the complexities and contradictions emerging in the reaction to live television banter, the conflicts between professionals and in-production routines, the difficulty in making sense of audience responses and complaints, and the unpredictable differences between the jokes that are perceived as taboo and the ones that go unnoticed and do not stimulate further discussion.

By presenting a rich and complex set of examples, perspectives, topics, television genres, ways of laughing, and objects to laugh at, this collection and its chapters aim at defining and expanding the scholarship on taboo comedy and on the television spaces devoted to taboo. The volume offers an in-depth discussion of—among others—the boundaries of TV representations, the effects of comedy, censorship, and regulation, new and old stereotypes, and the cathartic role of laughter. Hopefully, the issues raised here will be a valuable stepping stone for further questions and research for the benefit of scholars and students in both Humour and Television Studies.

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PART I

Controversial Humour
in Comedy and Drama Series

The Rise and Fall of Taboo Comedy in the BBC

Christie Davies

A historical account of the responses to questionable comedy within or in response to the BBC can be divided into two very different eras of conflict. The first of these, the internal ‘war against smut’, stretched from the very inception of the BBC in 1922, when it was given a monopoly over all UK radio, and later television, paid for by a compulsory licence fee, to 1960, when Sir Hugh Carleton Greene became the new Director-General. His appointment was a response to the crisis within BBC Television caused by the ending of its monopoly in 1955, when the Independent Television Authority began transmitting programmes funded by commercial advertising. Before Greene’s appointment, the producers of comedy that might offend were involved in an endless on-going internal fight with the BBC bureaucrats who tried to repress anything they found offensive. Greene gave the producers their freedom, but this only moved the conflict somewhere else, for the freer broadcasting of offensive comedy led to a culture war with those outside who vigorously objected to it.

During the time of its monopoly, and for a few years afterwards, the BBC operated almost as if it was a branch of the civil service when providing public service broadcasting. It was independent of the government,

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but the way its administrators were organized in a hierarchy, the outlook that went with this and the enormous emphasis placed on enforcing policy from the centre and on formal paperwork was that of the mandarins of the British civil service. Censorship of comedy was rigorous, particularly in relation to humour about sex or scatology, to the use of 'bad language' or to the mockery of religion. An elaborate code of prohibitions was imposed on radio and TV producers, and through them on performers and writers. There were even occasions in the 1940s when the Director-General himself, rendered apoplectic by a single joke contrary to 'policy', would intervene, firing off irate memoranda and demanding that those responsible for it be chastised.

The situation changed radically when a new libertarian Director-General, Sir Hugh Carleton Greene, was appointed in 1960. Greene unleashed the producers and the comedy writers, and they came up with a series of comedy programmes characterized by bad language, smut and irreverence to the Christian religion that caused great offence but attracted exceptionally large audiences. The old-style administrative hierarchy were so conditioned to accepting and implementing orders from the top that they gave up 'the war against dirt' and became the enablers of the new comedy. Some of them disagreed with the changes, but the party line had changed and democratic centralism prevailed. The younger ones among them, particularly those recently recruited to run the expanding television service, welcomed the changes. It was anyway a time of very rapid social change in the wider society, changes that had nothing to do with the BBC, and the new generation saw the world very differently from their elders. Thanks to Greene, the comedy producers could now defy the administrators with impunity. The upholders of the old order still in office were not always happy with this, but they were well aware that the tide of social change outside the BBC was running strongly against them, and it was easier to drift with it rather than fight the new Director-General. Even so, John Arkell, Director of Administration, wrote to Greene opposing, in Tracey's words, the new 'untrammelled freedom of the producer', with the role of the layers above being not to control but to cushion the pressure from outside. If this were BBC policy, Arkell added in an acid aside, 'then the TV service is being run by a staff with an average age of twenty-seven' (Tracey 1983, 219). However, the centre of the conflicts had now moved from inside the BBC to being one between the BBC and its external critics.

Those who resented most this new wave of smutty and irreverent comedy were the people outside the organization who had loved the *ancien régime*, the old BBC known as Auntie, precisely because it was prim and proper, respectable and responsible. In particular, their indignation was expressed through the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association (NVALA) led by Mrs. Mary Whitehouse. They were quite unable to accept the new comedies that Greene had enabled. They campaigned strongly against them and with considerable personal hostility to Greene himself. They fought a long war of attrition against the transformed BBC and won several tactical victories, including the toppling of Greene himself (Thompson 2012, 87–88). But despite these victories, they lost their war against the new permissiveness in broadcast comedy. They lost mainly because the wider social changes that had enabled the BBC to change direction continued, and the large and vocal minority who supported their campaign shrank in size. The remnant lost confidence in its ability ever to reverse the unwelcome shifts not just in the BBC, but in society at large. British society had become more secular, freer in its sexual behaviour and attitudes and increasingly tolerant of homosexuality. The critics lost the culture war and failed substantially to curb BBC comedy in the ways that mattered to them.

THE ERA OF THE LITTLE GREEN BOOK

From its inception, the BBC had strongly curbed comedy, which was easily done when radio programmes were made in the studio using carefully vetted scripts, but tensions arose during World War II when outside radio broadcasts became common, often with a live audience of men serving in the armed forces, who were used to ribald humour. This led to transgressions that provoked a series of vigorous interventions from as high as the Director-General himself that could reduce the minions dealing with comedy to a state of obsequious groveling. On 30 January 1941, the comedian Sydney Howard introduced an unscripted off-colour gag into a forces programme to the horror of the producer D. Miller and of Jack Payne who was in charge of musical continuity. A badly frightened Payne wrote a very angry letter to Howard, accusing him of doing it maliciously. Payne was minding his back, for he also wrote demeaning letters of apology and exculpation to Roger H. Eckersley, Organiser of Programmes, to John Watt, Director of Variety and to the Director-General F.W. Ogilvie himself, until he felt he was entirely in the clear and could write, 'I am

glad to know, Director-General, that you don't blame me'. The joke had proved to be no laughing matter.¹

At the end of the war, the BBC began codifying its censorship of comedy into a set of mandatory written rules. In September 1945, Michael Standing, the Director of Variety, drew up a formal censorship code insisting that programmes be entirely free of obscene and blasphemous language. There was to be no use of 'God! Good God! My God! Blast! Hell! Damn! Bloody! Gor Blimey! and Ruddy!' It was followed by the Television Policy Censorship Code of January 1947. In 1948, Standing produced the definitive BBC Variety Programmes Policy Guide for Writers and Producers that came to be known as *The Green Book*.² The little Green Book stated sternly that:

There is an absolute ban on the following:

Jokes about—Lavatories, Pre-natal influences, Marital infidelity, Effeminacy in men, Immorality of any kind (as well as) suggestive references to Honeymoon couples, Chambermaids, Fig-leaves, Prostitution, Ladies Underwear e.g. winter draws on, Animal habits, e.g. rabbits, Lodgers (and) Commercial Travelers.

Like all such censorship codes, *The Green Book* was always being extended to include new words and situations. Nothing was ever deleted, but new forbidden items were added whenever there was unease at the top, making it more and more restrictive over time. The comedy performer Nicholas Parsons could still, decades later, 'remember being told by one producer when recording a stand-up show that I couldn't use the word naked as a punch line to a joke, it was a banned word in the little Green Book's guidance and censorship' (Parsons 2008). The little Green Book was strict not only on smut but also on irreverence:

Sayings of Christ or descriptive of Him are, of course, inadmissible for light entertainment programmes [...]. Jokes built around Bible stories, e.g. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, David and Goliath, must also be avoided or any sort of parody of them [...]. Reference to and jokes about different religious or religious denominations are banned. The following are also inadmissible:—Jokes or comic songs about spiritualism, christenings, religious ceremonies of any description (e.g. weddings, funerals).

The absolutism of the code is emphasized by the instruction that 'Warming up sequences with studio audiences before broadcasting should conform to the same censorship standards as the programmes

themselves. Sample recordings should be submitted to the same censorship as transmissions.’ In other words, the code was not just a means of avoiding complaints from offended listeners but of upholding the inner purity of the BBC, one of Britain’s sacred hierarchies, a special space secluded from the vulgarity and commercialism of the outside world and its laughter. Those responsible for this code of practice for broadcast humour clearly felt that it might give rise to ridicule, should the general public learn of its existence and detailed content, for the file is marked as being only for reference and ‘not for circulation’, with a further note that it must be ‘kept in the office and not taken away by outside producers’.

The files of the BBC reveal just how emphatically the rules were enforced. They are full of edicts, memoranda, and denunciations from senior officials directed against errant producers of comedy programmes. Their missives tell us all we need to know about the internal tensions within the Corporation. The use of capital letters to indicate shock-horror is particularly revealing:

Cecil McGivern. Television Programme Director to producers. 11 August 1947

Subject. Over-runs and smut. URGENT and IMPORTANT.
SMUT

There have [...] been examples in variety programmes lately of very doubtful gags and songs. If a producer is not capable of deciding what is smut and embarrassing to the average householder, then he should not be producing.³

Poor McGivern, a gifted enabler of new programmes, was under constant pressure from above. On 8 December 1947 he wrote to his superiors in the hierarchy: ‘You will see from the attached the constant war I wage against dirt. The chief reason for the dirt is that our variety producers are young and inexperienced in BBC ways. They must be trained. And are being so. But alas! it takes a little time.’⁴ On 8 October 1952, Ronald Waldman, Head of Light Entertainment, sent a missive to all producers, saying: ‘Twice in the last five weeks we have been treated to the lavatory gag in Light Entertainment Programmes. It is NOT funny and NOT suitable in television [...]. I shall have to treat any further lapses of taste with extreme severity and this must not be considered an idle threat.’⁵ On 24 March 1954, there was a broadside from the Director-General himself, Sir Ian Jacob, to the Director of Television Broadcasting. Jacob complained that the television service was seriously departing from BBC policy and

standards, notably in its indecent light entertainment programmes and concluded ‘Unless action is taken soon to stop this kind of thing there will very soon be no standards left and the drift downhill will go right through the Corporation.’⁶

These splenetic letters are an indication of a guerrilla war *within* the BBC between the administrators and those doing the creative work—the producers and performers of comedy. The administrators waged a ‘war against smut’, by which they meant sexual and lavatorial jokes, innuendo and cross-dressing. Their use of angry phrases such as ‘despite orders, remonstrations and constant harping’, ‘serious outbreak of questionable and suggestive material’, indicate how upset they were and their rage was backed up by threats. To mark a memorandum URGENT and even URGENT and IMPORTANT, in capital letters, when it deals with a mere joke, indicates the extent of their bile. The administrators sound like petulant schoolmasters haranguing their impudent charges as when they say ‘dirt and nastiness’, ‘it is NOT funny and NOT suitable’. The use of terms like these is guaranteed to produce smirks and sniggers among those thus admonished. In 1947, Cecil McGivern, Television Programme Director, complained that ‘variety producers tend to smile behind their hands whenever I complain of smut in variety shows’.⁷

The administrators saw themselves as part of a strict hierarchy imbued with moral purpose, what they would have called the BBC ethos. Obedience was for them a key virtue and directives from above were responded to with great deference partly because the administrators’ careers depended on obeying orders, and partly because they strongly believed they should. The BBC officials were alarmed by ‘smut’ in comedy, not just because it might lead to complaints from the public and more alarmingly from the politicians who ultimately controlled the organization’s finances but because of the very nature of their employment, which narrowed their minds. They lived in a world of rigid, fixed, hierarchically arranged categories, as we can see from their compound titles built round the words ‘Director’, ‘Head’, ‘Controller’, and known by complicated acronyms as Tel.P.D., H.L.E. G. Tel, S.P. Man AC(OS), A/ADV. The head of it all, the Director-General, would be referred to in conversation as ‘the D.G.’ even though everyone knew his name.

In such a world, ambiguity is suspect and irreverence to authority even more so, but these two things are the very building blocks of comedy. The senior officials of the BBC hierarchy were part of the Establishment and linked in sentiment and social background to the senior persons of other

hierarchies, those of the armed forces, the civil service and the church. They had a shared outlook that rejected the commercial world with its vulgarity and the 'anarchy of the market place' and upheld traditional authority of all kinds.

They were particularly likely to be worried about jokes that seemed to mock religion or were indecent. Religious creeds tend to be suspicious and fearful of sexuality and hold up 'purity' as an ideal, with pollution as its antithesis. Smutty and scatological humour cuts against such an outlook. As they entered Broadcasting House on their way to their offices, the senior BBC officials would every day pass a dedication plaque that read (in the classical Latin, which they would all have studied in their youth):

This Temple of the Arts and Muses is dedicated to Almighty God by the first Governors of Broadcasting in the year 1931, Sir John Reith being Director-General. It is their prayer that good seed sown may bring forth a good harvest, that all things hostile to peace or purity may be banished from this house.

It was perhaps rather strange that a pagan temple of the Arts and the Muses be dedicated to the Almighty God of the Christians and the Jews. Purity was to be upheld except perhaps when the high seriousness of art required that it be suspended. Comedy did not qualify, and the rules about the use of 'bad language' on the air were stricter for comedy than for serious drama. Expletives such as Hell! God! and Damn! were rigorously excluded from light entertainment and replaced by Heck! Gosh! and Darn!, whereas they were allowed in drama to give verisimilitude and there was a reluctance to bowdlerize the serious and sententious classics. On 29 April 1954, the Head of Drama Michael Barry wrote to all Drama Producers:

URGENT. To be read today. This department has in the last four days transmitted a performance using language that it had been agreed should not be used in comedy and used only after careful consideration in serious plays.

Far from having a 'special freedom', comedy was bound by special restrictions that did not apply to other kinds of programme that the high-minded mandarins saw as heavily earnest. Only earnestness was important enough to justify wild language. It was forbidden to refer to 'marital infidelity' or to 'immorality of any kind', 'except in plays'. There could be no joking about it and certainly none about that most outrageous of vices, 'effeminacy in men (or impersonations)'.⁸ Comedy could never contain the kind of redeeming purpose that would make the portrayal of transgression licit.

The producers of the comedy programmes were by virtue of their trade not part of this world of high seriousness. Unlike the comedy performers, whose relationship with the BBC was temporary, commercial and contractual, the producers were part of the BBC staff and had organizational responsibilities, but an individual producer was not, as the higher BBC bureaucrat was, ‘chained to the activity by his entire material and ideal existence [...] forged to the community of all the functionaries who are integrated into the mechanism’ (Weber 1948, 228–229). The producers worked closely with performers, men and women whose main concern was to amuse an audience, often a live outside audience, with whatever material they could get away with. These last were entertainers, a class about as far removed from the senior BBC bureaucrats as could be. The entertainers’ main strength in the marketplace lay in their popularity and, so long as this held up, they had high earnings and were not dependent on employment by the BBC. The salaried producers were stuck in the middle, but even though they were forced to obey the officials, their sympathies were likely to be with the entertainers with whom they worked on a regular and intimate basis.

The conflicts over humour during the 1940s and 1950s were, then, mainly internal ones, a conflict of producers and performers versus the BBC’s senior bureaucrats. But even within the ordered hierarchy doubts and cracks were emerging. On 23 July 1963, Graham Miller, the Head of Northern Regional Programmes who was not happy with an explicit ban on jokes about the Profumo sex scandal, wrote in disagreement to R.D.A. Marriott, the Assistant Director of Sound Broadcasting, ending his letter with: ‘But orders are orders and they are being obeyed’.⁹ One suspects he is being ironic for the year is 1963, Carleton Greene is the new libertarian Director-General and the old order is crumbling. The war against smut was beginning to be lost. The situation was soon to change radically, with greater internal freedom leading to intense conflict with those outside determined to uphold the old taboos.

THE GREAT CULTURE WAR

The patterns of censorship of comedy in the BBC changed rapidly after Hugh Carleton Greene became Director-General in 1960. The Green Book gave way to the Greene book. He unleashed the producers of ribald and irreverent comedy and they made many outrageous series such as *That Was the Week That Was* (TW3) (1962–1963), *Steptoe and Son* (1962–1965;

1970–1974), and *Till Death Us Do Part* (1965–1968; 1970; 1972–1975) for television, and *Round the Horne* (1965–1968) for radio. They were all immensely popular. The audience for *TW3*, a satire programme that was shown very late in the evening (Hoggart 2005), rose from three and a half million when it began to six and a half million by the beginning of 1963 (Tracey 1983, 207) to 12 million just before it was taken off. In 1966, Harold Wilson, when Prime Minister, successfully demanded that the BBC show a repeat of *Steptoe and Son* later than usual in the evening on election night, well after the polls had closed, lest he lose votes (Tracey 1983, 266), because Labour supporters would see watching a couple of comic rag and bone men as more important than voting for socialism. Later, Labour was to get Harry H. Corbett, the younger rag and bone man in the comedy, to take part in the Labour Party's official political broadcasts. *Till Death Us Do Part* was for a time the most popular show in Britain and even the second series had 16 million watching it (Tracey and Morrison 1979, 115). Even in 1986, an old and familiar repeat drew an audience of 12.5 million. When shown in Australia, *Till Death Us Do Part* became the most popular programme ever seen on Australian television.

They were all hugely popular programmes and viewers voted for them by turning them on week after week. People wanted bad language, smut, irreverence and 'racism'. But those who disapproved of that kind of thing were enraged. A Roman Catholic paper told its readers 'to switch off when *TW3* comes on' and an Anglican priest called *That Was the Week That Was* 'a poisonous conspiracy against all that is good in British life' (*That Was* 2012). Indeed, within two months of its inception *TW3* was 'beginning to give some people indigestion' notably the item 'Consumer Report on Religion', which 'described each of the main religions as if they were goods on offer' (Tracey 1983, 209).

The widespread indignation led to a substantial protest movement, the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association led by Mrs. Mary Whitehouse and dedicated to cleaning up TV (Whitehouse 1967), which at its peak had 150,000 members. Its main objections were to the use of blasphemous and indecent language, to salacious humour and to the humorous mocking of the Christian religion. Thousands attended its inaugural meeting in 1964, and the following year a petition with nearly half a million signatures supporting its manifesto for cleaning up television was presented to Parliament (Whitehouse 1971, 68). It was a very rapid and hostile response to the new liberties being taken in the BBC. NVALA had very considerable support, particularly from traditional Christians of a

puritanical disposition, of whom there were many. But it represented only a moral minority, a large and important minority but a minority far smaller than the numbers choosing week after week to watch and enjoy the programmes that were giving so much offence.

The television programme that gave most offence was *Till Death Us Do Part*, written for the BBC by Johnny Speight and produced by Dennis Main Wilson, perhaps the most celebrated and successful of all the BBC's comedy producers for both radio and television, the man also responsible for *The Goon Show*, *Hancock's Half Hour*, *Here's Harry*, and *It's Marty*. It was a satire directed against its central character Alf Garnett, a foul mouthed, authoritarian, reactionary, working-class Cockney, devoted to the monarchy and the church, bigoted and xenophobic (Booth 2005; Speight 1986). On 20 September 1972, the episode of *Till Death Us Do Part* was called 'The Bird Fancier'. In one scene Alf's wife, Else, is saying that the local pub is a hotbed of scandal:

- Alf: Blimey... Hark who's talking! When you and Old Gran get in there with yer port an' gins no one's reputation is safe. The other night in there—old Gran—she was spreading scandal about heaven... saying—she was—that—Mary couldn't be a virgin—'cos she was in child by (*looks reverently upwards*) Him.
- Else: (*is shocked*)
- Alf: I thought she'd get struck down any minute, I did—I walked away. I wasn't the only one either.
- Else: Well... I suppose they're different to us—up there. I suppose they can have babies without having to do what we have to do.
- Rita: (*reacts sympathetically*)
- Alf: Yer... I know... well, what they do is immaculate, anit?
- Mike: I wonder how many they've got now?
- Else: Who?
- Mike: HIM and HER.
- Else: They only had the one.
- Mike: Yeah—but that was two thousand years ago—they could have had another fifteen hundred by now.
- Else: (*is not amused*)
- Mike: Unless they're on the pill.
- Alf: (*explodes*) You... I only hope He can hear you—you blasphemous scouse git! (Tracey and Morrison 1979, 110–111).

Speight's humour here was particularly offensive to Roman Catholics, who believe not just in the Virgin Birth but in the Immaculate Conception (a doctrine declared *ex cathedra* to be infallible), in Jesus not having siblings even though they are mentioned in the New Testament and that 'artificial' methods of birth control are wicked and forbidden. Speight had been brought up in an authoritarian Catholic family and sent to a Catholic school, and Alf Garnett is supposed to have been based on his own father, a Catholic docker, though Alf is depicted as an Anglican in the TV series. Speight is making fun not just of Christian churches and the oddities of their members and clergy, but of the central mysteries of their faith. This is not the mere gentle poking fun at religious institutions found in other BBC television comedies such as *The Vicar of Dibley*, *All Gas and Gaiters* or *Father Ted*; this is comedy that puts the boot in. It is likely that not only did Speight not believe in God but he hated Him. Not surprisingly this very popular episode caused widespread outrage (Tracey and Morrison 1979, 111–115) among those who had been protected from such comedies in earlier decades.

Both *Till Death Us Do Part* and another very popular programme, *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*, were regularly attacked for their use of innuendo and of bad language (Tracey and Morrison 1979, 88; Whitehouse 1967, 162). Alf Garnett's use of the word 'bloody' was incessant and repetitive, used as many as 103 times in a single episode (Tracey and Morrison 1979, 88). One of Mrs. Whitehouse's many supporters wrote two letters to Lord Hill, the Chairman of the Board of Governors, pointing out the monotony of his speech, a straight letter of complaint and a satirical version using the word bloody as often as Garnett did.

Dear Lord Hill,

Will you please spare a few b----- minutes to read these two b----- letters.

Last Friday my b----- husband and I counted the b----- number of times the b----- word 'bloody' was used in b----- 'Till Death Us Do Part'. You may be b----- well surprised to know the b----- number—44 times—16 in the first few b----- minutes as a b----- result of this I found myself b----- well obsessed by the b-----word and b----- well tossed and turned the whole b----- night long.

I feel I should be b----- well failing in my b----- duty as a Christian if I didn't raise my b----- voice small though it well b----- be and ask you as a b----- man in authority to raise your b----- voice in protest against such b----- programmes'

(Whitehouse 1971, 80–81, cited without naming its Christian author, the wife of a school-master).

Lord Hill replied to the letters without using the ‘b’ word. He justified Alf’s bloody mindedness on the grounds that he was inarticulate and so was forced to use it constantly. This was no more true of the highly articulate Garnett than of the comedian Billy Connolly when, like the legendary Australian (Davies 1990, 269), he said ‘I know at least... oh my God, at least 127 words. And I still prefer “Fuck”.’

Mrs. Whitehouse had long been a member of and was strongly influenced by an organization called Moral Rearmament (MRA) (Tracey and Morrison 1979, 63–69), which was widely regarded with dislike and disdain, and particularly by Sir Hugh Greene (Tracey 1983, 231). By origin, MRA was evangelical Christian, but many church leaders condemned it and it later transformed itself into a general vehicle for what it called ‘absolute morality’, open to members of any religion. One of its absolutes was ‘absolute purity’, which sounded sinister to many. Its leader in the early 1960s, Peter Howard, was full of contempt for what the BBC had become and obsessed with the ‘evils’ of homosexuality. Most of those who hold strongly negative views of homosexuals and homosexuality are not homophobic, merely misguided. But Howard *was* homophobic. He feared and hated homosexuality, and saw homosexuals as part of a conspiracy and as a potential source of total moral collapse. Howard’s book *Britain and the Beast* has chapters with titles such as ‘Sods and Squares’ and ‘Queens and Queers’. He begins another chapter with the phrase ‘God is the great totalitarian’ (Howard 1963, 84). The slightest public joke on the subject could reduce him to hysterical indignation:

The radio and television push acceptance of unacceptables on us in many ways. Programmes often are sympathetic to dirt and make suggestive jokes about homosexuals and filth. One morning in Spring, 1963, I heard two men talking about cricket reports. One said he had had his camera trained on an Australian cricketer with his legs wide apart fielding at left slip. He had commented to the public that the man was ‘waiting for a tickle’. Giggles and laughter. This goes out to millions (Howard 1963, 33–34).

The harmless remark in question, a vulgar pun and innuendo, depends on the use of the word ‘tickle’ by cricket commentators to mean that the ball has just touched the edge of the bat, which may mean that someone fielding behind the batsman can catch it and thus dismiss the batsman. The comment was made by Brian Johnston, known as Johnners, who was to

become one of the BBC's most popular commentators on cricket matches. It is quite likely that the original remark had been a 'Freudian leg slip', but one that was instantly recognized and produced sniggering hilarity. Peter Howard made a fool of himself with his paranoid interpretation of it as part of a BBC lurch towards permissiveness in regard to homosexuality. However, once the gaffe had been made it became and remains a very popular humorous item, and Brian Johnston repeated it in his book of jokes, along with his later gaffe broadcast by the BBC, 'The batsman's Holding, the bowler's Willey' (1995, 10; 2008; Tibballs 2007, 18). Michael Holding was a noted West Indian cricket player and Peter Willey an off-break bowler for England. They were playing together in a cricket match at The Oval in 1976 with Johnnners commenting, but by this time there may well have been a deliberate carelessness about his gaffes. He knew that the cricket fans would laugh at these petty indecencies and that no-one would care. Had Peter Howard, a former rugby international, still been alive and listening he would no doubt have seen it as the fall of the Roman Empire and the decadence of Weimar Germany rolled into one. The key question is why he could regard a mere joke as a matter of such extreme importance. The answer is that he was in the grip of a rigid and inflexible ideology, and any affront to his worldview or a reminder of its fragility he found seriously, if irrationally, threatening. An innuendo that made light of an imagined, indecent physical contact between men might lead to an unleashing of the sins of Sodom on the country and to total social collapse or to a supine acceptance of a foreign invasion. It is not difficult to guess what would have been the reaction of the by then deceased Howard to the popular radio comedy *Round the Horne*, described here by Jonathan Green (2005, 151):

But of all the *Round the Horne* humour none equalled the strain of unashamed camping that ran through the show. Homosexuality was not legalised until 1967 and the running references to the gay world and its particular jargon, delighted both homosexuals who were already 'in', and a growing 'straight' public, who began to understand just what it was the team were going on about. At its simplest there were the throwaway lines: Kenneth 'Stinker' Williams, the fag with the filtered tip [...] and, in reference to a well-known West End 'cottage': 'Kenneth Williams can be seen in 'The Little Hut' in Leicester Square—soap and towels, 3d extra'.

‘Hello, I’m Julian, and this is my friend Sandy’ was the catch-phrase of two outrageous camp characters played by two outrageous gay actors, Kenneth Williams and Hugh Paddick (*The Bona World of Julian and Sandy*, 1996), in direct defiance of the old BBC rule book edict that there must under no circumstances be humour about effeminacy in men. Mrs. Whitehouse would have been even more outraged by *Round the Horne* had she been able to grasp the references to unnatural sexual shenanigans being made in Polari, a gay argot (Took and Feldman 1974, 12; Baker 2004; Ellison and Fosberry 1996). One of the functions of Polari, particularly in the days before homosexual behaviour was legalized in 1967, was to enable gay men to talk freely about forbidden matters without incurring trouble from the censorious and indeed from police informers. If it fooled the informers, it would certainly have fooled Mrs. Whitehouse and she would not easily have been able to challenge in court what was being said. Both Paddick and Williams loved Polari and ad-libbed, which made the show far filthier than Mrs. Whitehouse could even have imagined. And yet even when the meaning was innocent, it sounded vaguely indecent. Kenneth Williams, the star of the show, wrote in his diary on 28 April 1968:

BBC Studios for the talk with Peter Haugh on ‘Moviegoround’. He asked me for a definition of ‘camp’. I said ‘To some it means that which is fundamentally frivolous, to others the baroque as opposed to the puritanical (classical) and to others—a load of poofs’ (Williams 1994, 324).

Despite considerable pressure from the members of MRA to play a larger role in the National Viewers’ and Listeners’ Association, Mrs. Whitehouse was careful to keep them at a safe distance and did not accept money from them. She did not want them explicitly involved in her work nor did she invite them to speak at her meetings (Tracey and Morrison 1979, 68), though they did sometimes distribute their leaflets in the foyer (Tracey 1983, 231). She wanted to run a quite independent organization. Yet at some level in her mind she probably knew that many Christian people were very hostile to MRA because of its tactics (Harrison 1934) and its bigotry. Nonetheless, her outlook was very much shaped by her earlier experiences as a member of MRA (Tracey and Morrison 1979, 63–64, 69) and she went to MRA conferences in the 1960s when she was setting up the NVALA. It was particularly manifest in the way she was later to mount savage legal attacks on representations of homosexuality in print or on stage, particularly if they impinged on and therefore, in her

eyes, besmirched religion or patriotism. In doing so, she foolishly drew the public's attention to obscure items that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. For her, homosexuality was the *peccatum illud horribile, inter christianos non nominandum*, that horrible crime not to be named among Christians, a crime against the very order of society and indeed of God's creation (Davies 1982, 1983, 2004). But her crusade failed and Quentin Crisp's 'stately homos of England' prevailed. Openly gay comedians are a standard part of twenty-first century broadcasting comedy. Welcome to the queer new world.

WHY THE CULTURE WAR WAS LOST

The conflict between the BBC and the NVALA over comedies that the latter found offensive has to be seen as part of a much more general 'culture war', which in turn arose from deeper patterns of social change. The dirty and irreverent BBC comedies were a symbolic battleground. Those who hated them did not understand the new and unwelcome patterns of social change in the wider world and must have felt helpless to stop them. Instead they attacked that which was visible and tangible and offensive and which they thought they could eliminate: offensive broadcasts. The would-be censors deluded themselves into thinking that these nasty comedies had a significant negative effect on society as a whole and that, were they abolished, there could be a return to the old decencies. They were utterly wrong on all counts. Comedy is both important and unimportant. It is important because of the great pleasure it gives to those who decide to join an audience. That is why so many millions of people chose to watch the disapproved programmes, enjoyed them enormously and went on watching. Comedy is unimportant because it has no effect and no consequences at all in a world where social change is driven by other far stronger social forces (Davies 2011).

It does not follow that the underlying concerns of the NVALA were trivial or unreal. They were in the main fervent evangelical Christians and rigorist Roman Catholics who were living in a society that was increasingly secular. People were giving up going to church or belonging to a church and, most important of all, had stopped sending their children to Sunday school (Davies 2004, 43–50). Very roughly, adherence to a church had peaked just before World War I and then gone into slow decline. From the mid-1950s the decline accelerated (Brown 2001; Davies 2004). The changes began well before the BBC descended into its comic mockery

of the Christian religion. The BBC did not cause secularization. Rather, the decline in religion created a cultural climate in which it was possible for the BBC to put out its offending comedies with impunity. Mrs. Whitehouse and her supporters were a remnant of what had once been the dominant culture and they did not like their new position.

With the decline in popular Protestantism (Green 2010) came a decline in the respectable virtues. The years of strong religion before World War I had produced a marked decline in both violent and acquisitive crime, in the abuse of drugs and alcohol, and in the number and proportion of illegitimate births. By the inter-war period, Britain was a low crime society; illicit drugs were almost unknown and public drunkenness rare. Prisons were being closed down because there were not enough inmates to justify their existence. From the mid-1950s all this changed. Crime rates of all kinds and drug and alcohol abuse rose rapidly, indeed alarmingly, and were to go on rising for forty years, completely transforming the society in undesirable ways (Davies 2004, 1–42). But the change that alarmed the opponents of offending comedy was the marked shift in patterns of sexual behaviour. Younger people no longer saw any reason for waiting until they were married before enjoying sexual relations. Sexual matters were freely talked about. The use of the criminal law to punish homosexual behaviour came to be seen as an anachronism, and attempts were made to abolish these laws. People were ceasing to condemn the abominations of Leviticus or to take seriously the view of religious traditionalists that tolerating homosexuality would lead to disaster (Davies 2004, 139–180). All this was abhorrent to the shrinking minority of true believers. Smutty comedies were seen as offensive because they aroused the deepest fears of those who were alarmed by the changes in sexual behaviour and attitudes. But secularization and the marked shift in sexual behaviour meant that in the long run the NVALA would be defeated because fewer and fewer people saw the world the way they did and ever fewer found comedies mocking the old conventional pieties to be unacceptable. Smut and irreverence had won.

A NEW HEGEMONY

Mrs. Whitehouse lost, but in the twenty-first century political correctness has taken the BBC back to the rigid patterns of the 1950s and comedy has been correspondingly enfeebled (Deacon 2009; Lawson 2009). The golden age of comedy of the latter part of the twentieth century is over. Many of the television programmes of that brief era of freedom, such as

Till Death Us Do Part and *It Ain't Half Hot Mum* are never shown, even though they would still attract huge audiences for a BBC, which for financial reasons depends heavily on repeating successful old comedies such as *Dad's Army* or sketches from *The Two Ronnies* (Barker 1999; Davidson and Vincent 1978). Needless to say, no new programmes employing or implying mockery from the outside of ethnic and religious minorities will ever again be made by or for the BBC. *It Ain't Half Hot Mum* made fun of British entertainer-soldiers in India in World War II with accompanying Indian menials, one of whom was played by a browned-up, Hindi-speaking, Indian-born Englishman. It can no longer be shown because it offends today's BBC elite, who, along with administrators and producers alike, belong to a new version of a high-minded upper middle class with a single seamless world-view. The hegemony is even more absolute than it was in the early days of the BBC, for there are no rebellious producers seeking to defy their masters and amuse the masses in politically incorrect ways. When politically incorrect old programmes such as *Fawlty Towers* are shown, they are cut and censored. It does not take a great stretch of the imagination to guess how and why the *Fawlty Towers* script reproduced here was mutilated before being shown as a repeat.

- The Major: Strange creatures women.
 Basil: Well, can't stand around all day...
 The Major: I knew one once... Striking looking girl... tall, you know...
 Father was a banker.
 Basil: Really.
 The Major: Don't remember the name of the bank.
 Basil: Never mind.
 The Major: I must have been rather keen on her, because I took her to see... India!
 Basil: India?
 The Major: At the Oval... Fine match, marvellous finish... Now Surrey had to get 33 in about half an hour... She went off to powder her... powder her hands or something... women... er... never came back.
 Basil: What a shame.
 The Major: And the strange thing was... throughout the morning she kept referring to the Indians as niggers. 'No no no,' I said, 'the niggers are the West Indians. These people are wogs.' 'No, no,' she said. 'All cricketers are niggers.'
 Basil: They do get awfully confused, don't they? They are not thinkers. I see it with Sybil every day (from 'The Germans' broadcast on BBC2, 24 October 1975).

The Major, who is clearly a doddering anachronism, rarely sober and not very sharp, provides humour by speaking in character and is not to be taken seriously or identified with, but he has been cut out like a fallen member of the Central Committee in a Kremlin photograph (Stevens 2013). Mrs. Whitehouse lost the war, but her style of thinking has captured the BBC. Words once again have magical evil properties, regardless of intention or context and have to be excised from comedy. The delusion that comedy can have a powerful bad influence has returned, as has the idea that certain selected minorities must never be offended. Like Mrs. Whitehouse, the BBC elite are unable to understand that their views and values are not necessarily widely shared and that others may in good faith and for honourable reasons reject them. The conflicts are not about values and never were. They are about power. It is about who decides whose tastes in comedy shall prevail and whose shall never be catered to. It is about who has the power to decide who may be spurned when offended and who shall be pandered to.

NOTES

1. BBC files. R34/292/21, 5 and 6 February 1942. All references to BBC files in the text refer to those in the BBC Written Archive in Caversham, England. I would like to thank the staff for their invaluable and helpful assistance to me during my research visits there.
2. BBC files. R/34/275/3 Policy Censorship in Programmes 1947–1954, File 1c, July 1948.
3. BBC files. T16/157.
4. BBC files. T16/157.
5. BBC files. T16/157.
6. BBC files. T16/162.
7. BBC files. T16/157, 1 September 1947.
8. Draft Television policy Censorship Code, 20 January 1947. Taste File 1946–1954.
9. BBC files. R34/1250, Policy Censorship Variety and Comedy Programmes, 1960–1967.

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The Last Laugh: Dark Comedy on US Television

Kristen A. Murray

In the TV series *Pushing Daisies* (2007–2009), a small car full of clowns runs off the road and crashes, killing all occupants. As the corpses are removed from the car, each clad in a colourful costume, the scene becomes increasingly preposterous. How many dead clowns fit into a car?¹

The phenomenon of dark comedy—also known as gallows humour or black comedy—engenders perceptions of distaste, insouciance, confusion, revulsion and even transcendence. In the presence of these intrinsic contradictions, dark comedy has emerged as a powerful and pervasive form of expression in contemporary US television.² Many recent series—such as *Six Feet Under*, *House, M.D.*, *Breaking Bad*, *The Last Man on Earth*, and *The Big C*—have created dark comedy through an imbrication of levity and death.

Despite the current popularity of dark comedy, there have been few efforts to understand the cultural conditions that evoked this form of expression. This chapter focuses on the social forces that sparked the creation of dark comedy and fuelled its prominence. I contend that dark comedy emerged from significant shifts in people's relationship to, and understanding of, death in contemporary American society.³ Some of the

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key aspects of this alteration include: longer life expectancy, changing religious affiliations, differences in memorial arrangements, constant access to media information and interactive experiences related to death. These social changes, which occurred over the past half century, coincide with the period in which TV became a ‘social and aesthetic force that serves as a powerful instrument for disseminating and legitimating culture and for regulating how persons and things are represented and valued’ (Shoshana and Teman 2006, 560).

This chapter explores television texts as cultural artefacts, or entities that both reflect and shape the ways in which people process their existence. In applying this analytical metaphor to dark comedy, I consider how media about death generates ‘a cultural forum of ideas, rather [than] a singular unified message’ (Mittell 2010, 363). From this perspective, people who engage with media about death may be considered ‘participants’: individuals who actively and continuously make and remake meaning from these texts and who influence the creation of future media.⁴ Thus, different forms of media ‘not only present culturally relevant content, [but also] models and opportunities for particular representational processes’ (Greenfield 1993, 161). The TV scenes analysed aired in the United States and other countries between 2000 and 2015—a period when many prominent TV series explored new, confrontational terrain through dark comedy.⁵

The following section offers a concise theoretical discussion of the structures and effects of dark comedy as well as illustrative examples of its caustic voice. The focus of this chapter is not primarily how dark comedy operates, but how particular social conditions facilitate the creation and appreciation of this form of expression. To that end, the central sections of this chapter look at how death has become increasingly medicalized, secularized and mediatized in contemporary society. Extending Mellor’s (1993) notion of the simultaneous absence and presence of death in contemporary society, this author argues that dark comedy is an urgent articulation of the tension between visible and hidden aspects of loss. The impetus for this research, then, is to ‘ascribe a place for humour in a particular process, by bringing it into relationship [with] the social structure’ (Palmer 1994, 67).

APPROACHING AND RETREATING FROM DEATH

In the early to mid-twentieth century in the United States, experiences of loss were particularly extensive and devastating, due to a wide range of untreatable diseases and the casualties of war (Kellehear 2007;

Seale 2000). These fatal forces were entwined with considerable social pressure to maintain an impervious personal facade. Despite the prominence of death in daily existence, the expression of emotion regarding death and grief remained relatively taboo through most of the twentieth century (Ariès 1981; Jalland 2006; Mitford 2000).

From the 1970s onwards, discussions of loss became more prominent in public discourse. Nonetheless, issues surrounding death, grief and palliative care have received, and continue to attract, insufficient research and public policy attention (Gibson 2007; Kellehear 2007). Becker (1997) believes this avoidance of death is entrenched in US institutions, cultural practices and personal interactions. Even in twenty-first century America, there are societal protections in place—particularly the healthcare system and funeral home industry—that keep death partially shrouded (Hockey 2007; Mitford 2000).

Yet the denial of mortality, however intricately conceived and practiced, ignores the inevitability of death. Bauman calls death the ‘ultimate incongruity’ because it juxtaposes the free, rational human mind with the crude limitations of the human body (1992, 1). This disconcerting public silence surrounding the subject of loss may ‘explain the intense confusion, anxiety, and even terror which are frequently experienced by individuals [facing] signs of their own mortality’ (Mellor and Shilling 1993, 414). Because real, tangible death is generally concealed from view, people may be poorly equipped to face significant bereavement. Despite society’s efforts to sanitize death, it ‘intrudes into human thought in a myriad of ways’ (Crouch and Hüppauf 1985, xi).

Although American society seems to sequester death, there are other ways in which contemporary culture brings death to the fore, incessantly reminding people of the fragility and unpredictability of life. The media, both in news and entertainment forms, make death seem more likely than it actually is, by artificially inflating our fears and predictions of loss (Höijer 2004). In addition, the entertainment industry creates virtual reality products that enable people to vividly view and perform acts of fatal violence. Thus, most Americans are exposed to countless deaths per day through both fictional and nonfictional media. In this sense, people possess a high degree of information about, and artificial engagement with, mortality (Gibson 2007; Seale 2000). Yet death in the media involves a kind of disembodiment—a crafted, marketed, sanitized representation of loss rather than a tangible, traumatic physical demise. As a result, media exposure to death may do little to assuage the angst of genuine, individual loss (Gibson 2007).

This creates a contradiction—between approaching and retreating from death—that seems to provoke dark comedy. The following section presents a concise discussion of the three key theories of humour and how they illuminate recent examples of comedy about death.

Incongruity Theory and Corpses

The television series *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005) focuses on the Fisher family, who operate a funeral home in Los Angeles. In one episode,⁶ an apprentice mortician named Arthur places the corpse of an extremely obese man on a trestle, awaiting the arrival of an extra-large coffin. In the middle of the night, the trestle collapses, dumping the body onto the floor. Arthur recruits three other people—two funeral home staff and a friend named Russell—to move the dead man back onto the trestle. While funeral home employees calmly debate different strategies for lifting the corpse, Russell freezes; he has never seen a dead body. Eventually they cooperate and lift the corpse, only to drop it again and dislocate the man's nose. Arthur spends the rest of the night reconstructing the deceased man's face in preparation for the funeral.

As discussed extensively in previous research, there are three key perspectives on the process of perceiving humour: the incongruity, catharsis and superiority theories (Martin 2007; Raskin 2008).⁷ The incongruity theory is particularly relevant to the perception of dark humour. This theory focuses on the juxtaposition between two unlike elements that share some unexpected similarity or surprising connection (Bergson 1980). In this scene, the characters in the funeral home have a problem that feels both familiar (that is, moving a heavy object) and entirely foreign (the weighty object is a corpse). The body is both essentially human and irrevocably inert. Bergson's model for the incongruity theory of humour states that the perception of humour arises from human rigidity, or 'a certain mechanical inelasticity just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being' (1980, 66–67). Thus, the dark comedy in this funeral home scene stems from the contradiction between the corporeal elements of inflexibility and malleability, as well as the difference between Russell's shock and Arthur's complacency.

Another aspect of incongruity in dark comedy is the contrast between the ideal concept of a funeral and the reality of these events. Although most people envision a tranquil memorial service populated by scores of

devoted friends and family, this is often not an authentic picture of an individual farewell. The series *Scrubs* (2001–2010), about a team of residents at an urban hospital, depicts an irreverent moment at a funeral home. A young doctor named John Dorian, known as J.D., treats a man in an irreversible unconscious state in the hospital.⁸ He labels the patient ‘Coma Guy’ and flirts with the man’s wife. When the patient dies, J.D. attends the funeral, where the deceased man’s wife displays her romantic interest in him. They are later caught, by the dead man’s parents, in a sexual encounter in the closet of the funeral home. The dark comedy in this scene stems from an obvious juxtaposition between an idealized, sacred memorial service and an impulsive, disrespectful act of passion. The incongruity theory suggests that this type of situation becomes funny when it is surprising, yet not too confronting. This dark comic scene in *Scrubs* achieves that balance through its slapstick style, yet it also reveals the ruthless scope of this form of expression.

Catharsis Theory and Mortality

In the series *The Big C* (2010–2013), a school teacher named Cathy Jameson confronts her mortality after being told she has melanoma and may have only 12–18 months to live. The prognosis creates complex tensions within her family, community, colleagues and medical care environment. As these anxieties intensify and overlap, Cathy copes by taking new risks. When she visits a restaurant,⁹ the waiter asks ‘Are you ready to order?’ Cathy briefly considers her situation. ‘I’ll just have desserts and liquor’, she replies. Cathy frequently manages anxiety—both her own and that of others—by creating dark comedy. She asks her oncologist what he thinks of her figure before she begins treatment for cancer.¹⁰ He hesitates, then gives her a compliment. Although he instantly regrets crossing the boundaries of appropriate patient/doctor relations, Cathy is amused. ‘Don’t worry’, she reassures him, ‘you only have eighteen months to feel guilty about it. Lucky for you. Not so lucky for me.’ In this moment, Cathy diffuses the tension that the doctor’s comment, and her impending mortality, create.

These scenes from *The Big C* align with the catharsis theory of humour, which suggests that a difficult situation generates an elevation in potentially negative emotions; this agitation may be followed by a surprising perception that minimizes the threat of the situation, thereby producing a sense of relief and the possible perception of humour. This view originates

in Freud's (1960) notion of psychological arousal and resolution, which sees an increase in tension as a catalyst to humour. When viewing *The Big C*, Cathy's comments create both apprehension and assurance.

In the series *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–present), about a team of surgeons in Seattle, a young doctor named George O'Malley attempts to allay the fears of a boy facing surgery.¹¹ George takes the boy into an operating theatre to show him how calm surgery can be. However, George chooses the wrong door and reveals a patient having a face transplant; the person's skull, musculature and eyeballs are entirely exposed. George and the child both scream. George then takes the boy into a different theatre, showing him a sleeping patient who is fully draped. The boy looks at the second patient and says: 'I want to go back to the other one'. The child's response indicates curiosity rather than terror, which dissipates the emotional tension regarding his wellbeing and allows the scene to be perceived as humorous.

Superiority Theory and Accidents

The superiority theory of humour states that people find it satisfying when a situation inflates their impression of themselves and diminishes their view of others (Hobbes 1997; Martin 2007). When characters on *Six Feet Under* die in embarrassing ways (such as a baker who dismembers himself in a bread machine, an actress who electrocutes herself in the bathtub with hair rollers), the participants who engage with this scene may minimize their concerns about their own mortality; they may feel inured to death, since they feel incapable of such obvious mistakes. Thus, dark comedy can foster the view that death is occasional and self-inflicted, not commonplace and inevitable. This perception of superiority offers participants a temporary, comfortable distance from their own demise.

The proximal/distant metaphor for dark comedy is supported by extensive research on individuals working in emergency services and journalism (Buchanan and Keats 2011; Moran and Massam 1997; Scott 2007). In joking about the severity of the situations they encounter, first responders and journalists employ dark comedy to 'disengage from emotionally challenging emergency situations', especially when the death is 'associated with compromised or unusual situations' involving the physical position or condition of the deceased (Scott 2007, 357). Dark comedy is especially common in bizarre situations, such as accidental decapitation or dismemberment. In another scene from *Six Feet Under*, the Fisher brothers try to

reconstruct a corpse that is in numerous pieces.¹² The two men search the funeral home for a missing foot. The mortician, David, asks his brother about the dismembered foot in an annoyed, parental tone: ‘Come on now, Nate, is there anywhere else you could have left it?’ In this scene, the physical segmentation of the dead body challenges the established notion of a unique, complete ‘self’ at the point of death.

In a similar scene from *Grey’s Anatomy*,¹³ a junior doctor named Cristina Yang notices an abnormality with a patient who is prepped for surgery. She asks the senior surgeon to look at the patient’s feet. ‘What about them?’ barks the busy surgeon. Cristina pulls back the drape, revealing one leg and one dismembered foot. ‘They’re both left’, she replies. This scene enables Cristina, and those who engage with this text, to feel superior; they know they would never attach a left foot to a right leg. This perception of superiority creates a degree of distance from death, allowing participants to become inquisitive but detached observers of the macabre—as though death is largely the result of incompetence. The perception of dark humour seems to require an ideal level of involvement in the text: participants need a feeling of recognition and empathy, but also a sense of neutrality and immunity.

While the three main theories of humour—incongruity, catharsis and superiority—provide frameworks for understanding the structure and effects of dark comedy, these perspectives do not fully illuminate the cultural conditions under which dark comedy thrives. In the following sections, it is considered how death is both shielded and exploited in contemporary society and how that influences the perception of dark humour.

CONCEALING AND REVEALING DEATH

Death is bound by a web of complex cultural factors, three of which—medicine, religion and the media—help define contemporary American society and its diverse cultural products.

Medicalizing Death

Since the mid-twentieth century, death has become the almost exclusive domain of professionals working in health and funeral services. In contemporary American society, people are more likely to die within sanctioned institutions (that is hospitals, nursing homes and hospices) than at home (Mitford 2000). In fact, people in the general population rarely witness

a death or see a dead body (Hockey 2007). The heightened medicalization of the process of dying means that death is seen as a separate experience, rather than an integrated aspect of existence (Jalland 2006). Nuland describes this as a move towards ‘the method of modern dying, where [death] can be hidden, cleansed of its organic blight, and finally packaged for modern burial’ (1997, xv).

Dark comedy can emerge from the contrast between those who witness death repeatedly and those who do not. In a scene from *Nurse Jackie* (2009–2015),¹⁴ a young nurse named Zoe is ordered to put pressure on a patient’s chest in an emergency room. ‘I could do something more important’, the young nurse complains. The seasoned nurse Jackie says, ‘Take your hand off.’ Zoe does so and blood spurts out like a fountain. ‘See?’ Jackie states. ‘*That’s* important.’ In these examples, dark humour emerges from the composure that health professionals show in life-threatening situations.

This familiarity with injury, illness and death is not present in the general population because medical care usually occurs in a hospital or clinic, where patients and their families are partially shielded from the complexities of death (Hockey 2007; Jalland 2006). In addition, people are inclined to abdicate responsibility for their health to doctors (Nuland 1997). This strategy externalizes the sense of control over health issues—a perspective that can be both reassuring and frightening. In addition, the high reliance on specialists to deliver palliative care and funeral services removes a degree of autonomy from the bereaved. People are more dependent upon professionals at times when they may be least prepared to advocate for themselves. Kellehear says that the last several decades have ‘heralded a major period of patient passivity’ (2000, 6).

The notion of the doctor as God figure is essential to the series *House, M.D.* (2004–2012), in which a famous diagnostician named Gregory House solves intransigent cases while flaunting protocol. When a young boy’s disease worsens,¹⁵ Dr. House brusquely relates the news to the parents: ‘His liver is shutting down.’ The boy’s father is confused. ‘What does that mean?’ House responds with cheerful sarcasm: ‘It means he’s all better. He’s ready to go home.’ The dark comedy in this series stems from House’s behaviour, which is incongruous with hospital protocol. Yet House is virtually immune to discipline because of his unparalleled insights into disease. Bauman refers to this phenomenon as ‘the cult of specialists’ in which professionals are deemed capable of not only delaying death but almost avoiding it completely (1992, 23). The excessive medicalization of death involves two additional, interrelated issues that influence dark comedy: the idealization of youth and the seclusion of the corpse.

Idealizing Youth

Over the past century, life expectancy has increased by more than twenty years. Yet for disadvantaged groups within the broader population, life expectancy is lower than average and it may not improve in the near future (Seale 2000). This greater longevity, combined with the increased medicalization of death, can create a deceptive future: it may seem as though ‘death, as such, is inevitable [but] each concrete instance of death is contingent’ (Bauman 1992, 8). The potential for a longer life prompts a kind of reverence for the vernal, vibrant body and unrealistic attempts to preserve it. The process of ageing now seems ‘as disgusting as the natural processes of copulation and birth were a century ago’ (Gorer 1995, 20).

Mellor and Shilling argue that an overwhelming emphasis on youth may make death particularly distressing. ‘[The] more people prioritise [a connection between] self-identity and the body, the more difficult it will be for them to cope with the idea of the self ceasing to exist’ (1993, 13). Yet this rejection of the ageing process inhibits people’s ability to contemplate mortality and prepare for bereavement. As a result of improved medical treatment, ageing has become protracted. For those privileged enough to have stable healthcare, the process of dying now takes longer than ever before (Seale 2000). Even though the past three decades have seen significant developments in hospices, home-based palliative care and bereavement programs, society still lacks sufficient resources for those facing death and grief (Kellehear 2007).

Veiling the Corpse

Another area of notable social change over the past half century is the handling of corpses. In previous generations, dressing a corpse was ‘a piece of domestic technology familiar to most households’ (Feifel 1977, 5). By the end of the twentieth century, however, it was extremely unusual to view a corpse in the deceased person’s residence; almost all deaths were managed by professional funeral services and/or hospital morgues. In fact, caskets—open or closed—are now less common, due to a significant increase in cremations (Najman 2000). Crouch argues that the practice of omitting the casket from public view symbolically hides the corpse and thereby denies the permanency of death. The ‘disposal [of the body] is hedged about with ritual to fence in the dangers it signifies’ (2004, 1). The sight of a dead body now seems more confrontational because it is less familiar.

Corpses feature prominently in a significant number of dark comic scenes on television. In the series *Monk* (2002–2009), detective Adrian Monk becomes suspicious of the circumstances surrounding the fatal shooting of a bodyguard. Monk takes a seat in a church balcony to observe the man's funeral, but he accidentally drops his keys into the open coffin.¹⁶ Since the key ring was a special gift from his late wife, Monk attempts to retrieve the keys without interrupting the funeral. He attaches a paper clip to a long line of dental floss and lowers it from the balcony towards the open coffin. Rather than grabbing the keys, however, Monk hooks the dead bodyguard's sleeve and jerks the man's entire arm out of the coffin. For a moment, it looks as though the dead man is waving. The entire congregation erupts into fearful cries; a few people faint, others run out of the church. Monk's inadvertent raising of the corpse is a reminder of the chaos death brings. The movement of the dead body in this scene is terrifying because most people in contemporary society are unfamiliar with the physical realities of death. The corpse is seen as an object that must be removed, albeit respectfully, so that living memories of the deceased individual can continue.

In a scene from *Grey's Anatomy*,¹⁷ the surgeon Cristina Yang finds it difficult to be sensitive about corpses because she sees them frequently. When a shocked and bereaved family is faced with difficult decisions about organ donations from their loved one's body, Cristina hurries them along to obtain as many donations as possible within the optimal timeframe. Just after the family agrees to the donation of several organs, Cristina abruptly asks one more question: 'Ok, what about the skin?' Cristina's view on the corpse requires a new perspective—one that the family cannot comprehend yet; the dead body is simultaneously a sacred entity and a collection of potentially reusable parts.

As noted, most people in contemporary society are unlikely to witness actual death or its aftermath. Thus, death seems more conceptual than practical; it is like a concealed possibility rather than a certainty. In the following section, it is considered another way in which death is sequestered from public view: through the diminishing, diversifying influence of religion.

Secularizing Death

In previous centuries, organized religion played a primary role in shaping people's beliefs about death by prescribing particular beliefs. More recently, religion provides a theological context for death as well as range

of communities in which people can contemplate and receive support for their experiences of loss. From approximately the 1950s to the present, however, the percentage of people involved in organized religion in the United States has declined. At the same time, the increasing power of the healthcare system has obscured the role of the church (Rumbold 2000). This shift—from a communal, religious perspective to a more individual, secular and medical one—foregrounds the physical aspects of death over its spiritual meaning. Mellor and Shilling point to an overall reduction in the ‘scope of the sacred’; they see the move away from organized religion as one of the major sociological changes of the twentieth century (1993, 413). Increased secularism means that people are less likely to have ‘an over-arching, existentially meaningful, ritual structure’ through which to understand death (1993, 427).

The shift towards secularism has also affected funeral practices. Most funerals held in the first half of the twentieth century were formal religious occasions with a pre-ordained structure (Jalland 2006). Over the past four decades, however, funeral practices have become more flexible memorial events, ranging from traditional religious rituals, to secular celebrations of life, to any combination of these. In general, contemporary funerals are more likely to present a diverse and animated record of an individual life rather than a reflection on shared beliefs about death (Crouch 2004).

The series *The Last Man on Earth* (2014–present) follows the lives of a small band of survivors after the death of almost all the planet’s inhabitants. An exuberant survivor named Carol, upon greeting another member of this strange group, screams ‘Boo!’¹⁸ The man, Gordon, has a sudden heart attack and dies. Subsequently, the survivors hold a makeshift funeral for Gordon on a beach, following a burial in a simple, sandy grave. During the memorial service, Carol unexpectedly takes the floor—perhaps due to her guilt over causing Gordon’s death—and babbles about the deceased.

Can I just say something real quick? I’ll be done in a jiffy. Um, well you know, I didn’t know, uh—Gordon? Was it Gordon? [Ok] Gordon. Is it Gordon with a G? Ok. I grew up across the street from a Dordon, with a D, like Dracula. I did not know Gordon well. May he have a smooth journey to heaven. Or hell. Again, I did not know him. By now we are all so used to death, as we have seen everyone in the world around us die. Every single person—dead. Just oodles and caboodles of death. Just heaps and piles. But Gordon will be missed. Uh, ok...

Carol's speech becomes comic because it breaks the boundaries of even the most casual and contemporary memorial service. While the framework of a eulogy is intact, the content is bizarre and explosive. At the same time, Carol does not severely disparage Gordon, so the speech remains relatively inconsequential. This balance—between meeting and contradicting expectations about funerals—may enable participants to perceive dark humour in this context.

Over the past two decades, some memorial services (particularly for celebrities or groups of people) have mimicked the form of other cultural products, such as sporting rallies, music concerts or theatre productions. These public events place death within a contemporary social framework that emphasizes an individual's life, but suggests a collective reluctance to accept the profundity and finality of loss. In Crouch's view, these secular 'celebration of life' events may serve to 'paper over the fragmentations of our existence, our terror and ignorance of death...' rather than bring a deeper sense of meaning to grief (2004, 3).

In addition to becoming more secularized, memorial services are now increasingly globalized; a few large companies now own the vast majority of funeral homes in America and their reach extends overseas (Howarth 2000; Mitford 2000). This corporate dominance of the funeral industry results in 'a lessening of cultural difference [...] and the loss of diversity' within funerals (Mitford 2000, 90). Increased globalization leads to a secular blueprint for funerals into which personal variation may be inserted. It seems that the commercialism of the funeral industry, in combination with the increasing secularization of death, create a less communal, more commoditized place for death in society. This point links to the following discussion of death as depicted in the contemporary media.

Mediatizing Death

While the preceding analysis focussed predominantly on the ways in which death is kept private and separate from everyday life, this section looks at how death is made public and how stories and images of loss are infinitely replicated.

At present, the US television landscape is a vast, dense, frenetic and frequently violent environment. There is also now a wide range of programming choices and viewing modes that influence participants in various ways; these processes of interpreting and shaping television content are complex, controversial and currently in flux, due to rapid shifts in the

way programs are transmitted and viewed (Mittell 2010). Denzin, writing prior to the Internet revolution, suggests that ‘the new information technologies turn everyday life into a theatrical spectacle [of] uncertainty’—one that both stimulates and desensitizes (1991, 8).

People living in contemporary American society encounter media about death so frequently, and often fleetingly, that the experience may become unremarkable (Gibson 2007; Kearl 1995). Stories, images and information about death form the core of most news programs and a significant number of entertainment programs, particularly shows focussed on crime, medicine and science fiction. The overwhelming majority of mediatized deaths are caused by crime and accidents, which generate vivid and violent images. Although sudden deaths represent only a small percentage of actual deaths per annum, the scenarios presented on television focus on unexpected, premature losses (Najman 2000).

A number of prominent television series from the past decade—including *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) and *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013)—contain extremely violent dark comedy. In a scene from *The Sopranos*,¹⁹ two mafia men try several times to stab an obese man, but it takes many attempts to fell the man because the knives are not long enough to penetrate his girth. Just as the man collapses, his cell phone plays a jaunty ring tone. *Breaking Bad* depicts a scene in which a drug dealer, Jesse, tries to eliminate a murder victim’s body by placing the corpse in bathtub full of acid.²⁰ However, the acid leaks through the bathtub and the floor, dumping the body, debris and acid into the hallway below. In *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (1990–2016) and *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000–2015), characters joke about suspects, colleagues and corpses. An important aspect of these scenes is that the deaths depicted are mostly premeditated murders, as opposed to natural or accidental deaths. The intentionality behind these losses makes the dark comedy more callous and confrontational, perhaps also more fragile. As participants immerse themselves in these media images and narratives about death, they may develop a simultaneous sense of detachment: a feeling that they are momentarily enthralled and concerned, but not distressed. This partial disengagement seems to foster the experience of dark humour. At the same time, these scenes reveal the liminal areas of dark comedy—the spaces where viciousness may prevent the perception of humour.

Another important aspect of dark comedy in a violence-saturated media environment is the tendency for stories about death—in both fictional and factual contexts—to minimize or omit details about the deceased.

Television implores us to notice the deaths of strangers, then requires us to relinquish any attachments to these losses. Because television rarely provides follow-up information about the extended, interwoven consequences of death, it contracts and contorts the experience of bereavement, making it seem like a contained, tearful moment followed by a funeral (Gibson 2007; Bauman 1992). In this respect, death in the media becomes merely a continuous, impersonal parade of anguish. Höijer points out that it is virtually impossible for people to engage with unrelenting misery and not experience a reduction in their sense of ‘collective global compassion’ (2004, 515). Kearl notes that ‘public callousness towards televised death [raises] the visual requirements’ (1995, 24). As a result of ongoing exposure to death in the media, people become inured and require increasingly shocking stories to garner their attention (Erth 2002).

The concept of desensitisation also relates to the research on dark comedy as a coping mechanism for emergency workers and journalists. Because first responders encounter death so frequently, and because they rarely know the deceased, they may create dark comedy to express the ‘absurd or paradoxical elements in daily sudden deathwork’; these coping strategies assist ‘by increasing camaraderie and forging solidarity’ (Scott 2007, 358). Research suggests that an analogous process occurs for journalists and other participants who are exposed to war, crimes scenes and other media about death (Buchanan and Keats 2011).

Death in the media is also partially controlled by fortune and power; the passing of famous individuals is examined in extensive detail and replicated continuously on the news, while the deaths of anonymous, single individuals, or groups of people killed in the same event, may be ignored or generalized. In addition, death perceived through a screen is always distant, untouchable. Death may seem close, through the magnification the camera provides, but this ‘enhanced proximity’ to death cannot ‘overcome the actual corporal and geographical distance’ to real death (Gibson 2007, 417). The contrast between simplified, immediate, public examples of loss and the complex, prolonged, private experiences of death may seem disconcerting, yet it may also be the essence of dark comedy.

RESPONDING TO THE ABSENCE/PRESENCE OF DEATH

This chapter presents the argument that current attitudes and practices surrounding death, set against the pervasiveness of violence and loss in the media, create an unsettling juxtaposition. In some aspects of contemporary

American culture, the physical realities of death are concealed and the expression of grief subdued. Writing in the 1960s, Gorer makes a prescient point that ‘while natural death [has become] more and more smothered in prudery, violent death has played an ever-growing part in the fantasies offered to mass audiences’ (1995, 21). Yet in other respects, media images of death and bereavement are omnipresent and intrusive. These social conditions—in which death is both artificially absent and virtually present—enables people to preview death within acceptable parameters; they can examine some of its complexity and cruelty without its sense of permanence. This process appears to be complex and tenuous, yet crucial to the appreciation of dark humour.

The experience of dark humour does not eradicate the existential questions prompted by the absence/presence juxtaposition of death in contemporary American society. Dark humour entreats people to engage, at least momentarily, with the experience of loss. It seem that dark humour is not an instantaneous, superficial response, but an ongoing, provocative endeavour—an attempt to articulate the impact of grief and ascribe meaning to loss. Rather than seeing death as a transition at the end of life, Shoshana and Teman ‘offer the concept of transitory movements’, or a continuous ‘oscillation’ between the ‘life-self’ and the ‘death-self’ (2006, 568). This metaphor of movement, shifting between different viewpoints in relation to death, provides a better understanding of what dark humour achieves. Lewis argues that ‘the apparent intensification of cruel humour’ in the late twentieth century suggests ‘a widely shared desire or need’ to comprehend and cope with the loss of life (1997, 253).

Ultimately, dark humour seems to present a precarious optimism: a sense that life has an inevitable but potentially tolerable end, seen in the broader context of human existence. Crouch and Hüppauf caution that ‘the history of [humanity’s] attempts to come to terms with death is a succession of obvious failures...’ (1985, 2). The phenomenon of dark humour may be one of those enervating failures—or perhaps it is a surprising, discomfiting success.

NOTES

1. Season 2, Episode 2, ‘Circus, Circus’, 8 October 2008.
2. The terms ‘humour’ and ‘comedy’ may be applied in different ways in humour studies research. In this chapter, the term ‘comedy’ is consistently employed to denote media texts (in this case, filmed performances of written

television scripts). The term ‘humour’ is used to refer to the phenomenon of humour, or the experience of finding something funny. The term ‘dark comedy’ is used in preference to ‘black comedy’ out of respect for the wealth of comic material created and performed by African Americans and other cultural groups who use the term ‘black comedy’. The term ‘dark humour’ refers to the perception that texts about death may be funny. (For an overview of recent humour studies research, see Martin 2007; Raskin 2008).

3. The term ‘contemporary society’ is intended to highlight the shared aspects of American culture, not to suggest the existence of a singular, unified cultural experience. In this analysis, the term ‘society’ indicates that people within a national group have in common a range of cultural artifacts, including television, that influence people’s perceptions of their existence (Gibson 2007; Hockey 2007; Mittell 2010).
4. The term ‘participants’ represents the interactive nature of the relationship between the people who engage with experiences and the researchers who study people’s creations and perceptions surrounding these experiences. The term ‘participants’ is used to refer to individuals who ‘read’ the relevant media texts.
5. This chapter focuses on dark comedy on US television since the year 2000, but the series *M*A*S*H* (1972–1983) was a forerunner of contemporary dark comedy. The series was audacious and poignant in its depiction of surgeons in a military hospital who chide and laugh while performing operations and create comic skits to divert depression. The series also obliquely criticized the United States’ involvement in the wars in Korea and Vietnam. In the latter two decades of the twentieth century, following the completion of *M*A*S*H*, few if any television series regularly and extensively engaged with dark comedy in this manner.
6. Season 3, Episode 32, ‘Making Love Work’, 6 April 2003.
7. It is not possible to extricate all strands of analysis on the texts discussed. This chapter applies the three key theories of humour in a concise analysis of dark comedy, but subsequently focuses on the overarching social conditions that enable this form of expression to flourish. Other researchers have worked to develop the three theories and consider their relevance to a range of texts (Boskin 1997; Davis 2003; Davies 2011; Palmer 1994).
8. Season 2, Episode 18, ‘My T.C.W. (Tasty Coma Wife)’, 20 March 2003.
9. Season 1, Episode 1, ‘Pilot’, 16 August 2010.
10. Season 1, Episode 2, ‘Summer Time’, 23 August 2010.
11. Season 5, Episode 4, ‘Brave New World’, 16 October 2008.
12. Season 1, Episode 2, ‘The Foot’, 17 June 2001.
13. Season 2, Episode 6, ‘Into You Like a Train’, 30 October 2005.
14. Season 1, Episode 7, ‘Steak Knife’, 20 July 2009.
15. Season 1, Episode 11, ‘Detox’, 1 March 2005.

16. Season 1, Episode 1, 'Mr. Monk and the Candidate', 12 July 2002.
17. Season 1, Episode 3, 'Winning a Battle, Losing the War', 10 April 2005.
18. Season 2, Episode 3, 'Dead Man Walking', 11 October 2015.
19. Season 6, Episode 11, 'Cold Stones', 21 May 2006.
20. Season 1, Episode 2, 'Cat's in the Bag', 27 January 2008.

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‘This Is Great, We’re Like Slave Buddies!’: Cross-Racial Appropriation in ‘Post-Racial’ TV Comedies

Carter Soles

In the season two *Arrested Development* episode ‘¡Amigos!’, Buster Bluth (Tony Hale), the effeminate, geeky youngest son of an affluent Southern California family, stows away in the trunk of his older brother Michael’s (Jason Bateman) Mercedes in an attempt to escape his obligation to the US Army by fleeing to Mexico. There are, of course, practical reasons for his journey (to evade the Army), but Buster’s flight also exemplifies the trope of privileged, white male geeks seeking coded-ethnic melodramatic victimhood via proximity to non-whites in contemporary one-camera television comedies like *Arrested Development* (2003–2006), *Party Down* (2009–2010), and *Trailer Park Boys* (2001–2008). Buster’s masculinity has been threatened by his fear of joining the Army, so he flees into an ethnicized fantasy of low-wage life among his housekeeper Lupe’s (B. W. Gonzalez) Mexican family in order to restore his manhood and generate sympathy for his abject plight.

The viewer is aware that Buster is not, in fact, in Mexico, but in Santa Ana, California, ‘just six minutes inland from his home’ according to the show’s narrator (Ron Howard). This only highlights that this ‘Mexican’ sojourn is purely Buster’s projected fantasy, an enactment of his desire to

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escape his whiteness: ‘I love being Mexican’ he tells Lupe at one point. Buster completes his imaginary flight from the world of white largesse by accompanying the several working men of his newly adopted family to work as dishwashers the next day: ‘This is great, we’re like slave buddies!’ he joyfully exclaims as he piles into the back of their truck.

Buster’s term, ‘slave buddies’, reveals what is at stake for him in this exchange: validation of his suffering (that is, his status as a ‘slave’) via proximity to non-white associates, which he uses to negate his substantial white privilege and achieve a sympathetic ‘simulated ethnicity’ that marks him as authentic in a postmodern, supposedly ‘post-racial’ milieu (Kunyosying and Soles 2012). Of course, his ability to simulate racialized, lower-class status at will merely reaffirms his place of privilege and social mobility as a white man.

Arrested Development and other millennial comedies participate in a longstanding tradition of cross-racial appropriation in American popular culture, from *Huckleberry Finn* to the present day (Fiedler 1948). As Stuart Hall (1983), a key critic of race and ethnicity in American popular culture, asks: What happens to such cultural appropriation as the US moves into the new millennium, deeper into the ‘postmodern’ era? How does the white male’s desire for identification with imagined blackness take shape in a cultural milieu increasingly (if wrongly) assumed to be ‘post-racial’?

This chapter explores how (representations of) acts of cross-racial appropriation unfold when perpetrated by white geeks who perceive themselves to be post-racial. Throughout millennial one-camera television comedies, there is a persistent trope of geeky white kids wishing to strongly align themselves with an imagined blackness, from Gob Bluth’s friendship with a black ventriloquist’s dummy in *Arrested Development* to Michael Scott’s failed attempts to seem simultaneously racially sensitive and ‘hip’ in the presence of people of colour in the US version of *The Office*. This chapter investigates the deployment of the racial appropriation trope across three recent, white male-centred comedy programmes *Party Down*, *Arrested Development*, and *Trailer Park Boys*, all single-camera ‘mockumentary’ style shows with strong cult followings. Since none of these was a mainstream hit—*Arrested Development* is the most widely seen of the three, as evinced by its revival, with a fourth season of new episodes released on Netflix in May 2013—the chapter will look at how shows that specifically address marginal, ‘cult’ audiences deal with cross-racial appropriation. Such shows are typically willing to expose the white

geek's complicity in creating the post-racial fantasy he himself engages in when in the presence of real people of colour. This helps these comedies achieve the aptly named black-comic, squirmy style of tonally dark and uncomfortable humour so pervasive amongst postmodern, one-camera shows produced since the new millennium. Ultimately, the chapter argues that while some of these shows make strides toward deconstructing the act of white cross-racial appropriation and offering a multi-ethnic point of view, they nevertheless tend to simultaneously perpetuate a narrow, stereotypical view of non-white characters, failing to shake loose the limited perception of people of color in the white cultural imaginary.

While the cultural critiques at the heart of comedy are sometimes overlooked due to the false notion that 'it's only a joke', Freud's work demonstrates that all jokes reveal deeper unconscious impulses, and along that line these shows expose a society that wishes to be post-racial yet clearly has not moved beyond unconscious use of damaging racial stereotypes and unthinking cross-racial appropriation.

In the postmodern milieu, in which white maleness becomes increasingly difficult to defend by virtue of its position of centrality and privilege, proximity to real ethnicity or racially marked persons connotes authenticity and generates audience sympathy. In a related development, even discussing racial or ethnic markedness—what Linda Williams calls 'playing the race card'—is frequently interpreted by the dominant culture as a cheap ploy for undue sympathy and undeserved privileges: 'the very accusation of playing the race card has now become a way of disqualifying the attempt to discuss past and present racial injury [...]. To win at the "game" of race is to lose the larger game of life in which raced competitors already play with a full deck' (2001, 4). Despite our culture's tolerance of structural economic and social inequities levied against persons of colour, in the cultural milieu, non-whiteness is somehow perceived as an advantage, a badge of victimhood that can be played to elicit sympathy and claim a moral high ground over whites.

Therefore, white male protagonists in pop-cultural texts often seize onto non-white ethnic identities as a mode of generating sympathy and recovering their accustomed place of centrality in narrative and in culture. This tendency is especially present wherever such protagonists' masculinity or sexuality is challenged or called into question. Sexuality is racialized, and the geeky, feminized white male protagonists of the contemporary television comedies under discussion exist on a racial and gendered continuum that positions them as sexually inferior to male jocks and black

males, who are stereotypically considered more embodied, sexual and animalistic than white men (Dyer 1997, 20, 27–28). Of course, these raced positionings along the masculinity/femininity continuum result from the projection of white male fantasies, not necessarily anything in ‘real life’—they are white, middle-class cultural stereotypes. The shows analyzed here depict interracial buddy pairings that exemplify the function of imagined black masculinity for the feminized geek in direct, highly sexually charged terms. In each case—*Arrested Development*’s Gob and Franklin, *Trailer Park Boys*’ J-Roc and T, and *Party Down*’s Kyle and William—the feminized white male protagonist’s anxiety over his own sexual impotency and fragile masculinity is channeled into projected blackness. These white men participate in imagined ethnicity to reinforce their masculinity and heterosexuality in the face of their own geeky arrested development.

PROJECTION AND PUPPETRY: *ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT*

Arrested Development chronicles the farcical exploits of the Bluth family, self-absorbed, overly entitled Orange County residents whose insensitivity to matters of race and class are attributed to their selfish, insular, upper-class cluelessness. As in many millennial comedies, audiences are encouraged to laugh at the anti-heroic Bluths’ failures and foibles, even as, each episode, we are encouraged to love them as well, their humanity emphasized through the *naïveté* and earnestness of Michael’s barely pubescent almost-teenager George Michael (Michael Cera).

The show assumes an intelligent viewer who can follow the rapid-fire, inter-textual references and complex gags; as in the example that opened this chapter, the show’s humour often centres upon the disconnect between the sympathetic way in which the characters see themselves and the obvious self-centredness of their onscreen actions, usually bluntly commented upon by the series’ narrator. Yet the series also signs off on the white characters’ fantasies to some extent, especially where Buster is concerned: his Mexican ‘slave buddies’ welcome him into their home with no protest or fanfare. We are never given any insight into Lupe’s family’s emotions nor do we know if they are in on the joke of his presence among them or if they are genuinely pleased to adopt Buster. They are ciphers who act in perfect accordance with Buster’s fantasy of interracial fraternity, for reasons left opaque to the viewer. In fact, this potentially represents a case of superficially positive stereotyping in which Lupe’s family’s extraordinary hospitality and willingness to harbor Buster, the son of their white employer, is naturalized as an innate quality of stereotypically hard-working and servile Latinos.

However, the series does feature several whistle-blower type characters of colour who call out the Bluths on their racist assumptions. For one, there is the Mexican man mistaken for a migrant labourer in the season one episode 'Staff Infection' who reveals that he is, in fact, a Professor of American Studies at the University of Mexico City, revealing Lindsay's (Portia de Rossi) racist gaffe. Or, in the same season two episode in which Buster finds his Mexican 'slave buddies', Gob (Will Arnett), the eldest Bluth brother, unsuccessfully attempts to become buddies with an African American bounty hunter named Ice (Malik Yoba), who repeatedly reminds Gob that he is only a client, not a friend, repudiating Gob's attempt to enlist him in an interracial buddy fantasy.

Gob finally finds a non-white friend in Franklin, a black ventriloquist's dummy he unveils during a social gathering late in season two. Franklin serves as a recurring sidekick to Gob, allowing the latter to indulge his projected fantasy of tough-talking, black masculinity through the puppet's interactions with other members of the Bluth family and the outside world. During the penultimate season two episode 'The Righteous Brothers', Gob enters a recording studio with his dummy in order to produce *Franklin Comes Alive*, a CD of the two of them singing duets together. As Gob and Franklin launch into one particularly racist set of lyrics about Franklin's having fathered multiple illegitimate children, we see the black sound engineer disappear from the sound booth, obviously refusing to have any part in such a racially ignorant and offensive project. The joke is on Gob, his racism exposed by the ethically grounded departure of the nameless engineer.

Yet in its third season *Arrested Development* concludes the ongoing Gob and Franklin saga in an uncritically stereotypical way by revealing (in 'Family Ties') that the dummy Franklin is a real-life pimp. In an attempt to glean information about Nellie (Justine Bateman), a woman he believes to be his long-lost sister, Michael goes to a hotel room to meet with a man named Frank he has only previously spoken with over the phone. Once Michael arrives in the darkened room and speaks briefly with the tough-sounding Frank, he turns on a light to find Gob and Franklin sitting in an easy chair, dressed as stereotypical pimps in loud suits and rakish porkpie hats; Gob and 'Frank' have been posing as Nellie's pimp for some time. Michael briefly expresses his disappointment with Gob but quickly refocuses upon the mystery of the sister, and neither Michael nor the ubiquitous narrator make any comment about the racist nature of Gob's equating Franklin's blackness with pimp-hood.

In line with the usual pattern of this trope, the viewer learns in flashback that Gob took on the role of pimp after meeting Nellie some months earlier and spending an evening ‘crying like a girl’ in her presence. Having the fragility of his masculinity exposed provokes Gob to shore up that masculinity by engaging an exaggerated performance of coded-black, hyper-masculine pimpness as a compensatory gesture. Of course, Gob’s assuming the role of pimp can be understood as an extension of his prolonged appropriation of a racialized identity via his partnership with Franklin, and the viewer knows the whole thing to be a charade perpetrated by Gob and endorsed by Nellie. Yet the show itself passively endorses the coding of pimpness as black, for ‘Frank’ has been acting as Nellie’s pimp for some time, and all of her clients have dealt with ‘Frank’ on the phone, believing him to be real. The simulation passes for the real thing: Gob’s performance of exaggerated, African-Americanized pimp-hood works as an effective front for Nellie’s prostitution business in the show’s fictional world. In other words, its conflation of pimp-hood and criminality with blackness is not just in Gob’s mind; it goes unquestioned by anyone in the show’s larger *milieu*.

All of which reinforces the show’s focus on white characters and white experience. There are no significant characters of colour in *Arrested Development*, and the non-whites who interact with the Bluths are as often ciphers as they are accusatory figures who comically expose the Bluths’ cluelessness. Thus the show, while poking witty fun at the stupidity and ignorance of its over-privileged whites, nevertheless engages in a strategy of exclusion or omission wherein ‘repetition of black absence from locations of autonomy and importance creates the presence of the idea that blacks belong in positions of obscurity and dependence’ (Snead 1994, 6). The show’s fourth season continues this trend. The whole season arc, conveyed exclusively from the white characters’ multiple points of view, is framed around the Bluth family’s attempt to preempt Cinco de Mayo by staging a Cinco de Cuatro event, crassly appropriating the Mexican-American community’s holiday for financial gain.

EMBODIED APPROPRIATION: *TRAILER PARK BOYS*

As its title suggests, the Canadian single-camera mockumentary comedy *Trailer Park Boys* examines white masculinity among the poor denizens of a low-rent Nova Scotia trailer park, at the opposite end of the class spectrum from the protagonists of *Arrested Development*. Due to their

lower class status and lived experience growing up around economically disenfranchised persons of white and non-white ethnicities, the white male protagonists of *Trailer Park Boys* have perhaps a greater justification for appropriating aspects of black culture into their identities. For example, most of the show's main characters, regardless of race, are fans of rap music, as becomes clear early in the series when Julian (John Paul Tremblay) receives an NWA CD for his birthday and later on when virtually everyone in the park attends white rapper J-Roc's (Jonathan Torrens) live freestyle rap show in the season three episode 'Who's the Microphone Assassin?'

The connection between coded-blackness and poverty-ridden life in the trailer park is made explicit by T (Tyrone Parsons), J-Roc's black sidekick, at the outset of 'Microphone Assassin'. T says of himself and J-Roc that 'we live in the park, it's real gangsta out here, you gotta keep it gangsta, you gotta keep it real, rappin' about the real life things we go through'. Thus for T, trailer park life equals 'gangsta' life, and while that statement may be part of his own attempt to compulsively bolster his masculinity by making suburban trailer park residency seem rougher and tougher than it really is, the economic disenfranchisement and resulting petty criminality that pervades the park does to some extent validate T's claim. The park, while not quite the same as an urban black ghetto, is surely not much akin to a middle-class white neighborhood either.

In addition to depicting the Sunnyvale Trailer Park as a quasi-ghetto, *Trailer Park Boys* also makes clear early on that J-Roc truly considers himself to be culturally and ethnically black. He is the leader and only white member of a posse made up entirely of black rappers and dope dealers, and other park residents verify that J-Roc has *always* considered himself black since childhood. No park resident ever seriously questions the appropriateness of J-Roc's assuming a coded-black identity, and his lifelong friendship with T further naturalizes this cross-racial identification.

J-Roc himself addresses the issue of his own racial identity at the outset of 'Who's the Microphone Assassin?' in a speech to the camera in which he claims to be 'reversing who's black and who's white' through his rap career, and ultimately stating that for he and T, as well as society writ large, racial categories do not matter: 'we're saying, society, you know what's up, this shit don't even matter, you know what I'm sayin', at the end of the day, right?' Under the guise of post-racial rhetoric ('it don't matter'), J-Roc appropriates a coded-black masculinity in order to conform to the demands of what Majors and Mancini Billson call 'compulsory masculinity', an alternative to

traditional masculinity often taken up by black males, a 'rigid prescription for toughness, sexual promiscuity, manipulation, thrill-seeking, and a willingness to use violence' that ultimately serves to compensate for 'feelings of shame, powerlessness, and frustration' (1992, 34). As a comedy, *Trailer Park Boys* often reveals the cracks in J-Roc's compulsively masculine facade, as when, despite his love of waving guns around in his rap videos, he flees every time a real gun fight occurs in the park. However, there is little doubt that J-Roc inhabits his compulsively masculine identity in large part due to his impoverished upbringing in the park and his early exposure to black culture through his friends. Yet as is the case with so many of the millennial 'squirmy' comedies, whose humour emerges more so from provoking uncomfortable situations than setting up and delivering tightly constructed gags and punch lines, the show leaves some central questions unanswered, especially where 'white negro' J-Roc is concerned (Mailer 1957).

Trailer Park Boys negotiates issues of cross-racial appropriation in complex ways, contextualizing J-Roc's imagined black or 'white negro' identity within a cultural and class structure that, to some extent, explains (if not justifies) it. Unlike the privileged whites of *Arrested Development* and *Party Down*, *Trailer Park's* J-Roc is lower class, living among the lower-class blacks and whites of Sunnyvale. As Eric Lott has documented, working-class white men, due to closer socioeconomic proximity to black men, often evince a complex relationship to black masculinity, an extremely ambivalent negotiation fraught with both admiration and emulation as well as fear and resentment (1997, 195). This ambivalent proximity does not so much give working-class white men the *right* to appropriate black culture, but it does complicate the act of appropriation in a way to elevate it above mere mercenary thievery.

Although J-Roc inhabits a more or less permanent coded-black identity as a white rapper, the biggest challenge to his cross-racial appropriation comes, as with Buster and Gob in *Arrested Development*, in the wake of a direct affront to his masculinity. In 'Who's the Microphone Assassin?' Julian, Ricky (Robb Wells) and Bubbles (Mike Smith) go to visit J-Roc in his mother's trailer, where he lives. J-Roc's mom (Linda Busby) shows the boys back to J-Roc's room, only to walk in on the white rapper furiously pleasuring himself. J-Roc is incredibly embarrassed over this and spends the remainder of the episode denying that his mother caught him masturbating. He specifically expresses concerns that the incident, if made public, may harm his rap career, making explicit the contrast between the immature, pre-Oedipal sexuality connoted by masturbation and the more compulsively masculine values embodied in J-Roc's usual coded-black identity.

Further complicating the implications of the masturbation scene are Cory (Cory Bowles) and Trevor (Michael Jackson), a buddy duo around whom an aura of heavily suggested yet never quite confirmed homoeroticism hovers throughout the series: in season two they have sexual *liaisons* with two transvestites, and in season five Trevor reveals that he knows on which nights male strippers take the stage at a local club. Significantly, Cory and Trevor are peeping in J-Roc's window during the masturbation incident, and while they claim to be following J-Roc's movements due to their interest in participating in the rap show, their presence queers an already emasculating event, intensifying J-Roc's need to reestablish his masculinity and heterosexuality via his coded-black (and compulsively masculine) performance at the rap show.

Once the rap show gets underway, things go fine for J-Roc until Detroit Velvet Smooth (Garry James), a black rapper from the nearby city of Moncton, shows up in Sunnyvale to interrupt the show and accuse J-Roc of pirating his music on a recent recording. Smooth's accusation is valid, and when J-Roc feebly explains that he meant the act of piracy as an homage and gesture of respect to Smooth, whom he calls 'my brother', Smooth challenges him: 'You calling me your brother? Seems like to me one of us ain't black. Are you black?' To which J-Roc replies, 'Yeah, I'm black.' Interestingly, at the moment of that pronouncement, T, standing just behind J-Roc, puts his hand to his forehead in a gesture of disbelief. This gesture is only visible for a brief second, but affords T the opportunity for critique of his white buddy denied to so many characters of colour in *Arrested Development*. However, the show never indicates whether T is skeptical of J-Roc's right to consider himself black in general, or if he is simply embarrassed to hear J-Roc state his appropriative racial identity so boldly in front of Detroit Velvet Smooth.

Immediately following Smooth's accusation and J-Roc's claim to blackness, the show cuts to a brief interview segment wherein two acquaintances explain that 'It's not an act—[J-Roc] really believes [he's black].' This endorsement of J-Roc's authenticity is followed by a second short interview clip, this time of J-Roc explaining his theory that there are 'degrees of black' and delineating where a few famous entertainment figures fall on the continuum of whiteness and blackness: Lionel Richie is 'barely black' and Michael Jackson is a 'white black' according to J-Roc. While in no way negating the appropriative aspects of J-Roc's identity and behaviour, his explanation nevertheless articulates an understanding of race as socially and culturally constructed, coding 'blackness' as a set of behaviours and

attitudes rather than a category essentially tied to biological race. As a biologically white man claiming a black identity, this is potentially problematic: J-Roc exercises his white privilege in *choosing* a coded-black identity. Yet the show and the episode leave open the possibility that this may be a legitimate choice in J-Roc's circumstances.

When we next see J-Roc after his confrontation with Smooth, he is hiding out in his room, site of the embarrassing masturbation incident that catalyzed his need to participate in the re-masculinizing freestyle rap show in the first place. His mother again walks in on him, this time to offer him consolation, and finds him changed out of his usual clothes, instead wearing a rainbow-coloured polo shirt and khaki trousers, his outfit signifying a stereotypically white man. When his mother inquires, he replies, in standardized English rather than his usual gangsta dialect: 'Why would I be dressed any differently, mom? It's who I am. It's hard to admit it, but—mom, I'm white!' J-Roc undergoes a race-based identity crisis that plainly reveals the constructed nature of his usual coded-black persona. Detroit Velvet Smooth's challenge to J-Roc's black identity has acted as a reality principle utterly shattering the white rapper's cross-racial fantasy.

Yet J-Roc's mother does not accept her son's acquiescence to his own whiteness, and gives him a pep talk in which she asks him 'Who's the microphone assassin?' and tells him that he needs to believe in himself. When this doesn't quite convince him, she reveals that she has always preferred black men to white ones, and has had sexual relations with several black men in the past. This cheers him up significantly.

Meanwhile, outside at the stalled rap show, Julian pays Smooth royalty money for the use of his music on J-Roc's behalf, settling his gripe. Then, J-Roc's mom, having reemerged from the trailer, asks the black rapper to go inside and speak to her son. He agrees. And while this at first appears to be a scenario akin to that of Buster's encounter with his Mexican 'slave buddies', in which a character of colour offers approval and validation for a white character's act of cross-racial appropriation, Smooth warns J-Roc that 'There's a lot more to being black than just being down with NWA, seriously.' This suggests that Smooth—and the show—is well aware that J-Roc does not in fact understand fully what it means to be black. Of course, to be fair, *Arrested Development* is well aware of the ridiculous inappropriateness of its white characters' appropriative cross-racial fantasies as well, yet it only rarely gives its characters of colour a chance to directly admonish its comically clueless protagonists. Here, conversely, J-Roc is reprimanded by one of the very people upon which he has modeled his 'black' identity.

Yet Smooth ultimately validates J-Roc's right to be whatever he wishes, saying: 'There's black and there's white and then there's you, J-Roc, and I still don't know what in the fuck that is yet.' Interestingly, Smooth's categorization of J-Roc places the latter in a liminal identity category, neither black nor white. While this pronouncement neatly sidesteps the problematic dimensions of a white person appropriating a coded-black identity, it nevertheless makes clear that whatever J-Roc is, it is unique and as-yet incomprehensible to people (and a society) who fit more clearly into established ethnic categories. Buoyed by Smooth's intervention, J-Roc changes back into his gangsta outfit and resumes the rap show, joined onstage by his idol. In line with classical comedy conventions, the episode ends with celebratory unification of the whole community around its male protagonist. The entire social body of the Sunnyvale Trailer Park rallies around J-Roc, validating his claim to a third racial category *between* that of black and white, offering a positive, utopian interpretation of the white rapper's act of ethnic self-determination.

However, this ostensibly happy ending masks a troubling subtext. As Eric Lott has written of Elvis Presley, 'nobody who thinks with their ears can dismiss Elvis as merely a case of racial rip-off' yet the fact remains that Presley made his fame and fortune by repackaging black music and dance moves for white audiences—what Lott ultimately calls a 'whiteface' performance of black blues and gospel sounds (1997, 203). Similarly, while it would be reductive to say that J-Roc *only* or *merely* steals his identity, music and performance style from black gangsta rap culture, it is nevertheless the case that he is a white man profiting from his appropriation of rap music and gangsta style. So, liberating though Smooth's liminal yet indeterminate classification of J-Roc may be for the white rapper personally, the episode ends by representing a problematic real-world act of cultural theft. Structurally speaking, J-Roc gets away with repackaging rap music for a mostly white audience in his own form of 'whiteface' performance. The episode responds to its own titular question—'Who's the microphone assassin?'—with a sobering answer reflective of the real history of popular culture: a white man.

DECONSTRUCTING THE POST-RACIAL TURN: *PARTY DOWN*

Party Down centres upon the exploits of a group of Los Angeles-based caterers, most of whom view their work as a stop-gap on their way to success in the entertainment industry. Though their ages and genders vary,

all are white. They all struggle to make ends meet but unlike the edge-of-poverty inhabitants of Sunnyside Trailer Park, the *Party Down* crew is all firmly situated in the middle class.

Being a darker comedy than the other two shows under discussion, *Party Down* is the most savage in its critique of the white racial imaginary. This comes to the fore in the season two episode 'James Ellison Funeral', in which the Party Down catering crew works the funeral reception of an upper-middle-class black businessman. Much humour is generated from the fact that most of the black party guests are richer, better educated and much more well-mannered than most of the white caterers.

Early in the episode, geeky crew member Roman (Martin Starr) engages in a debate with Mary (Tamala Jones), the daughter of the deceased, over the exact meaning of the phrase 'jungle fever'. Claiming that the term only applies when a white person lusts after a black one, and not vice-versa, Roman asserts that his position is based only upon 'facts of semantics' and does not mark him as racist: 'I'm post-racial', he confidently claims, 'People are people. If you're cool, you're cool.' To which Mary rejoins: 'If you're an ass, you're an ass', clearly referring to Roman himself, which he misses. This joke shows Roman not only to be self-involved and dense, but also exposes his claim to be 'post-racial' as a lie. Roman is an 'ass' precisely because he (wrongly) considers himself to be post-racial. His imagined post-racialness allows him to indulge his penchant for disregarding other peoples' feelings, and Mary Ellison calls him on it. The joke is on Roman; we laugh with Mary at him.

Roman's racism is reemphasized at one later point, when he asks a biracial guest if he knows the exact definition of 'jungle fever'. The guest stares at Roman in disbelief, and the vignette ends in an uncomfortable, squirmy silence. Roman's assumption that it takes someone of colour or (even better) a biracial individual to understand the concept of interracial desire reveals his essentialist assumptions and marks him as racist.

An even more involved joke of similar stripe involves Kyle (Ryan Hansen), a privileged, white 'pretty boy' metrosexual who, when not catering, stars in 'B' films and fronts a squeaky clean emo-pop band. As an aspiring musician, Kyle is utterly captivated by an older black funeral guest's performance of 'Amazing Grace' at the reception, and approaches that guest to ask him for pointers in learning how to play the blues. The guest, William (Lee Weaver), agrees, and begins ordering Kyle to perform all manner of absurd tasks: removing and surrendering his designer belt, picking shrimp out of shrimp puffs, and finally, shining William's

shoes. All these tasks, William claims, will teach Kyle about the blues so long as the white caterer doesn't try too hard to 'understand' their purpose; instead, the blues singer urges, Kyle must simply 'experience' what is happening to him. For Kyle, these assignments are freighted with meaning; he engages in each new humiliation with great eagerness, convinced he is learning something very special. However, at episode's end one of William's friends reveals that the blues man is not really a blues man at all, but rather a retired dentist who recently started learning to play guitar as a hobby. William and his chums (and Roman) have a laugh at Kyle's expense, and the latter walks off, looking a bit embarrassed and crestfallen.

Yet at the end of the reception, Kyle approaches William and, despite the ex-dentist's assertion that 'there was nothing to learn' from the degrading prank, insists again and again that he has indeed learned something, claiming to 'get it'. Kyle's earnestness here suggests that this is more than a simple defense mechanism against having been the butt of an elaborate gag. Rather, Kyle engages the dentist's joke in a postmodern way, on two levels, as both ironic *and* authentic simultaneously, as if there were 'real' lessons to be gleaned from it *even though it was a joke*. Kyle believes his temporary simulation of ethnicity, which he repeatedly equates to the 'slave experience', to be, in some sense, real. Just as, according to Judith Butler (1990), gender identity is performative, so too is ethnicity, when played to elicit melodramatic sympathy and simulate victimhood. Kyle reinterprets a process that only exists as a joke, investing it with depth, projecting a white racial fantasy, imagining (we suppose) that by participating as the victim of the joke, he has experienced genuine oppression akin to that of black slaves. He plays at being (what he imagines to be) black, but this is *not* real slavery, nor even a convincing simulation of it. But it is all the premise Kyle needs to imagine that he understands the 'black slave experience' which allows him to grasp 'the blues'. Yet the audience knows that the dentist's status as a Magical Negro, defined by Audrey Colombe (2002) as a 'self-sacrificing' black figure whose 'sole purpose in the story is to selflessly use [his] powers to help a White man', is only in Kyle's imagination.

The 'James Ellison Funeral' episode does evince racial stereotyping in its depiction of the late Mr. Ellison as sexually promiscuous, though perhaps the deployment of that stereotype is somewhat tempered by Mrs. Ellison's (Loretta Devine) acceptance of her husband's extramarital affairs and her claim that their marriage was an open one by mutual consent. However, the episode's major punch line comes when it is revealed that

the deceased Mr. Ellison fathered not one but (at least) two illegitimate children, a depiction that plays upon the same offensive stereotype that causes the studio engineer in *Arrested Development* to refuse to work with Gob and Franklin on their CD. The damage here is mitigated by Mr. Ellison's upper-class status, which works against the usual stereotype of *lower-class* black men as sexually voracious. Yet this joke illustrates how even the most intelligent and incisively critical of comedy shows finds it difficult to resist indulging in stereotypical depictions of persons of colour, even in the service of deconstructing the presumed post-racialism of its white characters.

CONCLUSION

Privileged members of the dominant white, Euro-American culture often find the fact of lingering structural racism hard to digest, wanting very badly to believe that we now live in a post-racial society. Contemporary single-camera comedies belie this persistent fantasy. These post-millennial, single-camera comedy shows, at their best, call out white characters (and by extension, viewers) for their discomfort in confronting issues of structural racism and white privilege. Insofar as they poke fun at whites who think themselves post-racial yet indulge in unconscious stereotyping and other passively racist activities, these shows give the lie to the notion of a post-racial North-America, even as they—to varying degrees—recycle those same stereotypes for the purposes of comedy.

Each of the three shows under discussion approaches these issues differently. As the best-known and most 'mainstream' of the three, *Arrested Development* focuses exclusively on its white characters. Despite a few moments of critique from characters of colour like Ice, *Arrested Development* tends to deploy cross-racial appropriation as a means to gently satirize the privileged Bluths and their associates, laughing at them yet centralizing them and their racist worldview. It mines humour from the cluelessness of rich white people yet lets its stereotypical depictions of blacks and Mexicans go unproblematicized. *Trailer Park Boys* is more subtle in how it addresses the cultural constructedness of race, explicitly critiquing the essentialist position. Yet as a more traditional (less dark) comedy, it favours a utopian view that allows characters like J-Roc to appropriate an imagined black identity without serious or lasting consequences. Granted, *Trailer Park Boys* self-consciously foregrounds its mockumentary form,

thereby decentering J-Roc's perspective by offering conflicting points of view (the acquaintances' interview, Detroit Velvet Smooth's accusation) on his act of racial appropriation in 'Who's the Microphone Assassin?'. Yet Smooth's episode-concluding endorsement, while ambiguous, is nevertheless an endorsement. The show ultimately signs off on J-Roc's right to inhabit an ethnically black identity, never again questioning his ethnic status and even granting him a black son in its Netflix-produced ninth season (2014). Finally, as the least well-known and tonally darkest of the three shows, *Party Down* makes the strongest effort to critique the white geek's post-racial position. Roman and Kyle are made the butts of jokes articulated by black characters, revealing the white caterers' complete obliviousness to their own structural privilege. Though the show, like *Arrested Development*, foregrounds economically advantaged white characters, it is more pointed in its critique of those characters' obliviousness to racism. For example, as early as its first episode, *Party Down* positions team leader Ron Donald (Ken Marino) as a well-meaning but passively racist idiot who is excited to have recently attended racial sensitivity training yet thinks nothing of yelling the word 'jiggers' (in reference to alcohol glasses) in front of two black clients. That said, *Party Down*'s focus is predominantly on white characters and the show employs racist stereotyping, as in the late Mr. Ellison's rapacious sexual desire for lighter-skinned women.

Ultimately, the trends analyzed here are bound up in the broader rise of geeky white masculinity to a place of cultural centrality and power in the postmodern *milieu*. These shows' threatened white characters participate in imagined ethnicity to reinforce their place of privilege in a culture in which whiteness is paradoxically (and inaccurately) seen as a liability. Yet while these shows' depictions of white appropriation of imagined ethnicity belie or at least question these characters' 'post-racial' fantasy, their focus on white characters and tendency to perpetuate racial stereotypes contribute to the ongoing marginalization and mistreatment of people of colour.

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Phrasing!: *Archer*, Taboo Humour, and Psychoanalytic Media Theory

Matt Sienkiewicz

Media theory, emerging at the intersection of literary criticism and critical theory, inevitably draws upon a variety of analytic tools. Some of these, such as the structuralist approaches to genre, remain intuitively appealing to contemporary students. For example, an evening watching network sitcoms makes apparent that the culture industries themselves have embraced the existence of deep structures and formulas in the production of entertainment. Other approaches, such as critical race theory, remain at greater distance from industrial self-awareness, but resonate strongly with the contemporary socio-political moment.

Freudian psychoanalysis, however, presents a different set of obstacles to both teacher and student. Students have a tendency to question the approach's relevance to the contemporary media industry and to contemporary life more generally. This makes the task of choosing a text through which to teach psychoanalysis particularly daunting. If the Freudian elements of a text are too obscure, the instructor is easily accused of 'reading too much' and infusing it with lewd connotations it has done nothing to deserve. If the Freudian elements are too obvious, the text is just as easily understood as mocking psychoanalysis and, perhaps, the instructor trying

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to teach it. After all, if Freud is right, the stuff worth studying ought to be hidden, right? An ideal text for introducing psychoanalytic media theory, therefore, is one that engages with the core concepts of Freudian analysis while nonetheless employing more subtle, subterranean elements that can, with effort, be brought to the surface. In order to ease naturally resistant students into the realm of psychoanalytic criticism, a text must be willing to display a certain level of interest in ideas such as Oedipal fixation, repression and the death drive. These elements must be visibly and audibly present enough to convince a careful viewer of their existence, but obscured enough, at least in places, to plausibly be understood as less than fully conscious references to psychoanalysis. The text must admit Freud, but not be about Freud.

In this chapter I argue that the animated FX series *Archer*, through its consistent, yet often narratively oblique engagement with Freudian taboos, offers just such an opportunity. I contend that, alongside putting forth humour steeped in Freudian concepts of sexual and violent drives, the spy comedy also engages in a variety of textual practices that can be interpreted as unconscious acts on the parts of producers that serve to make palatable (and enjoyable) taboo desires. There are obvious Freudian overtones in *Archer's* humour that must be understood in terms of consciously playful decisions on the part of the creators. However, through its exploitation of the medium of animation, *Archer's* producers (perhaps unconsciously) craft a safe space in which to give expression to some of the most deeply repressed elements of the human psyche. Countless jokes about mother-son incest and sadomasochism have no doubt been weaved into the show by producers at least somewhat conscious of their Freudian implications. Yet they are packaged in highly unusual ways that mitigate the threat these taboo jokes present to the social consciousness of producers and viewers. These techniques can be read as evidence of the impact of unconscious needs on the part of producers to blunt the edginess of their comedy.

Thus, *Archer* becomes a text that both provides an introduction to obvious psychoanalytic material through which to teach key Freudian concepts while nonetheless serving plausibly as a repository for the unconscious needs of its producers and consumers. It should be noted that my interest lies less with the absolute truth of a multi-layered psychoanalytic interpretation of *Archer* as with the utility the show provides as a pedagogical tool. The primary ambition of this argument is to present the program as an ideal text through which to communicate pre-established theories of the connection between comedy, taboo and the return of the repressed in media.

ARCHER AND THE DUALITY OF PSYCHOANALYTIC CULTURAL READING

Archer's first episode opens with a slow zoom out from the glass-blue eyes of the animated program's titular hero. He is chained to the wall of a dungeon, wearing nothing but tight black briefs over an Adonis body marred only by a few pink scars. A man with an odd, perhaps Russian, accent lights a large cigar and prepares for an interrogation. He speaks, making clear he knows exactly who his captive is: 'Sterling Archer. Code name Duchess. Known from Berlin to *Bangkok* [the stress being audibly clear] as the world's most dangerous spy.' He walks over to a pair of jumper cables and touches the ends together. Sparks fly and he shivers with excitement. After a moment of dramatic pause, Sterling speaks up. He mocks the interrogator, accuses him of faking his accent and laughs at the pleasure he seems to be getting out of the sado-erotic overtones of the scene. A voice then booms in from an intercom: 'Son of a *bitch!*' A screen lights up, revealing a middle-aged woman watching the scene while sipping on a mixed drink. She reprimands Sterling for not taking the interrogation simulation seriously. He complains about his code name, Duchess, which is revealed to be the name of the woman's deceased dog. She picks up a picture and looks down at it longingly—it's a black-and-white photo of her nude body huddled against the canine Duchess'. As the scene ends, the interrogator reveals that this woman, who had been watching the sexually charged interrogation and codenamed Sterling after a dog she once loved (perhaps physically), is Mallory Archer, Sterling's mother.

Archer thus begins with a scene drenched in Oedipal tension that shatters the few taboos that are left to break on cable television. Given the free expression of anormative sex found on FX programs such as *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* and *Nip/Tuck*, *Archer* must turn to jokes about incest and bestiality in order to call attention to its edge and, from a psychoanalytic perspective, address drives that are still understood as being widely repressed. The scene sets up the semi-sexual tension that marks the relationship between Sterling and Mallory Archer throughout the series and has become a trademark of the program's relentlessly taboo comedy. The plot of the episode, however, quickly moves away from this point of focus, developing a highly self-aware but nonetheless conventional story about a double agent infiltrating Archer's organization. While this Oedipal fixation, along with many other Freudian concepts to be discussed later, figures into the background of every episode, it never serves as the primary

driver of the program's narrative. *Archer* thus clearly places questions of humour and repression squarely on the surface but does not fixate on them. The result is a show that engages with repressed ideas and desires but nonetheless makes a certain effort to marginalize them, creating, I argue, an ideal opportunity to consider the ways in which taboo comedy can serve as fertile ground for considering the psychoanalytic implications of the show for both the producer and its viewers.

In his widely used textbook *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, Storey (2012) offers a simple but instructive division by which to articulate the possibilities for basic psychoanalytic interpretations of popular media texts. On the one hand, he puts forth the 'author-centered' approach. In this approach cultural texts are positioned as analogous to the 'dreams and pathological ideas' that, in Freudian clinical psychoanalysis, are revealed by the patient and interpreted by the analyst (Freud 1965, 135). This reading strategy thus treats the textual elements of a movie, television program or other cultural product as a manifest level of signification that, via analysis, can be made to reveal the latent meanings that the producer has unwitting imparted (Freud 1965, 99). In identifying this approach, Storey draws on Freud's own observations in *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* on the parallels that exist between the production of dreams and works of art. There Freud argues that art is 'a path that leads back from phantasy to reality' and that the artist is capable of 'work[ing] over his day-dreams' in order to use them as material to be presented to the public (Freud 1989, 468). These dreams are made tangible in the process of artistic production and can be extracted by the attuned critic.

Freud's artist, however, must 'tone [...] down' the repressed material, thus stripping it of any apparent connection to desires that must, perforce of societal demands, be left hidden. As Flitterman-Lewis puts it, 'concealment of those "marks of enunciation" that stamp [artistic] authorship' are crucial for the viewer to experience film as an analogue to their own dreams (1987, 182). This, of course, presents a challenge to the teacher of the 'author-centered' approach. By definition, the true meanings of the text have thus been buried so as to avoid detection on the part of most viewers. And, at least in theory, the process of recovering this meaning ought to require a similar level of attention and expertise to that which an analyst must devote to a patient. This is a difficult, daunting and perhaps even ridiculous-sounding prospect for students with no training in the field of psychology. Although it is certainly possible to evoke these meanings through careful explication of Freudian principles, the general

skepticism through which contemporary students tend to view the concept of psychoanalysis can make this an extremely uphill battle. It can appear, perhaps with some reason, that the interpreter can do little more than hazard guesses at what repressed ideas have been submerged in the text. *Archer*, however, offers something in the way of a happy medium. It is easy to identify material in the program's humour that, according to Freudian theorists, is commonly repressed. This fact allows the student to consider why these elements are present and how the producers have done the work of 'toning down' the latent material in the program while nonetheless leaving such manifest traces.

The question of viewer pleasure points to the second of Storey's two approaches, the 'reader-centered'. In this case, the interpreter considers the media text a 'substitute dream' through which the viewer gains 'unconscious pleasure and satisfaction' in the process of consumption (Storey 2012, 100). In an introductory text on the subject, Allen argues that the process of media viewing is ideal 'for escaping the tyranny of reason and staging the associative processes of condensation and displacement that, for Freud, characterized unconscious thought' (2003, 128). The broad popularity of a given text, therefore, can be explained by its ability to engage with feelings and desires that are repressed by large groups of potential consumers and to do so in fashion that produces a pleasurable sense of release in many of them. From this perspective, the overtness of a given text's engagement with taboo thoughts and ideas ceases to be a hindrance and becomes an opportunity. However, those texts that emphatically engage with the desires most easily communicated to students as being subject to near universal repression, rarely become popular hits. Although popular shows can often be mined for interesting psychoanalytic material, such work can require great nuance and appear to be rather forced. *Archer*, once again provides a unique opportunity. Yes, it is a program that is found in the higher numbers of most cable systems, but it is nonetheless a show that has gained a mainstream following unavailable to most texts that, to cite a few examples, feature repeated, explicit descriptions of eroticized death fantasies or make repeated reference to a son's ability to perform sexually in the presence of his mother. Furthermore, it is a program aimed precisely at the demographic most likely to be learning critical media theory for the first time—young, educated, middle-class viewers. The program thus not only offers the instructor the opportunity to ask why one might take pleasure at seeing a character described being choked to death during sex, but also to ask precisely why they seem to enjoy it.

In the following sections I analyze *Archer* from both of Storey's approaches to psychoanalytic interpretation. My aim is to show that *Archer* can be productively and honestly presented in psychoanalytic terms that strike a careful balance between the obvious and the hidden. To do so, I consider the impact of the media of television and animation, as well as the specific content of *Archer*, returning occasionally to original texts of Freud in order to bridge the comedic use of today's taboos with traditional notions of repression and release.

ARCHER AND DREAMWORK, CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION AS DREAMSCAPE

The author-centered approach to media texts is one that asks not only what repressed materials from the creator's unconscious are being expressed in the text, but also how those elements are incorporated in a fashion that makes them palatable to viewers. To answer this latter question is also perhaps to consider the ways in which artists are able to so consciously deal in the realm of their own unconscious. The 'toning down' that Freud describes not only serves the purpose of making taboo material palatable for others, but also enabling artists to plausibly distance themselves from the reality of the repressed desires they are expressing. My focus in this section is thus on the ways in which *Archer* exploits the medium of television animation in order to craft a fertile, safe environment in which to place the most shocking of repressed emotions and drives. All media can be thought in some ways to operate in a manner similar to that of dreams. *Archer*, however, employs exceptional, innovative approaches to crafting a diegetic world that mirrors the logic of dreams as Freud explains them and thus tempers the fierce reality of the repressed desires the show uses as the basis of so much of its comedy.

The foundations of psychoanalytic media theory lay primarily in scholarly reflections on the experience of traditional cinema going. The cinematic experience is said to run in parallel to the process of falling asleep and drifting into a dream state. The result is an aesthetic experience in which, as Mulvey notes, 'the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates the spectators from one another) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light' allow the viewer to project 'repressed desire on to the performer' (Mulvey 1975). Although psychoanalytic cinema theorists have devoted much time to parsing out the specific ramifications of this media experience, Mulvey's focus on darkness

and isolation is generally considered central to cinema's ability to grant access to repressed desires.

These factors have, however, created significant barriers to the importation of psychoanalytic theory into the realm of television studies. As John Fiske argues 'the huge bright cinema and the anonymous darkness of the auditorium' stand in stark contrast to 'the far less imperative television screen situated in the family living room in the middle of ordinary family life', thus disrupting many of the dream parallels that Mulvey and others draw to the cinema (1987, 226). Furthermore, as Flitterman-Lewis notes, television often resists the shot-reverse shot editing pattern that classical Hollywood engages in order to 'suture' the viewer into a scene (1987, 200). Even if a given show chooses to engage in such a visual style, the medium, via a preponderance of talk shows, game shows, variety programming and other fare establish a mode of viewing that is starkly different from that attending a pitch-black megaplex screening.

Both Flitterman-Lewis and Fiske find other means through which to employ psychoanalytic theory in order to explain televisual pleasure. Flitterman-Lewis attempts to turn the 'fractured subjectivity' of the television medium into an asset by asserting that it must create 'ever more powerful psychic mechanisms' in order to maintain viewer interest (1987, 204). Fiske, in contrast, points to television's traditionally degraded cultural position via associations with sexual promiscuity, glorification of violence and crass 'appeal to the lowest common denominator'. This discursive positioning allows viewers to engage in the pleasure of '*plaisir*' through which one releases repressed desires by 'confirming their social identity as one that opposes [...] dominant social values' (1987, 228). *Archer* certainly plays into these television stereotypes and taboos, offering levels of sex and violence that push the boundaries of what Michael Curtin describes as 'edge'—the process by which broadcasters intentionally limit their appeal to specific cultural groups in order to craft 'marketable boundaries of difference' (Curtin 1996, 190).

However, the contemporary context, particularly when viewed from the perspective of the student, complicates the picture that Fiske portrays. Yes, today's television landscape features more taboo material than ever before, but a new critical approach has come to eclipse the traditional stances toward televisual sex and violence. Whereas writers such as Jerry Mander once bemoaned television's insistence on promoting violence over values of 'cooperation, loving and caring', contemporary popular critics have reappraised such televisual tendencies, often reframing them in terms

of art (1978, 36). For example, the best-selling critic Alan Sepinwall, while never praising sex and violence for its own sake, points to the HBO series *Oz*, full of scenes of prison rape and murder, as a key text in the creation of 'another golden age' for television (Sepinwall 2012, 2). The violence of *The Sopranos*, the sexual candor of *Sex and the City* and the casual portrayal of extramarital sex on *Mad Men* have in each case contributed to television's cultural cache, not diminished it. This is not to say definitively that viewers no longer have access to the pleasure of *plaisir* that Fiske points out. It does, however, emphasize the importance of updating discussions of contemporary television in order to account for changes within the medium.

Some of these changes, in fact, significantly recast the original observations that forced Fiske and Flitterman-Lewis to reject the cinematic approach to television's psychoanalytic significance. Most plainly, television's domesticity, while certainly still prevalent for some viewers, is by no means universal. Both technology and industrial shifts have changed the television-watching experience, a fact that is plainly clear to contemporary students of the medium. For many, the experience of watching *Archer* might, in fact, provide an even more persuasive case as a parallel to a dream state than did cinema viewing for scholars such as Mulvey. Fiske approaches television as a small screen watched at a distance in the presence of the entire family. Younger viewers, however, are just as likely to watch *Archer* in bed, alone (or not alone), in the dark, on a computer screen laying mere inches away. Occasionally, one supposes, they fall asleep and enter actual dream states as a result of the experience. The rise of online video as a mainstream form of television consumption thus radically repositions the possibilities for considering television psychoanalytically, particularly with regards to shows aimed primarily at younger, richer and therefore more technologically advanced audiences.

Even when watched in real time on FX, the domesticity of *Archer* is significantly reduced in comparison to the context in which the foundational work on television and psychoanalysis was written. Network Era television was pitched at large swaths of viewers lending credence to Fiske and Flitterman-Lewis' sense that televisual publicity stood in opposition to cinematic intimacy. Over time, however, the fracturing of the television audience has complicated this picture, particularly with regards to cable television. As Lotz notes, networks such as FX have 'sought to develop programming that establishes their narrowly focused brands and allows them to deliver [...] particular demographic and psychographic groups of consumers' (2007, 183). In the case of individual households this suggests greater

levels of solo viewing. Furthermore, in order to reach this goal, networks have made concerted efforts to cordon off certain timeslots in order to craft a sense of intimacy and personal attention for viewers. Cartoon Network's *Adult Swim* block, for example, inserts 'bumps' into its commercial breaks aimed at crafting a sense of intimacy. These simple, text-based shorts are often addressed in the second person, creating a simulation of a one-on-one dialogue between viewer and television.

Archer's network, FX, uses a similar tactic, and one that can be read as particularly useful in setting up the viewer for the reception of repressed desires that is to be found in the programming that follows. Billing its late block as *FX Fully Baked*, the network introduces each episode of *Archer* with a soft focused, oddly lit scene featuring a young, beautiful woman baking in a messy, haze-filled kitchen. She is, in her own right, a rather striking Freudian concoction, equal parts suicide girl and fifties housewife. She wears her hair in a style reminiscent of June Cleaver, along with a very low cut apron revealing abundant cleavage. Her arms are covered in tattoos of domestic items—an eggbeater, cookie cutters and so on. And the end of each scene she smiles provocatively and offers the viewer a baked treat that, implicitly, has been made with some ingredients unavailable at the grocery store. These scenes not only offer a sense of intimacy to the viewer, but also suggest that the following material comes from a place devoid of standard social inhibitions. Just as Freud notes that the oncoming of sleep causes 'involuntary ideas' that must otherwise be repressed to emerge in the process of clinical psychoanalysis, the branding of *FX Fully Baked* as late-night, drug-like comedy suggests a safe space in which to grapple with taboos.

ARCHER, ANIMATION AND THE LOGIC OF DREAMS

It is this 'safe space' that is crucial in understanding the sense in which *Archer* is particularly suited to be read through the 'author-centered' approach to media psychoanalysis. As will be detailed later, the series provides ample material for the psychoanalytic critic to consider. Too much, even. In order to understand *Archer* as a text susceptible to psychoanalysis, as opposed to one that is simply *about* psychoanalysis, there must be some explanation as to the means by which the text tempers its release of repressed psychic materials, both for the sake of the audience and the producer. In this section, I argue that *Archer*'s innovative use of the medium of animation plays this role. The narrative and aesthetic strategies

of *Archer* work to reframe its content, employing tactics that bare remarkable similarity to Freud's descriptions of dreams. By mimicking dreams in such a fashion, *Archer* becomes a text in which producers can insert concepts such as Oedipal desire without fully facing their reality and viewers can enjoy them without understanding their true, unconscious origins.

The choice of animation as the medium for *Archer* plays a central role in establishing such an environment. Although FX and other cable networks often push boundaries in live action programming, *Archer's* animated format allows the program to depict images of intense sexuality and sexual violence, and to do so in the context of comedy no less. To a certain extent this likely relates to issues of television standards and practices. It is hard to believe a network signing off on depicting an actor naked, being choked to the brink of death as another looks on in apparent amusement or arousal. Such scenes appear with frequency in *Archer*. The question is why this double standard persists. The answer, perhaps, lies in the psychological framework in which audiences engage animated programming. As Napier notes, animation, by virtue of its ability to construct entirely artificial realities, 'challenges our expectations of what is "normal" or "real," bringing up material that may seem more appropriately housed in dreams or the unconscious, and this can be a deeply disconcerting process' (2005, 74). Along similar lines, Wells argues that animation, by re-writing both the rules of physics and society, can stage a space in which 'the free-play of the id, unchecked by other mechanisms in the personality' can be made manifest (1998, 154).

Archer, however, goes further in establishing such a space, engaging practices that, if not unique to the show, are nonetheless highly unusual in the context of mainstream narrative television. This can be seen in its unique use of what may be described as 'kettle' or dream logic. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud posits that dreams possess a unique trait that stands in stark contradiction to the rules of waking, social reality. In dreams, something can be true and not true at once. As an illustration, he points to a patient of his who had a dream in which he had damaged his neighbor's kettle. As a defense, the dream-self of the patient offered three explanations to the neighbor: that he had returned the kettle without damage, that it was damaged when he borrowed it and that he had never borrowed it at all (1965, 153). These obviously contradictory explanations are, Freud argues, one of the fundamental markers of the dream space in which repressed ideas can be safely expressed. In dreams, Freud argues that 'thoughts which are mutually exclusive make no attempt to do

away with each other, but persist side by side [...revealing that which] our conscious thoughts would never tolerate but such as are often admitted in our actions' (1965, 635).

Archer engages with this sort of 'kettle' logic in two fashions. For one, the show constructs scenes in which characters admit to the reality of two entirely contradictory experiences. For example, in the episode 'Training Day', Sterling Archer explains to Cyril Figgis, via flashback, an encounter he once had in Jamaica:

Cyril: When would you use an underwear gun?
[The scene cuts to a smoke-filled room. Archer gazes down at a naked women in bed.]
 Archer *[v.o.]*: Hopefully never. But say you're in a Caribbean bungalow, and you're kind of high, an exotic woman on the bed. Now is she just the high-priced whore you asked for?
[She kisses him.]
 Archer *[v.o.]*: Or is she an assassin?
[Out of nowhere, she pulls out a small gun.]
 Cyril *[v.o.]*: I don't know.
 Archer *[v.o.]*: Oh, here's room service. Who ordered champagne?
[Three large Jamaican men enter, all with friendly looks. One pushes a room service cart.]
 Cyril *[v.o.]*: Ah. How should I know?
 Archer *[v.o.]*: Exactly. You're baked. You can't remember. But since when does it take three huge surly Jamaican guys to deliver one bottle of champagne?
[Each of the men pulls out a gun and scowls.]
 Cyril: Ohh. Because they're assassins too?
 Archer *[v.o.]*: Or. Maybe one guy's a new waiter. The second one's training him, and the third's from maintenance, finally off his lazy ass to fix the A.C.
[The guns have disappeared. The Jamaicans pull out a bottle of champagne, a room service bill and a wrench, respectively, and present them.]
 Cyril: Oh, yeah. I guess that could happen.
 Archer: Point is, you come out of the john waving this [the underwear gun] around... no one's gonna bug you for a tip.

Equally kettle-like is the entire environment in which *Archer* takes place. Historically, the version of New York City featured in the program is one built on bizarre contradictions that emphasize the unreality of the

elements being presented in the story. For example, *Archer*'s world is one in which The KGB and Soviet Union remain America's greatest enemy, but also one in which sleek, slim contemporary cell phones are standard. The super high-tech office in which much of the show's action takes place is equipped quite noticeably with circa 1980 Apple 2C computers, yet characters travel by blimp, dress in 1950s-style suits, talk about their experiences in World War I and create holograms of Japanese anime vixens. The effect is not one of science fiction, as none of the elements are particularly remarkable or remarked upon. It is instead a world of contradictions, cobbled together from bits and pieces of cultural memory. Like the kettle logic Freud describes in dreams, *Archer*'s New York both is and is not set in the past.

Archer also follows the dream logic outlined by Freud in its creative use of scene transitions, whereby individual words or images are used to provide a fulcrum on which to move from one scene to the next. As the series has developed, the scripts have moved away from traditional transitions between scenes occurring in different plotlines, employing techniques in which a character from one scene will apparently answer a question posed in another or, more commonly, a homonym is used in order to serve as a point of connection between two storylines. For example, in the season one episode 'The Rock' the following exchange serves as a point of transition:

Mallory: *[Speaking of the wealth of a prospective client]* The thing important is that they're loaded.

[Scene transitions to another room.]

Pam: *[Describing her previous evening]* Just shit-faced! About fifteen freaking beers, although that shootsy and holy shit, did honk down a bunch of absinthe!

The connection between the scenes hinges upon the double meaning of the word 'loaded' and follows quite strikingly the sort of transitional logic that Freud ascribes to dream states in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In dreams, he puts forth:

The ideas which transfer their intensities to each other stand in the loosest of mutual relations. They are linked by associations of a kind that is scorned by our normal thinking and relegate to the use of jokes. In particular, we find associations based on homonyms and verbal similarities treated as equal in value (1965, 629).

Archer's use of this technique can be understood as a means by which the creators, perhaps unconsciously, create a fictional space in which, like in dreams, it is possible to address drives and desires too socially taboo to consider in straightforward terms. Moments after the transition just described, the character of Cheryl proceeds to punch Pam in order to induce her to vomit. She then turns to Cyril, telling him, with a hint of seduction in her voice, that she has 'lost her appetite-for food, that is'. This intertwining of scatology, violence and eroticism represents just the sort of repressed desire that, according to psychoanalytic theory, requires the mitigation of dream logic and structure to remain palatable and enjoyable.

ARCHER AND THE ID, *ARCHER* AND OEDIPAL DESIRE

Having established the sense in which the authors of *Archer* craft a text in which repressed desires are made manifest in fashion that mitigates conscious rejection, I now turn to the 'reader-centered' approach that Storey describes. This interpretative strategy asks the critic to consider the elements of the text that give expression to the consumer's unacknowledged but deeply held subconscious drives. The intentionality of the author thus plays a far less central role, as the psychoanalytic success of a text depends only on the viewer not being too harshly reminded of the fact that repressed material is being made manifest. Given the relatively low level of understanding (or interest) that most viewers have in Freudian concepts, this allows for a text that might be seen as rather obvious to the critic. Though *Archer* engages playfully with a variety of desires attributed to the unconscious in psychoanalytic thought, it most commonly invokes drives towards non-normative sexual behaviour, often mixed with a sense of sadomasochism. In this section I consider this tendency of *Archer* in terms of the Oedipal drive and the theorized dual forces of *eros* and *thanatos*.

As the interrogation scene that opens *Archer*'s first episode makes plain, much of the humour in the program derives from its interrogation of the relationship between Sterling and his mother Mallory. The series spells out an Oedipal drama in which Sterling, having no knowledge of his own father, condenses both parental roles into the character of his mother. Mallory, simultaneously sensuously feminine and stern in the manner of a prototypical father figure, becomes a simultaneous object of Sterling's drives towards both sex and violence. According to Freud, a young boy plays out an Oedipal drama by lusting after his mother and fantasizing

about the death of his father. For Sterling Archer, a man who maintains a boyish level of maturity and self-awareness, his mother takes on both roles.

Though never becoming the focus of the narrative, this story of Oedipal desire is present throughout the series premiere. Later in the first episode, by way of explaining Sterling's failed relationship with the character of Lana, *Archer* cuts to a flashback of the two lovers in bed. They speak lovingly to one another. Lana suggests they reengage intercourse while watching pornography. She flips on the television and moves towards Sterling as the phone rings. He picks up and begins talking to Mallory. Frustrated, Lana turns off the porn. Sterling, with the phone still open, turns to Lana, whispering 'No, turn it on. I can do both.' A few scenes later the theme of mother-son sexuality is further developed, as Sterling enters Mallory's office to find her masturbating. Sterling verbalizes a mild disgust at the sight but goes on to enter the room and discuss his own philandering.

This Oedipal comedy takes on yet another Freudian form in a running gag that develops over the course of the series. As a running joke throughout the series, Mallory stumbles into a series of statements that, to the ears of her son Sterling, are understood entirely on the level of sexuality. At the conclusion of each, Sterling exclaims 'phrasing!' in order to alert his mother to the sexual implications of her words. For example, in a scene during which Mallory complains about the professional ethics of a rival, male competitor:

Mallory: You want to play me hard?

Sterling: Phrasing!

Mallory: Then you better nut up!

Sterling: Phrasing!

Mallory: Cause I've swallowed just about as much as I can take from you!

Sterling: Hey! Phrasing!

Each element of the exchange falls precisely into the category of humour that Freud describes as *double entendre*, meaning a joke that 'depends quite specially on the sexual meaning' despite the presence of an equally available non-sexual meaning (1989, 44). In Freud's conception of comedy these *double entendres* function to aid in the release of nervous energy that comes with the expression of repressed sexual and aggressive desires (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004, 148). Set in the context of *Archer's* mother-son dynamics, however, they take on a second meaning.

In this case Sterling's insistence on pointing to his own mother's sexuality via the vehicle of *double entendre* can be understood as allowing the viewer to safely play out her Oedipal inclinations. Although the material is perhaps too overt to be considered revelatory of the repressions of the producers, the Oedipal content, filtered through the identification character of Sterling, can nonetheless be understood as providing pleasure in part through its expression of the audiences deeply held repressed desires.

The final scene of *Archer*'s first episode cleverly combines the two main components of Oedipal desire. In a comically confusing 'Mexican stand-off' Sterling finds himself holding a gun to Lana's head while an infiltrator—the man who was performing the mock interrogation earlier—puts a gun to Mallory's head and threatens to shoot her. The assailant asks Sterling to envision his mother 'down in the gutter' and describes her violent demise. The scene resolves as Lana screams in disgust, noting that Sterling has become physically aroused at the thought of Mallory's death, creating the distraction that ultimately saves the day. The scene, reaching for the ultimate taboo in the pursuit of edgy comedy, engages directly with the Oedipal implications of Mallory taking on both the feminine and masculine elements of Sterling's parenting. As both loving mother and relentless disciplinarian, Mallory has aroused in her son a simultaneous sexual and violent desire that finds expression when he is forced to consciously consider her gruesome death. From a Freudian perspective, his erection declares that he wants to love his mother and kill his father. In this case, they are condensed into a single figure. Although it is unclear how conscious the creators are of this dynamic, it would seem to nonetheless offer viewers the pleasure of relief in seeing their own, deeply hidden Oedipal desires expressed.

ARCHER, EROS AND THANATOS

Archer's consistent engagement with Freudian psychoanalytic concepts perhaps finds its most satisfying and ingenious expression in the program's dedication to the linking of sexual and violent desires. The program links the two in both obvious and subtle ways without resulting to overt contemplation of their connection. The highly unusual, nonjudgmental way in which sex and death are intermingled throughout the show offers a rare opportunity to clearly illustrate media's potential for giving voice to the component parts of Freud's conception of the id.

Animation has long been considered an ideal place for the representation of Freud's general breakdown of the personality into the *superego*, *ego* and *id*. David Berland, in a study of Disney and psychoanalysis, argues that the world of Mickey and Donald is beset with Freudian allusions. The debates that go on between Donald's mini angel and devil selves, for example, can be understood as a battle between the superego and id (1981, 96). Similarly, Mickey's perfectly behaved, sexless persona makes him the embodiment of the superego, whereas Goofy's slovenly joyfulness stands in for the id (1981, 97). *Archer* employs a similar tactic, but at a more sophisticated Freudian level.

Sterling is a truly powerful personification of the id. At the most basic level, he represents the absolute refusal to maintain the rules of one's social position. A running joke throughout the program derives from his insistence on broadcasting his position as the world's greatest secret agent because if one does not, then 'what's the point?' Sterling's appetites and fears account for the near entirety of his character with few scenes going by in which he is not drinking, copulating, destroying or doing some combination of the three. However, what makes *Archer* more useful in the explicating of Freud's concept of the id is the means by which the program goes deeper, expressing the Freudian division of *eros* (libido) and *thanatos* (the death drive) that comprise the id component of the personality.

In *Civilization and its Discontents* Freud codified a more complex conception of the id, acknowledging the need to supplement his theory that repressed sexual drives constitute the most basic motivations for human behaviour. He argues that the erotic drive and a destructive drive (named the *thanatos* by later writers) 'seldom—perhaps never—appear in isolation from each other, but are alloyed with each other in varying and very different proportions'. He points to the sadomasochist as merely an extreme case in which these dual desires, unconsciously present in all of us, take a 'conspicuous and tangible form' (1962, 66). It might be argued that in contemporary Western society many elements of sexuality that were once repressed by the socially driven superego no longer must be. However, as the move towards a more open attitude regarding sexual desire has taken hold, the same could hardly be said for the case of sexual violence. In a contemporary classroom, students are probably more open to considering the possibility that sexual desire drives their actions at a subconscious level. Given the progress that has been made in fostering awareness of sexual assault, however, the connection between sex and violence, *eros* and *thanatos*, perhaps more than ever, is likely to be a point of repression.

In *Archer*, however, they are presented as intimate, inseparable instincts, just as Freud would have it. In the character of Sterling, this manifests primarily in exuberant scenes in which he revels in his ability to simultaneously engage in destruction and eroticism. In 'Tragical History', for example, Sterling fights twin sister ninjas who, in previous scenes, have been remarked upon both for their skills with katanas and hand jobs. The fight becomes complicated by Sterling's obviously torn sense of purpose in the battle. On the one hand, he needs to defeat them in order to survive. On the other, he feels a desperate desire to seduce the twins. The added taboo of incest is always mixed into the scene. Sterling assures the twins he is 'totally into, obviously' the idea of sleeping with sisters simultaneously. Such scenes are commonplace in *Archer*, appearing at least once per episode and arguably giving the audience a form of safe expression of the drives towards both sex and destruction.

More potentially shocking, however, to the contemporary viewer, is the aggressive way in which the character of Cheryl articulates the intimate connections between the allures of sexual pleasure and self-destructions. Cheryl's comedic position is related almost entirely to her ability to overtly express the ways in which she finds death and self-affliction erotic. The joke, more often than not, derives simply from her ability to express this fact. A monologue she delivers in the episode 'Honeypot' nicely enforces this point:

Cheryl: Imagine [...] a big sweaty fireman carries you out of a burning building, lays you out on the sidewalk and you think ok, yeah, he's gonna give you mouth to mouth. But instead he just starts choking the shit out of you and the last sensation you feel before you die is he is squeezing your throat so hard that big, wet blob of drool drips off his teeth and, blurp, onto your popped out eyeballs... I'm wet just thinking about it.

The monologue is, in its own right decidedly unfunny. It expresses what it is, to most observers, not only a shocking sexual preference but also one in which it is morally abhorrent to find humour. But yet, for some at least, when placed into the context of *Archer*'s fictional universe, in which dream logics trump narrative coherence, an atmosphere of 'fully baked' haze lingers and repressions of all sorts are made manifest, there is something amusing and even pleasurable in hearing this most taboo of sentiments given voice. This does not prove, of course, that the pleasure of *Archer* derives from the relief of seeing one's repressed desired made manifest in a safe space. It is, however, a persuasive way to explain how this might be the case.

CONCLUSION

I have illustrated the ways in which *Archer* represents a model text through which to teach both the 'author-centered' and 'reader-centered' approaches that Storey develops in his discussion of psychoanalysis. I have, admittedly, for the most part avoided considering competing possibilities for the popularity of *Archer's* deep engagement with taboo humour. There are many other means of explaining *Archer's* aesthetics and their success. However, no competing approach ought to detract from the pedagogical possibilities that *Archer* offers in terms of teaching psychoanalytic media theory. By combining representations of oft-repressed desires with an innovative, dream-like mode of animated story-telling, *Archer* offers an opportunity both to draw students into the main concepts of psychoanalysis, as well as to consider the more subtle implications of media's relationship with the theory. Its bold use of taboo material immediately demands both attention and critical consideration. And although few students will freely admit their joy in the show derives from their own repressed drives towards sex and death, *Archer* nonetheless provides a perfect opportunity in which to provoke such a discussion.

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Taboo Humanity: Paradoxes of Humanizing Muslims in North American Sitcoms

Kyle Conway

In December 2010, CBS news anchor Katie Couric said she thought ‘the bigotry expressed against Muslims in this country has been one of the most disturbing stories to surface this year. Of course, a lot of noise was made about the Islamic Center, or mosque, down near the World Trade Center, but I think there wasn’t enough [...] careful analysis and evaluation’. As a solution, she proposed, ‘Maybe we need a Muslim version of *The Cosby Show*. I know that sounds crazy, but *The Cosby Show* did so much to change attitudes about African-Americans in this country, and I think sometimes people are afraid of things they don’t understand. [M]aybe if it became more a part of the popular culture’, attitudes toward Muslims would change (*Katie Couric Speaks*, 2011).¹

In fact, Couric was late to the game. In January 2007, a gentle Muslim-themed comedy called *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (2007–2012) premiered on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s (CBC) flagship English-language television network.² It was the creation of Zarqa Nawaz, a feminist Muslim filmmaker whose previous films included a comedy

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about two brothers accused of terrorism when their backyard grill blows up, and a documentary about conservatism in North American mosques. It was produced by Westwind Pictures, whose biggest prior hit was the reality show *Designer Guys*. By the end of 2010, when Couric made her comment, it had finished its fourth season, and it would run for two more before ending in 2012.

Little Mosque was remarkable in many ways, not least of which was its success—it attracted more than 2.1 million viewers when it premiered, rivaling the ratings of popular US programs such as *CSI* and *Grey's Anatomy*. It differed from previous shows about Muslims in many ways, including its setting and characters. It took place in the fictional small town of Mercy in the prairie province of Saskatchewan, and it was about a mosque community that found a place to worship in the basement of an aging Anglican church. It had an ensemble cast with six major Muslim characters, ranging across the political and theological spectrums, in addition to non-Muslim characters who represented a similar range of perspectives. The mosque-within-a-church conceit allowed writers to put Muslims and Christians into conversation with each other, and the diversity of characters allowed them to address a wide range of points of view. According to Nawaz, that was the show's purpose: to '[show] Muslims being normal. It humanizes Muslims. I want the broader society to look at us as normal, with the same issues and concerns as anyone else' (Bilici 2010, 204–205).

But despite its creator's efforts, *Little Mosque* did not do what Couric thought a Muslim version of *The Cosby Show* should do. Although it expanded the range of representations of Muslims on North American television, it did so in a paradoxical way. 'Humanizing Muslims' was a paradoxical task. It presupposed that 'regular' viewers were non-Muslim, and as a result, 'humanizing Muslims' meant erasing visible markers of difference. To talk about belief, writers had to privilege simplicity over complexity. Some traits were entirely out of bounds: 'humanizing Muslims' meant avoiding negative emotions such as anger and indignation. Hence the paradox: 'humanizing' Muslim characters meant cutting them off from much of what it means to be human.

In this chapter, I describe the factors that led to this paradox. Instead of describing how people use humour to deal with taboo topics, I consider topics that remain taboo—at least in sitcoms—even with the use of humour. I begin by considering the conceptual limits of representation, which result from the logic (or illogic) of synecdoche that subtends the idea that a member of a group can stand in for the group itself. Then I

describe two forms of pressure exerted on program-makers that limit the choices they can make. Some pressures are a function of genre: although sitcoms frequently serve as an entrance point for minorities into the realm of television programming, the door they provide has often been narrow, allowing certain people through but not others. Other pressures are related to policy and industry. Canadian broadcasters have a mandate to represent the country's diversity, but producers and networks want their shows to be commercially successful; as a result, commercial success plays a larger role in their decision-making process than policy. CBC executives have long had to borrow strategies from their commercial rivals, even though the CBC receives funding from Parliament.

To make my argument, I adopt a critical production studies approach (Caldwell 2008; Havens et al. 2009). I draw on interviews conducted in 2011 and 2012 with people involved in the production of *Little Mosque*, including the show's creator, executive producers, directors, writers, and financial underwriters, as well as CBC network executives involved in the green-lighting process.³ I supplement these interviews with CBC reports and accounts from popular magazines and newspapers. These additional materials corroborate, and sometimes challenge, program-makers' accounts, and in the process, they provide a multi-dimensional picture of the production process. The conclusion will examine a specific episode of *Little Mosque* where characters' reactions to mistreatment (detention at the airport) demonstrate writers' avoidance of depictions of negative emotions. In the end, I describe a situation characterized by good intentions but contradictory results: although the characters had a wide range of perspectives, there were still Muslim viewers who felt left out; although the characters experienced a wide range of emotions, there were still some—which were no less human for being negative—that were left out.

THE LOGIC OF SYNECDOCHE AND REPRESENTATION

In his story 'The Congress', Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges describes a plan devised by a group of utopian dreamers that illustrates the shortcoming of synecdochic representation, where one person stands in for a group with similar traits. Led by don Alejandro Glencoe, the dreamers want to '[call] together a Congress of the World that would represent all men of all nations', but they soon discover it is a complicated task: 'Planning an assembly to represent all men was like fixing the exact number of platonic types—a puzzle that had taxed the imagination of thinkers for centuries'

(Borges 1974, 33–34). The problem is their list of traits to represent is ever-expanding, and as a result, so is their need for representatives. In the end, they abandon their plans and destroy their work because they realize the Congress is coterminous with all of humanity, making representation unnecessary: ‘The Congress of the World’, don Alejandro explains, ‘began with the first moment of the world and it will go on when we are dust. There’s no place on earth where it does not exist’ (Borges 1974, 47).

A key idea that underlies Borges’s story is that of the asymmetric relationship synecdochic representation creates. No person’s identity matches up exactly with the identities of the members of the group he or she represents, but as a stand-in for a group, a person still comes to define its public face. The act of standing in creates a power differential between the representative and the other group members, whose diversity is obscured in the process (Galewski 2006). It is for this reason that don Alejandro’s Congress, as it is initially conceived, fails: the people who were represented felt that those who spoke for them could do so inadequately. Hence the expansion of the list of traits to account for, and, ultimately, the characters’ realization that representation, as they understood it, was bound to fail.

This logic has important implications for *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, whose creators wanted characters who better represented Muslims in Canada (and North America more broadly). To that end, they created six main Muslim characters. First is Yasir Hamoudi, an opportunistic contractor who rents the basement of the church on the pretense of housing his business there, and his wife Sarah, a local woman who converted from Christianity to marry him. They have a daughter named Rayyan, the town’s doctor and a strong feminist. There is also Fatima Dinssa, a woman from Nigeria who owns a local café and is more traditional in her approach to Islam. Finally, there is Baber Siddiqui, an irascible conservative who serves as the mosque’s imam until the arrival of Amaar Rashid, a young (and liberal) lawyer-turned-imam who comes from Toronto in the pilot episode.

This distribution of characters—an example of what Christopher Cwynar (2013, 43) calls ‘strategic essentialism’—clearly demonstrates the logic of synecdoche. Zarqa Nawaz explains, ‘I was fortunate enough to have [...] six main Muslim characters [...] so each character could represent a different aspect of the Muslim community, so they didn’t all have to be these “good” practicing Muslims, so you could have every spectrum, so you could deal with all the different nuances of the Muslim community’.⁴

Some viewers felt the show accomplished this task. As one wrote in a letter to the editor in an Ottawa newspaper,

The sitcom was actually a fairly realistic look at some of the challenges that Muslims face in Canada and around the western world. It also showed that Muslims are not always the typical stereotypes that one sees in the media.

There were Muslims from various countries and cultures, each arguing typically about what food would be best to serve for *iftar* (the opening of the fast), and how the moon should be best sighted for the start of Ramadan. There were Muslims who had adopted the faith of Islam through conversion as well as Muslims who were fairly secular in their approach, and Muslims whom one might describe as ‘straight off the boat’ (Sherazi 2007, A15).

Others identified the shortcomings of the show’s characters. Faiza Hirji (2011, 44) wrote of the doctrinal differences the show obscured: ‘all of Mercy’s Muslims seem to practise the same way—if there are Sunnis and Shias, who would differ in their understanding of how an imam is appointed, or in the specifics of their prayers, this is not made apparent’. Tarek Fatah and Farazana Hassan (2007) of the Muslim Canadian Congress, in contrast, considered the liberal/conservative spectrum: ‘Although the characters are meant to reflect the diversity of Muslim society, a closer examination reveals the show is not about liberal or progressive Muslims competing with conservatives. Rather, the writer has created a false dichotomy of ‘conservative’ Muslims vs. ‘ultra-conservative’ Muslims[,] the former being disingenuously passed on as feminist and progressive’.

The point here is not to offer an exhaustive analysis of the reception of *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, but to highlight how the logic of synecdoche created an asymmetric relationship between the show’s characters and the real people they were meant to represent. The show fell short of Nawaz’s goal of ‘deal[ing] with all the different nuances of the Muslim community’. How could it do otherwise? There are more North American Muslim identities than six characters could embody. Although the show’s makers were not deliberate in excluding certain identities, the gaps they left were the result of decisions they made: the list of traits they could address was finite, and addressing one category meant not addressing another. Thus the relevant question becomes, why did they choose the traits they did? And what effect did those choices have on what it meant to ‘humanize’ Muslims for their viewers?

TELEVISION'S STAGES OF REPRESENTATION

To answer these questions, it is useful to consider a second meaning of the word 'representation': in addition to 'standing in for', it also means 'depiction'. In television studies, this second meaning is more common as scholars have asked, what images do viewers see of minorities? In an early influential paper, Cedric Clark (1969, 18) suggested: 'The commercial nature of the medium emphasizes advertising of products bought by those at the top of the social structure, and thus reinforces the status quo. And it does this often at the expense of those at the bottom through non-recognition, ridicule, or regulation.' Each of these stages—non-recognition, ridicule, and regulation—allow the hegemonic class to control the images of 'those at the bottom'. During the stage of non-recognition, minorities are excluded. When they exert pressure for visibility, they appear on TV 'at the price of being ridiculed' (1969, 19). When they continue to exert pressure through protests, such as during the US civil rights movement of the 1960s, they begin to appear as people in positions of responsibility for maintaining law and order, where they call on viewers (directly or indirectly) to 'identify with the "right" side of society'. Clark identified a fourth stage but was doubtful about minorities' ability to reach it: 'In their bid to be recognized in a natural fashion by the mass media, ethnic groups must also pass through a fourth stage, which can be characterized as one of respect' (1969, 21).

Clark's model has been applied, critiqued, and extended by scholars writing about African Americans (Means Coleman and McIlwain 2005), gays and lesbians (Baley and Lucas 2006), and Native Americans (Fitzgerald 2010), to give only a few examples. The pattern also seems to fit depictions of Muslims (and Arabs, two categories that are often conflated), especially in North American film and television. Images of men as 'stooges-in-sheets' and women as 'bosomy bellydancers'—clear examples of ridicule (Shaheen 2001, pp. 19–20)—have given way to images of Muslims as terrorists or, more interestingly, innocent victims of racism who must accept the indignity of suspicion in order to prove their loyalty to the United States (Alsultany 2008). In this second case, stories that present Muslims as unfair targets of hate and discrimination have a regulatory effect because they illustrate the idea that suspicion of Muslims is natural and warranted.

With respect to *Little Mosque*, the value of Clark's model is two-fold: it highlights the evolution of depictions of minorities, and it emphasizes the influence of the socio-political context on the TV industry, and of the

industry in turn on that evolution. At first glance, the earnestness with which *Little Mosque's* creators approached their show, made evident in the range of characters, suggests that Muslims have begun to enter the 'respect' stage, even if depictions in other programs remain in prior stages. But if that is the case, it is so only partially: the logic of synecdoche dictates that the range of traits represented will be smaller than the ones that characterize the broader Muslim community.

To understand what is left out, let us consider the socio-political and industrial contexts affecting Canadian television. Two factors are especially important: Canada's policy of multiculturalism and its predominantly commercial system of broadcasting. Of those, multiculturalism is a weak force, while commercialism is a strong force.

CANADIAN BROADCASTING AND MULTICULTURALISM

In the Canadian context, 'multiculturalism' can refer to diversity as a demographic reality, a philosophy about how such diversity should be managed, and the policies meant to put such philosophies into action (Kallen 1982). Canada was the first country in the world to enact an official policy of multiculturalism in 1971, and in the following decades, it enacted two policies (one in 1985 and one in 1991) directly related to multiculturalism in broadcasting, but any direct effects on programs have been mitigated by the ambiguities of Canada's experience with managing its cultural diversity.

The 1971 policy came as an indirect result of the rise of the Quebec separatist movement in the 1960s. Although the colonial powers that 'settled' Canada were France and Great Britain, immigrants, especially those who moved to the western provinces, came from a wide range of other places. These non-French, non-English immigrants objected to the French-English dichotomy that framed debates about Quebec and shaped the policies, such as official bilingualism, that the federal government enacted in response. Their objections led Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau to enact the multiculturalism policy, which had the added benefit of undercutting one argument in support of Quebec nationalism, namely the idea that Canada was not only bilingual but also bicultural.⁵

The policy has had a mixed impact on its broadcasting policy. In the decade that followed its enactment, the term 'visible minority' entered the Canadian lexicon as a way to describe people of non-European origins (Karim 1993). It drew attention to the visible markers of culture,

race, and ethnicity such as skin colour and dress that set these new immigrants apart and made them targets for discrimination. By the early 1980s, visible minorities had grown increasingly vocal about the discrimination they faced, prompting the government to create a Special Committee on Participation of Visible Minorities in Canadian Society in the House of Commons. The committee examined social integration, employment, public policy, education, justice, and the media. About the latter, it said, 'The media are very far from the goal "of making Canadians visible to each other". Our very advance to the forefront of communications technology brings with it a threat to our identity as a nation, not to mention to ethnic groups within the nation' (Canada 1984, 94).

In 1985, in response to visible minorities' complaints, Canada's regulatory agency, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), crafted 'A Broadcasting Policy Reflecting Canada's Linguistic and Cultural Diversity', which established five categories of 'ethnic programs'. Type A programs were in languages other than English or French. Types B, C, and D were in English or French and were directed at 'culturally or racially distinct' groups. The only programs intended for broader audiences were those of type E: 'A program in French or in English that is directed to any ethnic group or to a mainstream audience and that depicts Canada's cultural diversity through services that are multicultural, educational, informational, cross-cultural or intercultural in nature' (CRTC 1985). To be licensed as an 'ethnic station', stations were required to devote at least 60 percent of their programming between 6:00 am and midnight to programs in categories A, B, C, and D.

The existence of these ethnic stations had an influence on the presence of minorities on 'mainstream' commercial stations. In 1991, Parliament revised the *Broadcasting Act*; the new act defined the system as made up of 'public, private and community elements' that collectively 'serve[d] the needs and interests, and reflect the circumstances and aspirations, of Canadian men, women and children, including equal rights, the linguistic duality and multicultural and multiracial nature of Canadian society' (3.1.b and 3.1.d.iii). Because the system, by definition, was a single one, 'it was initially possible to use the text to argue that as long as there is cultural and racial diversity somewhere in the system, it is balanced' (Roth et al. 2011, 390). After 2001, in response to the continued absence of minorities on the major commercial networks, the CRTC began to require broadcasters 'to develop strategies specific to their own operations that detail the measures they are taking and

procedures they will follow to ensure that they properly meet their ongoing responsibilities to reflect and portray cultural diversity' (CRTC 2005). But a 2004 report by a Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) task force found that the inertia of past practices made change slow. In its report, the CAB wrote:

There are very few experts (or expert news analysts/guests) from culturally diverse backgrounds used in English-language news. Very few on-screen roles such as anchor or reporter are filled by individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds on French-language news. Very few primary speaking roles are filled by individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds on English-language drama (Task Force 2004, 4).

Thus, multicultural broadcasting was characterized by a contradiction: the CRTC saw it as important enough to warrant its own policy, but the 'ethnic stations' it created targeted minority viewers, not majority viewers. This let the commercial networks off the hook, able to pursue their goals unfettered by the need to present a more representative image of Canada. In this way, concerns about multiculturalism were subordinated to the exigencies of Canada's predominantly commercial system.

COMMERCIALISM AND THE CBC

The commercial logic also affected Canada's public broadcaster, the CBC, which had an even more specific mandate. The 1991 *Broadcasting Act* required the CBC to offer programming that 'reflect[ed] the multicultural and multiracial nature of Canada' (3.1.m.viii). Parliament required the CBC to file annual reports about its efforts to uphold this mandate; during the years leading up to *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, these reports tended to focus on news programming (where content was concerned) and efforts to diversify production staff (where hiring practices were concerned).

In fact, the mandate's role was indirect at best in the conception and green-lighting of *Little Mosque*. Its principal value was to provide the CBC with a reason to take a risk on the show (Conway 2014). But the mandate did not figure into Zarqa Nawaz's decision to create the program.⁶ Nor did it figure into Westwind Pictures' decision to produce it, as executive producer Mary Darling explains:

I think there is that feeling that it's CBC's mandate to reflect what we see of ourselves as Canadians to ourselves as Canadians [...]. But I see *Little Mosque on the Prairie* as a show which should have been able to air on any of the channels. I don't think it has to be mandated—I think [...] we went in with a very strong interest in the content for our own reasons, but those reasons couldn't become preachy or didactic, or it wouldn't have gotten 2.1 million on its first airing. It had to be about relevance, relatable character comedy with some real laughs in it.⁷

According to Darling, Anton Leo, the CBC executive who was instrumental in green-lighting the show, thought about *Little Mosque* in similar terms:

When we pitched [*Little Mosque*] [...] Anton didn't say to us, 'Hey, that really fits our mandate beautifully, let's do that.' He said, 'You know what? I am—my parents came straight from Sicily' [...] H]is parents came from Italy [...] and Anton was a first-generation Canadian, but he really got the cultural context in the universal characters that we tried to create. He never went off about, 'Doesn't this hit the mandate beautifully?' and 'This is what Canadians need'.⁸

Instead, Leo saw the show in terms of its potential audience appeal: in a country of immigrants, viewers could relate to a story about marginalization, regardless of which group was marginalized.⁹

The question of audience appeal was, at its core, a question about commercial success. This is clear in the answers I received when I asked *Little Mosque*'s writers about what is necessary to make good multicultural programming. They worked to strike a balance between depicting diversity and attracting 'mainstream' non-minority viewers:

[W]hat the best multicultural programming [...] should do is it should have [...] an opening up of things that the rest of mainstream culture doesn't know and opening it up to them so that they learn about it in a way that doesn't feel like a lesson. And you only do that by making something that has kind of a mainstream appeal to it. And yet it at the same time is a window into cultures that you normally don't get a window into. And that's what I think *Little Mosque* did really well. A lot of the programming does not succeed that well. It doesn't succeed in [being] interesting to the mainstream audience, and so its only appeal is to the people of the [ethnicity depicted in the show].¹⁰

This is not to say that writers whitewashed cultural difference, however, only that they had to temper it by finding points of commonality with non-minority viewers. As another writer explained:

I don't like anything where it's about something that I know nothing about but I could have written all the jokes, you know what I mean? [...] If I see an Aboriginal comic, I want to learn something about the Aboriginal people or an Aboriginal point of view or something that I don't know going in because I could write a whole bunch of [...] simplistic and stereotypical jokes about any culture based on my rudimentary understanding—but the deeper you get into something, the better the comedy is always going to be because then you get subtlety, and [...] the more subtlety you have, the more likely you are to hit pay-dirt in terms of finding common ground [...]. Whatever it might be, there's just something where you're grounded enough that there's a little thing they do, some ritual, some little thing between mother and child, that's very similar to something you do. They do it like that, but it's just like the way we do something else. They both mean the same thing, you know, and that's where you find the comedy.¹¹

Writers' concerns about reaching an audience matched those of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation itself, which had seen its budget cut dramatically over the course of prior decades. Parliament was asking the CBC to do more with less, and the CBC in response had adopted progressively more commercial strategies. Commercial networks in Canada, especially those carried on cable, sought to create audiences by counter-programming against their competitors. The CBC began to adopt a similar niche approach in the 1990s: its focus was Canadian programming. It wrote in a submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage,

As the environment in which we operate shifts and the business models upon which we depend become more and more unreliable, there is an escalating need to consider how best to bring the system back into balance. And the strength of the Canadian system hinges on a robust national public broadcaster, since there are some things that private broadcasters either cannot or will not do, but that a public broadcaster can and will do (CBC/Radio-Canada 2007, 6).

What were those things? The CBC argued it could provide programming that was 'Canadian', 'distinctive', and 'intelligent/challenging', among other things (CBC/Radio-Canada 2007, 7–8), as opposed to the

commercial networks, which relied heavily on programming imported from the United States. In other words, the CBC sought to justify continued Parliamentary appropriations by re-articulating its public service mandate in commercial terms: Canada's broadcasting system worked better if the CBC, through its niche strategy of Canadian programming, gave commercial broadcasters the freedom to be, in a word, commercial.

In this way, the writers' concerns about audiences echoed those of the CBC. The CBC was willing to take a risk on *Little Mosque* because it helped the network make the case that it was upholding its mandate while also being commercially strategic. The writers' (and producers') attention to non-minority audiences paid off in the ratings *Little Mosque* received. But what effect did they have on representations of Muslims? If the logic of synecdoche means writers could not reflect all aspects of Muslim life, what did they leave out?

DISCRIMINATION AS COMIC MISUNDERSTANDING

The people who created *Little Mosque* wanted to address issues related to discrimination. The CBC's Anton Leo explained,

[Creator Zarqa Nawaz] told me stories about people calling the police when a white van showed up in front of her mom's house [and...] about people who didn't want to really associate with them [that is, Muslims]. And it was that sense of suspicion that animated this conversation I had with Zarqa [...] because no one was more in the news than Muslims at the time.¹²

Writers, as their explanations show, wanted to create a program that depicted Muslims more accurately, or at least less like generic 'ethnic' characters. They even wrote scenes where characters faced discrimination and allowed characters to express indignation, as long as it was funny. But in each case, they resolved the plot by redirecting attention away from the structural factors (such as racism and the institutionalized war on terror) that made such discrimination possible and focused instead on characters' personal shortcomings. In other words, there was a limit to the negative emotions characters could express about racism, and to resolve the plots, characters had to express personal responsibility for the problems they faced.¹³

The pilot episode illustrated this phenomenon well and set a pattern for the rest of the season. It begins with Amaar, the new imam, in the airport, as he prepares to check in for his flight to Mercy. He is talking on

the phone to his mother, and he says, 'It's not like I dropped a bomb on him. If Dad thinks it's suicide, so be it. This is Allah's plan for me. I'm not throwing my life away—I'm moving to the Prairies!' The woman behind him ducks away, and a few seconds later, security guards drag him away, saying, 'Step away from the bag. You're not going to paradise today.'

The humour, of course, derives from the juxtaposition between Amaar's sinister-sounding words and his innocent intents. This juxtaposition continues a few scenes later, when Amaar finds himself in a small room where the security guard, who seems to have learned his interrogation technique from police procedurals on TV, asks him questions. Here and throughout the episode, the scene builds on viewers' familiarity with other genres. Much of the humour comes from parody, or the way writers rework other shows' conventions. Thus, in Amaar's 'interrogation', the security guard, like other TV cops, presumes the suspect is guilty. He asks why Amaar left his father's law firm, and Amaar answers, 'While I was in Egypt doing my Islamic studies, I found my true calling.' 'Explosives?' asks the officer. Amaar rolls his eyes: 'Yeah, explosives.' But the scene does not end as it would in an episode of *Law and Order* or *CSI*. The agent does not extract a confession, but instead insists on his obviously mistaken understanding of the situation. Amaar finally explains he is moving to Saskatchewan to become an imam, and he says he can prove it: 'I have the ad I answered for the job. You can call the mosque if you like. If the story doesn't check out, you can deport me to Syria.' The officer answers, 'Hey, you do not get to choose which country we deport you to.'

In addition to parody, another form of intertextuality—satire—is at work here. Satire, as Cwynar (2013, 52–53) writes, is concerned with 'moral, social, and political' critique, whereas parody is concerned with other texts' formal or aesthetic qualities: 'Satire [...] reduces the stature of dominant entities, while parody often refers to shared cultural materials and frames of reference.'¹⁴ For viewers, the reference to Syria was likely to bring to mind Maher Arar, a Canadian-Syrian dual citizen whom the United States deported to Syria in 2002 on suspicion of belonging to Al-Qaeda. A Canadian commission of inquiry later cleared him of all charges, but the controversy surrounding his extraordinary rendition would have been familiar to viewers of the CBC, whose news programs covered it extensively. But the satirical edge is dulled when the scene ends with a clever one-liner. It is delivered by the contractor Yasir Hamoudi, whose answering machine the agent reaches when he calls the number Amaar gives him: 'Hello. You've reached Yasir's construction and contracting at our new location. We'll *blow away* the competition!'

Satire's critique is mitigated later in the episode, too. When Amaar arrives in Mercy, a reporter from the local paper asks whether he is a terrorist, a question that the town's radio shock jock, Fred Tupper, wants to ask, too. When Amaar accepts Fred's invitation to appear on air, their exchange sounds much like what viewers might hear on conservative talk radio. In that respect, it uses parody's intertextuality in the service of satire's critique, at least at first:

- Fred: Are you a terrorist?
 Amaar: No, I'm –
 Fred: Do you object to the term?
 Amaar: Of course I do!
 Fred: Or do you prefer mujaheddin?
 Amaar: Yes! No! I mean, look, Fred, I came here to clear the air. You're not letting me get a word in.
 Fred: Oh, please feel free to give as good as you get. That's the privilege of living in a country with freedom.
 Amaar: Freedom? To do what? Fan the flames of hatred?
 Fred: Oh, isn't it Muslim preachers like yourself who do that, huh? I got news for you, Johnny Jihad –
 Amaar: That's –
 Fred: Folks around here will not sit back and let that happen. You can bet your falafel on that!

Fred's aggressive style and his unwillingness to let Amaar speak both follow the scripts of shock jocks on networks like Fox News, which is based in the United States and has been available in Canada since 2004. Fred forces Amaar to choose between two bad options—Amaar is either a terrorist or a mujaheddin, and he either supports the freedom to insult or opposes the very idea of freedom. Fred also makes 'common sense' appeals to 'folks around here' who 'will not sit back' and let Amaar spread his supposed hatred. In response, Amaar begins to express his frustration with a system that forces him to say something he does not want to say. Satire's critique comes through in that frustration, but it is quickly tempered as the parodied scripts shift from talk radio to the western:

- Fred: I call on Rev. Magee to turn you and your gang out of the church hall by sundown. (*cut to shot of Rev. Magee*)
 Magee: Yasir, this is Rev. Magee again. We need to talk about this lease.¹⁵ (*cut to shot in Fred's studio*)
 Amaar: Sundown? What is this, the wild west?
 Fred: You got that right, my little bedouin buckaroo.

The shift from talk radio to the western also marks a shift in the logic of the episode's plot. Amaar reaches a line he cannot cross: despite having made his frustration with Fred (and the airport security agent) clear, he must now accept responsibility for his unhappiness. Fred finds his weak spot—his ego and sense of big-city superiority—and exploits it:

- Fred: You're not in the big city any more. (*cut to shot of radio in café*)
- Amaar (*exasperated*): Oh, I've noticed. Doesn't anyone in this town know how to make a cappuccino?
- Fred: Oh, you're saying we are ignorant? (*cut to reaction shots of café patrons*)
- Amaar (*over the radio*): Some of you, yes. In fact, I've never seen so much small town ignorance in my life.
- Unnamed patron: Well if he hates it here so much, why doesn't he go back to Toronto?

The camera cuts to Amaar in his office. He holds a telephone and says, 'Yes, a one-way ticket back to Toronto.' Thus, through his actions, he admits he is not up to the task he has undertaken, an idea confirmed in a later scene, when Rayyan comes to persuade him to stay:

- Amaar (*on the phone*): A one-way ticket to Toronto. (*pause*) Amaar Rashid. (*pause*) Yes, I'll hold. (*Rayyan enters the office.*) Can't a Muslim book a one-way flight these days without someone having to call their supervisor?
- Rayyan: Oh, you poor thing! Racial profiling, making it very difficult for you to *run away*.
- Amaar: What am I supposed to do?
- Rayyan: I don't know. Let me ask the imam. Oh, wait! He's *running away*!
- Amaar: Look, I screwed up, okay?
- Rayyan: No, it is not okay.

This exchange confirms what the earlier scene suggested: Amaar is frustrated not because of the discrimination he has faced but because of his own personal failings. As Rayyan repeatedly insists, he is 'running away' because he 'screwed up'. Amaar repeats the point at the end of the episode during a sermon on humility: his failings become the punch-line to his self-deprecating jokes, which themselves lead to his announcement that he will stay. The episode follows the sitcom's narrative logic and ends on a point of stasis (Feuer 2001).

Thus the episode responds to the pressures of the commercial system by hewing to convention and privileging parody (of police procedurals, talk shows, and westerns) over satire and critique. This pattern recurs throughout *Little Mosque*'s run. For instance, in 'No Fly List' (season 2, episode 9), Baber Siddiqui is scheduled to give a talk at a conference in Chicago, but his name appears on a no-fly list. The episode revolves around Baber's interactions with the US border guard indifferent to his plight, but in the end, Baber reveals that his name is not on any list—the 'list' was a story he told to cover up his fear of flying.¹⁶ Similarly, in 'Smooth Hate Criminal' (season 5, episode 6), it appears that someone has committed a hate crime against the mosque, but the 'perpetrator' is really the town's mayor, and the 'crime' is the result of a misunderstanding attributable to the mayor's ineptitude.

CONCLUSION: TELEVISION'S LOGIC OF PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

In the final analysis, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* was a complex and contradictory program. It expanded the range of Muslim characters on North American television, but, through the structure and logic of its plot, it restricted the range of emotions they could express. Restriction of some sort was unavoidable, and the specific form it took in *Little Mosque* resulted from program-makers' decisions in response to policy and industry pressures.

Was *Little Mosque* the Muslim *Cosby Show* Katie Couric imagined? No, but to be fair, *The Cosby Show* did not do what Couric thought, either. Similarly to *Little Mosque*, it expanded the range of black characters: the main characters Cliff and Clair Huxtable belonged to the professional class (he was a doctor, she was a lawyer). But, as Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis show, it gave the impression that US blacks' material conditions had improved, when in fact they had declined in the previous decade. By not addressing the structural factors influencing black poverty, the show suggested that racism was not based 'on the functioning of social institutions but upon the behaviour of individuals' (Jhally and Lewis 1992, 72).

In this light, *Little Mosque* points to a larger overriding logic shaping North American television, one that privileges personal, character-driven explanations over structural accounts of inequality or discrimination. Perhaps this is because structural accounts would implicate viewers, whom

program-makers are loath to alienate. As long as that logic holds, expression of certain emotions—danger, indignation, and so on—will remain taboo, even or especially in sitcoms: if characters take personal responsibility for problems that are structural in origin, program-makers can leave viewers undisturbed and willing to tune in again next week.

NOTES

1. Couric made this comment, it should be noted, before Cosby faced multiple accusations of sexual assault.
2. The show's title was, of course, a play on *Little House on the Prairie* (1974–1983), the series based on Laura Ingalls Wilder's books of the same name. Executive producer Mary Darling says it was a reference to her home state of Minnesota (personal interview, 20 July 2011), but the similarities between the shows end with their prairie settings. *Little Mosque* was a half-hour contemporary sitcom, while *Little House* was an hour-long historical drama.
3. I conducted most interviews in person or by telephone, and they lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. I conducted one interview by email when the interviewee had limited availability. I structured interviews around the following questions: What relationships (for example, between Muslims and non-Muslims) did the interviewee want to influence? What issues did the interviewee see as salient in the context of those relationships? How did they shape the interviewee's actions in producing *Little Mosque*? I cite by name only those interviewees who gave me explicit permission to do so.
4. Personal interview, 8 April 2011.
5. This is a truncated history of a series of events that were much more complicated. See Cameron (2004) for a collection of primary historical documents concerning Canada's multiculturalism policy. The point here is not an exhaustive account of multiculturalism, but of the policy's effect on TV programs, especially *Little Mosque*.
6. Personal interview, 8 April 2011.
7. Personal interview, 20 July 2011.
8. Personal interview, 20 July 2011.
9. Personal interview, 9 July 2011.
10. Writer from seasons 1, 2, and 6, personal interview, 12 August 2011.
11. Writer from seasons 1, 2, and 6, personal interview, 19 July 2011.
12. Personal interview, 9 July 2011.
13. This logic echoes the one Alsultany (2008) identifies in recent dramas with Muslim characters. One recurring device writers use to avoid stereotypes is to create characters wrongly accused of terrorism. To prove their patriotism,

these characters must accept the injustice of the racism they face. To criticize it would be to call into question the justness of US foreign and domestic policy since the rise of Al-Qaeda, but especially since the attacks of 9/11.

14. Cwynar (2013) draws on the work of Katarzyna Rukszo, Zoë Druick, and especially Linda Hutcheon.
15. This refers to a plot point made earlier: Yasir signed a lease to rent the church basement for his business, but the lease does not mention the mosque.
16. This episode caught the attention of the US diplomatic service, which was more concerned with the depiction of the border guard than the resolution of the plot, as a leaked cable published by WikiLeaks reveals: 'The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) has long gone to great pains to highlight the distinction between Americans and Canadians in its programming, generally at our expense [...]. A December 2007 episode portrayed a Muslim economics professor trying to remove his name from the No-Fly-List at a US consulate. The show depicts a rude and eccentric US consular officer stereotypically attempting to find any excuse to avoid being helpful' (United States 2008).

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PART II

Controversial Humour
in Variety Shows, Commercials
and Factual Programming

Dummies and Demographics: Islamophobia as Market Differentiation in Post-9/11 Television Comedy

Philip Scepanski

Despite promises and attempts by officials to respect racial difference and religious freedom, Middle Easterners and Muslims came under heightened scrutiny after September 11, 2001. In addition to the relatively subtle racial profiling of which federal and other agencies were accused, more obvious Islamophobia surfaced in forms like mosque vandalism (Lewin and Niebuhr 2001; Ridha 2003). ‘Do you know what it’s like being of Arab heritage with a Muslim last name living in America?’ asked Dean Obeidallah in the TV special *The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour* (2007), ‘I could use a hug.’ As one of many television comics engaged with post-9/11 culture, he joked from a position (both ideologically and marketably) of multicultural tolerance. But this was only one position within the ever-growing expanse of choices in the narrowcasted television landscape of the 2000s. Scholars of TV comedy have often focused on the apparent growth of a strain of moderate-left, politically aware satirical comedy over the course of the 2000s and not without reason (Day 2011; Gray et al. 2009; Jones 2010). But that is of course not the only form of comedy TV from this era. Although more politically progressive fare grew in prominence, other programmes demonstrated countervailing attitudes, both by avoiding easily

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pigeonholed political expression, or by playing more explicitly to conservative audiences. This chapter focuses on more ostensibly conservative programmes by examining how comedy programs featuring Carlos Mencia, Jeff Dunham, and others used post-9/11 Islamophobia for market differentiation. By feeding into the anti-Islamic and anti-terrorist sentiments of post-9/11 American culture, comics positioned themselves as brave truth-tellers against the tide of political correctness with relative safety. At the same time, these were not overly simplistic attacks, but required a certain amount of negotiation between discourses of racism and anti-racism as well as dehumanizing and humanizing in order to create their humour while navigating the rules that govern expression in twenty-first century American culture.

Though appropriately ridiculed as a cliché and exaggeration, there is some truth to the saying that ‘9/11 changed everything’. Alongside obvious changes like the Bush administration’s shift in focus from domestic to foreign affairs, Marita Sturken (2007) notes more subtle developments like changes to architecture and consumer automobile preferences. Of course, changes in common topics of conversation occurred as well—with issues like civil and religious liberties gaining prominence in media outlets and elsewhere. But for all these seemingly sudden changes, 9/11 occurred amidst various older and more slowly developing shifts.

Following trends as old as the medium itself, the US television industry continued to expand its outlets and subdivide its audiences during the 1990s and 2000s. In addition to the continuing spread of factors begun decades earlier, including cable subscriptions and home video sales, the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and the discontinuation of the Financial Interest and Syndication (Fin-Syn) rules in 1993 proved particularly notable aspects of the move towards ever-narrower niche marketing (Holt 2011, 140–177). The 9/11 attack seemed anomalous amongst these broader trends in that it temporarily drew US television viewers to a seemingly unified national culture. But as Lynn Spigel rightly predicted:

The post-9/11 performance of nationalism will fail because it really does not fit with the economic and cultural practices of twenty-first century U.S. media society. The fact that there is no longer a three-network broadcast system means that citizens are not collected as aggregate audiences for national culture. As we all know, what we watch on TV no longer really is what other people watch—unless they happen to be in our demographic taste culture. The post-network system is precisely about fragmentation and narrowcasting.

While the new five-hundred-channel cable systems may not provide true diversity in the sense of political or cultural pluralism, the postnetwork system does assume a culture that is deeply divided by taste, not one that is unified by national narratives (Spigel 2004, 257).

Though Spigel is sceptical towards claims of true 'political or cultural pluralism', TV attempts to court viewers based on their position within discourses of left/right American political culture.

Although often discussed as a unique event, 9/11 seemed repeatable inasmuch as it instilled a sense that the United States was under threat of future attacks. This model fit readily into familiar Cold War discursive patterns, positing an ever-lurking, foreign threat. The period separating the War on Communism from the War on Terror was not free from catastrophes, as events like the 1992 Los Angeles rebellion, the Oklahoma City Bombing, and the Columbine shootings proved. But compared to those instances, where the apparent perpetrators were American, post-9/11 fears focused on external, foreign threats. Terrorists, Muslims, and those of Middle Eastern descent were the prime targets for an anxious government and citizenry. Unlike in the catastrophes of the 1990s, television did not purport to represent a marginalized group's or disturbed individual's position in relation to the nation except in rare cases. Instead, it largely addressed issues from more nativist perspectives. 'How should Americans respond to this new Other?' they seemed to ask. In answering this question, certain programs conflated the categories of terrorist, Muslim, and Middle Easterner, while others made sure to distinguish them. Depending on ideological positions then—ones determined to a great extent by the target demographics—television comedy reinforced us/them binarisms, complicated these categories, and/or argued positions more reflective of pluralism.

Hamid Naficy (1997) notes the importance of derisive humour in American reactions to the 1979–81 Iranian hostage crisis—an event that represented a threatening mix of despotism, Islam, and anticolonial attitudes similar to those that seemed to energize Al-Qaeda. While bin Laden may have replaced the Ayatollah Khomeini on toilet paper sheets and in satirical songs, the enormous discursive imprint of 9/11, among other factors, meant a larger and more varied television engagement with the Middle East, its people, and its diasporas than had occurred two decades earlier. Additionally, while the taking of American hostages in Iran necessarily focused attention on another part of the world, the domestic nature of the 2001 attacks caused American Muslims and those of Middle Eastern

descent to come under heightened scrutiny, albeit a scrutiny that often threatened and/or denied their status as fully or authentically American. General cultural suspicion along with more official federal responses from agencies like the FBI and FAA echoed the kind of xenophobia directed at Japanese-Americans in the wake of the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941.

Debates over ‘political correctness’ also proved a longer-term trend into which 9/11 factored. Geoffrey Hughes explores the history of the term as well as many of its implications.

Political correctness became part of the modern lexicon and, many would say, part of the modern mind-set, as a consequence of the wide-ranging public debate which started on campuses in the United States from the late 1980s. Since nearly 50 percent of Americans go to college, the impact of the controversy was widespread. It was out of this ferment that most of the new vocabulary was generated or became current. However, political correctness is not one thing and does not have a simple history. As a concept it predates the debate and is a complex, discontinuous, and protean phenomenon, which has changed radically, even over the past two decades. During just that time it has ramified into numerous agendas, reforms, and issues concerning race, culture, gender, disability, the environment, and animals rights (Hughes 2010).

Hughes’ book offers a complex history of the way an explicit academic attempt to ‘sanitize the language by suppressing some of its uglier prejudicial features’ transformed into a more implicit set of codes pre- and proscribing certain actions and forms of communication. To detractors like Doris Lessing (2004), the threat of being labelled politically incorrect acts as a form of ‘mental tyranny [...] manifesting as a general intolerance’. Political correctness in the television industry is likely the result of two primary factors. First, it reflects a genuine ethical concern of a largely left-leaning, metropolitan, college-educated, creative labour force. At the same time, to the extent that rules of conduct might help to avoid scaring away viewers and advertisers, the strictures also reflect a business strategy. But if ‘political correctness’—however understood—reigns, then acting against this set of social mores offers the promise of unique content.

As the 1990s’ popular understanding of political correctness rose to cultural prominence, both cultural conservatives like Lessing and comics of more varied political leanings grew nervous regarding their ability to speak with impunity (Saper 1995). So while these attitudes may have helped usher comics like Andrew Dice Clay out of the limelight, hipper

comedies like *Seinfeld* ('The Outing', 1993) and *The Simpsons* ('Homer's Phobia', 1997) narrativized the apparent struggles of straight white males to navigate the new cultural sensitivity. By the late 1990s, more self-conscious rejections of political correctness like *South Park* and *Family Guy* appeared on broadcast and cable. At the same time, stand-up comics like Carlos Mencia worked comedy clubs and television's fringier cable and late-night sites as the apparent successors to Don Rickles, playing on their ability to say in comedy routines what appeared to be increasingly silenced elsewhere.

This thumbnail sketch of comedy in the 1990s suggests that those who negotiated, ignored, or flaunted the developing rules of political correctness served a wide swath of demographic markets from young adults to fans of older more Borscht Belt-inspired comedy. While crises of racial identity like the O.J. Simpson case informed these comedic debates throughout the 1990s, 9/11 inflected the conflict differently for the reasons discussed earlier. But since these nebulous standards acted as a subtle cultural dominant governing many areas of public life, certain television texts could differentiate their product by testing or flouting the rules. So while there was a perceived air of multicultural tolerance by the turn of the millennium, 9/11 created an Other defined in large part as a minority culture, religion, and ethnicity.

Numerous scholars have weighed in regarding humour's ability to create a sense of community as well as its ability to alienate individuals and subcultures from larger group formations. Henri Bergson's essay on laughter contains an often overlooked insight into the phenomenon's social dynamics. In his understanding, laughter is always that of a group directed at an individual (1980, 64). When one person is not performing in the best interest of society, the laughter of the group disciplines the individual.¹ More contemporary humour theorists offer further insight into humour's group-building aspects. Ted Cohen describes the ways that joking reinforces established bonds among comics and audiences by ritual engagements with linguistic codes (1999, 12–32). Group laughter signals common knowledge and values and thus reinforces group bonds and identity. And while admitting its potential for divisiveness, Lawrence E. Mintz believes that American humour developed the way it did as a way to smooth over divisions within the nation's 'dynamic and heterogeneous' culture (1999, 237). John Limon has a similar take, though instead of seeing comedy as an ever-present force unifying all Americans, he proposes that comedy of a type has spread to unite Americans. 'America, between

1960 and the millennium', he writes, 'in a process that began around the ascension of Johnny Carson or the Kennedy Assassination, comedified. Stand-up was once a field given over to certain subsections of a certain ethnicity. By now, roughly speaking, all America is the pool for national stand-up comedy' (Limon 2000, 3). In its ability to pilot issues of sameness and difference, comedy proved a privileged discourse after 9/11 in navigating the seemingly oppositional desires of xenophobia and ecumenism within culture.

Though comics like Rickles and others had been pushing similar buttons for decades, self-consciously anti-PC comedies from those of seemingly right-wing Jeff Dunham to the obviously leftist Bill Maher's *Politically Incorrect* flouted the rules as a way to build comic credibility. Thus after 9/11, Muslims and Middle Easterners became prime targets for comics who wanted to demonstrate their edgy rejection of political correctness, while ingratiating themselves to those who considered themselves to be more truly American. In comedy especially then, the clashes of cultural and religious tolerance, nationalist anger, anti-PC backlash, and humour's ability to negotiate such issues created a particularly telling milieu where these debates could be argued and examined like they could in no other television genre or cultural discourse.

LAUGHTER AS A WEAPON: TARGETING BIN LADEN AND TERRORISM

While 9/11 did not produce the Arab terrorist as a common enemy in American discourse, it undoubtedly increased the prominence of and scorn towards such figures. Coverage of and fallout from the events crystallized negative attitudes felt by many towards bin Laden, Al-Qaeda, terrorists, and perhaps Middle Easterners and Muslims more generally. Some comedy shows served the desire by symbolically mocking and abusing these figures. But while anti-terrorist sentiment hit a high point during this period, attempts to satisfy these desires were tempered by certain factors. Parties ranging from politicians to comedians almost immediately made sure to distinguish between Islamic extremists and peaceful Muslims and Americans of Arab descent, perhaps reflecting aspects of the gains made by proponents of 'political correctness' in the previous decades.²

At the same time, the 9/11 attacks produced a cultural demand for humour that attacked a foreign enemy while solidifying a sense of Americanness. Throughout this period, attacks on bin Laden served as a safe constant while

comedies variously took liberties humorously attacking terrorists, Islam, Middle Easterners, or non-Americans more generally. Flagrantly mocking ethnic and religious minorities would have signalled a strain of cultural conservatism, but in the wake of 9/11 it grew more difficult to easily peg some shows' political allegiances. Despite these upheavals and shifting signifiers of political allegiance, a number of comedies cornered portions of the market by blatantly appealing to the political and cultural interests of more conservative demographics through humour.

In reporting on his 2011 death, much was made of Osama bin Laden's appetite for pornography. While a curious element to the story of his demise, highlighting this aspect of his lifestyle clearly held value as a way to demean him. News outlets likely were not using this element rhetorically, since very few in their viewing audience would have remained on the fence about the terrorist mastermind. Instead, this acted as a unifying ritual meant to elicit disdainful laughter at this less-than-holy warrior. One of the most extreme examples of this symbolic shaming technique came from the stop-motion animated *Robot Chicken* ('Poisoned by Relatives', 2012). Airing after his death, it exaggerates reports of bin Laden's porn habit so that when Navy SEALs break into his compound, they not only discover pornography, but evidence of severe sexual deviance as bin Laden hangs in a closet wearing only woman's underwear in addition to his standard turban, suggesting that he died from autoerotic asphyxiation. Reporting to his commanding officer, a SEAL radios, 'I understand how it would look if the history books told future generations that a porn-loving jerk off enthusiast had gotten the upper hand on America.' Following an implied order, the soldier then shoots the corpse twice, recreating reports of his death as a result of shots to the chest and head.

Though *Robot Chicken*'s extreme example came after the leader's death, attacks on bin Laden and other newly perceived enemies were among the earliest forms of humour on television after 9/11. Bin Laden was of course a prime target during this period. One of the most notable examples of that period's attacks occurred in *South Park*'s 7 November 2001 episode, 'Osama bin Laden has Farty Pants.' While complex on many issues, it treated bin Laden fairly simply as a target for abuse, often mobilizing religion and ethnicity in its attacks. This episode offers numerous examples of violent slapstick, all with fairly comparable ends. For example, when bin Laden threatens Eric Cartman with a knife, Cartman announces, 'Uh oh. Five-thirty; time to pray.' At once mocking the leader's presumed piety and an invented gullibility, the leader kneels on a rug before the child flattens his head with an oversized mallet. These gags of physical humiliation give

way to those of sexual humiliation. Cartman dresses in drag in order to entice the leader, but instead a camel catches bin Laden's eye. This bit stops just short of literally showing bin Laden as a 'camel fucker'.

While the use of cartoon texts may suggest that these responses are somewhat juvenile, allusions to Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd also conjure a sense of nostalgia. In visiting humiliations on bin Laden, Al-Qaeda, and Islam in this episode, *South Park* paid homage to Warner Bros. Cartoons. These segments especially invoke those of the World War II era like *Herr Meets Hare* (1945) and *Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips* (1944) wherein Bugs Bunny took on Axis foes. And it is not the only nostalgic tribute. In this episode's final scene, one of the characters symbolizes America's imperfect superiority by propping up a miniature US flag in a nod to the 1965 *A Charlie Brown Christmas*'s similar treatment of a Christmas tree.

Textual and formal nostalgia in one sense spoke to a larger discourse from this era on wanting to return to a pre-9/11 sense of security, even while politicians decried those who held a pre-9/11 mentality.³ In other senses, playing around with the imagery of World War II implied comparisons between Pearl Harbor and 9/11 as unprovoked, devastating attacks. The connection to World War II also suggested popular notions of the 1940s and the immediate post-9/11 period as those of greater public unity regarding the belief in a military response that would be more justifiable than those of conflicts in the second half of the twentieth century. Most notably, it also served as a reminder of a time when comics felt more comfortable mocking enemies of the United States using ethnic and racial stereotypes.

That terrorists other than bin Laden served as targets for comedic scorn is unsurprising. The Seth MacFarlane-branded television shows—*Family Guy*, *American Dad*, and *The Cleveland Show*—tend to align with the United States' moderate, and sometimes less moderate, left even while relying on humour that deliberately flouts politically correct conventions. Similar to instances imagining violence on bin Laden, *Family Guy* provides examples where violent slapstick encourages laughter at the expense of less notable terrorists. One gag offers a parodic alternate history where 'America was attacked by mentally challenged suicide bombers' ('Hannah Banana', 2009). A cutaway demonstrates by showing an Arab man shouting 'Allahu akbar' as he rides a bicycle into a World Trade Center tower. The characters' use of the politically correct term 'mentally challenged', even while making a politically incorrect joke proved interesting considering the show's common use of the word 'retarded' ('Petarded', 2005). While often presenting as a politically progressive text, *Family Guy*'s

moments of apparent cultural conservatism deny easy reading as either left or right. But other comedy texts engaging in negative humour of this type spoke more directly to cultural and political conservatism.

ARAB IS THE NEW BLACK: RELATIVIZING THE OTHER

John Caldwell notes the way media texts familiarize crises and catastrophes by comparing them to recognizable historical precedents (1995, 317–318). While his examples focus on journalism during the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, post-9/11 media culture showed a similar impulse. As with any broad discourse, forms and levels of engagement varied. In one of the more notable forms of historical engagement, comics spoke of 9/11 as a historical turning point where certain older ethnic prejudices gave way to newer ones. If Muslims and those of Middle Eastern descent were the new Other, perhaps it meant that other oppressed minorities could escape that history.

The cheekily titled *Axis of Evil Comedy Tour* (2007) showcased Persian- and Arab-American comics, highlighting their position in relation to 9/11 and political labelling. Coming from this special, Dean Obeidallah's 'I could use a hug' joke underscores his position as a prime Other in post-9/11 United States. He characterizes this as a recent development. 'Before 9/11 I'm just a white guy living like a typical white guy life [...]. I go to bed September 10 white. I wake up September 11—I'm Arab.' Obeidallah's historicising instructs viewers regarding the political instability of racial categories. Not only does his race change in the eyes of many, but so too do the implications of being Muslim or of Middle Eastern descent. Discussions of these issues were common among comics who engaged with the idea that 'Arab is the new black', as he explicitly states. However, Obeidallah is fairly unique in that comics of Middle Eastern descent, while not entirely absent from television, are rare.

Lanita Jacobs-Huey's (2006) ethnography of African American comedy clubs demonstrates that even in the earliest days after the 9/11 attacks, black comics and their audiences celebrated the perception that 'the Arab is the new nigger'. While the historical specificity of each group and the conditions under which they became the target of conscious and/or structural racism prevent such simplistic comparisons from an earnest perspective, this discourse serves as a method by which comics negotiate the position of Middle Easterners vis-a-vis other minorities, explore the history of racial minorities in the United States, and historicise arguments

over whether everything had indeed changed. For one comic in particular, this logic acted as a useful tool by which to activate and justify xenophobia.

Carlos Mencia is a stand-up comic whose performances reflect an immigrant persona. Despite this aspect of his identity, his comedy rarely aligns neatly with a pluralist tolerance viewpoint. Instead, it often relies on self-consciously politically incorrect material playing with ideas about racial difference. As might be expected of this sort of comic in a post-9/11 environment, Mencia joked at the expense of Middle Eastern people, Americans of Middle Eastern descent, and Muslims to cement his persona as an anti-PC bad boy. This tendency is apparent in his Comedy Central program, which ran from 2005 to 2008. Mencia's monologue from the first episode of *Mind of Mencia* marks his stance with regards to both the dominant and perhaps growing racial power bloc and the Middle Eastern Other. The show's set decoration included a barbed-wire fence indicative of a border-crossing checkpoint. In his first monologue, Mencia enters the stage, exclaiming:

The beaner got a show! I want you guys to know that the fence around here is not just for decoration. This is the actual fence that my mom and dad jumped when they came to this country. Is he already making fun of people? I'm gonna make fun of everybody. I get Muslims pissed off. [*adopting an Arabic accent*] Why are the American people messing with me? [*returning to his voice*] Because Achmed, it's your turn! America's a giant game of tag, somebody's always 'it' and guess what Achmed? You're it. Here's what happened, a lot of people don't understand. September 11: bad day in American history; great day for blacks and Hispanics; greatest day in our generation, because on that day, white people accepted us as Americans. Before that, we weren't Americans. Then on the eleventh, the buildings collapsed; they showed the pictures of the hijackers. When they showed those pictures, Maria, Loquisha, Carlos, and Tyrone walked up to Achmed and went, 'tag. Your turn!'

Perhaps as a justification for the more controversial content to follow, Mencia both establishes and teases himself as an immigrant, despite admitting that his parents actually crossed the border. His promise to 'make fun of everybody' also functions as a justification since it guarantees some level of equity in his attacks on different races and ethnicities. And to some extent, Mencia lives up to this promise by mocking whites, blacks, Indians, and others. But the opening monologue signals two important tactics. First, though perhaps not the prime reason for self-deprecating humour,

Mencia's willingness to poke fun at his own ethnicity justifies much of his other material. And second, like many comics during this period, he uses 9/11 as ground upon which to show off his willingness to engage in edgy and racially insensitive humour in the relatively safe manner of attacking the newly perceived threat. While the seemingly indefensible argument that 9/11 was good may shock some viewers in its evocation of radical leftist politics, Mencia redirects these implications to buoy certain minorities at the expense of others.

Continuing the routine's use of comic metaphor, he moves from the 'giant game of tag' to comparing the United States to a fraternity. 'In order to join our country', he argues:

You must get hazed. And guess what? It's Greek week. Everybody went through it. That's what I don't understand. I'm not afraid of people calling me a racist. Go ahead and call me a racist. Go ahead and do it. [*adopting an Arabic accent*] Hey that's not fair you're only checking me. Why don't you check the women? [*returning to his voice*] Well, because women in this country, Achmed, were treated like crap for about 150 years when they couldn't vote. So unless you don't want to vote for that long and possibly give me head, I suggest you [*agree to increased scrutiny*].

Mencia attempts to short-circuit possible dismissals of his routine as racist by accepting all such criticism before again arguing for solidarity among all non-Middle Eastern, non-Muslim historically oppressed groups. The rhetoric in this routine relies on mixed appeals to racial and gender equality as well as racist exceptionalism. While to some extent admitting the injustice of racial profiling, Mencia places the contemporary wave of xenophobia in relation to historical injustices to argue that such hardships are necessary evils for gaining acceptance into the dominant racial power bloc. Of course, European Americans are largely absent from this argument, but Mencia ingratiate himself to various historically oppressed categories of Americans by adopting a logic where past suffering is a patriotic virtue. African and Latin Americans as well as women of all backgrounds earn the right to current liberties thanks to past violations. So while Mencia selectively subscribes to the classically liberal notion of individual equality, it is a zero-sum game by which one group's civil rights can only be purchased at the expense of another's.

At one point in the routine, Mencia's straw Arab American man asks, 'Why don't you check the Hispanics? Is it because you are Hispanic?' 'No', he responds as himself, 'It's because Hispanics don't blow shit up.'

They clean it up, then build it up after you blow it up.’ While he does not dwell on this point, it performs an important role in the routine, excusing the comic from accusations of self-interest. Mencia’s use of Latin American stereotypes continue to exhibit his penchant for political incorrectness, but the contrast he makes between Arab Americans as destructive and Latin Americans as constructive justifies Mencia’s as a more valuable category of immigrant.

These comedic tactics were not new to the 2000s. Scholars David R. Roediger (2007, 115–163) and Noel Ignatiev (1995) argue that Irish American immigrants performed black face minstrelsy in large numbers because denigrating African Americans was a way to win status as white Americans during a period when many considered Irish to be neither white nor American. Robert Nowatzki (2006) adds that the new immigrants were well-suited to this role not only because of a history of cultural sharing between Irish Americans and free African Americans, but also because the Irish had been the subject of minstrel shows performed by native-born Americans during earlier waves of immigration. To have been the subject of racist humour in the past offered entrée to the field, suggesting that the most successful racist humour comes from those who are or had recently been the subject of it.

Mencia’s monologue betrays a similar logic to that described by cultural historians regarding Irish American integration. Though a common tactic in history, his monologue’s notability arises from its explicitness and, compared to examples like Jacobs-Huey’s, for being performed on a mass medium where such boundary pushing comes under closer scrutiny. Seemingly having purchased with his own oppression the right to make these statements and jokes, Mencia explicitly argues for the curtailment of another group’s civil rights and invites all other formerly or currently oppressed parties to join his cause. Implicitly, this also functions as an argument for the freedom to attack the Othered group through humour, a right that *Mind of Mencia* exercised throughout its run.

A PITIABLE ENEMY: JEFF DUNHAM AND ACHMED THE DEAD TERRORIST

Though performing in relative obscurity since the early 1990s, Jeff Dunham’s self-conscious attempts to appeal to a conservative, rural, Christian audience enabled him to become one of the most financially

successful stand-up comics of the decade following 9/11. In a telling interview, Dunham confessed to mocking everything equally with the exception of ‘basic Christian-values stuff’ (Mooallem 2009). More generally, he revealed that while often working blue and trying to attract a large audience, he intends his humour for a particular type—‘the conservative “country crowd”’. And even though this *New York Times Magazine* piece intends kindness to both Dunham and his fans, even the writer could not help but poke fun as she describes Dunham’s ‘not thin’ audience. While offering different views of his audience, both the comic and the interviewer depict a particular taste culture. In his Comedy Central specials and short-lived weekly show, Dunham codes his routines to speak to a culturally conservative audience—often classified in news articles as ‘red state’ crowds (Genzlinger 2009; Lowry 2009; Mooallem 2009).

The comic’s Comedy Central specials tend to follow a pattern. After a short introductory sketch and the opening credits, Dunham performs a relatively short traditional stand-up routine that in part establishes themes and set-ups for later callbacks when he turns to his comedy’s more notable aspect: ventriloquism. In the opening stand-up routine for his 2007 special *Spark of Insanity*, Dunham proudly proclaims ‘I know it’s not politically correct to drive [my Hummer SUV] anymore’, to which the audience offers an applause break. While not exactly fitting with a common understanding of ‘politically correct’ as avoiding offence to identity categories, the attack on this concept as limiting a wider range of behaviour serves a number of purposes. Among others, it ingratiate the comic to right-identified members of the so-called culture wars. Additionally, the more general attack on the concept of political correctness—a theme that recurs throughout his performances—functions similarly to Mencia’s invitation to label him a racist. By adopting the politically incorrect label, Dunham seeks to short-circuit criticism. And in associating the strictures of political correctness with more broadly perceived attacks on personal liberties, like the types of automobile one chooses to drive, the comic further disparages the concept in the minds of his fans, implicitly justifying the more overtly edgy humour that follows. Finally, in celebrating a behaviour frowned on by one taste culture, he identifies with its perceived foes, defined in part through their resentment towards such social proscriptions.

Similar to Carlos Mencia, Dunham literally promises to offend—in that he verbally guarantees it when introducing content (*The Jeff Dunham Show*, ‘Episode 6’, 2009). But unlike Mencia, Dunham’s stage persona does not present him as a raging truth-teller. Instead, he more often

presents as an affable everyman or, at worst, a mischievous but harmless idiot. This despite his humour's overt reliance on racial and other stereotypes. Again like Mencia, Dunham justifies his offence as distributed evenly. Efforts to balance the mockery with white trash, black hustler, and Arab terrorist dummies function as another way in which Dunham justifies his speech in a media environment sensitive to issues of racial representation. A cell phone ring tone of his Achmed character's 'I kill you!' catchphrase was banned in South Africa due to its being perceived as offensive to Muslims. Dunham defended himself by arguing, 'I've skewered whites, blacks, Christians, Jews, Muslims, gays, straights, rednecks, the elderly, and my wife. As a stand-up comic, it is my job to make the majority of people laugh, and I believe that comedy is the last true form of free speech' (Miller 2008).

Dunham's fans do not appear to be as even-handed in their preferences as the ventriloquist is in providing options for comedic scorn. By many indicators—from on-screen audience reactions, to Internet video views, to journalist estimations—Achmed the Dead Terrorist, a skeletal puppet primarily used to poke fun at Muslim terrorists, proves time and again to be the comic's signature and most popular character. As *Time* points out, 'The explosion [of popularity] came, appropriately enough, with Achmed the Dead Terrorist, a character Dunham debuted in late 2007 on his [Comedy Central special and] DVD *Spark of Insanity*' (Luscombe 2009).

As a means of introduction, Dunham allows his cranky elderly puppet Walter to mock terrorists and Islam more generally just before introducing Achmed in that 2007 special.

- Walter: There's one group of folks I don't understand at all.
 Dunham: Who's that?
 Walter: Damn suicide bombers.
 Dunham: Oh.
 Walter: Good God! What the hell is this? [*performs an impression of Arabic speech followed by a battle cry and explosion*]. Well way to go, Habib! Betcha can't frickin' do it again. [*repeats battle cry/explosion*] Dumbass.
 Dunham: You know Walter, those guys actually believe that if they martyr themselves like that there will be 72 virgins waiting for them in paradise.
 Walter: Well, April fool, dumbass! If there are virgins waiting for you, it'll be 72 guys, just like you! [*affects an accent*] Oh no, this is not what Osama said it would be. [*repeats battle cry/explosion*] 72 virgins? Why not 72 slutty broads who know what they're doing?

In this special, disparaging attacks on Islamic terrorism and Islam more generally meet with vocal audience approval. Dunham plays the slightly knowledgeable, somewhat respectful straight man, setting Walter up with his comment on 72 virgins as a reward for martyrdom. Dunham's angry, psychopathic, and mischievous puppets clearly demonstrate the psychoanalytic understanding of jokes as expressing pent-up aggression (Freud 1963). In fact, later in *Spark of Insanity*, his character Peanut suggests that each of his puppets represent different repressed emotions, with Walter standing in for Dunham's anger and resentment.

When 'Achmed the Dead Terrorist' first appears, the routine shifts registers from Walter's non-ironic anger to an Arab character's illegitimate rage. Blatantly satirical, Achmed functions as a symbolic straw man. Having only managed to kill himself (and, in one routine, his son) with his suicide bombing, he operates as a pathetic figure at which the audience laughs (*Very Special Christmas Special*, 2008). Whereas Walter is a surrogate, giving voice to Dunham's and his audience's frustrations and anger, Achmed serves primarily as a target of derision. In this way, he is also an object at which symbolic violence can be directed. Not only did Achmed's self-victimization allow for slapstick humour, it also shows his incompetence.

As he first introduces the puppet, Dunham plays it straight: 'As we all know there's a big mess going on in the Middle East right now and when it comes to the terrorists, most of us don't understand their extremist views and beliefs and I got to thinking the other day, "How would it be just to sit down and talk to one of those guys?"' (*Spark of Insanity*, 2007). Adopting the language of cross-cultural curiosity and ecumenism presents the ventriloquist as the reasonable counterpoint against which his puppet will contrast. But at another level, it critiques the ideology that underpins such attempts to understand the Other. As quickly becomes clear, there is little thinking necessary to 'get' Achmed—he is single-mindedly violent. There is no point in trying to 'understand [his] extremist views' and no point in adopting any stance towards the Middle East's 'big mess' other than one of laughing derision. While all of Dunham's dummies are about the same size, the obvious intercultural conflict and Achmed's role as an object of scorn make the contrast in appearance between puppet and master notable. Dunham, representing a typical American, stands far taller than Achmed whose exaggeratedly large head and eyes, small body, and sitting posture suggest that of a toddler. This infantilization colours his emotions such that his and all other terrorist anger are more associated

with childish temper tantrums than legitimate political or religious frustration. Introducing himself as ‘a terrifying terrorist’, Achmed repeatedly tries to frighten Dunham. Each time he refuses to be scared, defeating the terror of terrorism. Frustrated, Achmed mutters, ‘God dammit. Ooh! I mean, uh, Allah dammit!’ simultaneously admitting defeat and profaning the religion that he supposedly serves.

While Dunham peppers the rest of the routine with further disparages towards terrorism—as when Achmed says that his organization’s recruitment slogan is ‘We’re looking for idiots with no future’ (in reference to the US Marines’ slogan, ‘We’re looking for a few good men’)—Achmed is at times more sympathetic. The audience applauds approvingly when he claims that he could pass through airport security by claiming to be Lindsay Lohan (in reference to a discourse from that period painting the star as too skinny). ‘I told a joke’, the dummy proclaims with the excitement of a child. Achmed takes this approving laughter as a cue to tell more jokes, eventually telling both anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic ones. ‘I would not kill the Jews. I would toss a penny between them and watch them fight to the death. Ha ha ha ha. Yes, yes! I did the same thing with two Catholic priests, but I tossed in a small boy. Ha ha ha ha. Yes, yes! And the winner had to fight Michael Jackson!’ None of Dunham’s other puppets nor would Dunham himself have been as successful telling such jokes to his audience. But by displacing jokes about Jews killing each other for money and Catholic priests killing one another for the privilege of molesting a child to an Arab figure, Dunham and his audience can have their cake and eat it too. The otherwise-verboten jokes get told, but are justified by coming from the mouth of an anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic character. The audience can laugh at the jokes in their own right as well as the teller, ultimately defaming all three groups, plus Michael Jackson.

Considering ventriloquism’s roots in the type of verbal play associated with ‘Who’s On First’-type vaudeville, Achmed the Dead Terrorist represents an exceptionally physical form of slapstick among ventriloquism acts generally and Dunham’s routines in particular. Achmed’s existential joke is that he was a terrorist too incompetent to kill anyone but himself and perhaps his son (*Very Special Christmas Special*, 2008). While more often described than shown, Achmed’s stories of botched attacks paint a picture of self-inflicted physical trauma that distinguishes him from Dunham’s other puppets, whose humour relies more on wordplay. ‘If you must know, I am a horrible suicide bomber’, he explains, ‘I had a premature detonation [...] I was getting gas and I answered my cell phone’ (*Spark of Insanity*, 2007). ‘What was the last thing that went through your mind?’

asks Dunham. 'My ass', replies Achmed. Considering Achmed's role as an object of scorn, this physicality makes sense. The symbolic shaming of verbal insults and humiliation as well as celebrations of physical damage wrought on Achmed and other terrorists speak directly to his role as a response to post-9/11 fears about the threat of terrorist violence.

In Dunham's *Very Special Christmas Special* (2008) Achmed's more physical humour plays out in a number of ways. Notably, one bit begins with a pun—among the most verbal forms of humour. After Dunham asks if he had actually ever blown anything up, Achmed responds that he has 'blown up' a woman. 'She was inflatable. You know, an inflatable virgin. I had to stop seeing her [...] she popped.' Achmed then makes the sound of a balloon popping and farting out its air. While described rather than shown, this routine quickly turned from a pun into a description of physical comedy in which the diminutive Achmed humps and ultimately destroys the less animate object. Presumably, the inflatable virgin popped because of Achmed's skeletal body, referencing his self-victimization. The humour exists primarily in the situation described, but also reminded the audience of the slapstick violence that caused Achmed to be a 'dead terrorist' in the first place.

In this and other stand-up specials, Achmed's physical humour goes beyond mere description. While Dunham's puppets all rely on physicality to some extent, all but Achmed stop for the most part at exaggerated facial expressions and head movement. In his first appearance, Achmed's skeletal feet fall upside down, leading him to exclaim, 'I need some ligaments!' (*Spark of Insanity*, 2007). This same gag repeats in the 2009 Christmas special except that in addition to his foot problems, Achmed loses an arm. A victim of his own violence, Achmed shrinks from a threatening figure to a pathetically fragile, albeit comic, one.

Because its filmed format allowed for more complex staging, Dunham's sketch comedy show, in which his puppets left Dunham's side to interact with off-stage people, provided an ideal place for Achmed to perform his self-destructive slapstick. On more than one occasion, the show features Achmed trying to learn how to be a more effective perpetrator of violence only to be comically stymied. Most notably, he attempts in one sketch to join the US Marine Corps. Justified as an attempt to become a citizen so that he could attack the United States 'from the inside', this bit is more about creating humorous contrast between the highly competent soldiers and Achmed, whose incompetence both highlights his harmlessness and offers an excuse for slapstick at his expense (*The Jeff Dunham Show*, 'Episode 6', 2009).

Various physical gags make these points. As punishment for his incompetence, a drill sergeant repeatedly orders Achmed to do push-ups that he cannot perform, underscoring his physical weakness. Although he eventually performs a lone push-up, Achmed's arms fall off in an exaggerated display of fragility. The dummy reinforces this point in bits where he attempts to fire weapons. When using a rifle, the recoil violently drives him back. And when Achmed throws a grenade, his entire arm goes with it, again showing how easily he could be torn apart. But because he is also stupid, Achmed runs after his arm, stepping on the grenade just as it explodes to re-enact his initial 'death'.

In the finale of the Achmed routine from the *Very Special Christmas Special*, he sings a song called 'Jingle Bombs', to the tune of 'Jingle Bells' with lyrics like 'Dashing through the sand/with a bomb strapped to my back./I have a nasty plan/for Christmas in Iraq./I got through checkpoint A,/but not through checkpoint B./That's when I got shot in the ass by the U.S. Military'. Here, US military forces in Iraq caused Achmed's wounds, seemingly in opposition to his previous explanations. Politically, this song seems to support the Iraq war as an anti-terror measure, one of the more controversial justifications for the United States' operations there.

CONCLUSION

The pleasure of revenge fantasies against Middle Eastern terrorists from bin Laden to Achmed is fairly self-explanatory. But shows demonstrating these tendencies varied in the ways they presented and attacked these representative figures. While *South Park*, in 'Osama bin Laden has Farty Pants' at least, uses both visual and narrative tools to ridicule bin Laden, *Family Guy* barely bothers to characterize its mentally handicapped terrorist. Mencia justified Islamophobia partly as a method for preventing further attacks, but also as a means for promoting other minorities' civil rights. Dunham took a somewhat different approach with Achmed in that the character has some depth and at times even arouses sympathy. Despite all the ways Dunham demeans Achmed, the character is at least partly humanized. Neat us/them binarisms thus cannot fully explain Mencia's rhetorical logic or the enjoyment of watching the puppet injure himself or fall apart. Dunham humanized the Other even while visiting violence upon him.

Though appearing rather simplistic at first blush, these examples and their defiance of easy readings represent a confluence of factors. The use of demeaning comedy to attack figures associated with terrorism demonstrate the differentiated appeal of anti-PC humour in a fragmented media market. At the same time, they at least acknowledge and sometimes subtly support aspects of the politically correct discourses they ostensibly reject. Ultimately, 9/11 produced a target uniquely suited for this type of comedy and media environment. It appeared edgy and delivered on aspects of the pleasure associated with contentious humour, albeit while attacking thoroughly safe targets. But even these most flagrant attempts to defy convention—using targets that seem especially safe for xenophobic and racist mockery—had to deal with the realities of discourse on race in the 2000s.

NOTES

1. Even if one person laughs, Bergson believes that person serves the larger societal interest and imagines themselves part of a group.
2. President Bush's Address on Terrorism Before a Joint Meeting of Congress, 21 September 2001.
3. See the Transcript of the Candidates' First Debate in the Presidential Campaign, 1 October 2004.

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Excessive Stand-Up, the Culture Wars, and '90s TV

Evan Elkins

Recent years have seen renewed debates over comedy and political correctness in American culture. Incidents such as Daniel Tosh's 2012 on-stage suggestion that a heckler should be raped or the discovery of offensive tweets from new *Daily Show* host Trevor Noah have produced outcries and discourse regarding the appropriateness of joking about certain topics as well as public laments from comedians that 'P.C. culture' constrains their freedom of expression. Because questions of appropriateness, propriety, and political correctness are so central to contemporary comedy, this is a good time to revisit three instances of controversial stand-up comedy on US network television during the 1990s, all of which point to the changes and continuities in more contemporary debates.

In particular, I will revisit Andrew Dice Clay and Martin Lawrence's controversial *Saturday Night Live* hosting gigs (1990 and 1993, respectively) and Bill Hicks's censored *Late Show with David Letterman* appearance from 1993. These performances are all notable for having been policed, regulated, or censored in some fashion; some of the comics were banned from these respective programs, and some led others to boycott the programs. The flaps over Lawrence, Clay, and Hicks's routines came

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out of two contexts—one cultural and the other industrial. The first is the various political, social, and regulatory public battles over art, free speech, and political correctness usually characterized as the ‘culture wars’. These extended from the Reagan 1980s into various debates over art and politics in the 1990s. The second is US network television during what Amanda Lotz (2007, 12) refers to as the ‘multichannel transition’, the period of widespread expansion and change in the television industry occurring between 1985 and 2005. These contexts each characterize certain discourses, regulatory acts, and political and aesthetic strategies existing at multiple levels of bureaucratic power, artistic practice, and audience activity.

Specifically, these performances characterize the uneasy existence of stand-up comedy on US television at an important moment of transition in US TV that shaped public discourses about comedy and offense. On one hand, the highly performative and improvisational characteristics of stand-up afford it a visual banality and unpredictability seemingly at odds with both the medium’s ‘televisual’ style during this period as well as its imperative to police and contain overtly offensive material. On the other hand, Lawrence, Clay, and Hicks all represent different versions of a highly popular and promotable anti-P.C. ‘bad boy’ comic persona that was a staple of comedy clubs, late night programs, and cable stand-up specials at the time. Such tensions also highlight network TV’s ambivalent adoption and rejection of offensive material within the competing contexts of conservative culture wars and deregulation of the television industries. While this was an era in which the ‘big three’ networks increasingly found themselves competing with the looser affordances of niche cable programming and the Fox network, they still had to maintain their position as exhibitors of more mainstream entertainment during a period when certain sectors of American art and culture were under fire from various watchdog groups and the US government.

CULTURE WARS, THE MULTICHANNEL TRANSITION, AND STAND-UP COMEDY

The ‘culture wars’ refer to a wide-ranging series of debates and controversies surrounding art and culture considered offensive or transgressive in some way.¹ Although rooted in long-held binaries of left/right, progressive/conservative, and Christian/secular, the culture wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s are often associated with two art exhibits in particular: Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (1987), a photograph of a crucifix submerged in the artist’s urine, and photographer Robert Mapplethorpe’s

retrospective *The Perfect Moment*, which contained explicitly homoerotic photographs. In 1989, *Piss Christ* attracted the attention of Reverend Donald Wildmon, chairman of the American Family Association (AFA), a fundamentalist Christian organization promoting conservative values and politics. Wildmon sent a letter to Congress decrying the work and initiated a letter-writing campaign. The same year, Mapplethorpe's retrospective resulted in a public and political outcry when it arrived at Washington, D.C.'s Corcoran Gallery of Art. The fervor over *Piss Christ* and Mapplethorpe in particular led to former US Senator Jesse Helms' ultimately failed attempt to cut funding for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) the same year. During this period, the culture war debates spilled over into countless venues, including congressional hearings, newspaper editorials, court cases,² and perhaps most infamously, former Republican presidential candidate Pat Buchanan's speech at the 1992 Republican National Convention. Often dubbed the 'culture war' speech, Buchanan's address outlined his vision of a polarized America and supported a right-wing, fundamentalist Christian set of values while positing supporters of these values as directly opposed to the purportedly left-wing, secular pole represented by Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton.

While the culture war debates were prominent among the spheres of high art, news media, and partisan politics, they also focused on popular culture and television. In one example, bowing to pressure and boycott threats from religious groups (including the AFA), Pepsi dropped singer Madonna from its advertising campaigns in 1989. However, the most notable war over pop-culture censorship surrounded the rap group 2 Live Crew and their album *As Nasty As They Wanna Be*. In 1990, a Florida record store clerk was arrested for selling a copy of the album, which a US court had recently ruled obscene after complaints from, once again, the AFA. Shortly after, 2 Live Crew was arrested after performing songs from the album at a concert. Eventually, the band and record clerk would be acquitted and an appeals court would overturn the initial obscenity ruling.³ Throughout the ordeal, 2 Live Crew became a convenient target for conservative pundits and politicians attempting to build capital with their conservative base by condemning what they considered obscene and offensive material.

Writing in 1992 at the heart of the culture wars, Lawrence Grossberg outlines the importance of these practices and discourses for conservative politicians, who 'have won and held political power only by waging a

cultural war'. As he suggests, 'If the new conservatism can accomplish its victory directly within the space of culture and everyday life, it will have already won the terrain on which any democratic state, no matter who controls it and with what ideology, must operate' (1992, 257–258). Thus, lest examples from popular culture and television seem frivolous or banal compared to the court cases and congressional hearings just described, they in fact exist within a terrain of hegemony, power, and discourse that circulates beyond the more explicitly 'political' realms of the state. As Jeffrey P. Jones points out, the ideological battles waged in the culture wars 'have been conducted as much through social institutions or cultural patterns and behaviours (such as media, language, lifestyle, academia, religion) as through formal politics'. Furthermore, 'the battlegrounds are quite fluid, though, to the point where cultural battles can be waged in political forums [...] and political battles may be waged in cultural forums such as talk television' (2010, 50). Indeed, S. Craig Watkins notes that during the culture wars, a key battleground for conservative groups' attempts to achieve ideological dominance was the popular media, which they viewed 'as a bastion of permissiveness and nihilism that erodes public civility and antagonizes traditional American values by promoting violence, sexual promiscuity, and familial disintegration' (1998, 29). In addition to this more nuanced understanding of the relationship between popular culture and politics, the three examples of regulation and censorship discussed herein represent complex articulations of race and gender that erode the simplistic binaries that tend to circulate within culture-war discourse.

In many ways, television during its 'multichannel transition' was moving against a tide of new conservatism that seemed to dominate much of the national discourse around the culture wars. Due to the development of new media technologies, deregulation of ownership and content, and especially the rise of basic and subscription cable networks, broadcast television shifted its programming strategies during this era (Lotz 2007, 12–15). As Lotz points out, 'Instead of needing to design programming likely to be least objectionable to the entire family, broadcast networks—and particularly cable channels—increasingly developed programming that might be most satisfying to specific audience members' (2007, 14). An inevitable consequence of straying from the 'least objectionable' strategy that characterized broadcast television in the network era was a move toward edgier content that would hopefully pry eyes away from cable's laxer decency standards. The late-night variety and talk show became one of the formats where networks could offer more audacious material.

While late-night broadcast television has been a space more permissive of excessive and offensive performance, in the 1990s it was, and is still, bound to the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) decency rules. However, the US Supreme Court case *Federal Communications Commission v. Pacifica Foundation* (1978) resulted in a post-prime-time 'safe harbor' enabling looser restrictions for broadcast content between midnight and 6:00 am (Hendershot 1998, 79–81). This safe harbor, and the resulting 'transgressive' or 'indecent' material that might air during that time, has helped sustain a vision of late-night viewers as constituting part of what Lynn Spigel calls the 'fringe time public' (Spigel 2008, 270). For Spigel, such viewers maintain a 'queer relation to the entire apparatus of TV time' insofar as they exist outside of the normative, nine-to-five work paradigm and watch programming other than the first-run, prime-time material that holds a more central place in US television culture (2008, 270–271). It follows, then, that the 'fringe time public,' or at least the sector of it that views late-night programming, will likely prefer a different, and perhaps even bawdier, form of humour. Still, while it makes sense that late night was a space where networks would exhibit such comedians, network television still had to tread a fine line between promoting these figures around their extreme personae and restricting that excess within the strictures of network television content. As David Marc notes regarding stand-up on television, 'the fetishization of "dirty words" on television puts severe limits on stand-up text. It is perhaps principally for these reasons that the stand-up comedian has been largely squeezed out of prime time into what the industry terms "marginal hours"' (1996, 23).

Similarly, stand-up comedy has been at once a mainstay of US television and a marginalized factor in histories of the medium. On one hand, this is surprising, considering the importance of stand-up as not only a form of television but a feeder system of talent into the television industries as well. On the other hand, comprised largely of monologues told to a generally unseen audience, stand-up is at odds with the excessive visual style of 'televisuality', which John Thornton Caldwell posits as the reigning aesthetic of US television during the 1980s and 1990s. However, while visually banal on the surface, stand-up comedy communicates its excess through the performativity of the comedians and the often ribald content of their acts. As Caldwell points out, televisuality is 'conceived of as a *presentational attitude*, a display of knowing *exhibitionism*' (1995, 5). Indeed, such a description is in many ways similar to Marc's characterization of the comedy-variety show, and its 'presentational teleforms: stand-up comedy,

impersonation, and the blackout sketch', which strive for 'the spectacle of excess' (Marc 1996, 21). He notes that by 'eschewing the protection of narrative superstructure and continuity', stand-up 'is one of the most intense and compelling of modern performance arts' (1996, 22). Caldwell draws on Marc's analysis of the comedy-variety show, suggesting, 'presentational comedy [...] involves the traits one associates with liveness: improvisation, snafus, and spontaneity' (1995, 30). Thus, even if stand-up is less 'visual' than other, flashier forms of television at the time, it exhibits televisuality's 'stylizing performance' (1995, 5) through excessive personalities and star images. However, individual performances based in rhetorical and actual violence against people, groups, institutions, ideologies, and social mores could still only push so far against the regulatory mechanism of network television standards and practices. In a few instances, comedic performances crossed, or at least threatened to cross, these lines.

'BAD BOYS' ON LATE NIGHT

The examples I look at in this section are far from the only instances of stand-up comics going too far during this time period. Though not nationally televised (at least until its circulation on the news after the fact), Roseanne Barr's loud and playfully obscene rendition of *The Star Spangled Banner* before a 1990 Major League Baseball game between the San Diego Padres and the Cincinnati Reds drew the ire of conservatives like columnist George Will and President George Bush (Rowe 1995, 50–52). In another untelevised incident, at the 1993 Friars' Club Roast of Whoopi Goldberg, actor Ted Danson (then Goldberg's boyfriend) performed, in blackface, a racially charged act written by Danson and Goldberg (Haggins 2007, 166–169). In 1994, 'alternative' comedian Bobcat Goldthwait was banned from *The Tonight Show* after dousing one of the set's couches in lighter fluid and setting it ablaze. On the same token, it should not be assumed that these were by any means the first instances of US broadcast television regulating excessive stand-up. On *Saturday Night Live*, Richard Pryor in 1975 and Sam Kinison in 1986 were both placed on seven-second delay. And while there have been fewer controversies surrounding stand-up comedians on broadcast television specifically since the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, the FCC complaints over U2 singer Bono's use of profanity on the 2003 Golden Globe Awards and FCC fines brought after Janet Jackson's 2004 Super Bowl halftime performance indicated that battles over appropriate content on broadcast television would continue into the new millennium.

But let's return back to the early nineties. Andrew Dice Clay's 12 May 1990 performance as host of *Saturday Night Live* came at the peak of his career. At the time, he represented the archetypical 'bad boy' comic that existed in the stand-up world but also characterized the 'shock jock' sensibility of Howard Stern, Don Imus, and later Clay cohorts Opie and Anthony. In his stand-up act Clay offered affronts against multiculturalism, feminism, and other movements promoting social justice and equitable treatment but that were often derisively dubbed 'political correctness' by conservatives and comedians alike. This drew him a large audience in the early 1990s, and he became the first stand-up comedian to sell out Madison Square Garden twice. Accordingly, his act was often sexist, racist, and homophobic, and this combination of celebrity and offense made him a controversial character. Given the level of his fame, Clay was in many ways a natural choice to host *Saturday Night Live* in 1990. At the same time, the profane nature of his act would seem to be a poor fit for a live program so notoriously skittish about dirty words. By this point, he had already been banned from MTV for reciting an explicit monologue on the 1989 MTV Video Awards, and considering the more permissive nature of MTV's censorship rules, it is unsurprising that Clay's appearance on the presumably more restrictive venue of network television would be greeted with public controversy and unease from NBC's Standards and Practices department. Adding to an already substantial level of publicity surrounding Clay's appearance, *Saturday Night Live* cast member Nora Dunn and musical guest Sinéad O'Connor boycotted the episode as a protest against Clay's misogynistic act (Donlon 1990). Furthermore, as a result of the comedian's raunchy routine, the network announced that it would place the program on a seven-second delay in case Clay swore on the air (just as they had done for Pryor and Kinison in past years) (Shales and Miller 2003, 354).

Although the episode brought reasonably high ratings, the news that Clay would appear on the program and the subsequent outcry would prove to be more eventful than the actual episode. The episode's cold open is a parody on *It's a Wonderful Life*, which comments directly on the uproar over Clay's hosting gig. In the skit, the devil (Jon Lovitz) shows a suicidal Clay what life would be like had Clay not been born and, thus, if he would not have hosted the episode of *Saturday Night Live*. In a winking nod to the controversy leading up to the episode, as a result of Clay's absence, Nora Dunn is killed when she is crushed by Sinéad O'Connor's amplifier. The crowd's uproarious laughter at the revelation that the legs under the amplifier belong to Dunn indicate that the joke's true punchline

was her mock-killing rather than the sketch's self-referential commentary on the controversy. Following the cold open, Clay's jittery and largely inscrutable monologue is comprised of material about telling clean jokes and one dirty, misogynistic joke about brides wearing white. The rest of the episode is generally garden-variety *Saturday Night Live*, except for an after-school special parody wherein Clay explains sex to his son (played by Mike Myers) in particularly lewd terms.

The hosting gig would appear to be the beginning of the end for Clay. After the critical and commercial failure of his feature film, *The Adventures of Ford Fairlane*, released in the summer of 1990, his career began to fall into a decline. Only two months after his *Saturday Night Live* appearance, the *New York Times* would write, 'Popular entertainment does, after all, have a revulsion threshold. Andrew Dice Clay should know. He stepped over it and is now desperately trying to salvage his career as a stand-up comic' (O'Connor 1990a). By the end of the year, the same writer blamed Clay for two of the television year's most 'dreadful moments, the kind that trigger an involuntary shudder. Andrew Dice Clay gets credit for scoring twice in this regard: being the host of "Saturday Night Live," and weepily whining about his critics on *The Arsenio Hall Show*' (O'Connor 1990b). Several years after the fact, *Saturday Night Live* and NBC executives reflected on Clay's hosting gig as an unfortunate period in the program's history. For example, NBC Vice President of Late Night Rick Ludwin calls booking Clay onto the program a 'professional mistake' made without knowledge of the misogynistic nature of his act (Shales and Miller 2003, 354).

Looking at Clay's career and performance on *Saturday Night Live*, it should be evident that humour considered 'politically incorrect' or 'offensive' in some way, or comedy that has been subject to censorship, does not necessarily imply a politically progressive stance. Thus, while the 'culture wars' described in the preceding section are often framed in the binaries I outlined earlier, the conflict between decrying the hateful material in Clay's act and denouncing censorship on broadcast television indicates that these debates take place on a more complicated and multivalent matrix of power. The same can be said of another example of excessive stand-up on *Saturday Night Live*: Martin Lawrence's 1993 hosting gig. While most of the controversy surrounding Clay's performance on *Saturday Night Live* involved the hype leading up to his appearance on the program, the outcry over Lawrence's performance stemmed directly from the material in his monologue.

On the 19 February 1993 episode of *Saturday Night Live*, Lawrence presented one of the lewder moments in the program's history. Beginning his monologue with a comment suggesting he needs to watch himself because of the network censors, Lawrence proceeds to joke about John Bobbitt and the supposed anger and malice of women in the 1990s. This leads into an infamous, extended bit about poor feminine hygiene:

I'm meeting a lot of women out there, and you got some beautiful women, but ... some of you are not washing your ass properly ... I tell a woman in a minute, douche! ... Some women don't like when you tell them that, when you straightforward with them ... I say, well, I don't give a damn what you do, put a Tic-Tac in your ass. Put a Cert in your ass ... But if you're not clean in your proper areas I can't, you know, kiss all over the places I wanna kiss. You know, some women'll let you go down, you know what I'm sayin', knowin' they got a yeast infection ... Come up with dough all on your damn lip.⁴

Even by today's standards, the bit crosses lines rarely crossed on network television. Indeed, Lawrence's monologue was pulled from the program in all subsequent reruns. The whitewashing of Lawrence's monologue is made literal during rebroadcasts of Lawrence's episode. When the episode has been rerun in syndication, an onscreen disclaimer read in a professional, sober monotone by long-time *Saturday Night Live* writer Jim Downey replaces the offending portion of Lawrence's monologue:

At this point in his monologue, Martin begins a commentary on what he considers the decline in standards of feminine hygiene in this country. Although we at *Saturday Night Live* take no stand on this issue one way or the other, network policy prevents us from re-broadcasting this portion of his remarks... It was a frank and lively presentation, and nearly cost us all our jobs. We now return to the conclusion of Martin's monologue.

The cheeky nature of the voice-over, as well as Downey's faux-sincere delivery, provide a safe, ironic distance from the black male excess of Lawrence's monologue. Indeed, there is a conscious and even jokingly reflexive sanitation of Lawrence's material, as Downey continues, 'Martin feels... that the failure of many young women to bathe thoroughly is a serious problem that demands our attention. He explores this problem, citing numerous examples from his personal experience, and ends by proposing several imaginative solutions.' By couching the monologue in academic terms, the program implies a heightened address that, along with

Downey's elocution, is coded as 'white' to counteract the now-censored black masculinity from the initial broadcast.

As in the case of Andrew Dice Clay, however, outlining network censorship should not imply a full-throated endorsement of the censored material. Indeed, Kristal Brent Zook notes that Lawrence's monologue was entirely in keeping with his misogynist sense of humour, manifest in his feature film *A Thin Line Between Love and Hate*, his concert film *You So Crazy*, and his appearances on HBO's stand-up showcases *Def Comedy Jam* (which he hosted) and *One Night Stand* (Zook 1999). Zook notes that this misogyny is at odds with much of the contemporaneous public discourse about Lawrence's starring Fox vehicle *Martin*, which framed the program as a tale of a generally functional, happy relationship between Martin Payne (Lawrence) and his girlfriend Gina Waters (Tisha Campbell), thus ignoring the explicitly patriarchal dimensions of the program (1999, 64). In her criticism of *Martin*, Robin Means Coleman also suggests that the program relied largely on black stereotypes and misogynist humour, writing, 'In full view of young white viewers (the series' primary audience) Martin belittled not only Black women, but cultural signifiers at times attributed to Black females' (Means Coleman 1998). That Means Coleman laments in particular the presentation of intra-racial animosity to a white audience recalls Christine Acham's discussion of black comedians like Chris Rock exposing the 'internal critique' existent within black American cultures. As Acham points out, once black comedians begin airing grievances in white, mainstream contexts of national television, 'the venue can change the meaning. No longer are you speaking to an audience that has a shared historical understanding underlying the humour' (2004, 182).

Still, while Clay was undoubtedly controversial, his white, Brooklyn-based masculine persona protected him from the often literal policing to which people embodying other identity groups were subjected. As Kimberlé Crenshaw points out, 'While 2 Live Crew was performing in an adults-only club in Hollywood, Florida, Andrew Dice Clay was performing nationwide on HBO' (1991). This double standard suggests that while Clay's exaggerated version of familiar white-masculine aggression could be domesticated safely enough for late-night network television (MTV ban notwithstanding), the offensive humour and excessive black masculinity represented by Martin Lawrence's stand-up made for a more volatile mix on network TV. While the misogyny of Lawrence's

monologue is deserving of harsh criticism, it enters a cultural conversation that is more complex than a binary of offensive/inoffensive based merely around the jokes' content. In addition to stand-up comedy, Lawrence maintains an association with early 1990s hip-hop culture due to his hosting gig on Russell Simmons' *Def Comedy Jam* and his existence within a Fox milieu that promoted its brand around hip-hop aesthetics and signification. As Bambi Haggins and Amanda Lotz point out, while the program 'offered a comedy product apropos of television's zeitgeist in the early 1990s' (2008, 159), it belongs in a broader context. They write, 'Russell Simmons brought black and "blue" comedy to HBO at the moment hip-hop was blowing up into mainstream American popular culture.' As implied by Crenshaw's comparison between Andrew Dice Clay and 2 Live Crew, Lawrence's monologue can be understood in concert with public battles over rap music and hip-hop culture from the same time period. The censure of Lawrence's monologue is at once an ambivalent reaction against hatefully misogynist humour as well as a policing of ethnically coded performance in a predominately white space.

Due to their hugely popular stand-up acts and television programs, Clay and Lawrence were firmly entrenched in the early 1990s zeitgeist. However, more obscure 'alternative' comedians also found themselves facing network regulation during this time. Already well known in various stand-up comedy scenes around the country and especially in the United Kingdom, Bill Hicks began to achieve a measure of mainstream success in the late 1980s and early 1990s along with other 'alt-comics' like Janeane Garofalo, Denis Leary, and Steven Wright. Hicks, a Texas-based stand-up with a significant British fan base, but only a cult following in the United States, was a regular guest on David Letterman's talk shows in the late 1980s and early 1990s. On 1 October 1993, Hicks taped a stand-up segment for *The Late Show with David Letterman*, where he told jokes targeting anti-abortion activists. Hicks says:

You know who's really bugging me these days. These pro-lifers. You ever look at their faces? 'I'm pro-life!' ... Boy, they look it don't they? They just exude joie de vivre. You just want to hang with them and play Trivial Pursuit all night long. You know what bugs me about them? If you're so pro-life, do me a favor. Don't lock arms and block medical clinics. If you're so pro-life, lock arms and block cemeteries. Let's see how committed you are to this idea.

In addition, Hicks mocked the Christian practice of wearing crucifixes as jewelry and the absurdity of Easter celebrations involving ‘giant bunny rabbits’ and chocolate eggs. After the bit, Letterman invited Hicks to sit beside the desk, making the good-natured crack that Hicks should have fun reading his mail for the next few weeks. That evening, however, Hicks received a call from *Late Show* executive producer Robert Morton notifying him that the set had been cut and would not air that evening (Lahr 1993).

While Clay’s performance was controversial due largely to the audience’s preceding knowledge of his persona and act and Lawrence’s because of the misogynistic nature of his monologue, Hicks’s performance was cut due to the fear of backlash from right-wing groups and sponsors. Furthermore, his was the only one of these three that, until recently, never made it to air. Of the three acts discussed in this study, his is the most blatantly political, inasmuch as it touches on the hot-button partisan issue of abortion, one of the mainstays of the culture wars. Indeed, the battle over representations of abortion on television predates *Roe v. Wade*, the US Supreme Court ruling that eased federal and state restrictions on abortion (D’Acci 1997). After the ruling, fundamentalist groups like the AFA, Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition of America, and Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority publically opposed abortion and a woman’s right to choose, and as I have discussed, such groups saw television and popular culture as one of the battlegrounds on which these cultural wars should be waged. That *The Late Show* cut the act pre-emptively speaks to the power of such groups’ ability to pressure networks and advertisers.

After the Letterman taping, Hicks discussed the incident on Howard Stern’s radio program and Austin Public Access program *CapZeyeZ*. In the *CapZeyeZ* interview, Hicks tells host Dave Prewitt that he appreciates public access and decries network television for its reliance on advertising dollars and its unwillingness to promote experimental or controversial material. Significantly, then, the fight against censorship is framed not only as a battle against generally oppressive social norms, but against the capitalist exigencies of broadcast television. As Hicks says in the interview, ‘I thought I lived in the U.S.A., United States of America, and actually we live in the U.S. of A., the United States of Advertising. Freedom of expression is guaranteed—if you’ve got the money.’⁵ Ultimately, insofar as Hicks’s set was banned due to generally progressive viewpoints denouncing the radical, right-wing tactics of many anti-abortionists (although it’s worth mentioning that the act also contained homophobic humour), it is in many ways a more admirable example of fighting against network television strictures

than those of Clay and Lawrence, which prop up traditionally dominant power structures. On the same token, as a battle between network television executives and advertisers trying to avoid angering right-wing groups and an explicitly left-wing comedian mocking uptight pro-life groups, Hicks's *Late Show* appearance offers a neat summation of the polarized—and polarizing—discourses, functions, and practices of television regulation during the period sustaining these culture wars.

CONCLUSION

Network television maintains its complex relationship to offensive material, at once celebrating and castigating it. Indicating television's propensity to both promote and reflect on its most sordid histories once enough time has passed to heal the wounds, two of the incidents discussed recently made reappearances, of sorts. On the 30 January 2009 episode of *The Late Show*, sixteen years after Hicks's performance and fifteen years after his death from cancer, Letterman invited Hicks's mother onto the program for an interview and finally aired the suppressed set. In an unusual moment of sincerity for the broadcast (though also reflecting the program's tendency to look back unsentimentally on its own past as Letterman approached his retirement in 2015), Letterman apologized to Hicks's mother and took responsibility for cutting the set in the first place. Lawrence's censored monologue from seventeen years earlier made a less serious comeback during actor Jon Hamm's monologue on the 30 January 2010 episode of *Saturday Night Live*. During the monologue, Hamm alludes to fictional pre-*Mad Men* gigs, one of which was an appearance on *Def Comedy Jam*. The program cuts to Hamm, dressed as his *Mad Men* character Don Draper in a suit and holding a tumbler of whiskey, standing behind a stand-up microphone and dryly reciting the following adaptation of Lawrence's monologue: 'Have you seen them? You know what I'm talking about—those round the way girls... They need to wash they ass.' The program then cuts to archival footage of a predominately black *Def Comedy Jam* audience laughing uproariously. That the joke is based on the incongruity of the paradigmatically white Hamm in a distinctly black context, and the according incongruity of the suave Draper/Hamm reciting such 'debased' material, indicates that such humour's racial dimensions maintain an uneasy presence on broadcast television. Even as it represents its own way of making amends for an earlier act of censorship, it does so

by packaging Lawrence's monologue within Hamm's broad appeal—a far cry from Letterman's much more honest and difficult contrition.

Still, while US television's allowances for dirty or willfully offensive humour have increased a great deal since these incidents, the bluest material remains on premium cable, streaming platforms like Netflix, and basic cable channels like Comedy Central (particularly during the Comedy Central *Roasts*), Adult Swim, and FXX. Nevertheless, contemporary domestic (and domesticated) network sitcoms are more amenable to relatively offensive humour, as a viewing of, say, *Two Broke Girls* will indicate. Although it would be tempting to attribute this to an inexorable and ethereal loosening of 'standards' or 'mores' due to the evolution or de-evolution of American society, a more accurate reading is that broadcast television comedy, in what Lotz has called the 'post-network era' (Lotz 2007), must continue to compete with cable and web comedy for viewers. Still, such industrial dimensions must always take into account the social contexts in which they are embedded. Looking back at recent history, then, the examples of Clay, Lawrence, and Hicks indicate much about the conflicts that would continue to exist within the US TV industry and US political culture as well.

Indeed, these incidents speak to both the longevity of debates regarding comedy and political correctness, but they also indicate how the industrial and technological mechanisms that sustain them have shifted over time—from decisions made by powerful television executives to debates produced primarily by online activists and comedians speaking directly to Internet-based publications like *Salon* and *The Daily Beast*. While complex debates over the cultural politics of Clay, Lawrence, and Hicks's acts came largely out of top-down actions from executive boardrooms, more contemporary rhetoric over the appropriateness of rape jokes and racist and misogynist comedy is often produced from Internet-based writers. Some of these writers are professionals or freelance pop-culture commentators, but some are simply fans who are tired of comedians 'punching down', to use an increasingly common parlance. That many of the more contemporary debates over comedy and political correctness revolve less around the appropriateness of 'blue' material and more about the cultural and identity politics of certain kinds of comics and jokes also indicates that at the center of debates over comedy, offense, and freedom of expression is a much-needed critique of humour steeped in patriarchal aggression. While the politics of comedy, offense, and freedom of expression are thorny and complex, this criticism is, at least, welcome and necessary.

NOTES

1. For more thorough history and analysis, see Bauerlein and Grantham (2009); Bolton (1992); Heins (1993); Hunter (1991); Wallis et al. (1999).
2. For reprints of many documents pertaining to these debates, see Bolton (1992).
3. For a comparison of the 2 Live Crew and Mapplethorpe controversies, see Brigman (1992).
4. Transcript from [SNLTranscripts.org](http://snltranscripts.org). <http://snltranscripts.jt.org/93/93nmono.phtml>
5. The *CapZeyeZ* interview is available at <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-8409129199157823217>

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Tosh.0, Convergence Comedy, and the ‘Post-PC’ TV Trickster

Ethan Thompson

In the summer of 2010, comedian and television host Daniel Tosh pulled off a Comedy Central coup: his show, *Tosh.0*, was drawing more viewers than the US cable network’s nightly cornerstone, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. True, Tosh only put one new episode on the air each week to Stewart’s ‘daily’, but in the land of basic cable comedy, this seemed a significant milestone. The show had more than doubled its viewership from the previous, premiere summer, and Daniel Tosh was, in the words of *The New York Times*, ‘indisputably the television comedian of the moment’ (Stelter 2010). Most surprisingly, Tosh had done it all on a cheaply produced clip show featuring online videos that many people had already seen or could easily see elsewhere. Originally conceived as an inexpensive format that would drive content to the Comedy Central website, the program successfully leveraged online videos as a free (or nearly free) source of content with the clip show format popularized by E!’s *Talk Soup* (1991–2002) and *The Soup* (2004–present). However, the popularity of *Tosh.0* has proved to be anything but ‘of the moment’. Going into its fifth season in 2013, *Tosh.0* remained not only the most highly rated program on Comedy Central, but had become the highest rated program among

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men ages 18–34 across all channels on Tuesday nights (Levine 2012). By 2015, it had not only maintained its ratings success on Comedy Central, but had been sold into broadcast syndication on Fox stations across the country (Block 2015).

This chapter will argue that the success of *Tosh.0* is not simply due to the combination of funny videos and a wise-cracking host, but how the program integrates participatory practices of online media into TV content, and how Tosh's comedy is preoccupied with what appear to be the declining privileges of white masculinity. Tosh's success is symptomatic of a particular moment in media culture where *what we laugh at* and *what we feel about that laughing* is in flux, due to technological and cultural change. Henry Jenkins (2006) has described how the sweeping changes of convergence culture refigure relationships between media producers and consumers in provocative ways. And yet, in this new era of media culture, many of the traditional power relationships maintain prominence. For example, the 'we laugh' above is a problematic assumption, similar to how television comedy (such as *Tosh.0*) presumes to speak for and to everyone, yet is often calculated to specifically appeal to males aged 18–34. Since it now constitutes a long-running hit, *Tosh.0* is a prime example of media culture that begs to be analyzed in order to situate and understand the assumptions and privileges elided when males aged 18–34 stand in for the norm. Daniel Tosh deftly crosses boundaries between what is or isn't socially acceptable to do or say, just as his show blurs boundaries between consumers and producers of comedy, and between viewer and host. This goes beyond the typical self-deprecation of many comedians, and seems key to his construction of a masculine identity privileged to engage in 'politically incorrect' comic commentary. The combination of these strategies helps explain why *Tosh.0* has managed to be the 'comedy of the moment' for so long. Tosh's comedy incorporates participatory components and also turns upon shifting cultural politics and values in relation to identity. Tosh's recurring jokes about race and ethnicity seem symptomatic of white male anxiety about 'who gets to say what' in an era of increased diversity, complaints of censoring due to 'political correctness', and continued discomfort talking about race in particular. *Tosh.0* is an important example to consider as representation and articulation of white masculinity in what has been referred to as a 'post-politically correct' moment in television—particularly in how the comedy seems preoccupied with the politics of language and power.

Freud theorized that laughter relieved the anxieties produced by social repression. The joke is social subterfuge; it allows the getting around of social decorum and the explaining of reaction as involuntary. 'A joke will allow us to exploit something ridiculous in our enemy which we could not, on account of obstacles in the way, bring forward openly or consciously; once again, then, the joke will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible' (1960). From this theoretical perspective on comedy, the social changes brought about by identity politics and 'political correctness' creates social pressures, and laughing at 'politically incorrect' jokes is a return of the repressed. Another essential piece to understanding this social repression/release mechanism and its relation to culture and the broader community is Mary Douglas's work on 'joking relations', which describe how jokes map tensions within a culture and emerging perspectives (1975). The job of the comic or clown then becomes mapping the borders of what can or can't be said. *Tosh.0* enacts this mapping through television, bringing into existence through his audience a community whose laughter or squirms provide the other half of making that map, signaling what can or can't be said. Simply put, *Tosh.0* resonates with the 18–34-year-old male audience's online habits, as well as its repressed anxieties.

COMMENT COMEDY, ON TV AND ONLINE

The simplest description of what happens during almost any episode of *Tosh.0* is that a stand-up comedian does something people usually do themselves. That is, they watch videos from the relative safety of a computer, perhaps sharing them with friends, or commenting on other people's posting of them on Facebook or other social media. Though the content of the featured videos varies from episode to episode, *Tosh.0* has followed a strict structure in how those videos are presented and commented upon. Like many sitcoms, each episode starts with a cold open: a short video that usually involves self-inflicted physical injury. Tosh introduces himself, makes a short joke about the clip, then shows it again, making more comments. Soon after is '20 Seconds on the Clock' in which Tosh fits in as many comments about a video as he can in 20 seconds. The result is similar to reading a series of brief comments on a video from different users, one after another, sometimes related to each other, sometimes not. Another regular segment is 'Video Breakdown', in which a clip is slowed down and paused while Tosh comments upon what happens at various

moments. Thus, *Tosh.0* is modeled upon the ways in which viewers all over the world have been interacting with online videos since before the dawn of YouTube: watching and ridiculing videos of individuals humiliating themselves in an infinite number of ways.

True, as a professional comedian with a team of writers, Tosh's comments trump the entertainment value of your average comment thread. But making snarky comments about television *on television* isn't exactly ground-breaking, either. Examples of television antecedents to the comic commentary of *Tosh.0* include clip shows like *Talk Soup*, amateur video showcases such as *America's Funniest Home Videos*, and other programs that have featured hosts or characters talking about TV or media culture, such as *Mystery Science Theatre 3000* and *Beavis & Butt-Head*. These examples of media culture all create comedy from comic commentary on media culture, and model such practices as methods of making media pleasurable by ridiculing it. *Tosh.0* weds that format with the expansion of individual viewers commenting on and about media beyond isolated conversations on fan message boards to the common, mainstream media practice it has become. The participatory culture of comically commenting may target anything from a lousy episode of an expensively produced TV show, showcased on an official website, to a low-res, mobile phone-shot clip of backyard wrestling, to a badly produced, early 1990s hip-hop video digitized off an old videotape and posted on YouTube. Whether actually commenting on the footage, or laughing at other people's comments, there are abundant opportunities to engage and participate in the culture of humiliation comedy without actually being the person shooting the video or its subject. Aside from the videos themselves, comments posted by individuals now provide a legitimate draw in their own right, especially for those who enjoy taking pleasure in the pain and failures of others. For every Daniel Tosh, there are thousands of others who provide similar services, and they do so without their own television show but a peculiar kind of self-produced celebrity: 'trolls' who don't just try to be funny but seek to create a negative response because of the harshness of their comments.

Tosh's commenting is a professionally enhanced version of what individuals might do online, but the show does actually offer opportunities for viewer participation in the show itself. From its premiere, *Tosh.0* has embraced online participatory practices, with Tosh commissioning fans to make particular kinds of videos that could be uploaded to the show's website and even showcased on the program alongside viral video stars. The program's rise also coincided with that of Twitter, and Tosh encouraged

viewers to 'live tweet' the show, to interact with him and each other, long before the networks began superimposing hashtags in the corners of every primetime program. Some of those comments routinely were put at the end of the episode for Tosh to respond to—a convergence culture update of the practice of reading viewer mail that has been around since the medium's early days.

Talk show hosts have long addressed their audiences in such ways, but Tosh uses social media to engage them in conversation and even feature them on the program to an unprecedented extent. He regularly gives video assignments based on other videos he shows, encouraging viewers to submit their own videos, which may be later featured on the show or its website. An example is 'I'm Better Than You, Na-Na-Na-Boo-Boo', in which Tosh challenges viewers to outdo something he has done on video, usually some physical feat such as jumping chairs or something more elaborate such as a gag that had Tosh and staff members repeatedly jumping through a flaming hoop as it rolled down a hill. *Tosh.0* occasionally takes viewers behind the scenes of the show's production, usually to show Tosh torturing/humiliating staff members or himself. These scenes are usually in dialogue with one of the videos, and the behind-the-scenes nature of them is obviously done to set up jokes, rather than provide any actual documentation of what producing the show is like. Comedy shows for many years have offered behind-the-scenes moments as one way to invite audiences in on the production of comedy. This includes David Letterman's banter with his director in the control room, for example, all the way back to Ernie Kovacs, who liked to appear wearing a headset before a pile of monitors, chomping on a cigar. *Tosh.0* has gone beyond the tease of such glimpses, not only prompting viewers to consider what it might be like to put a show together, but making their contributions and participation fundamental to the content and structure of the show.

Will Brooker has described web content for television programs as 'overflow' that seeks to capture viewer attention when not actually watching the program 'on TV'. Such content constitutes an extension of the television text for fans to engage and 'live' beyond just viewing (2004). Because *Tosh.0* is so based upon online videos and practices, it makes sense that the program's website offers many opportunities for fans to talk back to Tosh, comment upon other videos and photos featured on the site, and talk to one another. The blog is continually updated with videos that don't make it to TV, and contests are held for fans to write captions for photos or argue the merits of a video. Aside from these official sites, there are also

many videos on YouTube and groups on Facebook campaigning to get the stars of various clips on the show. *Tosh.0* has not just nurtured its fan base by giving them something to do ‘off TV’, but reversed the process of overflow, bringing the habits of commenting and communication of interactive media to television.

PARTICIPATORY HUMILIATION OR REDEMPTION?

Tosh.0 is not a narrative, but its ‘Web Redemption’ segment creates narrative for online videos by tracking down their stars, then flying them out to appear on the show to ‘redeem’ themselves by correcting their failed performances or bad behaviour. By facing Tosh (and through him those who would comment upon their failures and humiliations) these segments don’t simply provide moments of prolonged humiliation, but offer an opportunity for the subject to regain some control of their identity. The ‘Web Redemption’ segment involves both the star/victim and the viewer taking pleasure in their failure, allowing an opportunity for the star/victim to talk back and regain a modicum of control while humiliation is displaced upon Tosh—usually. Whether the star/victims come off looking good or bad, or better or worse than Tosh, is somewhat inconsistent. For example, Denny Blazin, the self-proclaimed ‘Average Homeboy’ who made his own rap video circa 1990, comes across as a jerk who complains that you couldn’t make a movie called ‘Black People Can’t Swim’ without being called a racist (*Tosh.0*, 10 February 2010). One way Tosh attempts to be non-threatening in these segments is by appearing as an exaggerated version of the individual in the original video. This usually means similar-but-worse fashion choices and showing off his skinny body the way Will Ferrell is fond of showing off his not-so-skinny one. In doing so, Tosh offers to preemptively humiliate himself, both as a visual joke and an apparent attempt to put the individual at ease. But this comic feminizing also seems designed to put Tosh’s sexuality into question, freeing him up to inquire about or taunt viral star/victims about their sexuality. Examples include asking a male intern to take his shirt off when he delivers water to him during a web redemption in which Tosh is attempting to ‘out’ the male star of the video (*Tosh.0*, 18 January 2011). Two other examples suggest the extreme to which Tosh is willing to tease male anxieties about sexuality: in season two, he filmed a slow-motion segment in which he meticulously rubbed tanning oil all over physically ripped comedian Carrot Top (*Tosh.0*, 21 August 2010), and another in which he and male

staff members took Viagra and then watched gay porn in a contest to see who would involuntarily out himself as being attracted to men (*Tosh.0*, 25 January 2011). In retrospect, the first example seems a similar taunt of his male fans, forcing fans to watch a man rub oil on another man. The Viagra segment itself surely prompted a large proportion of the demo to ask themselves, 'What if?'

Usually the redemption itself is fairly simple: a better music video, a better job answering pageant questions, a better job singing the National Anthem. Others are more elaborate. The first episode of the third season featured Antoine Dodson, the star of Auto-Tune-the-News' 'Bed Intruder' video, which was based on footage from his TV news interview following the sexual assault of his sister (*Tosh.0*, 11 January 2011). The segment offers Dodson a chance to recapture control of how audiences read him, and while Tosh dresses up as Dodson in the video, with an afro wig and red do-rag, and sleeveless shirt, Dodson comes across as dignified and, mostly, annoyed with Tosh.

A description of the redemption illustrates the standard format, as well as the recurring kinds of jokes about sex and sexuality Tosh likes to make. Tosh meets Dodson in a park where he says there are more unsolved rapes per square acre than any place in the United States—queue a screaming woman running behind the two of them. Tosh asks Dodson what he wants the world to know about him, and when Dodson says that he is openly gay, Tosh counters that he thinks people knew that one second into his video, alluding to his effeminate mannerisms. Tosh also asks him about his reactions to being remixed. Dodson says he was initially offended and thought that his family was being made fun of, then he decided the video had a positive message and was an 'alert'. Tosh seizes upon this to turn the redemption as an opportunity to treat sexual violence as a topic for light humour. The two conduct a 'rape prevention class', then set a trap with Tosh in a pink tutu as bait for a rapist. It all culminates with a timely joke about Ben Roethlisberger, the Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback accused of sexual assault. This redemption, while typical in terms of its structure, is disconcerting for how it typifies the sexist tone and content of much of Tosh's material. Rape is made a topic for light humour throughout the piece, a screaming victim of sexual violence little more than a quick gag. This kind of attitude, while successful with the demo, would later create controversy, also typified by an ill-conceived viewer challenge: 'Lightly Touching Women's Stomachs While They're Sitting Down' (*Tosh.0*, 3 April 2012).

Given how the featured performers usually end up getting the better of Tosh, the Web Redemptions don't seem to add up to prolonged humiliation of the online video star/victim. They might be seen as symptomatic of audience fascination with celebrity (and the industry's proven methods to nurture that fascination), however minor or dependent upon humiliation that celebrity might be, as well as conflicted feelings about taking pleasure in other people's humiliation. That self-consciousness is symptomatic to this moment not just because of online video, but because of reality television, which often features ordinary people humiliating themselves with bad behaviour, or showcases fashion failures necessitating a makeover. Aside from criticism based on quality, the complaint that pleasures produced by watching these shows is unethical is part of the popular discourse on reality TV. The Web Redemption segments do adopt the 'makeover' trope of many recent reality television shows. However, *Tosh.0* skips the empathy crucial for melodrama or the sense of justice necessary for Schadenfreude that Amber Watts has described as so important to makeover shows (2008). The continued centrality of these segments to the show as its success has continued might signal audience anxieties about what social media could 'do to them' if old video from high school found its way online, for example, or if someone happened to have a video camera that time a public speaking engagement went tragically off course. Again, *Tosh.0* offers another opportunity for the audience to wonder, 'what if?'

IS IT (OR THE HOST OR THE AUDIENCE) RACIST?

That several of the examples noted in this chapter include comedy that overtly engages issues of race, gender, and sexuality is not the result of cherry-picking content from the series for social relevance. *Tosh.0* is overwhelmingly preoccupied with what it means to be 'politically correct'. This in itself is not a negative criticism: violating taboos and mapping the boundaries of what can or can't be joked about (and therefore, what can or can't be said) is an important social function of comedy. However, *Tosh.0* doesn't so much engage identity politics as it attempts to ridicule and dismiss them. The program serves as a prototypical example of what Amanda Lotz terms 'post-PC comedy'—comedy that seems to have internalized the discourses of identity politics, not to the extent of having 'learned the lessons' or embraced identity politics, but that takes audience awareness of them for a given, and treats this as a license to incorporate jokes

with racist, sexist, or homophobic content while suggesting that the jokes themselves are not racist, sexist, or homophobic because both comedian and audience know better (Lotz 2011).

The negotiation of the politics of language, what can or can't be said or laughed at, is right on the surface of *Tosh.0*. 'Is it racist?' is another segment that has appeared multiple times over the seasons, and usually includes both an online video and another segment starring Tosh. Sometimes it is simply the visual content of the video itself that seems to embody racist stereotypes. For example, video of a watermelon eating contest held by a Baptist Church, which shows a black woman destroying two white male competitors while she is cheered on by several white women (*Tosh.0*, 28 February 2012). Other times, the videos are about the politics of language, basically showing white people saying things that contemporary social standards dictate they shouldn't. For example, in one episode, Tosh shows a clip from a local news show in which one of the news anchors introduces an African American weather man with the phrase 'speaking of the colors' (*Tosh.0*, 26 February 2013). Tosh then says, 'In this hyper-sensitive day and age, it's hard to know who will be offended by what', and so he developed a list of terms he says have no racial connotations whatsoever and presented them to an 'extremely diverse' focus group: a white woman, a gay man, a Latino, an African American man, and an Asian woman. Tosh presents terms that he wants to know if any of them find offensive. While most seem totally nonsensical, they bear enough of a derogatory nature that the individuals argue back and forth with Tosh. 'Cream jockey', 'water flaps', 'sugar taster', 'saddle shins', 'clink clunk'—by the end it is a back and forth between him and the African American man. 'What can I call you?' 'Apple picker? Why are you offended by Apple Picker?' What is lost on Tosh, but not the individuals, is that it is not the particular words that are offensive, but the exercise of privilege and power that labeling a group assumes. The terms may be nonsensical, but the fact that the entire scene is essentially seeking to update white privilege with new derogatory terms for referring to entire groups of people is not lost on the members of the focus group, who repeatedly object. What this is really about is trying to maintain existing white, male power by updating language. The joke is supposed to be that minorities will be offended by even total nonsense, but the end joke is that it is Tosh that can't figure out that it's the 'name calling' and not the names themselves that are offensive. 'Be careful using those new terms, guys', Tosh tells the audience. 'It's a slippery slope. I'm pretty sure you also shouldn't say "slippery slope".'

The presence of the studio audience in each episode is also noteworthy. Not only does Tosh stand in front and comment while we hear audiences laugh approval or groan disapproval, but we see reaction shots of them as well. Tosh will even sometimes poll the studio audience as to whether a segment or joke is racist. For example, one ‘Is it racist?’ segment featured a news report about a middle-aged, white high school teacher who argued that he shouldn’t have gotten in trouble for saying ‘niggas’ rather than ‘niggers’, which he regards as two completely different words (*Tosh.0*, 19 July 2011). Tosh uses this video to create a segment where he attempts similar transformations, adding an ‘A’ to other racial slurs. We see Daniel at work, throwing around such creations as ‘chinka’, ‘wetbacka’, and ‘disgusting diabetes having fat piece of crapa’. The extent to which *Tosh.0* recognizes that this segment caters to the demographic that has to monitor its language for offensiveness is made a part of the joke. After the tape ends, Tosh says, ‘Let’s let the black people in our audience decide, is it racist?’ The camera cuts to a single African American man standing in the midst of the studio audience. He gives a thumbs-up, to which the audience cheers. But Tosh feigns confusion: ‘Guys, I don’t know what you’re cheering about. A thumbs-up means it is racist.’ Tosh suggests his audience is clueless about what it means for something to be racist, perhaps acknowledging that the segment is just another in the flow of comedy, something else to laugh at without reflecting upon what’s at stake with racist language.

Herman Gray describes whiteness as ‘the privileged yet unnamed place from which to see and make sense of the world’ (1995, 86). Richard Dyer has likewise stressed the need to interrogate whiteness:

White power [...] reproduces itself regardless of intention, power differences and goodwill, and overwhelmingly because it is not seen as whiteness, but as normal. White people need to learn to see themselves as white, to see their particularity. In other words, whiteness needs to be made strange (1997, 10).

A generous evaluation of *Tosh.0* might suggest that in its brazen attempts to be funny for males aged 18–34 it has succeeded, inadvertently, at ‘naming’ that position and working through its particularities. This happens continually through jokes about sexuality, race, and gender, and sometimes very directly in segments like ‘Is it racist?’, which are staged over and over and over. Tosh’s inability to recognize that it is fundamentally

not language but privilege that is offensive undermines the potential for interrogating privilege, overdetermining the repetitive, reductive ways the segments address and dismiss the anxieties of the audience.

Tosh, of course, is not alone in making comedy that directly or tangentially deals with identity politics in the 'post-PC' context. The program's approach bears comparison to two distinctive other programs that have been considered by scholars. The first is *Chappelle's Show*, a Comedy Central hit years before *Tosh.0*, and *Psych*, a light drama on the USA Network. Examining *Tosh.0* in the context of these other shows illuminates how differently race is treated and made meaningful in comedy at the same, or nearly the same, cultural moment. Davi Johnson Thornton writes that '*Psych*'s jocular treatment of race and racism communicates to audiences that racial humour enhances, rather than threatens, interracial intimacy because humour demonstrates that genuine amity need not be regulated by race-conscious social etiquette such as the rules of "political correctness," or PC' (2011, 426). Lisa Perks investigates how the humorous discourse in *Chappelle's Show* is structured in order to encourage activation of 'polysemic potential' in the text. *Chappelle's Show*, she says, created,

a rhetorical space to question cultural definitions of race and racial discrimination. The inclusion of conflicting discourses that circulate around issues of racial stereotypes, racial epithets, discrimination, and White privilege magnifies the semiotic system of racial stereotypes, plays with semiotic bonds of racial signifiers, and gently pushes the comedic generic constraints so as to make serious issues more palatable to a diverse audience (2010, 286).

More recently, *Inside Amy Schumer* (2013–present), which also airs on Comedy Central and is formatted very similarly to *Chappelle's Show*, routinely interrogates definitions of gender and sexist discrimination. *Inside Amy Schumer* also has repeatedly referenced its unique status as a female-centered program on a male-skewing network. Its second season opener, for example, featured a sketch in which a focus group of male viewers argued about how sexually desirable Amy Schumer was or wasn't (*Inside Amy Schumer*, 1 April 2014). Such reflexivity or polysemic layering is missing in *Tosh.0*, which appears to lack the desire to mean different things to different people. *Chappelle's Show* had to make comic commentary on race more palatable for its audience—a fact that ultimately lead Chappelle to quit the show when he realized he had little control over what audiences

were laughing at (Haggins 2009). *Inside Amy Schumer* has already garnered Emmy and Peabody Awards, but it still can't transcend the gendered demographics of the Comedy Central audience. Deadline.com, for example, caged the ratings success of her debut episodes each year relative to how much of her lead-in audience she lost. Her lead-in? The program that was routinely the highest rated show among male viewers on Tuesdays, *Tosh.0* (De Moraes 2015).

Tosh, on the other hand, starts from a privileged position that needn't worry over audience reception, as he can assume he and the audience are the same; that is clear in the content of the 'Is it racist?' segments. Mary Douglas's description of the position of the joker in a culture suggests a homogeneity that fits Tosh better than Chappelle. She writes that the joker 'has a firm hold on his own position in the structure and the disruptive comments which he makes upon it are in a sense the comments of the social group upon itself. He merely expresses consensus' (Douglas 1975, 107). Chappelle's position as an African American comedian with a largely white audience was much more tenuous, as is Schumer's among the male audience.

Perhaps, then, we shouldn't be surprised by the prolonged success of *Tosh.0* vs. Chappelle's retreat from television. *Chappelle's Show* featured sketches about race until Chappelle famously called it quits, crediting his own misgivings about who was laughing at what in his comedy (Haggins 2009). But Daniel Tosh continues to churn out episode after episode, not just feigning a lack of self-awareness, but outright dismissing the notion that his comedy might mean something, aside from occasionally warranting an apology. Since he speaks to and for dominant masculine tastes, there is little need to worry anyone might be laughing against the grain.

CONCLUSION: TRICKSTER 2.0

Andrew Stott, in his elaboration on recurring comic types, differentiates the 'trickster' from other figures by the frequent boundary crossing that the figure engages in. While other comic types might be laughed at for being inferior or engaging in activities outside social norms, the trickster makes a game of violating prohibitions and 'is not confined by boundaries, conceptual, social, or physical, and can cross lines that are impermeable to normal individuals' (2005, 51). But rather than destroying such boundaries by their violations and ultimately subverting social order, tricksters narratives, he notes, 'usually conclude with the meddlesome actions of the

protagonist coming to serve some useful or illustrative purpose' (2005, 53). Trickster figures from the Coyote of Native American cultures of the southwest United States, to Puck in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, to that 'cartoon anarchist' Daffy Duck, ridicule belief systems from the inside and out, ultimately not to subvert but to prevent them from becoming too secure in themselves.

Tosh is a convergence media trickster, whose television program crosses boundaries between watching videos and starring in them, between laughing at people from a safe distance, to confronting them and allowing them to 'talk back' in person. That is, *Tosh.0* confuses boundaries between who is laughing and who is laughed at. Bridging boundaries of time and space are what frame him as the trickster, who then can cross the socially contentious boundaries of decorum and language that is the substance of much of the show. The trickster gets away with things others can't; his comic power comes from his ability to cross boundaries, to switch identities, to break categories that 'normal' people (who don't have the power of their own television program, and who abide by social decorum) cannot. He blurs boundaries between what the white male says, wants to say, and shouldn't say. This is the source of what makes him funny; it's not what he says, or how he helps us see the world differently. Rather, it is how he relentlessly breaks the rules that govern our world, that repress all the psychic energy waiting for comic release.

Tosh.0 is a not just a prime example of a trickster figure on television, but a trickster figure as product of (and suited for) the technological characteristics of television in the convergence era, the industrial parameters of its production, and the cultural tastes and experiences of its audiences. That is, while the Coyote might have spoken to the particular social mores and belief systems of southwestern Native American cultures, Tosh is a trickster for the twenty-first century male audience aged 18–34. He therefore crosses and violates boundaries of socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and language that are symptomatic of that audience's experiences, and, crucially, does so in ways that ultimately reaffirm the belief systems of that audience. In other words, it isn't just what Tosh says, but the particular format of his show that makes him such a successful 'post-PC' trickster. Considering Tosh as trickster figure helps us recognize that it isn't so much the particular videos Tosh comments on, or the specific 'redemptions' he stages, that can be credited with his quick ascension and long-running ratings success. Rather, it is how he routinely stages scenarios for white, heterosexual, masculine identity that perform

insecurity in the face of sexual, racial, or gender difference, but end by confirming masculine power. While ostensibly providing another opportunity to see online videos featuring humiliating or disgusting content to laugh at, Tosh's humour overwhelmingly derives from anxiety about cultural change and the loss of privilege. While that might be found in the punchlines of the highest rated sitcoms of the day (*The Big Bang Theory*, for example), the format of *Tosh.0* enables a more flexible boundary crossing that, divorced as it is from narrative, explicitly engages with questions of language: who can say what about whom—or who can laugh at whom.

Tosh possesses the ability to cross boundaries of time and space that are impermeable to the audience. That is, Tosh doesn't just laugh at an Internet fail, he can summon that person to Los Angeles, restage a scenario, and through a 'Web Redemption' attempt to rewrite the fail or whatever it was to begin with. This is of course not just the product of technology, but of the power granted Tosh by Comedy Central. In other words, any individual might Skype with the star of a YouTube video, but they wouldn't be able to compel them to do so for cash or greater celebrity/notoriety the way Tosh can. Tosh's engagement with audiences through social media and through his speaking to them and about them on the show itself invites them along for the tricksterdom. The opportunities Tosh provides online for fans to comment on videos provides another staging for audiences where they can assume the role of trickster by crossing boundaries of what is acceptable to say about people.

The demographic profile of the basic cable audience that *Tosh.0* successfully targets mirrors that of Daniel Tosh himself: young, white, and male. The awareness of that mirroring that we've been examining helps us better understand the success of *Tosh.0* aside from its adept use of participatory media practices. It also helps us understand Tosh's resilience in the face of the most controversial event in the history of the show. While attending one of Tosh's stand-up performances at the Laugh Factory in July 2012, a woman, offended at Tosh's discussion of the humorous merits of rape jokes, intervened by heckling him, saying, according to her account, 'Actually, rape jokes are never funny!' Tosh responded by immediately countering that it would indeed be funny if she was raped by five guys. Her description of the event testifies to the immediacy of the experience: 'I should probably add that having to basically flee while Tosh was enthusing about how hilarious it would be if I was gang-raped in that small, claustrophobic room was pretty viscerally terrifying and threatening all the same, even if the actual scenario was unlikely to take place.' The comment

was particularly threatening because of its invocation of sexual violence 'in person'. That is, Tosh made the comment to a particular woman in the same space he was performing. The sexism of the comment, while consistent with the sophomoric tenor of his material, crossed over into the territory of invoking violence.

The story was first publicly recounted on an anonymous Tumblr page (2012), which garnered more attention after Tosh tweeted a two-part apology, not surprisingly inspiring an explosion of responses back and forth about the appropriateness of rape as a subject for comedy. Enter another comedian adept at navigating and manipulating the convergent media landscape, Louis C.K., who tweeted '@danieltosh your show makes me laugh every time I watch it. And you have pretty eyes' in the midst of the controversy. When he did so, he became the subject of headlines across the Blogosphere as well as in the trade papers (Zakarin 2012). As Amanda Ann Klein (2012) has written, what proved especially interesting about the incident were its repercussions—not so much for Tosh, but for Louis C.K. While Tosh's comments were offensive, they were consistent with his comedy and not particularly offensive to his core audience. By 2012, Louis C.K., not Tosh, had arguably become the comedian of the moment, particularly following the success of his critically acclaimed program *Louie*, which he writes, directs, edits, and stars in. Like Tosh, Louis C.K. combines social media acumen with narrowcasted TV success. Aside from Twitter, he has self-released comedy specials online and sends lengthy email messages filling his followers in on his current comedy projects, on top of the success of his series on the cable station FX. However, C.K.'s defense of Tosh, while typical of comedians reflexively defending one another, was not consistent with his brand of politically conscious, liberal-friendly comedy. Louis C.K. had become known as a comedian whose stand-up routines and sitcom routinely critiqued white male privilege. Repairing his image, C.K. appeared on the *Daily Show*, trying to explain that he wasn't *really* defending Tosh's comments, but that he thought jokes about anything bad were a good thing that increased dialogue. As an example, he described how after reading some responses to the controversy, his eyes had been opened to how rape polices women's lives, limiting where they can go and when. Thus, after a reckless tweeting error, he went on TV to make his bumbling more consistent with his brand. In his next HBO special *Oh My God*, which was shot in early 2013, C.K. even included a bit on how ill-advised it was for women to date men at all, since men were the number-one danger to women.

Unlike Louis C.K., Daniel Tosh is no critical darling, but the rape controversy did little to hurt his popularity. *Tosh.0* has continued to mine Internet failures and humiliations for comedy gold. While Tosh's profile is prominent enough that he receives attention outside his core audience, he is beholden to their tastes (and anxieties) for his comedy and his paycheck. *Tosh.0* has mined online culture not just to find videos to repurpose, but for jokes (and insults) from viewers, treating 'the Internet' as a production partner. That back-and-forth sometimes leads to Tosh defending himself on his own show, as in a 2013 episode in which he felt compelled to spell out his show's 'mission statement.' 'I'm well aware you think I'm getting too big for my britches. That's why I thought tonight it would be appropriate to remind you of the mission statement that hangs in our office and has been the guiding principle behind every episode of *Tosh.0* since day one: to create a silly, web-based clip show that makes males between the ages of 18 and 34 laugh and occasionally cringe, all at the lowest possible price point so that one day I can purchase a private island. That's it, nothing more, nothing less (*Tosh.0*, 5 March 2013). Contrary to Tosh's denial of any cultural agenda, this examination of the content and format of the show reveals it is profoundly preoccupied with the politics of language and identity. In fact, this preoccupation need not be an agenda, as it is inseparable from Tosh's directive to make males aged 18–34 'laugh and occasionally cringe'. What makes that audience do so are those videos, sketches, and jokes that violate boundaries of decorum, which evade social controls, and thereby elicit the involuntary response of laughter. The very content of the program itself shows that identity politics isn't just a mine-field for a comedian to navigate, but central to the cultural work of mapping the boundaries of what is funny, and what is just offensive.

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Crude and Taboo Humour in Television Advertising: An Analysis of Commercials for Consumer Goods

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The analysis proposed in this chapter implies, from the start, two different sets of problems: advertising is, due to its nature, a restless and elusive type of discourse, which resists categorization; at the same time, consensual definitions of humour are difficult or even impossible to reach.

The issue of humour in advertising has generated considerable academic interest since its use as an advertising strategy is widespread (Gulas and Weinberger 2006, 18). Although the positive effects of humour for the purposes of memorization and increased likeability towards a brand are not definitely proven, it is generally accepted that the ‘right’ audience will react favourably to the ‘right’ humorous approach and that, regardless of the underlying mechanisms involved in the process, the outcome is positive and beneficial to the participants and to the message itself (Flaherty et al. 2004, 26).

In order to achieve this purpose, a number of variables must be taken into account, namely the type of product that is being advertised, the characteristics of the audiences intended, the media where the ad is being broadcast, and, finally, the type of humorous approach that is going to be used—hence the difficulty of correctly gauging what is meant by ‘right’,

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since contemporary advertising often resorts to cruder versions of humour that would be potentially alienating for certain audiences.

It is the aim of this chapter to reflect on the uses of crude and taboo humour in a number of contemporary ads, with a view to understanding the way in which they manage to effectively reach their target audience, despite their potential offensive charge. The corpus of the present chapter consists mainly of television ads. Effectively, advertisers are almost unanimous in singling out television as one of the best media for the use of humour, since its dynamic qualities are well adapted to the depiction of situations that require a temporal development that ends with a punch line (Freitas 2008, 108). There is also some consensus as to the most suitable products to be advertised by means of humour: as we will see, these would seem to be the ones in the category of consumer non-durables, or ‘yellow products’ (Gulas and Weinberger 2006, 73), a category that encompasses most of the ads on which this analysis will be based.

THE USES OF HUMOUR IN ADVERTISING

The complex mechanisms that underlie humour are hard to describe (Berger 1993, 2; Yeshin 2006, 301), even though response to humour would seem to be something of a universal human trait (Raskin 1985, 2). There are even doubts as to the way laughter (one of the most visible consequences of humour) can be categorized among the gamut of human emotions and behaviours (Morreall 1983, 2). In fact, laughter is normally seen as a commonplace and normal reaction to funny events. However, as Morreall points out, it is difficult to pinpoint the utility of this behaviour as a physical response to a humorous situation, which can assume myriad forms—unlike other reactions such as an impulse to flee caused by a terrifying event (1983, 3).

However, other authors foreground some major benefits that this apparently irrelevant behaviour might encompass, which would be telling of its cognitive advantages for the adaptation of humankind to its environment. In fact, mere crude jokes require the use of a number of social and linguistic skills, and it is therefore possible to say that humorous reactions enable further social activity, which is reinforced, in turn, by the positive emotions that were generated (Polimeni and Reiss 2006, 348).

Rather in the same way humour, as we will see, can be a difficult strategy to handle in ads, writing about humour in general can be a hard task to undertake—the difficulty arising with the very definition of the concept. In

fact, 'humour' covers such a broad spectrum of possibilities (ranging from wit or whimsicality to laugh-out-loud reactions) that it becomes problematic to provide a definition that comprehends all the varieties of humour available. It is also a matter of controversy which mechanisms underlie the gratification we obtain from different kinds of humour (Berger 1993, 2; Gulas and Weinberger 2006, 22; Yeshin 2006, 301). However, generally speaking, it seems to be related with a pleasurable sensation of satisfaction either to the party at the production end, the receiving end or even both.

Raskin (1985) proposes a number of obligatory 'external' conditions for humour, which are closely related to those required by advertising as a communication process. Firstly, (1) a speaker and a hearer are necessary (as a minimum of participants), followed by (2) a stimulus, whose exact nature or trigger is debatable. It is also important to take into account (3) the participants' ability to deal with humour as a form of communication, which will necessarily vary according to (4) the psychology of the individuals involved. Another fundamental element in the process is (5) the situation where the humour act is taking place, which defines whether a funny situation is indeed humorous or not. As Attardo points out (2003, 1289), humour is a highly collaborative situation, where two (at least) have to agree on the adequateness of the moment and context for humour to be effective. In close connection to these situational elements come (6) the social backgrounds of the participants, which must be shared, at least to some extent, for a joke to succeed (Raskin 1985, 16).

Although all the conditions mentioned here imply difficulties in terms of taxonomy, condition number two (the stimulus) is, admittedly, one of the most complex to define (Polimeni and Reiss 2006, 349). Effectively, there are several theories that purport to explain why we laugh, some of them mutually exclusive and others presenting a number of overlapping features. These theories are often grouped according to the main approach they adopt, as in Raskin (1985), who puts forward three main classes: one possibility are (a) incongruity-based theories, which correspond to a cognitive-perceptual approach, where humour would stem from an unexpected element that frustrates previously created expectations—the humorous effect would then result from the collusion of the two 'stories' or scripts being told when reaching the final surprise element, or the punch line; another theory corresponds to (b) superiority/disparagement approaches to humour, (classified by Raskin as 'social-behavioral'), which can be traced back to Plato and Thomas Hobbes, which claim that the

enjoyment we derive from humour always has at its roots some feeling of superiority experienced by a group of individuals when compared to others, felt to be more ridiculous and weaker than them (Zillmann and Cantor 1996, 94). Finally, (c) arousal-release/relief theories, (a psycho-analytical approach), which stress a biological purpose of laughter, in that it can serve as a means to vent pent-up tensions and energies (as postulated by Freud), as well as presenting some advantages in terms of pleasurable feelings, which might contribute to an overall healthier state of mind (Polimeni and Reiss 2006, 351).

There is extensive research on the specific ways humour can work in advertising. There seems to be a natural affinity between this discursive format and humour, as a strategy. In fact, there is some similarity between the proper functioning of a joke and the felicity conditions for a TV ad to work in the best way, which involve the ideal length, content, timing of a punch line and details in the right measure (Raskin 1985, 18).

These coincidences are probably due to the fact that both joke telling and advertising have a very definite purpose (in broad terms, on the one hand, to make the hearer laugh and, on the other hand, to persuade an audience into buying something). The clarity of the aim intended by these discursive pieces demands strict economy of means and a perfect adjustment to the hearers' needs and expectations. Additionally, a television ad, with the vast array of channels it can resort to, can pack immense significance in a matter of few seconds—which mimics real life experiences of joke telling, where the speaker hints, anticipates, insinuates a lot just with facial expressions, gestures and voice modulations. In the same way we expect to be amused when a number of clues on the speaker's end signals that a joke is about to be told, we have also learned to expect an ad to deliver its message in very a competent (albeit artistic and creative) way.

Following on the path of the traditional grouping of the different theories of humour that were previously mentioned, several authors have tried to point out which one (or ones) correspond to the most prevalent or effectively used in advertising. Pioneer studies in the area, such as Alden and Hoyer (1993), Cho (1995) and Alden et al. (2000), have undertaken the task of analyzing different executional humorous styles in television ads, in an attempt to gauge their effectiveness. Alden and Hoyer (1993) concluded that the most successful humorous formats seem to be the ones that resort to everyday life situations followed by a surprising punch line, in contrast with direct presentations of real life confronted with impossible events. This controlled kind of incongruity (vs. an obvious plunge in total

absurdity) apparently elicits the best results in terms of humorous readings. Cho's research (1995) confirms this position, adding that, according to cognitive approaches, the audience's problem solving abilities are activated by the proposed incongruent elements of the ad, in order to make them fit pre-existing schemata—but this will only happen in case there is a proper balance of all elements.

The fact that there are clues signalling intended playfulness is also decisive in order to make the ad be read as humorous—otherwise, other unwanted feelings (such as fear) could be aroused, which would be detrimental to the overall message of the ad. There are a number of possible executional styles related with humour that are commonly found in ads, such as 'slice of life', 'ludicrousness', 'miniaturization', 'subtle complexity', and 'perceptual interest' (Cho 1995, 193). From all these styles, the first, 'slice of life', is clearly the one that relates the most with people's daily struggles and is, therefore, the easiest for audiences to identify with. This is possibly the reason why this style came second in perceived humour, according to Cho's research, immediately after 'subtle complexity', a style that includes ad messages conveyed by means of metaphors, indirectness and allusions, which stresses subtlety. In the wake of these findings, Cho posits that cognition and affection seem to rank higher in the audience's ability to perceive an ad as humorous. On the other hand, styles based in disparagement and negativity, as 'ludicrousness' and 'miniaturization', although widely used in ads (especially in the United States and the UK), often result in an ad that is not perceived as funny.

Starting with the assumption that failure to detect intended humour in an ad will necessarily affect the way the message is perceived, Alden et al.'s research (2000) builds on previous studies focussed specifically on television ads, which have concluded that a combination of controlled incongruity and an element of surprise (that was previously signalled as playful) can result in enhanced humour perception. This, in its turn, might eventually result in a more positive attitude and warmth towards the ad (and, in extension, towards the brand at stake). However, the authors stress that not all attempts at humour in ads will result in an ad that is perceived as funny, and this failure can eventually backfire when it comes to the public reading of a given brand (2000, 12).

Regardless of the different approaches that try to cover the effects and inner workings of humour in general, in the specific case of advertising, it can be agreed that humour is used as a strategy at the service of the advertiser's 'hidden agenda', that is the promotion of a given product or service

with a view to raising the audience's positive awareness of the brand, which may eventually lead to a purchase decision (Belch and Belch 2004, 206). In fact, humour seems to be an increasingly pervasive phenomenon in the world of advertising (Alden et al. 2000, 1) and one that, apparently, guarantees memorization (Cho 1995, 191)—if not of the product or service that is being advertised, at least of the ad itself.

Humour as an Advertising Strategy

The difficulty inherent to the characterization of the phenomenon makes it all the more valuable when used as an attention-grabbing strategy in ads. As Cook points out, ads make the most of indeterminacy and appeals to emotion (1992, 45), such as the ones conveyed by humour or even music, which might help disguise the lack of a relevant or noteworthy message. When it is hard to pinpoint what exactly makes us remember a specific ad is when the combined appeal of its different elements has effectively managed to convey a powerful global message (Freitas 2008, 128–129).

Humour can indeed be a useful tool when indeterminacy is an intrinsic part of the message (Polimeni and Reiss 2006, 348). That is usually the case with advertising when, very often, there is no real discernible difference between products in the same category (Myers 1986, 49). Therefore, differentiation has to be established on the basis of intangible and often emotional associations that are used to extol the virtues of a material artefact (Williamson 1978, 24; Dyer 1982, 53). Ambiguity allows the product to be read beyond the mere physical characteristics, which are no longer enough to seduce the audience into buying a specific brand (Myers 1994, 19).

Humour, as a strategy, can in some cases play a major role in an ad, but it must necessarily be supported by other auxiliary strategies, such as music, metaphors or intertextual references. This *caveat* is important in that it draws attention to the fact that every single element in an ad conveys meaning and all of them work together, concurring to the conveyance of a unique message at the service of the product at stake (Cook 1992, 37). However, the fact that humour never works alone in ad messages adds extra complexity to an already demanding task, since the different effect of humour in ads can be heightened, foregrounded or even downplayed by the action of the other strategies that are also present.

Especially in the case of television ads, it is the simultaneous effect of all the elements as they unfold during a chronological timeline that conveys the overall effect intended (Freitas 2008, 127). An analysis that is exclusively

centred in either the text, the image or even the audio part of the ad will necessarily be limited and fragmented in its scope (Cook 1992, 38), since it does not take into account the way ads are seen and interpreted by real-life consumers. In the case of humorous ads, a global approach in their analysis is all the more necessary since, very often, the build-up of a final humorous effect is achieved by means of an abridged narrative process, where text (which can be written, spoken or sung), moving and static images, as well as music and special sound effects all contribute to the delivery of a successful punch line—and the joke will not be the same without one of them.

Humour represents a special case in advertising strategies, since it can both describe a functional device—one of the many ingredients, which can assume different forms, used to convey the ad's message—as well as an outcome or global effect of the ad (which allows us to describe a specific ad as 'funny'). This fact clearly positions humour as an extraordinary instance among the possibilities advertisers can resort to in order to transmit their messages in a convincing manner.

Alienating the Audience? Risky Uses of Humour in Ads

As we have seen, the use of humour in ads does not guarantee persuasion. Many complex factors have to be taken into account and to interact properly for it to succeed since, as Gulas and Weinberger point out, humour is somewhat frail as a strategy (2006, 19). However, humorous ads seem to be a favourite form of entertainment for many people and humour is definitely one of the features that audiences single out as revealing of creativity and talent in the area of advertising.

As we have seen, ads are a marginal kind of discourse, which keep interrupting other discourses—the ones that people really want or need to pay attention to (Cook 1992, 13). Therefore, to make us overlook this intrusion, ads have to give audiences something in return for their trouble. The bargaining chip is, very often, their entertainment value. An ad makes an implicit promise that it is worth watching, because it will be creative, funny and entertaining. The use of humour is, normally, a safe bet in this case, since people will only tolerate an interruption that is not boring. In certain cases, the entertainment value of ads has even created a tradition of its own, as in Super Bowl advertising, an event where the social power of advertising becomes obvious (McAllister 1999, 403), and where series of ads are sometimes run months in advance, building up to the culmination of one final glorious ad during the event (Kim et al. 2005, 46), and where 'ad meters' measure the entertainment value of the ads, that

is, their likeability, which is often associated with humour. As Gulas and Weinberger postulate, it is possible that this measurement does not yield crucial marketing information in terms of brand recall or even purchase intent—however, it is most revealing of the fact that people have come to expect ads to fulfil other functions apart from the mere delivery of a sales pitch (2006, 165–166). In fact, research shows that a part of the audience will only watch the Super Bowl games in order to watch the famed Super Bowl commercials (Kelley and Turley 2004, 399, based on previous studies), which demonstrates that some audiences have come to enjoy ads merely for the entertainment they may offer, appreciating them as pure fun or even objects of aesthetic contemplation—or even both, simultaneously (González Requena and Ortiz de Zárate 1995, 12).

In view of the diverse findings discussed, which indicate that cognition and affective-based approaches might achieve better results in the identification of an ad as humorous, thus enhancing its positive effects, there could be something of a paradox in the fact that some brands deliberately decide to advertise their products with more aggressive humorous tactics. In the case of the Super Bowl ads mentioned previously, research indicates, interestingly, that ads that combine violence with humorous contents were among the public's favourites, this type of ads having doubled in number when comparing figures from 2005 and 2009. Apart from the information this research may yield, it also raises serious ethical concerns, mainly related with issues such as trivialization and acceptability of violence, when embedded in humorous messages, which, apart from the humour, also contain attractive and seductive features, rendering the whole experience enjoyable (Blackford et al. 2011, 131).

Due to the complexity of the matter, the concept of 'aggressive/violent humour' has to be modulated by reassessing a number of factors that always have to be taken into account when the issue is humour: among others, it is crucial to define (1) the type of product that is being advertised, (2) the audience at stake, and (3) the interplay of the mechanisms that are activated in the individual during the processing of the ad's message.

Concerning point (1), Gulas and Weinberger (2006), based on previous studies, conclude that advertisers prefer to use humour in products that imply low involvement, low risk and less financial investment (designated as 'yellow products' or 'small treats'). These products seem to be the ones that lend themselves to light readings, which will (hopefully) keep the product in the prospective buyers' minds, whereas in the case of

more serious, high-involvement products, the humorous approach might trigger readings of frivolity or shallowness, which could easily rub off onto the product itself, therefore affecting its more sober image.

Point (2) is crucial when it comes to assessing the pertinence of adopting more aggressive approaches when existing research as well as empirical evidence, up to a point, suggest that subtlety and affection might be more effective in the long run. However, it is essential to bear in mind whom the message of the ad is, in fact, addressing (Freitas 2008, 108). The matter of offensive approaches should be viewed taking into account the intended addressee of the ad message. In fact, criticism often comes from people who are not the intended audience of such ads and who are imposing their own concept of 'good taste' on messages that were not meant for them in the first place (Boddewyn 1991, 33). Admittedly, some audiences are harder to reach than others, and the characteristics of a given audience will decisively affect our taking offence with the content of a specific ad (Beard 2008a, 14). On the other hand, our ever increasing media and advertising literacy makes us more difficult to seduce and persuade (Myers 1999, ix). One of the most difficult targets to reach is that of males between the ages of 18 and 34. This is partly due to the fact that they are very familiar with every type of media and the possibilities they offer when it comes to escaping unwanted interruptions by commercial breaks, and also to their evasive habits when using technology, seldom allowing their undivided attention to dwell on any broadcast content for a long time (Gulas and Weinberger 2006, 167–168). Men in this age span are more tolerant of ads that feature sensitive issues, whereas women (particularly the ones over the age of fifty) are more easily offended with references to antisocial themes (Waller 1999). This higher level of tolerance seems to be an opportunity for advertisers to try to reach such an elusive target (even if it raises ethical concerns, as pointed out by Gulas and Weinberger), attracting their attention with the outrageousness of the humorous approaches adopted—certainly, running the risk of alienating other audiences by doing so (2006, 168–169).

Point (3) is an especially complex one in that, on one hand, it is closely connected to the nature of the different humour theories previously discussed, and their possible simultaneous existence, albeit in different degrees, in many humorous ad executions (Cho and Kim 2000, 196). On the other hand, we have to keep in mind that the market is overflowing both with remarkably similar products in each category and with myriad of ads in every medium imaginable. It is becoming increasingly more difficult to cut through the clutter and achieve some visibility. As Beard postulates,

resorting to more aggressive forms of humour might be a way to achieve this, enhancing attention to and awareness of the ad and, consequently, of the brand (2008b, 3).

However, attention and awareness have to be of the positive kind if effective results are to be obtained. There are several classic cases where, by means of a misguided humorous campaign with shocking advertising appeals, increased notoriety was indeed achieved, but for the wrong reasons, which tarnished, in some cases permanently, the image of the brand at stake. As examples of different types of attempts at humour gone astray, Gulas and Weinberger mention the case of the shoe retailer Just for Feet, with a campaign that was felt as racist and insensitive; Nike, with a magazine ad that was felt as offensive to the disabled community, as well as several ads for beers that stress the infamous ‘beer and bimbo’ sexist association (2006, 174–177). Potential for offence when using humorous execution styles is certainly high—hence the ‘fragility’ of the strategy that was mentioned before (Gulas and Weinberger 2006). However, research indicates that it can be minimized with specific approaches. Even though their use does not guarantee that the ad will be perceived as funny, it is less likely that viewers will take offence, which, in the long run, will have positive results for the brand’s image. Beard (2008a, 14) concludes that the risks of humour in advertising are mostly concentrated on negatively aggressive arousal-safety instances, since humour with positive resonations is relatively safe. Additionally, when taking the risk of using the most risky approach, the best target would be the most tolerant target audience (young males).

These findings seem to confirm the previously existing research, when it comes to the riskier humorous types of execution. Approaches based on disparagement and aggression seem to correspond to higher potential in terms of offence, which may even obliterate the possibility of the ad being seen as funny at all. As to the more compliant target audience, this study reinforces the notion that young men are the most tolerant ones—which provides a safe haven for advertisers who want to attempt more daring approaches for the sake of novelty and innovation. Surprisingly enough, this same target is increasingly becoming a favourite butt for jokes (Gulas et al. 2010).

ANALYZING AD CAMPAIGNS

Examples of purportedly funny ads that end up causing offence, for different reasons, are not hard to find. A traditional repository for such material can be found in the famous Super Bowl ads. In fact, the annual championship sports

event of the National Football League (NFL) in the United States, which culminates the sports season, has become much more than a sports event. Due to the huge worldwide viewership it enjoys, it represents, for some brands, a major broadcasting opportunity for their most expensive advertisements—and, very often, for their most risqué ones. Broadcasting these ads during the Super Bowl event is, for some brands, a test of their acceptability when it comes to using them for traditional media such as national TV. The brief analysis that follows of specific ads will refer to Super Bowl ads, as well to as some randomly chosen television ads recently broadcast on Portuguese television channels. The criteria underlying these selections is ads that illustrate some of the theoretical points from the first part of this chapter as to different types of humour and possible readings on their effects.

Blondes, Beer and Hamburgers: The Male Paradise

The classic association (already referred to) between a cold refreshing beer and a ‘dumb blonde’ is explicit in a Sagres beer ad. Sagres is one of the two most popular beer brands in Portugal and this particular ad was broadcast on television in 2010 during the summer months. The ad relies on a very basic narrative thread line, where a gorgeous blonde young woman in a small bikini emerges from the sea, after taking a bath, and sashays slowly along the sand towards a group of google-eyed, gaping-mouthed young men. After looking at them for a few seconds in a seductive way, the woman picks up a bottle of beer from an icebox next to her beach towel and gulps it down with relish as the men still gaze at her. The intended humour in the ad is to be found in the facial expressions of the group of drooling men and on the lyrics of the song that is heard during the narrative. Sung loudly by a male choir, it speaks about ‘Sagres, our very own blonde’, with a very straightforward pun involving the colour of the young woman’s hair and the colour of the beer—a metaphor that any Portuguese viewer would immediately grasp, since it is still quite usual to hear beer referred to as ‘a blonde’. What this ad does is to illustrate a rather sexist view of women, using a visual and verbal metaphor to convey the notion BEER = WOMEN. However, it is also possible to discern objectification of men in the ad who are portrayed as simple-minded individuals, who are rendered speechless by the sight of a beautiful woman, and are contented if they have cool refreshing beers to keep them happy during a hot day at the beach. This approach is similar to the one found in several of the crudest ads aired in the Super Bowl series, in the United States, with comparable edgy

approaches by brands such as GoDaddy.com an Internet domain purchase company - which heavily stress the 'buxom bimbo' theme (with the use of celebrities such as Danica Patrick and Bar Refaeli), although in recent years there has been a noticeable effort to downplay the excessive sexism typically associated with their Super Bowl advertising. A part of this trend, which seems generalised of late, might be associated with a shift in viewership demographics: in fact, as of 2014, 46% of Super Bowl viewers are women, which might help explain this recent turn towards a more mature kind of humour (B2BNews 2015). However, brands like Carl's Jr. burgers are still betting on sexual suggestiveness as a source for rather crude humour, as in their 2015 'All Natural' ad featuring supermodel Charlotte McKinney, who successively pays short visits to the different stands at a farmer's market. As she sashays along the aisles, we see curvy fruit being superimposed on her body parts, which both exaggerate and hide the curves of her—almost naked—body. This (c)overt sexuality is further emphasized by the model's delighted reaction to the male, wide-eyed admiration she is obviously eliciting.

Both the Sagres ad described previously and in the 'All Natural' ad by Carl's Jr., the attempt at humour might easily backfire, on the one hand, due to its perceived crudeness, but on the other hand, also due to the lack of a strong narrative thread that might help support the use of the metaphors WOMEN = BEER, in the former, or FRUITS = FEMALE BODY PARTS, in the latter. The use of metaphors usually indicates indirectness and subtlety in the humorous approach, which normally increases positive feelings and likeability (Cho 1995). However, as the metaphors used in both ads are rather worn-out and simplistic, the final effect may result in a rather crude reading—which, in the case of the Carl's Jr. ad, could even disqualify it from airing on national television (Daily News 2015).

The disparagement of young males and their simplistic needs is extremely visible, in a more laugh-out-loud way, in a Super Bock ad (another brand of Portuguese beer) also broadcast in 2010. This ad is for a stout beer, which is traditionally associated with more mature men. The humour in this ad is centred on incongruity, paired with the unlikelihood of the situation it proposes. The ad begins with a number of men in their thirties, in white bathrobes, standing at the door of the 'Stout Beer Spa'. When they enter the spa, they see that it is designed as a men's paradise: a number of gorgeous and sophisticated female attendants wait on them hand and foot, serving them all the (stout) beer they want, as they lounge in comfortable sofas and have their backs massaged with a special oil concocted

with stout beer. Although funny (and most men would probably find it so), this ad clearly imposes a sexist reading of men in general. However, the Sagres ad elicited more criticism and caused more offence, on the one hand, probably because its approach is blunter. On the other hand, it is possible that the more sophisticated approach of the Super Bock ad (BEER + WOMEN = EARTHLY PARADISE FOR MEN), where a narrative thread can be detected and where the actors seem to be aware that they are indulging in a stereotypical masculine fantasy, creates a frame that erodes the disparagement and enhances the creativity and ingenuity of the concept. Men are the butt of the joke, in this case, but they are doing it in a mock-ironical way, as if that kind of behaviour were expected of them, after all. In this instance, it might be possible to read this ad's humorous approach as a depiction of male fantasies that has been duly sanitized (by the use of irony and self-deprecation) for general consumption, so as to render it eventually non-threatening for female viewers (Gulas et al. 2010, 117). These pre-emptive strategies are quite common when advertisers use crude humour: after all, although an ad is meant for the enjoyment of a specific audience, it is seldom good policy to outrage and antagonize other potential viewers.

Drenched in Sweat: Making Grossness Funny

The ad chosen to illustrate this point can also be seen as disparaging for men. In the ad for Axe deodorant (Lynx in the UK), humour clearly stems from absurdity and exaggeration. Its technique is that of slapstick, when it shows a young man so seriously afflicted with a perspiration problem that he completely drenches everybody around him. Although it was seen as truly disgusting by the majority of adults and even young women, this ad proved extremely popular with young men (as most Axe ads are), which seems to confirm that this is, indeed, the ideal approach for this target audience, who are highly tolerant of explicit grossness.

In the present case, the Axe ad is resorting to an exaggeration of taboo in order to create interest and humorous effects. It is common practice in ads for products that enclose taboo readings (such as sanitary protection products for women, toilet paper, laxatives, deodorants) to downplay whatever is unpleasant about them and divert the viewers' attention towards more pleasant things, with the help of music, metaphor, intertextuality, and, eventually, unrelated (and positive) humour (Freitas 2008). Taking the opposite approach, for the sake of originality, the Axe ad highlights

the perspiration problem, magnifying it into a major sweating affliction, which affects the man doing the sweating and everyone who happens to be nearby—for maximum grossness effects. Highlighting taboo instead of hiding it can be a risky strategy, but for a brand like Axe, with a tradition in outraging ads, it may pay off, especially with its target audience: once again, constituted by young men.

The Blue Pill: Unlucky Man vs. Lucky Car

The Fiat 500X ad for the 2015 Super Bowl features, right from the start, some classic elements of a humorous narrative, further enhanced by the technical possibilities offered by the medium, such as the fast-paced alternate angles that effectively tell the story, the close-ups on the actors' faces, and the scenic landscapes that help create the sense of scenic grandeur that plays on the 'enlargement' metaphor that pervades this very Italian universe. The famous blue pill and its effects are, just by themselves, commonly used humorous elements in jokes, and this prop guarantees, right from the beginning, the appropriate mood on the part of the viewers. What begins as a positive humour script suddenly takes an unexpected twist, as the blue pill misses the elderly man's open mouth, bounces all over the town and finally lands in the open fuel tank of a Fiat 500, turning it into a 500X crossover, bursting with life and energy, as the pill starts to work inside it.

The sexual impotence vs. increased virility metaphor is, in the case of this ad, safely kept within boundaries, making it a lot less racy than it could be. The sexual readings are mainly expressed by means of the transformation (i.e. the sudden enlargement) of the small car's frame, and confirmed by the lewd gazes of several women who glance at the transformed version. This succession of metaphors effectively protects the ad from the disadvantages negative humour could bring to the brand, and manages to retain its attractiveness both for the main target audiences as well as for other secondary ones.

CONCLUSION

This chapter ends with a truism of sorts: it is impossible to separate humour in advertising from individual and contextual factors. Although we can say that this applies to every single instance of humour in any situation, it is

even truer of its use in advertising: although an ad can be planned from scratch to be funny (and with such a loaded form of communication as advertising, that kind of planning was certainly earnest and intensive, were such a strategy intended), it is only the individual on the receiving end that will determine whether a specific ad will be received with laughter (Gulas and Weinberger 2006, 56).

Audiences use the humour they find in ads for their own purposes, which means that it cannot be imposed from outside. As with every other strategy meant to seduce the viewers, attempts at humour in ads are proposals, which can be successful or not, depending on many circumstances. As Myers points out, 'advertising does not impose its messages on passive audiences, but provides a text that audience may take up and transform—or may ignore entirely' (1999, 14). One of the advantages of humour is that it enhances an experience that can be already enjoyable: if successful, the laughter it elicits is an extra reward given to us for taking the time to pay attention (1999, 125).

A number of ethical issues can be associated to this discussion, and the need to discuss them becomes even more pressing in the cases where humour in ads is insensitive, sick, cruel, racist or sexist, due to the violence that it can contain and depict, in more or less explicit manners. Although in some cases ads with such characteristics do sell, they also have adverse effects, since they may undermine the credibility and acceptance of the advertising industry (Boddewyn 1991, 33).

It is true that risky humour strategies in ads can serve their purpose and please the public they want to seduce. As we have seen with the Fiat 500X example, it is certainly possible to dilute or minimize aggressive humour, combining it with other approaches so that it makes sense in the overall context of the ad. Humour, in general, can be a very helpful strategy for ads to say things in a more appealing and enjoyable way, even when their subject is drab or downright unpleasant. However, as we have seen, humour can also be a very dangerous weapon, when inappropriately used—and the risk of it happening is considerably higher when extreme forms of humour are used.

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Filthy Viewing, Dirty Laughter

Delia Chiaro

There is nothing intrinsically amusing about filth and dirt, especially when it is displayed in vast quantities, in full colour and in minute detail across our television screens. However, for some inexplicable reason, watching Kim Woodburn and Aggie MacKenzie, the presenters of TV series *How Clean Is Your House?* dipping their beautifully manicured fingers into thick gunges of sticky, mouldy leftover food and brandishing toilet brushes streaked with faecal matter is not simply repulsive and nauseating, it is also very funny. What exactly is so funny about these repugnant visuals? Are such revolting scenes amusing because they are incongruous and out of step with the pristine perfection for which we so often aim? Are we purely taking pleasure in the misfortunate lifestyles of others? Or are the producers dabbling in some tendentious fun and laughing at these serial ‘grime offenders’?

In his extensive work on jokes, Davies has established that the trait of stupidity is at the core of a vast number of joke targets, while another widespread characteristic of those who are stupid is dirtiness. In serious discourse ‘dirty’ has a stronger negative connotation than ‘stupid’—consider ‘dirty bugger’ versus ‘stupid bugger’. Davies explains that in some

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societies the absence of ethnic jokes about the filthy habits of others reflects conflicting values and attitudes towards rational hygiene in different nations (1992, 173–174; 190). Having poor personal hygiene or living in filth is not something of which people are generally proud. *How Clean Is Your House?* places the dirt and grime of a person's home on public display, thus breaking a social taboo. After all, cleanliness, according to the proverb, is close to godliness. Furthermore, this public display of dirt reinforces the mores of society. By framing these images of dirt within a context where they can be safely viewed, and above all contemplated and ridiculed, they can subsequently be rejected as modes of behaviour appropriate in the everyday world (Makarius 1970, 68). However, this display of filth reminds us of our animal nature and with its many images and references to faeces and urine the subject matter of the show is truly scatological. The indigestible content of *How Clean Is Your House?* is far from being metaphorical alone. The thought that people actually go about their daily activities including eating and assimilating nutriment in environments surrounded by rotting food and faecal materials, is, in itself, stomach churning. Yet we laugh and enjoy it.

This chapter sets out to examine the humour factor and to identify some diverse types and functions of laughter occurring in a representative sample of six episodes from the series. Rather than simply occurring in response to the shocking yet comical situations presented in each episode, much laughter in the series conveys nervousness and embarrassment as well as being a manifestation of alignment or dis-alignment with the show's presenters by the ill-fated residents of the unkempt homes.

INTRODUCTION

How Clean Is Your House? is a lifestyle entertainment program produced by Stephanie Harris and Lisa Edwards that ran for five seasons on UK Channel 4 between May 2003 and September 2009. In each thirty-minute episode, experienced cleaners Kim Woodburn and Aggie MacKenzie tackle a house or an apartment that is in an exceptionally dirty condition and, with the help of a team of professional cleaners, meticulously clean it from top to bottom and thereby restore it to immaculate perfection. Unlike other home makeover programs such as Endemol's *Extreme Makeover Home Edition* (2003–12), in which dilapidated houses are totally refurbished with new fittings and furniture, *How Clean Is Your House?* limits itself to cleaning and restoring the contents that are already present in

the household. Furthermore, although the show deals with people who have serious problems regarding lack of hygiene, it is also different from programs such as *Hoarders* (A&E, 2009–present) and *Hoarding, Buried Alive* (TLC/Discovery, 2000–13). *How Clean Is Your House?* is not concerned with the physical and psychological ordeal that people suffer when they are unable to control their surroundings, but focuses instead on the dirt and chaos in which they live. Above all, the program mostly tackles the problem from a light-hearted and whimsical stance.

A US spin-off of *How Clean Is Your House?* ran for two seasons in 2004 on Lifetime network. The series differed from the UK series in that the presenters, who typically give out household tips and use everyday household products like lemon juice and bicarbonate of soda for cleaning, in the US version also use and advertise commercially available cleaning products throughout. Translated versions of the show, via subtitling and dubbing, have ensured its success in twenty countries worldwide, while the format also exists in its Dutch and French adaptations, respectively *Hoe schoon is jouw Huis?* and *C'est du propre!*

As in all makeover shows, *How Clean Is Your House?* follows a before-and-after format that is repeated throughout the series with each episode following exactly the same set-up and structure. Practiced cleaners Woodburn and MacKenzie arrive at an exceptionally filthy and unkempt property in need of cleaning and begin by inspecting the premises for dirt and grime. They reprimand the owners for their slovenly habits, offer practical advice on how to carry out household tasks and with the help of a team of professional cleaners, clean the premises to utmost perfection. However, as well as providing instructions in terms of tips regarding how to set about a variety of household tasks, the show also provides a good deal of comic relief. Each episode is a sort of humorous cautionary tale that provides a shock factor deriving from the extreme living conditions of the occupants of the households, tempered by the contrast of the presenters' appearance (especially Kim's) plus their irony, sarcasm and witty banter. The mismatch between sharp, witty discourse and its surrounding images of extreme filthiness contributes to a general atmosphere of non-seriousness. In other words, the program walks the fine line between the serious predicaments of the occupants' dire living conditions and the objective absurdity of these very conditions. Images of noxious matter and serious discourse regarding the dangers of living in filth constantly switches to friendly banter and then back again to seriousness in a matter of seconds.

So, how exactly does *How Clean Is Your House?* succeed in transforming the serious problem of people who have at the very least an aversion to cleanliness and at the worst who suffer from a pathological condition into light entertainment? According to the contents of this show, the answer is quite simple: through humour and laughter. In fact, from the capricious opening credits and upbeat background music to actor Paul Copley's quirky and alliterative voice-over narration together with Woodburn's amusing banter, each episode is in sharp contrast with its more serious documentary style counterparts. The show's true protagonist, together with dirt, is the repartee that succeeds in subverting situations concerning the unpleasant subject matter of messy homes into something that audiences actually want to watch.

The episodes examined in this chapter are all contained in a DVD compilation entitled *How Clean Is Your House. Six of the Filthiest Shows ever seen on TV!*¹ Presumably the producers of this DVD must have considered the single episodes representative enough to make up a sort of 'greatest hits' compilation making it ideal material for the purpose of this study as they should exemplify six typically dirty premises and six equally typical residents, or, as they are wittily labelled on the show 'grime offenders'.

Media scholars have examined makeover shows such as, and including, *How Clean Is Your House?* Of particular interest are the studies by Hunt (2009), Moseley (2000) and Nathanson (2013), which examine these series from the point of view of femininity in the postfeminist context. While providing significant (indigestible?) food for thought, these studies remain beyond the scope of this chapter, which is restricted solely to the humorous aspect of the show.

MUCKY SURROUNDINGS

The stark, white DVD cover features Kim and Aggie relaxing on a sofa. The duo are wearing the white cleaning overalls and bejewelled rubber gloves they don in the cleaning stage of each episode and are clutching feather dusters. Both are looking straight into the camera, poised with their legs crossed, Aggie simply smiling while Kim has a mock-stern expression and waves a gloved hand in a queen-like manner. The accompanying blurb is couched in a light-hearted mode as it informs viewers that Kim and Aggie, 'the ladies who like to ditch the dirt' will '...expose their [the homes'] deepest, darkest, dirtiest secrets'. The cover also includes a short review from the *Daily Star* that claims that the series guarantees 'Good, filthy

fun. Humiliating, embarrassing and extremely funny.' So, thanks to the not especially subtle sexual innuendo of terms like 'dirty' collocated with 'secrets' and 'filthy' with 'fun', viewers can expect a program that may not be totally in earnest. As well as this, the terms 'humiliating' and 'embarrassing' hint at unkindness, suggesting that the series will involve some kind of underdog, a target to be laughed at. In fact, the blurb appeals to what George Orwell famously refers to, in *The Art of Donald McGill*, as the typically British inclination for 'low' humour, the 'naughty' *double entendre* of the seaside postcard and the *Carry On* tradition. This information, together with the comic-style haphazard font of the graphics, builds up expectations that are more reminiscent of a tabloid newspaper than a documentary about home maintenance.

The title sequence at the beginning of each episode opens with roughly twenty seconds of black-and-white close-ups of different parts of the house where dirt and upheaval reign accompanied by a tune that is characteristic of a horror film. There are quick flashes of sinks piled up high with dirty dishes, piles of laundry scattered all over, floors covered in rubbish, close-ups of dusty and grimy surfaces and the floating corpses of a variety of insects. Each shot of a filthy space is interspersed with a short clip of the residents explaining how and why the premises got into such a state. The horror music reaches a crescendo as the photographs moves into a 17-second long title sequence, in which the presenters appear as their cartoon parodies. The cartoon versions of Kim and Aggie consist of exaggerated caricatures of their real life persona: Kim is excessively buxom, Aggie overly nerdy. As in reality, the duo are meticulously well dressed in colourful outfits, trendy shoes, costume jewellery and signature manicured nails so, the opening sequence, like the entire show itself, strongly focuses on the contrast between the well-groomed duo and their slovenly surroundings. Against a background of dramatic music that includes the sound of squeaking doors, gasps, screams and horrific laughter, the first thing the audience sees is a spider crawling across a wedding photo covered in cobwebs and a manicured index finger rubbing a thick layer of dust off the surface beneath it. A close up of Kim's stylized face honing in on an anthropomorphised spider dashing across the screen follows, while bespectacled Aggie's inspection beneath a table is met with the silhouettes of two Disney-style mice and several pairs of headless, beady eyes. Audiences next see insects emerging from the toilet pan, a kitchen sink overflowing with dirty dishes, pots and pans and spiders dangling from the ceiling. However, the blood-curdling shrieks and horror film music

gradually morph into the upbeat rhythm of a jazzy tune and dust and cobwebs transmute into soap bubbles. A series of close-ups follow, first of Kim threateningly shaking a tin of Scour Away at the offensive dirt, then of the tightly swathed derrières of the cartoon versions of Kim and Aggie on their knees as they scrub a floor wiggling their hips to the rhythm of the music. The sequence ends with a close up of Kim's curvaceous calves, her feet in teetering high heels as she sweeps away numerous creepy-crawlies from the floor. Finally, we see the pad of Kim's finger with its long manicured nail lacquered with scarlet varnish, writing the title of the series in a layer of dust. Therefore, from the musical score to the caricature of the presenters and a dirty home literally crawling with insects, audiences receive a clear signal of the non-seriousness of what is to come. And this represents the program's first incongruity, the first hint of (ill)logical mechanisms and oppositions contained in the text that render it humorous in intent (Attardo 2001, 25–27).

A further important element that signals non-seriousness of the series is actor Paul Copley's whimsical, often alliterative voice-over narration for each episode. As discussed at length elsewhere (Chiaro 2016), Copley uses words and expressions from the semantic field related to the specificity of each episode and elaborates as many connected puns as possible. Although makeover shows are generally considered to be unscripted, it is unlikely that Copley's voice-over has not been carefully planned, written down and rehearsed in detail in order to get the timing that is so crucial to achieve a comic effect, just right. When Kim and Aggie set about cleaning a houseboat, Copley says that the residents are 'a family who have sailed into deep water' and are now 'struggling to keep their heads above water' as, among other things 'the family has made a titanic mess of the toilet' but that Kim and Aggie are 'ready to stick their oar in'. Copley's delivery is usually deadpan but at times he delivers his lines in a 'smile voice'—a 'raspy way of speaking that correlates with smiling, nearly laughing, or preparing to laugh' (Glenn and Holt 2013, 6). In other words, some situations are so extreme that at times Copley is unable to maintain a straight voice and his smile voice will emerge.

SHOCK, HORROR AND LAUGHTER

According to Glenn and Holt, time after time laughter turns up either in moments of celebration or moments of trouble (2013, 2). The quality and quantity of filth in the homes in question is undoubtedly a troublesome

situation and over and above matters of safety and hygiene, these spaces are exaggeratedly unkempt, so much so as to trigger a reaction of shock, horror and, why not, laughter. After all, more incongruous situations than homes in which garbage takes over most of the living spaces and refrigerators teem with rotten food are hard to find. Therefore, it stands to reason that upon entering each household Kim and Aggie will normally react to the dirt and chaos they see with shock and revulsion. In fact, the duo typically have difficulty moving around, as the residents of the home will have usually hoarded large quantities of clutter that haphazardly occupies large areas of space. As the couple explore, often physically having to climb over debris, they come across filth and grime of all sorts, including food left to rot, mould surfacing on unfinished drinks, dead insects and the excrements of rodents. Kim and Aggie's outfits further impede their movements. They wear brand new shiny shoes, Kim's with high heels to complement a very tight skirt, and Aggie's trendy with pointed toes. Neither of them wears shoes that are suitable for mountaineering over rubbish heaps, so viewers engage in their physical exertion. Of course, this contrast shiny, new/dirty, messy teamed with the sheer struggle of physically negotiating the spaces adds to the humour factor. Moreover, Kim and Aggie will quite rightly shriek and gasp in histrionic disgust, but most of all they use laughter to express their revulsion. Upon entering a household where eleven birds are flying around the room and defecating on every possible surface, Kim and Aggie retreat to a corner of the room where they crouch down and cover their heads to prevent being hit by droppings. Surrounded by flying birds both women shriek and laugh presumably out of a mixture of astonishment and fear. Having eleven birds run (fly) wild in someone's living quarters is undoubtedly bizarre, but how exactly does all this become comic?

Arguably, it is the duo's use of laughter as well as their physical reaction as they huddle together giggling loudly, combined, of course, with a series of extra-textual elements that create the humour. Viewers are already privy to the cartoon opening sequence, the offbeat music and, of course, the tenor of the Paul Copley's camp voice-over. In this episode, Copley's wordplay includes painful puns such as 'Kim and Aggie don't normally get into a flap', 'These birds may be living in Paradise but Corinne's kitchen is no Garden of Eden' and that luckily upstairs is a 'No fly zone'. This episode is especially comical because of the combination of animals and excrements in which spectators return in laughter, that, according to Critchley, is in itself, similarly to defecation, 'an eruptive, physical animality' (2002, 47). Critchley argues that animal jokes and

therefore by extension humour involving animals ‘are a sort of code for the body and its wayward desires’—‘look this isn’t really about birds, is it?’ Combined with the horror film music in the background, the scene is quite reminiscent of Hitchcock’s *The Birds*, especially as Kim’s hairstyle, worn up in a blonde bun, recalls Tippi Hedren’s. Only, Hitchcock’s masterpiece is not funny while this scene with Kim and Aggie, on the other hand, is. The thought of being defecated upon by a bird is unthinkable ghastly, and the duo quite rightly retreat to a corner of the room, and do their best to ‘protect’ themselves first by adopting a brace position of ‘safety’ and second, by clinging onto each other. Their laughter seems to be genuinely fearful rather than laughter connected to the absurdity of the situation itself. In a way, it recalls the behaviour of children trying to avoid being touched by the child who is playing ‘it’. Children’s fear of being caught is mingled with laughter, as they know they are playing a game. Kim and Aggie’s squealing shrieks of fear continually transmute into laughter giving the impression of genuine fear and at the same time betraying their feeling of foolishness for feeling that fear. However, it is Aggie, in particular, who laughs and giggles the most, while Kim prefers to put on a brave face, that of a sort of stern matron figure.

In fact, Kim tends to partake in what Drew (1987) calls ‘po-faced’ behaviour; in other words, she is especially good at retaining an overtly serious stance while her interlocutor attempts to stifle laughter. Throughout the series Aggie will often fall into fits of giggles, also mixed with fear (or pseudo-fear) when confronted with especially strange situations while Kim adds to the comedy by remaining po-faced. When the pair present themselves to Corinne, they do so wearing clear plastic rain bonnets, again a ridiculous incongruity as they are indoors. Aggie is clearly stifling laughter when Corinne asks them whether it is raining outside. Po-faced Kim remarks, ‘She’s a comic cut isn’t she? This is to stop the doody.’

Before the residents arrive, the couple will walk around the property picking up smelly underwear and retrieving half-eaten meals from beneath piles of debris. They especially seem to enjoy putting their beautifully manicured nails into oven trays deep in old fat and grease and picking thick clusters of stagnated urine and faecal matter from around toilet rims. Another favourite activity is to pull clumps of hair out of various plugs and bathroom appliances. For a few seconds viewers see grease, hairs and gunge being rubbed with relish between French manicured fingers—disgusting, yes, but it is likely that viewers’ appalled expressions at such sights may well include a smile. It is in such scenes that Copley goes to town

on the punning while Kim never misses an opportunity for banter either. When Aggie retrieves a dusty book entitled *Home Comforts, The Art and Science of Keeping House* from beneath a pile of detritus, Kim emits a series of genuinely loud guffaws, but even without the help of Kim's laughter the irony is self-evident.

Examples of what Critchley labels 'peditological wit' (2002, 47–50) do not escape Kim and Aggie. Upon stepping into a particularly putrid houseboat, Kim opens the bathroom door and Aggie says 'What a terrible smell you just released', opening the way for Kim to retort 'Well it wasn't me... are you suggesting?', in an affronted tone. What is funny here is not the hypothetical fart, which would not be that funny in itself, but Kim's negation and articulation of disrespect.

HOW EMBARRASSING!

After a first inspection of the premises, the presenters meet the residents, who are probably already embarrassed about their life-style, yet Kim in particular will scold them quite vigorously for having allowed their homes to get into such a terrible state. Kim's dressing downs are not always taken seriously. Recipients do hang their heads in shame, but they will do so at the very least with a wide grin on their faces, at the worst with laughter. It would appear that this laughter is an attempt at jokingly laughing the situation off, a dis-alignment with the presenter. This reaction to Kim's admonishments causes Kim to reply with comments such as 'I'm glad you have the grace to laugh' delivered in her deadpan, po-faced manner.

During Kim's admonishments, another kind of laughter can be detected within residents' explanations and excuses for the state of their houses. Unlike the predictable schoolchild laughter of a reaction to a scolding, this is clearly embarrassed laughter. A mother of seven says she does 'have a clean out now and then especially £when we have visitors coming£';² another mother of three says, 'I'd say Ryan was the worst offender but Daniel comes a close second heh huh' and a woman living on a houseboat 'we're actually £too tired to do anything about it£'. As Billig points out (2005, 218), in his discussions on embarrassment, Goffman ignores the role of laughter, yet it is evident that nervous laughter plays a part in conveying discomfiture. Laughter accommodates an apology, albeit non-verbally.

Kim and Aggie are extremely severe with bird lady Corinne, but her response to 'How can you live like this? How can you not notice this?',

with regard to a house covered in bird droppings, she replies giggling ‘They’re my babies aren’t they?’ Corinne also giggles when shown putrid food from the fridge. Research reports that there is a relationship between laughter and ‘delicate’ environments. Corinne is being scolded and may be using laughter in an attempt to ameliorate a confrontation (Arrminen and Halonen 2007) or else, she may be trying to ‘win round’ the presenters in an endeavour at affiliation. Laughter here can be interpreted as a way to relieve the tension of the moment by undermining the seriousness of the situation. However, Corinne’s laughter is equivocal and it is most likely that it displays a stance of dis-alignment in response to the presenters’ complaint (Holt 2012).

Residents do not always react passively to Kim and Aggie’s reproaches, and Corinne is one of those residents who stand up to the presenters through their own witticisms. In answer to how bird droppings got onto the walls of her lounge, Corinne proudly shows the presenters how she herself flicks the droppings from her clothes onto the walls ‘you know what that is don’t you? You know if they do it on you, you go ping!’ She then laughs loudly and proudly at her audacity in clear dis-alignment to Kim and Aggie. Flicking pieces of bird excreta across a room from one’s clothes to a wall is not for the squeamish, but the incongruity and surprise element of Corinne’s bravado is disgustingly funny. Presumably, audiences perceive a mixture of horror and amusement too. From the safety of our armchairs, as viewers we are distanced from the mess and stench of these properties and are therefore relieved not to be a part of it.

When Kim and Aggie open the fridge of a young chemistry teacher (James) and find some very old eggs, Aggie asks ‘Shall we open them?’ While begging them not to crack the egg, James’ speech is full of laugh particles as he is aware that the eggs are rotten and if opened will let out a stench:

O(h)h n(h)o! oh my G(h)od d(h)on’t d(h)o that! O(h)h no n(h)o no no
Oh God!³

Indeed, Aggie, Kim and James break out into peals of laughter when the year-old rotten egg is cracked. Cries of disgust (ugh!) are indistinguishable from laughter although Kim does emit a reproachful ‘Ho ho!’, followed by an appalled ‘Oh you dirty devil! You dirty beggar!’ This last epithet, which she uses repeatedly throughout the series, again, like her response to the accusation of having broken wind, is not funny per se, but as in real life conversation, we generally try not to insult other people so directly,

the shock factor is conversationally incongruous and unexpected. What is funny about Kim's manner is that she breaks conventional conversational behaviour, and according to Chiaro ([forthcoming](#)), Kim's overt disrespect of the grime offenders makes good entertainment. Again, Kim reprimands a young woman who lives with her father but does no housework, 'Life is not just pleasuring yourself', to which the young woman replies 'but I'm only 24!' True to style Kim retorts 'You're a dirty 24!' It is not at all usual to affront a complete stranger in such terms, but Kim does and the effect is comical. In line with Kim's signature insult, the DVD examined contains a 'Grime and Punishment Quiz' in the special features. This quiz consists of a multiple-choice test about cleaning and if the respondent gets the wrong answer, they receive a screen shot with the words: 'You dirty beggar!' Rules of politeness dictate that we do not overtly signal others' shortcomings with such a rude epithet. We are surprised, possibly shocked and therefore laugh.

Aggie is generally kinder in her scolding. When she tells the residents of a houseboat that a toothbrush taken from their toilet contains 32 million bacteria, they quietly laugh in what can only be described as mortification, also conveyed by their hanging heads.

KIM AND AGGIE: THE FEMME FATALE AND THE DETECTIVE

As Nathanson points out, the show's hosts Kim and Aggie are 'extremely feminized and maternal...decked out in pearls, heels and manicures' (2013, 44)—a highly polished dress code that is in stark contrast with the filth contained in the homes they visit. While on one level Kim and Aggie are a pair of middle-aged fairy godmothers, on another, contradictory level, Kim plays on her sexuality by taking on the persona of the coquette. No spring chicken, Kim is tall and Junoesque and her shapely figure is accentuated by tight fitting pencil skirts and glossy nylon stockings and heels. In each episode, cameras never miss an opportunity to close into her hips and legs. Her skirt is too tight to step over a mountain of laundry so she hitches it up to reveal her shapely legs. Audiences get full views of her thighs as she climbs onto a houseboat and above all, when, daringly for a woman her age, she tries to stop a passing dustcart by standing on the kerb and pulling up her skirt as far as her thighs. However, she does not stay in her civvies for long as in each episode, when Kim changes into her white working overalls; she emerges from the changing room to a tune the first bars of which are reminiscent of 'The Stripper', an instrumental

composed by David Rose that evokes the kind of music that traditionally accompanies striptease artists. Once kitted out in her whites and rubber gloves embellished with marabou feathers and jewels, she stands in front of the camera in a sexy burlesque pose. Kim is the embodiment of camp.

A leitmotiv and huge source of humour is Kim's 'sexy' persona. Typically, Kim glares appraisingly at a group of male cleaners, prods the arms of one of them, looks into the camera with a sultry look and says 'they're all muscle' and flirts with male residents: 'Vince you're a lovely man, but a dirty beggar'. Queen of the innuendo, when she provocatively leans on an especially short male resident as he does the washing up he flirtingly says, 'I'm just the right height for you, aren't I?' Kim is not game and replies 'Could you possibly take your mind out of the gutter and get on with what you are doing?' Later she rubs his arm with a nylon scouring pad and asks, 'Is it rough on you darling? Is it nice?' Kim is a tease with an attitude. As she struggles to make her way through a cramped houseboat choc a block with rubbish, she holds onto her breasts and says 'Got to be flat chested I tell you!' If, as argued by Critchley, humour functions by 'exploiting the gap between being a body and having a body' (2002: 42), then the false tragic sublimity of Kim's body collapses into comic ridiculousness. Kim inhabits her body powerfully and comically. Interestingly, we do not laugh *at* Kim, and although she is acting with her tongue firmly in her cheek, she is not ridiculous. We are not laughing at mutton acting like lamb—in fact, whether Kim is actually sexy is questionable. Kim's attitude is reminiscent of Mae West, of a girl behaving badly yet who is very much in control of her sexuality and in no way a sex object (Chiaro 2005). Neither is Kim object of laughter. Like West, she is very much subject. When she makes fun of herself it is not in a self-deprecating way; On the houseboat Kim's distinctive hairdo—her hair is worn up in a ponytail looped over with plaits on top—gets tangled up in the rubbish dangling from the ceiling; 'Me coiffeur me coiffeur, me coiffeur's going to seed here', she shrieks.

Playing on her femme fatale image, before cleaning the houseboat, she tells Aggie that 'I can take the husband and you can take the wife'. Aggie complains that 'you always take[s] the men' and the banter continues with Kim's 'Jealousy does not become you Aggie, come on, don't start'.

PROFESSIONAL LAUGHTER

While Kim acts the part of a middle-aged sex kitten, Aggie, the less voluptuous of the two, plays the role of the serious, bespectacled scientist. When first entering each property, Aggie in particular adopts the persona of the

frightened woman who startles at every creak and noise. When the noise has a simple explanation, such as an object falling off a pile of debris, she will typically laugh in relief. She inhabits the 'serious' body. When she changes into a lab coat there is no accompanying music or burlesque pirouettes that accompany Kim's 'striptease'. Aggie inspects the premises for bacteria and takes swabs of dirt from different areas of the house that are then professionally analyzed for microorganisms. Characteristically, lab tests show that the premises are infected by a variety of bacteria such as salmonella, *E. coli*, etc. Aggie presents the residents with magnified (and disgusting) close-ups of these germs that are seen moving around beneath a microscope. Microbiologist Dr. John Barker takes part in the episode featuring bird lady Corinne and discusses the health hazards present in her house:

Barker: when you consider that 1 gram of bird faeces can contain up to 10 billion bacteria and £there may be 500 or a 1000 grams£ of faeces £distributed r(h)ound the room that means there could be trillions and trillions of bacteria£ within the room on those surfaces.

Aggie: So Corinne could be eating bird poo?

Barker: W(h)ell £she may well be£ and of course £fresh£ b(h)ird d(h)roppings are a g(h)reater hazard than those that h(h) ave. dried onto a surface...?.

Aggie is perfectly serious and concerned about the health hazards created by the bird droppings, yet Barker is clearly amused by the absurdity of the situation. He begins by explaining that the quantity of bacteria the birds are creating is unsafe but does so with the inclusion of laugh particles as he speaks. The complete ludicrousness of someone who may actually be eating bird droppings is overstated by the technicalities of fresh versus dried excreta and as before Barker is unable to suppress particles of laughter from his speech.

Chemistry teacher James keeps a cat litter in his kitchen that he is reluctant to move elsewhere. Aggie informs James that he has carpet beetles and, worse still, flies breeding in his home. When she tells him that they found a pupa in his home his response is 'One?' to which Aggie laughs in dis-alignment while James defensively and laughingly asks 'S(h)eriously, just the one?' Cameras zoom into numerous flies and maggots while Aggie explains that:

They're laying eggs, the eggs are turning into maggots, the maggots are pupating, more flies and you know how flies eat? They need everything to be liquefied, so there's lots of vomiting, lots of pooing all over the kitchen surfaces.

ON (NOT) CALLING A FILTHY SPADE A FILTHY SPADE?

Aggie juxtaposes scientific terms such as 'pupating' with childish words like 'pooing'. This use of euphemisms used to talk about excrements and urine adds to the humour, especially when it occurs encircled by more technical terminology. The presenters refer to bird droppings as 'bird poo', faeces as 'doody', a bad smell is described as 'everything is stinky poo' and chemistry teacher, James, who habitually urinates outside the toilet bowl is made to smell his own 'pee pee'. When Kim has to leave a bathroom gagging because of the stench, Aggie cries out 'Oh uric acid everywhere' and 'This person is just not aiming, there's wee wee everywhere.' Kim scolds the owner 'Dear the devil's living in your bladder!' Presumably, female viewers will laugh in alignment with the presenters regarding the male habit (commonplace?) of missing the bowl:

Aggie: Look at that loo seat, it's thick with urine.

Kim: Men, never aim down a toilet.

Aggie They don't...

Kim: You can pick it up in little balls.

The presenters use a wide gamut of nouns to describe urine, from uric acid right the way down the register scale to pee pee. The same occurs with terms concerning defecation:

Having that cat litter on the floor, you're attracting lots of flies, they're crapping and weeing everywhere so it's all over your surface and your food and the cat jumps out of the litter tray, up onto the surfaces as well, licking out of your bowls and round the taps...

After a close up of droplets of caked urine that Kim rubs with delight between her hands, Aggie summons James:

Aggie: James I want you to take a look at all this nastiness around here.

Kim: It's called urine.

James: I don't want to get any closer.

- Kim: Excuse me it's your pee pee dear.
 James: It might not all be my pee pee.
 Kim: Don't start that business, if you can't bear to look at what you've done, it's a disgrace. You are cleaning up your own pee pee.

Kim is totally dour throughout the exchange while Aggie looks on with a huge wide mouthed smile on her face, which turns into a quiet giggle of alignment with Kim and dis-alignment with James. Tackling the filthy state of what Copley describes as 'the toilet time forgot', Kim flaunts the toilet brush towards James telling him to look at it. He begs her not to make him look but the camera zooms into the soiled brush as she continues to brandish it telling James that it contains 'dried in urine and little bits of faeces'—that are clearly visible to viewers.

So this switching between technical jargon and childish euphemism adds to the humour. In fact, examining the toilet on the houseboat Kim says 'That toilet is so full of stale poopy-doops' and 'Pee pees I'm being very polite'. She then throws in a pun for good measure: 'Aggie have you ever heard the expression on the poop deck? This is a poop-poop houseboat. A poopy decky houseboat.'

LAST LAUGHS

At the end of each episode, the residents are led around the clean premises. Dissolves of before and after in different locales of the property are accompanied by a sweet musical refrain. At this point, instances of laughter occur as a sign of the contented reaction to the makeover. Residents laugh in amazement and happiness and the laughter is convivial as Kim and Aggie smile proudly at their—hopefully reformed—grime offenders. Residents' laughter is of an affiliative nature and in alignment with the presenters. In the episodes examined, two residents actually become over-emotional and shed a few tears, but the usual reaction is laughter. When Kim tells James he is a changed man, he laughs in accordance and alignment, as do other reformed residents. At this final stage of the makeover, only the laughter of one resident, bird lady Corinne, has a different function. After presenting her with a pristine house, Aggie tells Corinne 'We will be back' to which Corinne emits a lengthy cackle. When Kim and Aggie leave the premises Corinne rubs her hands and chortles and she says to herself in glee 'I'll just go and get the birds now'. When the presenters actually return after two weeks and find the house in reasonably good condition they tell Corinne

to 'Keep up the good work' and wish her 'Good luck with the cleaning'. Nevertheless Corinne sarcastically replies, 'I will try' followed by an artificial 'Ha ha ha...I'll do my best...I'll try huh (shrug) try not to come back, eh? Bye heh huh'. However, the duo do get the last laugh as Aggie, ever the optimist thinks that the house could remain clean 'Once she's got the poo under control', to which Kim replies 'Yes and pigs might fly!'

LAUGHTER AND MATTER OUT OF PLACE

Feminist scholars such as Nathanson (2013) have read much into makeover shows, claiming, among other things, that these shows place the fault of home mismanagement, women's careless appearance and badly behaved children onto women's newly acquired social position in the workplace. Women now share time that was once dedicated solely to the home with the workplace. In fact, the transformation in *How Clean Is Your House?* takes place in 24 hours and the underlying message is that anyone can achieve an immaculate home with minimum effort—never mind the expense of the squad of numerous cleaners who actually do the work on the show. This program like others in the genre does indeed focus on the time factor. But unlike other shows it does not involve only female culprits, although it does suggest that a clean home will lead to eternal happiness and joy—as does being able to cook a meal in twenty minutes, or having a slimmer body and looking ten years younger of other makeover shows. This significant aspect of the show is beyond the focus of this study.

How Clean Is Your House? presents audiences with dust and grime, mould and gunge, flies and larvae, urine and faeces and a variety of stench, a flotsam and jetsam of stomach-churning conditions in which some people choose to live. If the pain and suffering of the human condition is the essence of humour, then this, in itself is funny. According to philosopher Critchley, this kind of subject matter is what triggers the *risus purus*, the highest laugh that laughs at the laugh, the laugh that laughs at the unhappy (2002, 111). Take away Kim in her camp attire and her po-faced attitude, take away Copley's voice-over and take away the embarrassed smiles of the 'grime offenders' and the program turns into one of many tear-jerking reality shows that promise happiness if we simply tidy up and lose weight. Instead, the show invites us to laugh and to laugh at what we, as humans, are capable of achieving left free to act as the animals that we really are deep down inside. A cold thought, but a funny one. After all,

in the famous words of Margaret Mead, dirt is only matter out of place, so let us rejoice and laugh at what is out of place in the places of others. After all, we are only human.

NOTES

1. *How Clean is your House? Six of the Filthiest Shows ever seen on TV!* (Talkback Thames Productions/FremantleMedia Group, 2004). The disc has a running time of approximately 144 minutes and contains six episodes plus special features. The episodes included are: 'Kim and Aggie take a fright at bird lady'; 'Kim and Aggie climb a mountain of laundry'; 'Kim and Aggie sniff out the science teacher's ancient egg'; 'Kim and Aggie clean up with Geordie jokers'; 'Kim and Aggie perk up the Perkins'; and 'Kim and Aggie ask How Clean in your Houseboat?'.
2. From the system for notating laughter in conversation developed by Gail Jefferson (1984): *ŁyesŁ*, pound signs, indicate a 'smile voice' of delivery of materials in between, and 'heh huh' indicates beats of laughter.
3. From the system developed by Jefferson (1984): y(h)es, h in brackets, indicates laugh particle within speech.

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A Special Freedom: Regulating Comedy Offence

Brett Mills

In January 2010 a man called Paul Chambers, who was stranded at Robin Hood airport in Doncaster, England, after his flight was cancelled due to bad weather, tweeted, ‘Crap! Robin Hood airport is closed. You’ve got a week and a bit to get your shit together otherwise I’m blowing the airport sky high!!’¹ A week later Chambers was arrested by anti-terrorism police, his house was searched and his laptop, PC and mobile phone were confiscated. He was charged with ‘sending a public electronic message that was grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character contrary to the Communications Act 2003’. In May 2010, Doncaster Magistrates Court found him guilty, and he was fined £385, plus £615 costs. As a result, he lost his job.

This series of events has come to be known as the ‘Twitter Joke Trial’ in the UK, and Chambers’ ordeal continued for another two years.² After two failed appeals in 2010 and 2012, his conviction was finally quashed in July 2012 at the High Court. Explaining their decision to overturn the conviction, the judges stated that ‘a message which does not create fear or apprehension in those to whom it is communicated, or who may reasonably be expected to see it, falls outside [the Communications

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Act 2003]'. At the court, Chambers was accompanied by the comedians Stephen Fry and Al Murray, who saw the case as one vital to debates over free speech and comedy; Fry had offered to pay any legal costs and fines Chambers incurred.

The Twitter Joke Trial was heavily reported in the British press, with many commentators seeing it as emblematic of the failure of state institutions to understand how humour works, and the ways in which fears of terrorism affect how forms of communication are understood (for example, Bracchi 2010; Mensch 2012); indeed, the judge that rejected Chambers's first appeal explicitly referred to the current socio-political context in the UK, justifying the decision by saying, 'Anyone in this country in the present climate of terrorist threats, especially at airports, could not be unaware of the possible consequences.' In doing so, this judge asserted that such judgements are predicated on the content of a piece of communication, irrespective of whether those who saw the tweet thought it was a genuine terrorism threat or not: in contrast, the successful appeal ruling foregrounds readers and audiences, noting that if no 'fear or apprehension' is caused then nothing wrong has been done.

Nowhere in the story is there evidence that anyone involved thought Chambers's tweet was a real terrorism threat; this is unsurprising considering it's unlikely that terrorists commonly end their warnings with exclamation marks, nor do they conventionally give a 'week and a bit's' notice of their intentions. The trial was not really interested in whether or not the tweet was a joke, nor does it analyse the success or failure of the humour; instead, in finding Chambers guilty, the English courts demonstrated their inability to make sense of humorous communication, which, by definition, prioritises 'ambiguity, inconsistency, contradiction and interpretative diversity' (Mulkay 1988, 26), in opposition to the seriousness of legal systems, which are predicated on 'the existence of a single, organized, independent world' (1988, 23). Furthermore, the trial raises questions concerning the relationships between comedy and regulations, and highlights the consistent difficulty regulators have in putting together rules and guidelines that successfully encompass comedy.

This chapter aims to explore these relationships and difficulties, and to contribute to debates about the roles of humour in society and, in particular, the boundaries that regulations place upon comedy. This is an extremely broad area, and debates about the 'appropriate' use and content of humour repeatedly arise in many societies and cultures (Davies 1990; Lockyer and Pickering 2005), resulting in this being one topic of Humour

Studies, which, perhaps, non-scholars see as worthy of interest. Certainly, it is a field that many sections of the mainstream media report and comment upon, as the examples in this chapter demonstrate. Such debates are, of course, historically and culturally specific, and a single chapter is incapable of exploring these contexts in their entirety. The focus here, therefore, is on a much smaller area, and explores how regulations pertinent to British television attempt to encompass and make sense of comedy. It is hoped that focussing upon this area is a fruitful entry point into broader debates about ‘appropriate’ and ‘taboo’ humour in society, including those pertinent to the Twitter Joke Trial, which is predicated on similar, though not identical, assumptions about humour in mass media and the consequences comedy might have.

To do so, this chapter first outlines the ways in which regulations have, and had, defined comedy’s role on British television. While such regulations respond to broader social understandings of comedy, there are contexts related to broadcasting that inform the development and function of such regulations. For a start, TV is a mass medium wherein there is a geographical and temporal distance between the joke being told and the audience that hears it, and so it is much more difficult for joke tellers to respond to audiences in the same way that someone might in a stand-up comedy club, or when friends tell jokes to one another. Perhaps more important, though, are the roles that television is ascribed in many cultures, and that are made concrete within the British context through the concept of public service broadcasting. Britain has always seen television as something that is not merely a product, and has instead always required it to have a social role as a ‘public utility’ (Scannell 2000, 46): in negative terms this has been because of a fear of the effects of mass media and a mistrust of audiences; in positive terms this has been intended to inform a democratic citizenry and therefore aid the country functioning in the best way it can. While this chapter does not intend to examine these contexts, they are worth noting because the regulations demonstrate these two conflicting contexts in action. The idea that comedy might fulfil a social purpose—and therefore be a part of public service broadcasting—is enshrined in British television regulations to an extent that is not seen in all such systems around the world. Indeed, we can see these regulations as emblematic of the ways in which British society defines itself in terms of its sense of humour. The problem, of course, is that societies are made up of individuals who have different ideologies, beliefs and boundaries, and therefore have differing ideas of what kinds of comedy are and aren’t ‘acceptable’. Regulations are

therefore inevitably compromises, and the problems that arise in their construction and application result from the necessity of making rules that apply to all. Paul Chambers was a victim of this, whereby a rule intended for one purpose gets applied in a manner unlikely and unforeseen; he is one example who powerfully highlights the consequences of attempting to regulate humour.

THE SPECIFICS OF COMEDY

The problems of regulating comedy are shown in the phrase, ‘a special freedom’. This phrase comes from the *Code on Standards* produced by the Broadcasting Standards Commission, which until being abolished in 2003, was responsible for responding to audience complaints about broadcasting standards on British television. The *Code on Standards* ‘aims to give broadcasters, their regulators and the public an understanding of the factors which should be taken into account when making editorial judgments’ about programme content, and it notes that it ‘is part of the broadcasters’ duty to find ways of striking a balance between their creative freedom and their responsibility to their diverse audiences’ (BSC 1998, 3). The *Code* draws on extensive audience research, and justifies its guidance by noting that, as much as possible, it aims to reflect the perceptions and preferences of the audiences it claims to represent via such qualitative research.

What is noticeable is that the *Code* repeatedly points towards the difficulties it faces in coalescing the multiple viewpoints held by the public it represents, as well as the inevitable conflict arising from the ambition for innovation and creativity in broadcasting and the possible offence or upset such programming may cause. The *Code*’s key areas concern matters of representation, sexual content, and violence, and these are presented as being those of most concern for the viewing audiences. On the whole, the *Code* distinguishes little between different genres of programming, and instead foregrounds matters of audience expectation, which, it suggests, are predominantly a result of scheduling (1998, 4–5), promotional material (1998, 5), and previous experience of similar programming (1998, 3). However, there is a fairly remarkable paragraph in the *Code*, under its introductory section on ‘Respect and Dignity’:

Challenging or deliberately flouting the boundaries of taste in drama and comedy is a time-honoured tradition. Although these programmes have a special freedom, this does not give them unlimited licence to be cruel or to humiliate individuals or groups gratuitously (1998, 6).

As such, the *Code* acknowledges the difficulty of its remit, as the majority of the document asserts the value of constraint, yet here it is made apparent that one of the key roles much culture has is precisely in ignoring such boundaries. It is telling that the phrase ‘a special freedom’ is used: in using the term ‘freedom’ the existence of boundaries is constructed as a barrier to free expression, perhaps inadvertently acknowledging the negative, restrictive consequences of regulation; in referring to this freedom as ‘special’ the *Code* positions it as abnormal. In that sense, this could be seen as the *Code* giving up on its own ambition, as the document spends 18 pages outlining guidance, but then admits that it may not be applicable to a rather wide range of programming.

Perhaps more noticeable here is that the *Code* does not in any way define this ‘special freedom’; we are not told to what extent it can be used, what its consequences are, how special it is, how much freedom it offers, or the extent to which audiences accept this freedom as valuable. Considering the document is intended to help broadcasters make decisions about the content of their productions, there is little concreteness on offer here which gives prescribed and specific guidance. Of course, the Commission would insist that this is the point, and the *Code*’s role is not to be overly prescriptive. However, it is easy to imagine a programme-maker looking at this guidance and not knowing to what extent they can exploit or rely on this ‘special freedom’.

More significant for the analysis here is the assumption that comedy *should* have this special freedom. After all, if the majority of broadcasting is bound by certain regulations and expectations, why should humorous forms be any different? The *Code* justifies this via the ‘time-honoured tradition’ it refers to, yet it is perfectly comfortable with rejecting other cultural traditions; for example, it notes that ‘Racist terms and terms mocking disability and mental illness have come to be regarded as deeply offensive, overtaking some traditional terms of abuse’ (1998, 7). In that sense, why is one ‘tradition’ held to be worth enshrining within guidance if another is not? How come the breaking of some taboos is deemed more acceptable—even desirable—than others?

That comedy is difficult to regulate is apparent in other documents attempting to help programme-makers make decisions about content. For example, the BBC publication *Taste, Standards and the BBC* (2009) draws on data from a wide range of specially commissioned audience research, using methods including in-depth interviews, focus groups and a large-scale quantitative survey in order to try and get as broad an overview as

possible on viewers' perceptions of, and responses to, broadcasting content. Unlike the Commission's *Code*, this study does explore material in terms of genre, and finds that audiences insist that 'The context in which potentially offensive content is placed is of paramount importance, and can make the difference between taking offence and not' (2009, 22). However, when looking at comedy, the report outlines findings so disparate as to be as of little use as those proffered by the idea of an undefined 'special freedom':

Comedy: This is such a wide-reaching genre, from mainstream family comedy, to edgy, niche comedy, that it is difficult to make generalisations about the audience's expectations of content. Furthermore, opinions of 'offensiveness' in this area are often very subjective and a matter of personal taste, more than for other types of programmes, and most say comedy comes with 'it's own licence' (2009, 24).

This section goes on to note that a number of common themes arose in discussion with audiences about comedy, which point towards the factors viewers take into account when responding to such material. Firstly, 'strong language'—however this is defined—repels some viewers. Secondly, audiences learn to expect particular kinds of material from certain comedians and series, and therefore choose to avoid them if they know they dislike what they do. Following on from this is an issue of trust, and audiences state that newer comedians, for which they had no preconceived expectations, need to 'earn the right to push the boundaries of taste and standards'. Finally, audiences are wary of the overly male aspect of much comedy and the combative nature of such humour. What this points towards is how insignificant actual content is compared to the context within which it is placed, for audiences seem to insist that there is no material that is definitively offensive or not, and the appropriateness of comedy is fundamentally affected by the context within which it occurs. While this may seem obvious, it does have significant consequences for the makers of such programming and those of us attempting to examine them, for it shows the complex ways in which comedy is understood and the multiple factors that affect how it is received.

The specificity of comedy as opposed to other forms of broadcasting is found in other pieces of research carried out by the BBC and other broadcasters. For example, the report *Disabling Prejudice* (Sancho 2003) draws on a wide range of interviews and focus groups about 'disability

representation' in order 'to assist programme makers and broadcasters in making judgements about material to ensure that, as far as possible, it does not cross the offence boundary' (2003, 6). One of the largest sections of the report concerns humour, and it notes that 'Comedy has a special role in offering different perspectives on changing cultural norms and trends in society. It is also a genre that pushes boundaries with the potential to be controversial, especially in relation to sensitive issues' (2003, 72). There is, of course, a commonality here between this report noting comedy has a 'special role' and the BSC's references to humour's 'special freedom'. Yet the further data *Disabling Prejudice* offers demonstrates the complexity of working out how this functions in practice. For example, the research participants were asked whether or not they agreed with the statement 'I think any aspect of society is fair game when it comes to comedy'; 41% agreed, 37% disagreed, and 23% neither agreed nor disagreed (2003, 73). Yet it is hard to reconcile that 41% with the result from a different, but related, research question. When asked for responses to the statement, 'Broadcasters have a duty to ensure they show nothing that is offensive to any element of their viewing audience', 48% agreed, with 28% disagreeing and 24% undecided. While not a majority, 48% of respondents agreeing that *nothing* should offend *any* audience member sends a significant signal, and implies that offence is in and of itself wrong, and with no potential to have a positive impact. In essence, this suggests viewers have a right *not* to be offended. Such a result places severe limitations on the idea that comedy has a 'special freedom', for it is hard to see how that liberty can survive if offence has to be always avoided.

In order to explore the ways in which offence might depend on the content of humour the research in *Disabling Prejudice* also asks its participants to state whether they found jokes about particular social groups 'very or quite offensive' (2003, 74). The kinds of groups covered in the research is broad, and are constructed around a wide range of categories to do with physical aspects (for example, 'disability' and 'overweight' are categories), sexuality ('homosexuals', 'lesbians') race and ethnicity ('black', 'Asian'), nationality ('Chinese', 'Irish'), and so on. While there are clear problems in lumping such disparate categories together, this method helps give an overview of the ways such groupings are correlated by audience members, and signal those aspects which humour might find as a target in broadcasting. Significantly, jokes about all but one of these categories are found to be 'very or quite offensive' by the minority of respondents, even if some of these minorities are sizeable (for example, 44% found jokes

about the ‘overweight’ offensive, and 41% found jokes about ‘black’ people offensive). The one category where a *majority* of people found offence (65%) was the ‘disabled’. The statistics produced here offer interesting, if often confusing, reading. For example, 35% found jokes about ‘homosexuals’ offensive, whereas 31% said the same about ‘lesbians’; 29% were offended by jokes about ‘women’ compared to only 18% for ‘men’; and while jokes about the ‘overweight’ were found offensive by 44%, only 23% were offended by jokes about people who were ‘short’ or ‘bald’, demonstrating a significant difference in responses to comedy about a range of physical characteristics. The report explores the participants’ responses to jokes about disability further, and finds that two key aspects of such jokes are common in such humour found to be offensive; firstly, when comedy encourages anti-social behaviour (2003, 76), and secondly, where audiences are encouraged to laugh *at* disabled people ‘where the focus of the humour is aimed at their disability’ (2003, 77). It is probable that both of these aspects apply to the other categories covered by the research too, but these findings do suggest that there is something particular about disability that heightens the offence felt by audiences.

The fact that this research points towards the ‘anti-social’ potential of comedy makes explicit an assumption about humour and broadcasting that underpins all regulation in practice and the assumed necessity of regulation *at all*. That is, there is no point in having regulation, and being concerned about the content of broadcast comedy, unless it is assumed that such comedy can affect society in undesirable ways. Of course, the debate about media effects is one of the most thoroughly researched yet least settled topics in Media Studies (for overviews see Barker and Petley 2001; Kirsh 2012). Yet, like the judges that found Paul Chambers guilty, all regulation assumes that comedy has effects, and this is such a normalised assumption that evidence supporting it does not seem to be required when judges and regulators present their conclusions.

The aim of this overview of some of the research into British television comedy regulation was to highlight the tension that exists in a desire to uphold a ‘special freedom’ and the often unexamined assumption that mass media can have negative and widespread effects. It is rare for someone to argue that there should be no regulation at all, highlighting the persistent fears mass media engender. Comedy is pertinent here, as its ‘special freedom’ is precisely problematic for those who believe that television can destabilise the social order. The rest of this chapter will explore these tensions via two case studies, which show the regulatory system in action, and the ways in which those involved aim to balance the freedom/offence problematic.

CASE STUDIES: *TOP GEAR*

The two case studies selected are from the same programme: *Top Gear* (1977–present). *Top Gear* is a motoring magazine programme in which cars are reviewed and other motoring news is covered. While a long-running series it was relaunched in 2002 and has been a considerable ratings success since that time.³ It has a claim to be the most watched television programme in the world (Bonner 2010, 32), partly because it is sold to many television networks, but also because its content is attractive to the international business community, and so it is sold to many airlines and hotel chains for their customers. It was noted earlier that some viewers find the overly masculine nature of some comedy problematic, and *Top Gear* has repeatedly been on the receiving end of such concerns. Its three main presenters engage in mocking banter of one another and other people, and it has gained a reputation for containing jokes based around race, nationality and sexuality. Indeed, the programme has such a history of audience complaints and issues raised by particular groups that there is a separate page on Wikipedia devoted to its controversies, which is longer than the main entries for many other television programmes. That *Top Gear* and its presenters have such a reputation is significant for the ways in which regulators respond to complaints about it, for, as noted earlier, expectations are assumed to be key in enabling audiences to decide whether to watch a programme or not. However, as will be shown, the fact that the kinds of humour covered in these case studies are precisely the kind of thing to be expected from *Top Gear* is not the only factor taken into account, because in one of these examples the complaints made by viewers were upheld and the programme was censured, whereas in the other this was not the case; that is, the content and perceived intent of the humour was seen to be significant too, and therefore expectations—while a key component of regulators’ adjudications on offence—do not trump all other factors.

The first case study concerns an episode of *Top Gear* broadcast on 5 February 2012. In it the three presenters discussed the new Prius campervan, and mocked its appearance as ugly, comparing the shape of the vehicle (which looked as if the campervan part of the vehicle had simply been forced onto the pre-existing car) to a ‘growth’ on someone’s face. In the final adjudication made by the BBC Trust that upheld the complaint there is much detailed analysis of a particular piece of dialogue from the programme, and it unpicks the acceptability and unacceptability of specific sections of it. It is therefore worthwhile recounting that dialogue in full, as it appears in the published adjudication:

- Jeremy Clarkson: Hey, now, you know sometimes you meet somebody who's got a growth on their face and it's actually bigger than their face?
- [*Richard Hammond gestures towards Jeremy Clarkson as if he were a case in point*]
- Jeremy Clarkson: No, I mean one of those really ugly things. No, this is just a face. I'm talking about a growth...
- Richard Hammond: [*Maintaining the gesture*] That's your face?
- Jeremy Clarkson: I bring this up because there's a company in Japan who's obviously used this growth thing as an inspiration for their new Prius campervan. Here it is.
- [Full-screen picture]
- Richard Hammond: Oh, God—it's the Elephant Car.
- Jeremy Clarkson: It is. 'I'm so pleased to meet you. I hope that nobody knocks my cathedral over' [*slurred speech*].
- Richard Hammond: It's a monster!
- Jeremy Clarkson: You've got a double bed in the back and then another one in that growth. That is not a car that you could talk to at a party unless you were looking at something else is it? (BBC Trust 2012, 12).

This sequence draws on references to the film *The Elephant Man* (David Lynch, 1980), which tells the story of John Merrick (1862–90),⁴ whose body developed large growths and who made a living exhibiting himself as 'the Elephant Man'. Clarkson's slurred speech and reference to the 'cathedral' draws directly on John Hurt's portrayal of Merrick in the film. In its report the BBC Trust directly highlights this reference, and asserts that 'the audience would have understood this connection' (2012, 12). However, the report goes on to state that Clarkson's final statement is not about Merrick but instead refers to disability more broadly, and its adjudication draws directly from this distinction. That is, its finding delineates the acceptability of making a joke about the specific individual Merrick and the category of disability more broadly, finding the former acceptable and the latter unacceptable. The report does not make clear why mocking Merrick is 'on the margins of acceptability' (2012, 3) while mocking disability more widely is not, yet it can be presumed that a number of factors might come into play here. Firstly, that the Trust sees a distinction between jokes about individuals and jokes about groups; secondly, that a distinction is made between joking about people who are dead and those who are alive; and finally that humour about a figure

such as Merrick who is known in contemporary society only via media portrayals such as Lynch's film is perceived differently to humour about social categories that exist outside of media and therefore impact upon the everyday lives of large numbers of people. That is, the humour the Trust deems acceptable is presumed not to have implications for disability more widely, whereas that which it condemns instead finds comedy in circumstances that many viewers might regularly encounter. In that sense, the Trust seems to assume that Clarkson's final line normalises the stigmatisation of disability, and therefore 'encourages anti-social behaviour' (Sancho 2003, 76), which *Disabling Prejudice* shows audiences find problematic about such comedy.

A number of other factors were taken into account by the Trust when making this decision, and some of these respond to the defence the programme-makers mount in order to justify the broadcast. For example, the section under discussion is performed as ad-libbed banter, and *Top Gear*'s tone is one that purports to capture the unscripted interplay of the three presenters. In fact, as the adjudication notes, some of this exchange was scripted while other sections were not, as is common for the programme. In defending the programme, 'The Executive Producer [...] said that banter such as was broadcast on *Top Gear* would always be an imperfect science; it would invariably upset some viewers at some point'. Drawing on ideas of creative freedom, he goes on to argue that if guidelines and punishments were too strict, 'humour or banter would inevitably become strangled' (BBC Trust 2012, 10). Interestingly, this justification also refers to the fact that due process was carried out; the BBC has a compliance process in which potentially problematic material is referred up the Corporation's management chain, and signed off as acceptable before broadcast. There is, then, a managerial structure intended to support programme-makers but that could also be seen as passing the responsibility for programme content to those outside the production process. Hence the Executive Producer argues that 'if the segment was found to have overstepped the mark, the compliance system and editorial team were as much to blame as the presenters and arguably more so' (2012, 13). Such a statement has interesting connotations for debates about creative freedom, for it seems to suggest that programme-makers (rightly) demand such freedom yet suggest responsibility lies elsewhere if it is seen to be used for unacceptable purposes. Furthermore, there's a telling distinction made here between how freedom functions during banter, and its applicability to scripted material. This might make more sense during a live programme, where managing such banter might be

more difficult, but considering the lengthy gap between the recording of the unscripted banter in *Top Gear* and its broadcast, it is hard to see why it is categorised differently from scripted material. There's clearly leeway being offered here to unscripted material which conforms to idea of liveness that permeate cultural understandings of television, even television which is not live (Levine 2008; Marriott 2007). The decision to delineate between different kinds of utterances highlights the Trust's assumptions about the 'norms' of television, and these are enshrined in the adjudication that resulted.

It is perhaps also worth noting here the long and tortuous journey this complaint took, until it was eventually upheld by the BBC Trust. The BBC had, in fact, responded to this complaint twice before, via different systems, and the existence of a wide range of committees and boards that such complaints can be referred to is testament to the BBC's desire to be seen to be responding to audience views as thoroughly as possible. This long narrative is outlined in the BBC Trust's report (2012, 9–10). In the first instance, the complaint was directed to BBC Audience Services, which 'is responsible for handling all complaints, comments and enquiries that the BBC receives via phone calls, emails, SMS and letters' (BBC Press Office 2009), and is currently contracted out to a separate company, Capita. The complaint was investigated by the Complaints Adviser for Drama and Entertainment who, after consultation with the programme's production team, decided that 'the BBC hoped that it would be clear from the absurdity of the context that no offence was intended'. However, while the complaint was not upheld at this stage, 'The Executive Producer [of *Top Gear*] repeated that the BBC was sorry if it had caused offence' (BBC Trust 2012, 9), demonstrating that the Corporation is capable of acknowledging that offence has been caused, while justifying its inclusion and deciding that nothing needs to be done to rectify this. Unhappy with this outcome, the complainant then 'escalated' (2012, 10) their complaint by writing to the Editorial Complaints Unit. This Unit 'deals with serious complaints about breaches of the BBC's editorial standards in connection with specific programmes or items of content' (BBC n.d., 215). The Unit's response was to find that the broadcast was acceptable, because of the programme's 'well-established expectation that exchanges between the presenters would be characterised by a flouting of political correctness and a degree of hyperbole bordering on self-parody' (BBC Trust 2012, 10). The adjudication once again, then, relies on audience expectations and the norms that exist for particular genres or series. However, the Unit

acknowledged that the broadcast has the ‘potential’ to offend audiences, even though this is mitigated by such audience expectations; though it is difficult to delineate how such potential is defined, especially as the existence of a complaint shows that this potentiality has been realised. It was only after these two organisations had rejected the complaint that it reached the Editorial Standards Committee, which ‘may consider any matter which raises questions of a potential breach of the BBC’s editorial standards, [...] including appeals against decisions and actions of the Editorial Complaints Unit’ (BBC [n.d.](#), 215). It was this Committee that upheld the complaint, overturning the adjudications made by Audience Services and the Editorial Complaints Unit. The fact that *three* bodies exist to respond to audience complaints, allowing audiences a hierarchy of institutions structures to appeal to, demonstrates the centrality of viewer response to the BBC’s ethos and behaviour.

That the complaint against this edition of *Top Gear* was eventually upheld, despite two other rulings to the contrary, highlights the difficulty an institution such as the BBC has in making sense of audience responses, and the care that is taken in ensuring regulations do not unnecessarily limit programme-making. Tellingly, all three of the bodies take the complainant’s grievances seriously, and profess regret at causing it; there is no discourse here allowing the BBC to simply say a viewer is wrong to be offended, or to point to the fact that such offence is a minority view in this case. The upholding of this complaint has consequences for future programme-making for such rulings are understood to be test cases that production teams, for any kind of programme, should take note of. In this instance, the complainant also requested that the BBC’s Editorial Guidelines be updated to foreground the potential offence generated from inappropriate representations of disability, but despite upholding the complaint the Editorial Complaints Unit rejected this plea, arguing that ‘the Guidelines and corresponding Guidance together give sufficient and appropriate guidance to programme-makers on the issue of the portrayal of minorities and vulnerable social groups’ (BBC Trust [2012](#), 14). Indeed, the Unit argued that as they were able to uphold the complaint using the existing Guidelines there was demonstrably no need to change them. The complainant’s pleas here turned on the specificity of disability, arguing that it was a particular category that the Guidelines do not recognise. This may be a telling point, as the second case study to be explored here is one that does not concern disability and that was not upheld; it is therefore a matter of debate as to whether the distinctions between the two cases are predicated on their different subject matter, or if other criteria come into play.

So, in an edition of *Top Gear* broadcast on 30 January 2011, the three presenters discuss a newly released sports car from Mexico, and their responses to it centre on humour drawing on national stereotypes. This is set up early in the section, as one of the presenters quickly sets up those stereotypes in wondering why such a car would be of interest to anyone:

Why would you want a Mexican car? ‘Cos cars reflect national characteristics, don’t they? So German cars are very well built and ruthlessly efficient, Italian cars are a bit flamboyant and quick—Mexican cars are just going to be a lazy, feckless, flatulent oaf with a moustache, leaning against a fence, asleep, looking at a cactus, with a blanket with a hole in the middle on as a coat (Ofcom 2011, 44).

The discussion quickly moves away from the car, and instead makes comments about Mexicans more broadly:

- Richard Hammond: I’m sorry but just imagine waking up and remembering you’re Mexican. ‘Oh no...’
 Jeremy Clarkson: It’d be brilliant, it’d be brilliant because you could just go straight back to sleep again. ‘Aaah, I’m a Mexican...’
 Richard Hammond: ... that’s all I’m going to do all day ...
 Jeremy Clarkson: That’s why we’re not going to get any complaints about this—‘cos the Mexican Embassy, the Ambassador’s going to be sitting there with a remote control like this [*slumps in seat and snores*]. They won’t complain. It’s fine (Ofcom 2011, 44).

The irony, of course, being that people did complain; Ofcom received 157 such complaints. The number of complaints is telling because it is more than that received for the earlier case study, yet this was a broadcast that, as will be shown, was deemed to be acceptable. That is, the regulatory system does not take into account the number of complaints, and there’s ample evidence of regulators rejecting complaints made by thousands of people, and upholding ones made by single people. Considering the regulatory system repeatedly insists its criteria for making decisions is based on ‘generally accepted standards’ (National Archives 2003) ascertained via large-scale, quantitative, representative surveys, which suggest the attitudes of the mass are pertinent in this context, it could be seen as odd that the number of complaints made about a broadcast is rarely taken

into account. All such regulatory systems function with as much speed and tenacity irrespective of the number of complainants. That a complaint could be upheld even if it is only made by one person gives evidence of the notion that it is assumed that no-one should be unduly offended by broadcasting. In rejecting the complaints of 157 people here, Ofcom makes no mention of the fact such a number is, of course, a tiny minority of the actual viewing audience; numbers here simply don't count, and the system therefore allows the taboos of the individual to be valued identically to those of the group.

In its adjudication Ofcom distinguishes between the content of the comedy here, and the context within which it is broadcast, stating that it 'took into account that *Top Gear* is well known for its irreverent style and sometimes outspoken humour' (2011, 45). That this kind of comedy is 'normal' for this series is given further evidence:

We considered that viewers of *Top Gear* were likely to be aware that the programme frequently uses national stereotypes as a comedic trope and that there were few, if any, nationalities that had not at some point been the subject of the presenters' mockery throughout the history of this long running programme. For example, this same episode featured a competition between the U.K.'s *Top Gear* presenters and their Australian counterparts, throughout which the Australians were ridiculed for various national traits (Ofcom 2011, 45–46).

There is, of course, an interesting side question here, as to why Ofcom seemed to receive *no* complaints about the jokes about Australians, and anthropological research shows societies have 'implicit cultural rules' (Davies 1990, 40) governing the acceptability of jokes about other nations or communities. What Ofcom's adjudication tells us more is that the regulator is not interested in discussions concerning the social consequences of such jokes, or whether national stereotypes are appropriate fodder for broadcasting; instead their only interest is whether audiences could expect such material within a particular programme. In that sense, by making jokes about Mexicans *and* Australians *Top Gear* makes it clear that it regularly employs national stereotypes and audiences should expect as much. Perversely, Ofcom's adjudication seems to advise those wanting to be offensive in the future to start doing so *now*, so that audience expectations can be put in place. The rather absurd consequence of this could be the *proliferation* of humour audiences find problematic, as Ofcom does not

seem to see such material as a problem as long as it is expected. It is an odd regulatory system that might inadvertently *encourage* material audiences have said they are uncomfortable with, perhaps minimising taboo by rendering it more common.

CONCLUSION

So, what are we to make from the analysis of these two case studies? How does a regulator go about making decisions on comic material some audience members clearly define as taboo, balancing the requirement for broadcasting to minimise offence while upholding ideas of free speech? How does a regulator maintain its commitment to comedy's 'special freedom' while appropriately responding to audience expectations?

Perhaps the key finding here, and the underlying assumption that runs through regulation, is the idea that there is some material that is taboo and should remain so, at least in regulatory terms. It is simplistic to equate 'censorship' with 'taboo', but punishing broadcasters for disseminating material that contravenes 'generally accepted standards' both prescribes allowable material and, by extension, therefore renders it taboo. That this kind of comedy has some kind of extra pleasure attached to it because it is taboo is evident in the audience reactions in *Top Gear*, and the producers' insistence that regulation should not be so heavy-handed as to limit creative freedom asserts the value of not delineating boundaries too markedly. Yet no party in any of these case studies—including the Twitter Joke Trial—asserts the blanket right to freedom of speech, and no-one argues that regulation should be got rid of completely. Taboo comedy is seen as a problem here because it is assumed its existence and dissemination will have social consequences, with such culture a threat to the social order. Of course, there's a circularity here, in which the justification by the regulators for the policing of boundaries rests on audience research, yet audience expectations are created at least partly through the norms of broadcasting. That it's impossible to define these in any concrete—or even useful—terms, is pretty much admitted in the BBC's *Editorial Guidelines*, which state 'In a perfect world the BBC Editorial Guidelines would consist of one sentence: use your own best judgement' (n.d., 2).

The freedom for comedy, then, remains a special one, but in a variety of ways. It acknowledges the social role of comedy, and its cultural power, and asserts its right to say and do that which would be unacceptable in other, more serious modes. Yet it is also special precisely because it is so ill-

defined, seemingly able to allow *Top Gear* to make jokes about Mexicans, but not about disability.

NOTES

1. The tweet was posted by the account @pauljchambers on 6 January 2010, 4:08 AM. Later, it was deleted.
2. For newspaper articles covering the story for its entire length see Guardian (2012); all quotes in this overview come from articles on that site.
3. In March 2015, one of the presenters of *Top Gear* was suspended following allegations of physical violence towards a producer. In response, the BBC also ceased broadcast of the programme. The BBC also carried out an enquiry into the alleged violence. In the end, all three presenters left the show, and as of 2015 are making a motoring series for Amazon Prime. The BBC's *Top Gear* is slated to return to television in 2016, with new presenters.
4. More recent research suggests Merrick's name was Joseph, but the film depicts him as John (Howell and Ford 1980).

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