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Editorial Preface

CHRIS RUDGE, PATRICK CONDLIFFE

“How many editors does it take to produce a late issue of Philament?”

It is a question, perhaps, on the lips of this journal’s readership—and even on those of its contributors—but it is a joke best left without its punchline. For while it is late, this twentieth issue of Philament is as well-rounded a collection of early-career scholarship, we think, as any other that the journal has published before, a diverse and sophisticated volume on the fascinating theme of “humour.”

Testament to the increasing critical significance of humour (as much as to the increasing popularity of Philament) is the high number of submissions we received for this issue. Yet the emergence of so many serious critical studies of humour may have come as a surprise. Aristotle seems lugubrious in his Poetics—a work of some twenty-four centuries old—when he observed the initial exclusion of “comic poets” from the workbooks of serious scholars: “Comedy has had no history, because it was not at first treated seriously.”

Aristotle’s imputation, that comedy has occupied a “non-place” in the history of literary philosophy, might serve to describe the critical situation today just as aptly as it had served to illustrate the scholarly scene of Aristotle’s antiquity: in both periods critics seem to have expressed a distinct allergic reaction to humour.

One explanation for the reluctance of scholars to embrace this mirthful subject is perhaps that, for all its wondrous effects, humour tends to defy explanation, its very unwieldiness condemn-
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ing it to that historical non-place to which Aristotle averted. In
his 2002 monograph *On Humour*, Simon Critchley crystallises
the problem aphoristically, averring that “a joke explained is a joke
misunderstood.” When too much analysed, and made subject to
systematic scrutiny, a joke can be stripped of its spontaneous poten-
tiality, losing an important constituent of its humour. In other words,
formal analyses of jokes often serve mainly to erode the power that
jokes possess to amuse us, depotentiating and neutralising rather
than enriching and explicating the form. To critically analyse a joke
is thus to overdetermine it, and to discover, as Critchley notes, that
humour can be an “impossible object” of study. As chimerical in its
effects as it is idiosyncratic in its phenomenology, humour exhausts
almost all attempts to be examined. Even studies as exemplary as
Freud’s analysis of jokes, or Bergson’s essay on laughter, are readily
dismissed, as Critchley observes, by scholars of heterogenous disci-
plines and specialties.

Yet the problem should not be laid entirely at the door of the
critical theorists. If critics have avoided comedy, they have less
turned their backs on the genre than observed how humour is
devalued—and remains ever overpowered—in the works and cul-
tures they study. For every critical research work on humour that
is dismissed, it seems, so another literary creation drains itself of
its comedic potential, directing critics’s attention elsewhere. Such
is the case in a range of graphic novels recently adapted to cinema,
where characters who originally enacted quirky and even slapstick
performances in their comic book forms now become comparably
prosaic, the dark realist dystopia that is characteristic of the con-
temporary action film leaving little room for comedy or laughter. In
both Zack Snyder’s *Man of Steel* (2013) and Christopher Nolan’s *Dark
Knight* trilogy (2005–2012), for instance, we discover that the camp
humor so intrinsic to these protagonist’s earlier iterations is now all
but absent. Nowhere is the schlocky “naive camp” (to paraphrase
Susan Sontag) of Adam West’s character in the mid-1950s televi-
sion series, and long gone is the kitsch, dime-store quality of the original superman comic book. Even more disturbing instances of humour’s recession occur within the narrative treatments of original contemporary diegeses, suggesting an aversion even more pervasive. In AMC’s Breaking Bad (2008–2013), for instance, the oftentimes absurd corporeal antics of anti-hero Walter White (Bryan Cranston) are routinely sidelined, seemingly dispensed with to make way for the character’s more hubristic and brooding elements. What results is an emphasis on torment that leads us only too readily to apprehend White’s often farcical body as—though perhaps a little neurotic—only ever suitably histrionic, a locus of stress and misery rather than a site of comedic or even clownish kinesthesis. When Aristotle observes how “the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain,” he not only disavows the notion that suffering might inhere in humour; he also disavows comedy’s potential to profitably enter onto the tragic and dramatic stage, and to express its own form of melancholy or rage.

But to adopt a narrow view of humour’s place, so divorcing it from tragedy, is to inhibit its ability to evolve, and to deprive it of both its political and critical potency. As Charlie Chaplin’s The Tramp (1915) and his antics in Modern Times (1936) affirm, comedic works do more than satirise ideology in direct or empirical terms. Rather, histrionic performativities such as that with which Chaplin, the beloved vagrant, overacts his misery in Modern Times—rebuking the efficiency driven ideology of Taylorism and the harmfulness of the capitalist “machine”—all at once convey the human cost of life under a given governmental regime. Almost half a century after Chaplin, stand-up comedians like Richard Pryor similarly exploited humour’s ability, in all its aleatory vitality, to speak truth to power. Contesting the inequality of institutionalised racism, Pryor’s stand-up—including his now legendary “Racist Word Association Game,” a skit with Chevy Chase that aired on Saturday Night Live in 1975—touches directly on the personal experience of social and racial prejudice at the same
time as it allegorises and ramifies these issues, drawing attention to a range of institutional and political problems in democratic states.\(^9\)

But, whether they are political, social, or altogether other, what is humorous about comedic performances seems often to depend on the occurrence in (or to) the audience of an almost undetectable thought, a dissociated realisation that arrives at quantum speed. In such a kairotic moment of recognition, what is remarkable is, as Critchley observes, precisely the fact that this thought or idea—the realisation at which one now laughs—had been so unexpected.\(^10\) Apparently foiled by an absurd reversal, we express surprise at the irregular and unpredictable way in which humour appears to arise \textit{ex nihilo}, allowing for a cathartic resolution of difference, and even demonstrating truths in ways that seem inarguable or self-evident.

But these twentieth-century examples of humour form part of a weave whose loom was first spun in the historical plays of Aristophanes and his contemporaries. These classical works inaugurated the continuing tradition in which humour could be used not only to mock society but to challenge its elected (and unelected) officials. Aristophanes’s \textit{The Frogs} (431 BCE) offers a critique of the his contemporaneous political system, proposing conservatism as the best means of maintaining stable society.\(^11\) Later, Giovanni Boccaccio would appropriate Apeleius’s \textit{Metamorphosis} (or, \textit{The Golden Ass}, a play of 175 BCE) to compose his \textit{The Decameron} (1353), a collection of picaresque tales that satirise the greed, lust, and hypocrisy of the Florentine clergy.\(^12\) And modern satire is in many ways only an extension of the Greek Satyr drama, a form originally involving the unexpected appearance of a host of disruptive mythical satyr on the dramatic stage in a chaotic carnivalesque, unapologetic in its mockery of drama’s well-known conventions. Now the lifeblood of political puppet shows and cartoons including \textit{Spitting Image}, \textit{Charlie Hebdo}, \textit{Private Eye}, and \textit{The Guardian}’s “First Dog on the Moon,” satire continues to interrupt and disturb, functioning as an antidote to the ossification of orthodoxy, and a defense against attempts to interdict free and critical opinion.
Diverse in their methodologies, and varied in their textual subjects, the essays in this issue of Philament confirm humour’s radical power, demonstrate its abiding potency, and revitalise the contemporary theoretical discourse on the subject. Laura Castagnini’s study, “Mika Rottenberg’s Video Installation Mary’s Cherries: A Parafeminist dissection” of the Carnivalesque,” brings into view the work of Mika Rottenberg, an artist relatively understudied within mainstream of art history and theory. Subjecting Rottenberg’s 2004 video installation Mary’s Cherries to an analysis that calls on the problematics of parafeminism, as well as on Bakhtin’s notions of the grotesque and carnivalesque, Castagnini’s article reminds us of the almost unexceptional rule that where there is humour, there is also politics. Here the “female grotesque” of Rottenberg’s installation constitutes a “fetishistic” representation of the production of women’s bodies, a work that showcases “ageing, pregnant, and irregular women” precisely to foil “taboos that circulate around [them] in a society where femininity has long been equated with discipline and regulation” (22).

Where Castagnini’s study of Rottenberg’s video installation is a locus for the intersection of art and humour, Melanie Piper’s study of the “comedian podcast” highlights the way in which this new media form—exemplary among so many novel, post-Internet text types—generates a new kind of comedy that collapses real life into art. Titled “Little Big Dog Pill Explanations: Humour, Honesty, and the Comedian Podcast,” Taylor’s essay distinguishes the comedian podcast from what might simply be called comedy podcast, observing how it is in the former genre that we discover something new: a comedian-hosted show that straddles on-stage performance and back-stage “confessional” (52-3).

The formal distinction to which Piper’s article alludes—a difference between scripted theatre and extemporaneous storytelling—is a difference more directly the focus of Stayci Taylor’s essay, “Arrested Development: Can Funny Female Characters Survive Script Development Processes?” In this strident analysis of
the way in which female characters are developed for contemporary television and film (“behind the scenes”), Taylor brings into relief the conditions in which certain exclusionary authorial modes have led to “women’s marginalised (or, at least, consistently interrogated) place in comedy” (64). Cataloguing a range of stock figures within the limited representational idiom of the “funny female” identity, Taylor identifies how certain attributes, like “likability,” and certain stereotypes, like “the klutz,” remain unthinkingly privileged in Hollywood and other entertainment institutions (68-9).

In the wake of the recent 2015 terrorist attacks on the offices of Charlie Hebdo magazine, a tragedy which resulted in the deaths of twelve of the cartoon magazine’s staff, Beatriz Carbajal Carrera’s analysis of cartooning techniques seems especially significant. In “Dogsbody: An Overview of Transmorphic Techniques as Humour Devices and their Impact in Alberto Montt’s Cartoons,” Carbajal Carrera focuses on the prevalence and history of transfiguration in cartoons, and the relation of such devices as zoomorphism and anthropomorphism to political parody. For Carbajal Carrera, these devices engender a way of seeing the world that invokes not only humour but at one time represented an important “divergence from [...] idealistic representations,” inaugurating not simply a retreat into myth, but “a turn to a more realistic form of representation” (90).

A similar imbrication of realism and myth appears in E.A. Williams’s “Bakhtin and Borat: the Rogue, the Clown, and the Fool in Carnival Film.” In this innovative essay, Williams adopts Mikhail Bakthin’s discussion of “carnival character masks” to confront the problem of “determining who bears responsibility for carnival subversions” in parodic, burlesque, or carnivalesque texts (108). How, and precisely as what, Williams asks, does Cohen position himself when he continually “question[s] the confidence that [Americans] have in their tolerance”? Williams’s paper shows how Cohen’s character functions as an agent of subversion; how through his ambivalent humour and discomfiting confrontational mode, Borat...
problematises “Americans’s apparent belief that their acceptance of
cultural difference is not only noble, but limitless” (107).

The theatricalisation of cultural difference is a subject both
forcefully addressed and constructively historicised in Karen Aus-
tin’s essay, “Talkin’ Blak: Humour in Indigenous Australian Theatre,
1970–2000.” An indispensable account of Australian Black Theatre
movements in the late twentieth century, Austin’s analysis observes
how many Indigenous plays tell “autobiographical narratives to
mainstream audiences” through particular modes of humorous
address, such as “yarning” and “taking the mickey” (152, 135).

While to read the essays in this issue is to recognise how the
formal study of humour remains both productive and exciting, its
narrative “Excursions” also indicate the less formal ways in which
humour’s operations may be illustrated or reflected on. The first
example is Nicolás Llano Linares’s narrative, “Garzón, My Dad, and
Us.” A short reflection on the impact of Columbian comedian Jaime
Hernando Garzón Forero on the author’s father, Linares’s piece is
part memoir and part analytical history, a story imbued with the
kind of indirect and personal insight that only biographical story-
telling allows. It reminds us that what lies at the root of the most
“talented” comedians is a superlative fair-mindedness, a political
attitude leavened by impartiality and resilience. Then, Tom Doig
offers an appropriation of Winnie The Pooh that Alan Alexander
Milne would surely have endorsed himself. But “Winnie the Pooh
as told by Cormac McCarthy” may forever change the way we see
the Hundred Acre Wood. Retreading the anxiety-laden footsteps of
novelist Cormac McCarthy, Doig’s creative piece “poohnders” an
encroaching environmental apocalypse. Written specifically to be
read by McCarthy, the story is focalised through the perspective
of an altogether more selfish pooh bear than the one we know,
a honey mogul who is concerned less for his neighbours’s safety
than he is fearful of running out of his favourite, apparently all-
too-finite resource.
Marking something of a milestone in Philament’s history, this issue also introduces a series of innovations that we anticipate will elevate the credibility of the publication, better promoting the postgraduate scholarship it publishes. It may already be apparent, for instance, that Philament’s layout has been redesigned, its pages now typeset rather than simply exported from a word processor. We hope that this begins a process in which Philament can be redesigned for different issues. Furthermore, beginning with this issue, Philament will include a book review section, an addition made possible by the generosity of Footprint books (http://www.footprint.com.au). Footprint is an Australian distributor of academic and other specialist texts, and we are grateful that the company has agreed to provide the journal with review copies of relevant contemporary work. Additionally, the journal has agreed to make content included in this and future issues more easily discoverable through the premium resource provided by EBSCOhost research databases, a development that we think will increase the exposure and citability of Philament’s published scholarship. Finally, over the coming months, we have planned to launch a new Philament website, which we hope will not only generate further interest in the journal, but streamline its submission process. Renewal and reinvention are thus at the core of Philament’s current goals, but they have also been a touchstone of the journal’s history, the very substance of its genealogy. Taking its name from a light bulb’s “filament”—a threadlike conductor, heated to incandescence only when hot current passes through it—the journal’s name alludes to its conduction of rulecent and incendiary scholarship. And, in its heterodox spelling of the very word from which this journal takes it name, Philament indicates its openness to alternative and even rebellious styles of critical scholarship, and a preparedness to radicalise and diverge, to interdict and transform.
Notes


4 David S. Goyer, *Man of Steel*, dir. Zack Snyder (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros., 2013); Christopher Nolan’s *Batman* series, often referred to as the *Dark Knight* Trilogy, comprises *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). All are directed by Christopher Nolan and released Warner Bros.


Mika Rottenberg’s Video Installation
*Mary’s Cherries*: A Parafeminist “dissection” of the Carnivalesque

LAURA CASTAGNINI

“People might say that my work is absurd, but reality is even more so.”

Argentinian-born Israeli artist, Mika Rottenberg, came to prominence in the New York art scene during the mid-2000s with a cohesive body of video-based work that complicates notions of agency and exploitation surrounding the commodification of women’s bodies. Usually shot within constructed sets in the studio, but more recently outdoors, she invented and filmed illogical and highly imaginative systems of production orchestrated by mostly women labourers. For example, one of her early works, *Tropical Breeze* (2004), takes place inside a truck where scented moist tissues are manufactured from the sweat of the driver, champion bodybuilder Heather Foster. To play these characters she hired non-actors with extraordinary attributes—hyper-muscularity, excessive obesity, or exceptionally long hair—who professionally rent out their bodies. The website of Queen Racqui, for example, the main character in *Squeeze* (2010), offers a range of erotic services including “Squashing, Wrestling, Crushing & Trampling.” Mika Rottenberg has described her working process as inspired by the extraordinary physiques of
her cast of characters, whom she calls her “talents.” In a recent documentary produced for ART21, Rottenberg revealed this: “Meeting the person is part of developing the concept... A lot of the time the main characters are my inspiration.”

The central concern of the literature about Rottenberg’s work is her motif of the factory, and associated themes of labour and capitalism. This includes Hsuan L. Hsu’s essay “Mika Rottenberg’s Productive Bodies” (2010), which is the only scholarly analysis of Rottenberg’s work published to date. Hsu draws from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s influential account of immaterial labour to argue that Rottenberg’s assembly lines derive value from the labouring body itself rather than the products it manufactures. In this article I articulate the way in which this ‘labouring body’ is costumed and exaggerated so as to be presented as carnivalesque: a parody of the normative body that unfolds to reveal an expansive parody of femininity, fetish, and feminism. My case study is Rottenberg’s early work *Mary’s Cherries* (2004) which, despite acquisitions of editions by the Museum of Modern Art in New York and, more recently, the Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA) in Brisbane, has not yet been the subject of academic analysis. I suggest *Mary’s Cherries* depicts a cyclical relationship between food, growth, renewal, and excessive female bodies that affords a new feminist articulation of carnivalesque imagery.

To do so, I analyse the carnivalesque imagery in *Mary’s Cherries* beginning with the central motif in the video—the transformation and regrowth of Mary’s long, red, fingernails—through feminist interpretations of Mikhail Bakhtin’s influential theory. The embodied mode of vision produced by such imagery is, I argue, offset by the spectatorial politics of *Mary’s Cherries* as part of the broader parafeminist project that employs strategies that function to distance the viewer. These strategies, herein referred to as ‘distancing strategies,’ include the evocation of the uncanny and the appropriation of fetishistic modes of representation. The dialectical
parafeminist approach presents a significant shift from the way in which feminist artists of the 1980s and 1990s employed carnivalesque imagery, and enables Rottenberg to squeeze in a multitude of references that lead to an ever expanding proliferation of meanings: more than can be dealt with in the scope of this article.

The paradoxical, parodic, and manifold logic(s) of Mary’s Cherries contributes to my reworking of Amelia Jones’s theory of parafeminism: an intersectional form of feminist art practice that refutes coalitional identity politics and adopts a “rethinking” and an expansion of second wave feminist methodologies. I interpret Jones’s theory of parafeminism as enabling feminist practitioners to own the history of feminist art through strategies of homage and citation that can be read through the lens of Linda Hutcheon’s concept of parody as “repetition with critical distance.” Parody, as I use it in this article, often involves a dialectic of proximity: it is produced by a “critical distance” but provokes a bodily response of laughter that in times of carnival, Bakhtin argues, unifies communities as it “embraces all the people.” My approach repurposes the carnivalesque as offset through the former aspect of parody, “critical distance,” which in the works analysed often takes the form of spectatorial tools appropriated from phallocentric modes of representation. The juxtaposition of paradoxical visual politics, through parody, enacts a parafeminist approach that belies a sophisticated understanding of the political purchase of historical and physical context.

Mary’s Cherries is a single-channel video installation in which a CRT cube monitor displaying the film is encased in a self-contained wooden box structure that has been covered with stucco and custom carpet recycled from the film set. The box is usually suspended from the ceiling so the monitor hangs at the viewer’s eye height, which combined with the analogue cube monitor, creates a viewing system that is at once nostalgic and reminiscent of surveillance arrangements. The 3:50-minute looped video content of Mary’s Cherries is set in a claustrophobic factory in which three small rooms are
vertically stacked. In each of these rooms a middle aged Caucasian woman, dressed in a low-cut, pastel-coloured work uniform and visor, sits on a cyclopad at a multi-layered wooden workstation. The bizarre assembly line begins in the highest room where an unidentified woman, of whose face we rarely catch a glimpse, but who is presumably Mary, sits. Mary wears a different hat to the others, one with an in-built fan, and thus is both vertically and symbolically superior to the other two women. The first shot of Mary’s Cherries is
a close-up of Mary’s desk, where she is cutting a long red fingernail onto a circle of white clay; a substance visually repeated in the film through the stucco white plaster which covers the walls of each room. Mary undertakes this process with utmost precision, despite wearing a clunky, yellow dishwashing glove on her cutting hand, picking up the nail clipping before dropping it down a small hole in her workstation.

Barbara, who has been waiting expectantly, catches the clipping. She has sandy brown hair, tanned skin, and hard features, such as broad shoulders and a strong jawline. She presents as androgynous: she wears a pale-blue uniform with minimal make-up and jewellery, has a husky deep voice, and her unpainted fingernails seem stumpy in comparison to Mary’s brightly decorated talons. With her fist, Barbara pounds the clipping into a lump of clay she has prepared earlier. As a result, the red cutting takes on a different form, appearing as a soft and viscous jelly when Barbara picks it up between her forefinger and thumb. Calling out to Rose, Barbara drops the object down to the next floor.

Rock Rose, as her nametag identifies her, can comparably be identified as “hyper-feminine.” Wearing lipstick and mascara, she has dyed-blonde hair, manicured, pink nails, and gigantic breasts, unbridled by a bra, which topple from her unbuttoned pink dress. She vigorously rolls the red substance between her hands to form a ball. As she holds it up we realise it is a maraschino cherry—which she drops into a half-filled container. This is the point at which audi-
ences usually laugh in recognition of the absurd logic of production.

This process repeats and, amid the boredom of waiting for their turn in the assembly line, the women work collaboratively and quietly: the only sound that emits from the scene is the whirring fan and the labourers’ calls. Once all of Mary’s five nails have been cut and transformed into cherries, she makes a clicking noise with her mouth, at which point Barbara and Rose start pedalling their cyclopads. The energy produced by the cycling enables regenerative activities to occur at Mary’s workstation: a black conveyor belt brings hamburgers for the three workers and, more surprisingly, a buzzing lamp above Mary’s hand prompts the regrowth of her trimmed nails to full length. The latter usually provokes the second eruption of audience laughter as viewers realise the incongruous manufacturing rationale. The workers then refresh themselves with wet towels brought by the conveyor belt, rearrange their workstations, and wait for the next round of production to begin.

Once More, Without so Much Feeling: The Parafeminist Female Grotesque

Mary’s transformative fingernails enact a cyclical and regenerative growth process which can be read through Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque. However, as will be elucidated in my analysis of Mary’s Cherries through Mary Russo’s theory of the Female Grotesque, Rottenberg firmly positions her performers’s bodies within the
Castagnini: A Parafeminist “dissection” of the Carnivalesque

hierarchical viewing politics of spectacle. In this section, I ask: How does Rottenberg negotiate between the embodied mode of viewing provoked by carnival imagery and the spectacular terms of the Female Grotesque?

In the first stage of production, Mary’s nails are presented in a state of artificially-induced growth that is comic in its exaggeration. This image can be described, to use Bakhtin’s terms, as “grotesque realism”: the artistic or literary expression of the material body in a transformative state of becoming, such as eating, copulating, excreting, or decaying. The production of food is intrinsic to the narrative of Mary’s Cherries, but also features as a nourishing reward to its labourers through the form of hamburgers, delivered on a conveyor belt at the end of each shift. Furthermore, shots of half-eaten burgers recur throughout the video, suggesting an excess of food. According to Bakhtin, images belonging to the category of ‘grotesque realism’ express that which makes us all human and thus incite an attitude of positive affirmation and revelation at our commonly held material body: a realisation which causes a carnivalesque laughter that can be traced to “the collective ancestral body of all the people.” The regenerative potential of carnivalesque laughter is allegorised in Mary’s Cherries by the transformation of fingernails into food that is ingested back into the body by maraschino cherry consumers. Thus Rottenberg creates an ambivalent space where life (cherries) stems

Stills from Mary’s Cherries (2004).
from death (clippings): transforming abjection into sustenance, and degradation into laughter. As a metaphor for digestion, the cyclical nature of the production line becomes further abjected and carnivalised.

Mary’s Cherries revolves around painted fingernails, themselves markers of femininity, which are transformed into cherries by female performers. Therefore the transformation is symbolically located within the same female body that is celebrated by Bakhtin as a strong expression of the grotesque. However, Mary Russo, among others, argues that Bakhtin’s notion of the female grotesque is underdeveloped. It was Bakhtin’s uncritical insistence on the grotesque as female that prompted Russo’s feminist reinterpretation of this theory in her influential The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity (1995), which offers a sophisticated analysis of carnival and grotesque strategies in feminist artistic production. Locating subversion in the unruly female body, Russo focuses her analysis on images of female performers who deviate from the norm and “who are, in one way or another, in error.” Russo’s “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory” (1985), an earlier essay reprinted in the book, undertakes a critical analysis of the female grotesque body in carnival as it is constituted both historically, where Russo draws on Natalie Zemon Davis, and symbolically, where she turns to Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva. Having already discussed Bakhtin’s thoughts on the topic, I now turn to the work of Zemon Davis and Kristeva to offer some background about the theoretical bedrock from which Russo develops her claims.

Zemon Davis has analysed the political potential in the figure of the “disorderly woman” in her essay “Woman on Top” (1975), an impressive study of archival material that documents both literary and festive inversions of gender in early modern Europe. Zemon Davis diverges from the scholarly consensus in claiming that such traditions reinforced patriarchal hierarchies and instead valorises the figure of the disorderly woman as a “multivalent image” that
could “widen behavioural options of women” and “sanction riot and political disobedience” for both men and women of lower socio-economic classes whose formal means of protest have been heavily restricted.17 Suggesting the transformative social potential of comic gender transgression, Zemon Davis writes that

Play with the unruly women... is also part of the conflict over efforts to change the basic distribution of power within society. The women-on-top might even facilitate innovation in historical theory and political behaviour.18

Attributing to the “disorderly woman” the potential for social change, Zemon Davis’s account of carnival is thus a productive standpoint for Russo’s conceptual framework of the female grotesque. Bakhtin’s treatise on the carnival was highly influential for Kristeva and thus instrumental in her formulation of the abject as encompassing that which we must “thrust aside in order to live.”19 The abject can be individual (bodily fluids) or collective (lower social classes), but evidently functions equally forcefully across all its permutations. To formulate the notion of abjection, Kristeva builds on Freud’s Totem and Taboo, in which Freud contends that civilisation is formed through two taboos: patricide and incest.20 Kristeva argues that Freud does not fully develop the incest taboo and, through her analysis, locates abjection within the maternal: an ambivalent space which, in addition to housing horror, is described as “the polymorphic, orgasmic body, desiring and laughing.”21 Kristeva’s theory of the abject maternal elucidates the simultaneous response of repulsion and laughter produced by Rottenberg’s treatment of Mary’s fingernails and thus, symbolically, the feminine. In Mary’s Cherries, Mary’s fingernails are thrice abjected: as long talons, they represent a sinister threat; as regrowing appendages, they are animated as unnatural and monstrous; and as a clipping, removed from the body, they become dead. A reaction of laughter produces the boundary of abjection: as a civilised person we “thrust aside” the clippings, drawing a line through disgust at the thought that these materials could be transformed into food. As argued by Kristeva: “laughing is
a way of placing or displacing abjection.” Further, disgust can act as a distancing strategy that ensures that the viewer is not enveloped by the corporeal experience. Instead, as film scholar Julian Hanich argues, the viewer undertakes a “see-saw process” of immersion and repulsion that enables them to “reflect on what [the artist] wants to convince us of.”

Incorporating the work of Kristeva and Zemon Davis in her study of carnival and carnivalesque theory in order to compensate for Bakhtin’s ‘underdevelopment’ of the female grotesque, Russo analyses the comic and subversive possibilities of female bodies that are “in error.” These are the same kinds of bodies termed “disorderly” by Zemon Davis and framed as “abject” by Kristeva. With reference to feminist theories of female hysteria, mimesis and masquerades, Russo posits laughter—or, more specifically “the laughter of intertext and multiple identifications”—as a potential strategy to “expose and subvert the impasse of femininity.” In doing so, Russo emphasises the element of display, positing her analysis in relation to “the spatial and temporal dimensions of modern spectacle.”

This methodology is developed in the introductory chapter to *The Female Grotesque*, in which Russo complicates naturalised associations of the female body and the grotesque through models of depth and surface. The depth model refers to the epistemological origin of the term grotesque, the “grotto-esque,” and the metaphor of the abject, material female body that it evokes—an origin from which, Russo argues, “it is an easy and perilous slide” to “misogyny.” The surface model refers to the marginal and superficial positioning of both the grotesque, which emerged in classical Rome “only in relation to the norms which exceeded it,” and the feminine, as it is often described by poststructuralist and feminist theorists as “bodily surface and detail.” Russo explains: “The late Renaissance and baroque combinations of depth and surface models of the body resurface in the twentieth century to produce the spectacular category of female grotesque.”
in the hierarchical viewing politics of spectacle, Russo’s treatise diverges from theories of carnival, which emphasise its unifying and participatory qualities, and thus echo the dialectic of complic-ity and distance that I argue is intrinsic to parafeminism. As I will argue in the final section, *Mary’s Cherries* simultaneously employs these two conflicting politics of vision, embodied and distanced, to produce a parafeminist parody of pornographic tropes.

The insights of Russo’s theory, in its insistence on spectacle, become important for my analysis of *Mary’s Cherries* when it is acknowledged that in real life the two “characters” in *Mary’s Cherries*, Rock Rose and Barbara, are not factory workers but professional erotic fantasy wrestlers who hire out their services on the Internet to clients, most of whom request the women to “win.” This form of labour, in which the body itself is the means of production, could be considered as subverting or failing the reproductive value of women (whose traditional means of “production” is indeed reproduction). Furthermore, the ageing bodies of Barbara and Rock Rose are not those typically eroticised in Western culture, and thus, in their occupation, they are fetishised as non-normative. To use Russo’s phrase, they are “in error.” Rock Rose’s size, in addition to her age of forty-five years, doubly mark her as an ‘erroneous’ sexual body. She is the only character from *Mary’s Cherries* whose professional erotic services are discussed in interviews, and an image of her website, WrestlerRockrose.com, is reproduced in Rottenberg’s monograph. Thus it is the oversized, bra-less, breasts of Rock Rose, which in real life serve her in her work as a BBW [Big, Beautiful Woman] porn star, dominatrix, and model, that are prioritised as extraordinary in *Mary’s Cherries*. Rottenberg’s work features two other BBW women (Queen Racqui and Trixxter Bombshell, both of whom feature in *Squeeze*), and thus this casting choice requires close attention.

Russo locates the display of overweight and ageing bodies within a tradition of a woman “making a spectacle out of herself.” “For a woman,” she writes,
making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries: the possessors of large, aging, and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach.\footnote{26}

She cites ageing, pregnant, and irregular women as exemplifying taboos that circulate around female bodies in a society where femininity has long been equated with discipline and regulation. But Russo also accords transgressive potential to the display of such bodies, which become “unruly” when “set loose in public.”\footnote{27} Elaine Aston develops Russo’s argument in her analysis of the female grotesque in British performance artist Bobby Baker’s piece \textit{Take a Peek!}, arguing that Baker’s ageing body is “at a risk of becoming a spectacle.”\footnote{28} As Aston writes,

The failure to recognize boundaries is at once a source of humiliation, pain, embarrassment and amusement. It can be used to admonish the woman who ‘gets herself wrong’ in public, but, on the other hand, it can also yield possibilities, subversive possibilities, of ‘bad’ behaviour.\footnote{29}
Female transgression is therefore located in spectacle: that is, in Rottenberg’s display of RockRose’s body rather than in the physical body itself. Rottenberg is inspired by the bodies of these women and, as such, has described these women as her “muses.” She rents them for their films at their usual rate and never asks her characters to act, instead creating “a situation in which their bodies will have to react rather than act.” Thus, Barbara and Rock Rose, who also perform in their professional occupations, perform their ‘erroneous’ bodies for Rottenberg’s camera through the distancing strategy of spectacle. In this way, the female grotesque presents conflicting modes of vision, embodied and spectacular, enacting a dialectic of proximity and distance to the body.

Similarly, the video component of Mary’s Cherries is exhibited in a viewing structure that functions to emphasise bodily sensation but, at the same time, to distance the viewer from it. Of these viewing structures, Rottenberg writes

I want people to have a physical connection to the work. That’s why I create viewing devices, installations around the films that accentuate the relation between body and space. Through the setting I want to make viewers aware of the surrounding architecture and go back to their physicality.

To accomplish her goals, Rottenberg recycles materials from the film set of Mary’s Cherries to make structures that mirror the architecture on display in the film, and in turn to draw greater attention to the bodies and sensations presented on screen. In Mary’s Cherries, the video is housed in a small container covered with lumpy, flesh-coloured dollops of stucco that are plucked from the factory walls, and which reflect the pudgy flesh of Rock Rose. Maud Ellmann has argued that the figure of the fat woman, especially if she is working class, embodies the liberatory negation of “everything the prosperous must disavow.” As Ellman notes,

she siphons off this guilt, desire, and denial, leaving her idealized counterpart behind: the kind of woman one sees on billboards, sleek and streamlined like the cars she is often used to advertise, bathed in the radiance of the commodity.
Like Rock Rose, whose body is “in error,” the lumpy walls in Mary’s Cherries reject the sleek texture usually associated with capitalism through commercial architecture. Even the walls are making a spectacle out of themselves.44

Forced by the scale of the structure to watch the video alone, the viewer undergoes a viewing experience that mimics the claustrophobic situation of the women on screen, implicating the viewer in the production line. The participatory nature of this experience can be considered carnivalesque: as Bakhtin writes, the “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because the very idea embraces all the people.”45 However, as Hanich argues in relation to the close-up, the enforcing of an “obtrusive nearness” causes a phenomenological distancing for many viewers.46 This is further emphasised in Rottenberg’s video because it is screened on a surveillance monitor: a model that self-consciously highlights the act of viewing itself and thus creates further distance between the spectator and the subject. Mary’s Cherries presents the corporeal body through conflicting modes of representation, both embodied and distancing. It sees the eye as what Amelia Jones describes in parafeminist terms as a “blood-fueled camera” that subverts the concept of vision as securing knowledge.47 That is, Rottenberg’s representation of the grotesque oscillates between corporeal and sterile: the abject, perpetually regrowing female body is presented through a spectatorial lens that is emphasised by Rottenberg’s use of medical tropes, her futuristic, lo-fi construction of the cyclopads, and her installation’s appropriation of the sanitising filmic language of advertising. As argued by Hutcheon:

the pleasure of parody’s irony comes not from humour in particular but from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual “bouncing” (to use E.M Forster’s famous term) between complicity and distance.48

In this way, I argue, Mary’s Cherries repurposes the carnivalesque to enact a parafeminist dissection of the female body, eliciting pleasure through its “intertextual ‘bouncing’” between complicity and
distance. In doing so, *Mary's Cherries* instantiates a transgression of received notions of the feminine, exemplifying the continued relevance of Russo’s claim that laughter can “expose and subvert the impasse of femininity.” In the following section, I will demonstrate this point using the framework of the uncanny.

**Femininity as “creepy and uncanny”**

My videos employ clichés about femininity... I’m attracted to how these trite ways of thinking about women offer a kind of bliss, that is, they satisfy a basic desire for resolution and simplicity. I’m a sucker for the related visual images—girls playing with little lambs and bunnies, waterfalls, and long blond hair blowing in the wind. But the fun really starts when I dissect the clichés, turning them inside out and showing them as they really are—creepy and uncanny.

In this section I examine Rottenberg’s critique of traditional gender norms through the representation of femininity as “creepy and uncanny.” I argue this strategy offsets the embodied mode of viewing encouraged by the installation’s carnivalesque imagery. Thus, I further articulate how *Mary's Cherries* presents the body through a dialectic of complicity and distance that is integral to the work’s parafeminism.

*Mary's Cherries* contains images that can clearly be located in Freud’s notion of the uncanny. Freud’s conception of the uncanny refers to the uncomfortable feeling of encountering something familiar and strange simultaneously. Freud’s essay on the subject, *The Uncanny* (1919), attempts to define the “special core of feeling” which enables us to distinguish that which is uncanny from the more general category of the frightening. Some of the examples of objects and occurrences that Freud cites as provoking an uncanny response include: entities that cause us to doubt whether something is an animate being or an object, such as waxwork figures, dolls, and automata; epileptic fits and episodes of insanity that suggest mental activities are in fact mechanical process; damaging or losing one’s
eyes (enucleation); doubles, including unintentional recurrences and coincidences; dismembered limbs, severed heads, hands cut off at the wrist, feet that dance by themselves; the experience of being buried alive by mistake; and, finally, the female genital organ. In addition, Freud notes that

animism, magic and sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, man's attitude to death, involuntary repetition and the castration complex comprise all the factors which turn something frightening into something uncanny.

To develop his treatise on the uncanny, Freud builds on Ernst Jentsch’s essay *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* (1906), an essay that Freud argues offers an incomplete definition of the uncanny as that which arises from “intellectual uncertainty.” Freud contrasts the German word *unheimlich* (uncanny) with its base word, *heimlich*, which, in addition to familiar, also means hidden or secret. He then goes on to define the uncanny as that which reminds us of our repressed or infantile desires:

An uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.

Freud emphasises the infantile element of the uncanny in his final point of general application, a point which he feels “deserves special emphasis”:

An uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes, and so on.

Freud locates the uncanny in these slippages between the real and the imaginary. It is in this conflation, I argue, that Rottenberg’s practice delightfully revels.

The physiological experience of watching *Mary’s Cherries* evokes the uncanny through disorientation. Exploiting the capabilities of the video medium, *Mary’s Cherries* distorts time through quick jump
cuts, magnified sound, and the repetition that appears throughout the entire artwork in looping as well as visual resemblances between the three stages of cyclical production. Disorientation through such “unintended recurrence,” Freud argues, can evoke the feeling of “helplessness and uncanniness.” Furthermore, through “wild exaggeration,” he notes, such situations can become “irresistibly comic.” Accordingly, poet Efrat Mishori has argued that Rottenberg’s practice employs and exaggerates the conventions of television commercials: “Rottenberg amplifies the grotesque and ludicrous dimension of our space.” As Mishori explains,

Her works are a hyper-realistic deformation of a deformed hyper-realism, a simulacrum of simulacra, a morbid exaggeration of morbid excess. They fake the appeal of fake appeal, they are synthetically synthesized; they are the reworking of a reworked reworking.

Thus, in evoking the uncanny, the strategy of repetition simultaneously functions to parody the filmic language of commercial advertising. Through her dizzying exaggeration of television marketing, which, to use the words of Hutcheon, enacts a “repetition with critical distance,” Rottenberg evokes the uncanny to offer a derisive yet playful parody of consumerist tactics.

Rottenberg’s enactment of parody through the uncanny re-emerges in her treatment of Mary’s astonishingly long red fingernails, which are symbolically located as central in the film’s narrative as well as the published literature on the work. Firstly, a seemingly dead clipping is transformed into an edible, animate, maraschino cherry. Secondly, with the aid of a buzzing lamp, Mary’s fingernails grow at a comical speed. Thirdly, they grow from her body already painted red, and thus what is artificial is seen to be growing from what is presumed to be organic. In summary, the impossible is presented as truth and, to use Freud’s words, “something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality.”

This transformation casts into doubt our perception of the border between dead and alive; we are suddenly unsure whether
the labourers are indeed human or whether the architecture is indeed inanimate. As Ellie Buttrose has written of Mary’s Cherries,

Everything seems overwrought, from the ‘licks’ of stucco on the walls of their claustrophobic rooms, to the fleshiness of their bodies on the exercise bikes, to their flimsy plywood workbenches. Rottenberg transforms the factory line from a mechanical space to a feast of flesh.63

In his essay on laughter, Henri Bergson avers that anthropomorphism is a key factor to the comic. In fact, Bergson argues that “the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human.”64 The small rooms in Mary’s Cherries are certainly womb-like, which, according to Freud, evokes the uncanny because of the familiarity of the unfamiliar womb. Thus, Rottenberg’s transformation of fingernails into cherries, from inanimate to animate, has a comic effect, rooted in the work’s evocation of an uncanny effect that contradicts the embodied mode of viewing that is produced by its carnivalesque imagery.
As I have previously quoted, Freud writes that the uncanny occurs when “a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes.” Rottenberg consciously provokes and conflates symbolic meaning in accordance with Freud’s description of the disarming process in which symbolisation exceeds that which is symbolised. As she writes,

A maraschino cherry and red fingernails have other connotations, so one thing that looks like something will turn into something else. Each thing that it transforms into will need its own baggage for it to be interesting to me.

Certainly, long painted fingernails are simultaneously a signifier of femininity and womanhood, and in particular of the upper class woman who does not get her hands dirty. They also function as phallic fetish, working to alleviate the castration fears of an assumed heterosexual male viewer. At the same time, cherries are often considered a delectable and erotic fruit through their visual similarity to the body’s internal reproductive organs as well as their metaphor for the end-goal of desire. For example, in the phrase “popping the cherry,” which signifies the loss of virginity, the hymen is substituted for a cherry. It seems appropriate, then, that this desirable and unattainable cherry belongs to Mary, a woman whose face we never see in the video and whose name recalls the archetype of the sexually unattainable: the Virgin Mary.

Yet the real-life profession of the women handling the nail/cherries—and thus what is responsible for their transformation—is sex work. Rock Rose and Barbara are erotic fantasy wrestlers hired by Rottenberg through the internet. Thus, Rottenberg casts fetish workers as labouring bodies to clip long red phallic fingernails, gleefully inciting the viewer’s castration complex, and aggressively pounding a symbol of femininity into a lump of clay, before metaphorically transforming it into a bloody red, juicy cherry. In provoking and conflating symbolic meaning, Rottenberg evokes the uncanny. To repeat Rottenberg’s words, this process “dissect[s] the clichés [of femininity],
turning them inside out and showing them as they really are—creepy and uncanny.” Furthermore, in rendering symbols of femininity uncanny, Rottenberg enacts an expansive feminist parody of the markers of femininity as well as the fetishisation of women’s bodies. The bodies of Rock Rose and Barbara have been hired by Rottenberg, and thus their exhibition does not exert the same transgressive agency as, for instance, Bobby Baker’s ageing body might exert. Rottenberg’s camera is complicit in fetishistic tropes of representation that exaggerate Rock Rose and Barbara’s everyday professions as sex workers. This dialectic of female liberation and exploitation, as well as its implications for Rottenberg’s relationship to feminism, will be the subject of the following section.

The Paradox of Parafeminism

I’ve always defined myself as a feminist. There is an aspect of misogyny in my work that is a response to the way society in general is. I have to ask myself what it means to be a ‘good’ feminist. If I use people’s bodies and objectify them, then I’m a bad feminist... I keep questioning my own morality.

Rottenberg claims she is a feminist, but acknowledges that her relationship to feminism is complicated by her practice of hiring women’s bodies. The relation of Rottenberg’s work to feminism is thus centered upon notions of exploitation, both in her casting process and her work’s employment of fetishistic tropes of representation. This conflict is integral to the work’s meaning, as Rottenberg affirms: “In my videos, I cast women with extreme physical abilities in roles that both exploit and empower them by focusing on their real extraordinary talents.” Critics have responded to the work in a number of ways, some arguing that it “empowers” women and others labelling Rottenberg’s practice “post-feminist.” Others have praised Rottenberg’s work for utilising humour to tackle serious themes. Featuring Rottenberg’s Dough in the “Best in Art” category for their 2006 Culture Awards, New York Magazine described Rottenberg’s practice as “art about gender politics that doesn’t feel heavy-
handed,” while Chris Bors wrote in *Art Papers* that Rottenberg’s “theory-laden critique manages to avoid the pitfall of didacticism.”

According to Jones, this debate about feminism forms an integral part of parafeminism, with parafeminist subjectivities themselves often questioning “the meaning, significance, and status of feminist—or parafeminist—visual practice today.”

Furthering Jones’s notion of parafeminism as possessive of a paradoxical relationship to feminism itself, in this section I argue that parafeminist practices engage phallocentric modes of representation in order to politicise objectification and desire. Hutcheon has articulated how parody and parodic strategies serve as distinctly productive for feminist artists, although, as she writes,

> To work it must be complicitous with the values it challenges: we have to feel the seduction in order to question it and then to theorize the site of that contradiction. Such feminist uses of postmodern tactics politicize desire in their play with the revealed and the hidden, the offered and the deferred.

That is, parafeminist parody makes the viewer complicit “with the values it challenges” in order to politicise desire. Following Hutcheon’s theory, in this section I analyse the affective and critical effects of the cinematic strategies employed in *Mary’s Cherries* in order to “theorise the site of that contradiction.” Through this analysis of *Mary’s Cherries*, I articulate a parafeminist dialectic of exploitation and empowerment that “bounces” between the complicity and distance of fetish and feminism and, in doing so, I elucidate the way parafeminist parody engages phallocentric modes of spectatorship.

In addition to the embodied and proximate functions of carnivalesque imagery, *Mary’s Cherries* simultaneously employs distancing strategies of both fetishistic and parodic modes of representation. Rottenberg’s camera observes the bodies of her performers with an intense and lingering gaze, often through the strategy of close-ups, appropriating fetishistic modes of representation. Of the close-ups, Rottenberg herself notes the technical similarity of her videos to pornography:
The film’s cinematic language is rather brutal and, in some ways, it is reminiscent of pornography: in the way the sound is amplified to the different movements of the people, and in the closeness of the camera. But, it’s the brutality that helps you accept this reality.\textsuperscript{76}

Rottenberg’s fetishistic parody is encapsulated by a sequence of three close-ups which occur at three minutes and ten seconds into video, when Barbara and Rock Rose pedal their cyclopads. The first two close-ups examine the women’s movements as they pedal: first the camera scrutinises Rose’s legs as they pump beneath her pink dress, her ring-laden and manicured hand resting on her thigh. Cutting to the same frame of Barbara’s body, the second close-up of the sequence observes her pedalling, and then pans up her fleshy arm. Enclosed in matronly uniforms, the women’s body parts are presented as particularly mundane. The third close-up, however, is not of Mary: instead, Rottenberg’s camera scrutinises the lumpy dollops of stucco that line the factory’s walls. As I will demonstrate, this sequence simultaneously empowers and exploits the bodies it presents in order to present its parafeminist parody.

Hsuan L. Hsu argues that Rottenberg’s use of women’s bodies is empowering as they enable her characters to “negotiate their own versions of erotic signification.”\textsuperscript{77} Hsu links Rottenberg’s “idealisation of extraordinary bodies” to earlier video artists who similarly enacted a “critique of, and exploration of alternatives to, mass media stereotypes about gender and body image,” locating Rottenberg’s casting within a feminist celebration of “alternative body images.”\textsuperscript{78} Having traced a lineage for Rottenberg that includes Joan Jonas, Martha Rosler, Dara Birnbaum, and Joan Braderman, Hsu locates Rottenberg’s casting within a tradition of feminist celebrations of alternative body images, a tradition that is, as Hsu writes, even more expansive after the rise of the Internet:

Whereas Jonas, Rosler, Birnbaum, and Braderman critiqued mainstream television’s images of women, the Internet makes some room for alternative body images that video can incorporate in less oppositional ways.\textsuperscript{79}
Thus, Hsu suggests that Rottenberg’s eroticisation of extraordinary bodies generates a critique of mainstream stereotypes about female beauty unique to a post-Internet age. Agency is a key factor in this argument, in that Rottenberg celebrates the control that her characters have in their self-managed profession: “they are very much in charge,” she says. Ellie Buttrose has argued that in this form of agency lies the work’s feminist subversion of phallocentric modes of viewing: “Rottenberg is interested in collaborating with exhibitionists in her works; by hiring people who seek an audience, she subverts the traditional power of the viewer’s gaze.” Empowerment, Hsu and Buttrose concur, arises from the subversion of the male gaze. Hsu develops this line of argument when he argues that the fetishistic gaze that Rottenberg’s camera casts on Barbara and Rose’s bodies enacts a “displaced and expanded conception of the fetish” in a way that subverts Freud’s account of fetishes as phallic substitutes that serve to ease the male subject’s fear of castration.

The “displaced” fetish recurs throughout Mary’s Cherries, most evidently in the subversion of the symbolic function of the long red fingernails which, as noted previously, are clipped and pounded into clay. Rottenberg’s light-hearted treatment of this subversion suggests that Mary’s Cherries delights in evoking the castration complex as a pathway to female liberation and solidarity through laughter. (Artforum reviewer Claire Barliant singled out Mary’s Cherries as a particularly humorous work, describing it as “a rambunctious, absurdist romp involving the manufacturing of maraschino cherries.”) In her manifesto essay “Laugh of the Medusa” (1975), Hélène Cixous analyses this type of women’s laughter through the myth of Medusa, whose protagonist Freud accuses of symbolising the mother’s castration as it is seen from the “terrorized” view of the male spectator. “She’s not deadly,” Cixous writes, “She’s beautiful and she’s laughing.” From women’s laughter, suggests Cixous, emerges a “stormy” powerful force that can break down the systems of patriarchy. In this tradition, Mary’s Cherries, exemplifies the subversive
feminist potential of gleefully inciting the castration complex and subverting the phallic function of both fetish symbols and modes of representation.

Rottenberg’s “displacement” of the fetish emerges as a feminist parody of phallocentric pornography in the third close-up of the previously examined sequence. After close-ups of Barbara and Rock Rose’s bodies, *Mary’s Cherries* presents a close-up of the stucco: implying the resemblance of the lumpy architecture to the dimpled and excessive bodies which these walls contain. However the relationship between Rottenberg’s hired bodies and architecture is slippery: if she simulates bodies through sculpture, she also treats bodies as sculpture. Rottenberg insists she is a sculptor, and thus sees her characters “in dimensions, in size, depth, height.” She uses women with extreme physiques because “they have a lot of body, and the relationship between them and their bodies gets amplified.” However, read through the lens of Hutcheon’s notion of parody as “repetition with critical distance,” the juxtaposition of women’s flesh and stucco walls parodies such fetishistic close-ups of women’s bodies by “repeating” the filmic technique with a “difference” in perspective, focusing instead on inanimate objects. Thus, *Mary’s Cherries* employs pornographic conventions to fetishise the mundane (thighs, walls), and in turn enacts a feminist parody of phallocentric modes of representation. Such a strategy simultaneously empowers and exploits the bodies of Rock Rose and Barbara as it also counters earlier feminist disavowals of fetish through the framework of parafeminism.

As a parafeminist work of art, then, *Mary’s Cherries* involves a “rethinking” and extension of second wave feminist strategies. That is, it engenders a simultaneous proximity to, and distance from, history. Rottenberg’s emphasis on the labouring bodies of women in her work—on women’s bodies that are constantly in motion, sweating, squeezing, growing, and kneading—continues the trajectory of important feminist artists who examined contested notions
of women’s labour in the 1970s and 1980s such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Martha Rosler, Suzanne Lacey, Annie Sprinkle, Mary Kelly, and, in Australia, Helen Grace and Jude Adams. Feminist film critic Linda Williams has expanded on the feminist legacy in Rottenberg’s work, marking it as a “wonderfully new” form of feminist art:

This is feminist art that seeks neither to express the nobility nor the suffering of women who squeeze and are squeezed... Women’s work, we see in this video, is beautiful and oppressive and strange. Though the women work together and squeeze and get squeezed in a strangely isolated, wordless togetherness, the point is neither union nor revolt. It is sheer wonder at the strangeness and beauty of the labour itself. This is women’s work, this is women’s time. The elements of Mika Rottenberg’s video are all the things feminist artists and theorists of the seventies and eighties used to find important, only here they are made wonderfully new and strange through the surreal insight of “the squeeze.”

This evocative passage locates Rottenberg’s work within a strong lineage of feminist artists whose practices examine the notion of ‘women’s work,’ a history that interweaves positions of celebration, critique, and ambivalence. In a typically parafeminist manner, Mary’s Cherries channels this often contradictory history to present paradoxical strategies of empowerment and exploitation that complicate existing notions of what a feminist artist is in the twenty-first century.

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Notes


3 In this essay I cite the original publication of Hsuan L. Hsu’s essay, which appeared as “Mika Rottenberg’s Productive Bodies” in Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies 25, no. 2 (2010): 41-73. However, this essay is more recently reproduced in Mika Rottenberg, ed. Mika Rottenberg, et al. (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co. and De Appel Arts Centre, 2011), 94-180.

4 GOMA’s acquisition is the first Australian purchase of an artwork by Mika Rottenberg, and its recent exhibition in Harvest (Gallery of Modern Art, 2014), constituted the second time her work had been shown in Australia; the first time was in an exhibition that I curated, titled Backflip: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art (Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Victorian College of the Arts, 2013).


8 Ibid.


10 Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, “Mika Rottenberg: Video Fact Sheet,” document received by author via post January 3, 2013. I note that this box may also be supported by the ground in accordance with Rottenberg’s site-specific decision; this was the case, for example, at Rottenberg’s solo exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary, United Kingdom, 5 May–1 July 2012.

11 This exercise bicycle/workstation also appears in a photographic work produced by Rottenberg in the same year, titled “The Cardio Solaric Cyclopad—Work from Home as You Get Fit and Tan,” digital c-print, 2004, 152.4 x 127 cm, edition of 3 + 2AP. Thus in my analysis I refer to this structure as a ‘cyclopad.’

That these hamburgers arrive from a gap in the wall suggests their production in a neighbouring factory, thus alluding to the necessity of further production lines to create food for further labourers in the hamburger factory, paroding the expansive and generative nature of capitalism.


Ibid.


Julian Hanich, “Dis/liking Disgust: The Revulsion Experience at the Movies,” *New Review of Film & Television Studies* 7, no. 3 (2009): 306. Parenthetical additions are mine. While Hanich’s comments are aimed at film director Pier Paolo Pasolini, Hanich’s point may be read as broader statement that encompasses the work of Rottenberg also.


Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 73.

Ibid.

Ibid., 2.

Ibid., 3, 6.

Ibid., 6.


Mika Rottenberg, 48-49. Rock Rose was also cast in *Squeeze* (2010), which may explain why her performance in *Mary’s Cherries* is emphasised.

The term “BBW” was coined by Carole Shaw in 1979, when she launched *BBW Magazine*, a lifestyle magazine for plus-sized women. However it is now commonly used in the context of fat-fetishism.

Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 53.

Ibid.

Ibid., 56.

Elaine Aston, “Making a Spectacle Out of Herself: Bobby Baker’s *Take
a Peek!” European Journal of Women’s Studies 11, no. 3 (2004): 279.

39 Ibid., 279-280.


42 Mika Rottenberg, “Simply Fantastic (Realism),” 16.


44 See Russo, The Female Grotesque, 13. Herein lies the queer cinematic lineage of Mary’s Cherries. For example, it is notable that the cinema of John Waters provides one important example the kind of grotesque and queer camp typology on which Rottenberg’s work draws. The arguably camp palette of aqua and pink, together with the dayglo sunshades, stucco walls, and bad carpet, referenced Fordist production lines and the white, working-calls, postwar industrial imaginary in the US. Further scholarship of Rottenberg’s work through a queer lens is required, although this work lies outside the scope of this essay.

45 Bakhtin, Rabelais and his World, 7.

46 Ibid.


48 Hutcheon, The Theory of Parody, 32.

49 Russo, The Female Grotesque, 73.

50 Mika Rottenberg, “Mika Rottenberg: Long Hair Lover.”


52 Ibid., 635.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid., 620.

55 Ibid., 639.

56 Ibid., 636.

57 Ibid., 631.

58 Ibid., 631. Freud uses the example of Mark Twain trying to find the switch in a dark room and repeatedly running into the same piece of furniture. See Mark Twain, A Tramp Abroad (London: Chatto & Windus, 1880), 107.


60 Hutcheon, The Theory of Parody, 32.

61 A close-up of Mary’s extended fingernails comprises the first shot of Mary’s Cherries, and the motif reappears in the monograph, Mika Rottenberg. In the latter text, the source material of the section devoted to Mary’s Cherries is restricted to a series of photographs of long fingernails that appear to have been pulled from the Internet. Thus, an analysis of this image is central to understanding the work. See Mika Rottenberg, 57.


63 Ellie Buttrose, “Mika Rottenberg,
Mary’s Cherries, 2004,” *Artlines* (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery), 47.


65 Freud, “The Uncanny,” 636.


67 Here I suggest that Rottenberg presumes a heterosexual male viewer because she elsewhere evokes the visual language of mainstream, male-centred pornography. However, taking Laura Mulvey’s influential account of the ‘male gaze’ to its logical conclusion, one could also suggest that all screen-based work presumes a heterosexual male viewer. See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6-18. For a recent examination of paradoxical feminist visual politics (cited as “parafeminist” in this article) that extends Mulvey’s theory, see Sarah French and Georgie Boucher, “Viewing the Burlesque Hour: The Pleasures of the Masochistic Gaze,” *Australasian Drama Studies* 63 (2013): 6-23.

68 All three characters’ names relate to biblical references; Saint Barbara, who was martyred and had her breasts sliced off, and the Rose of Sharon (from Song of Solomon 2:1), which some biblical commentators interpret as symbolising Christ (but this is contested). Roses, of course, are also a flower associated with romance and thus with chaste female sexuality.

69 Rottenberg, “Mika Rottenberg: Long Hair Lover.”

70 Ibid.


77 Hsu, “Mika Rottenberg’s Productive Bodies,” 54.

78 Ibid., 51, 54.

79 Ibid., 54.

80 Mika Rottenberg, “Mika Rotten-
Philament 20 (2015): Humour


82 Hsu, “Mika Rottenberg’s Productive Bodies,” 54.


85 Mika Rottenberg, “Simply Fantastic (Realism),” 17.

86 Mika Rottenberg, “Fetishizing the Visual: An interview with Mika Rottenberg.”

87 Jones, Self/Image, 213.

88 Linda Williams, “On Squeeze,” in Mika Rottenberg, 188.
Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphor of self-presentation can be readily applied to stand-up comedy performance. With a literal front-stage and back-stage in the space of live stand-up performance, the audience develops certain expectations of the front-stage behaviour of the comedian as separate from their back-stage behaviour. As the comedian performs themselves on stage through intentionally comedic material developed from their own life and perspective on the world, the audience can often expect to find something out about the comedian: whether or not they are married or have children, what annoys them about everyday life, or what aspects of popular culture capture their imagination enough to warrant commentary. What the audience may not expect from the front-stage stand-up comedy performance is an honest confession told in a way that moves in and out of a comedic frame, something that is simultaneously serious, absurd, and life-threatening. The audience would not likely expect the comedian to engage in an open discussion of relapsing into addiction by stealing painkillers from their dogs, and eventually being driven to the brink of suicide from the comedown. In episode 144 of Walking the Room, a weekly podcast hosted by stand-up comedians Greg Behrendt and Dave Anthony, this is exactly what Behrendt engages in.
The comedian podcast mixes discourses of humour and honesty, comedy and tragedy, and performances of the comedian-as-person and the comedian-as-comedian. To use Goffman’s terms, it brings backstage talk to the front. To put it another way, the comedian podcast is part of an increasingly successful form of introspective comedy that “cut[s] the jokes.” From the privacy of Walking the Room’s recording space in the closet of Behrendt’s master bedroom, the two comedians talk about their lives as people and as comedians, mixing a range of absurd and vulgar jokes with frequent threats to kill one another, and then broadcasting these conversations on the virtual stage of the podcast. By bringing the comedian’s backstage self into a front-stage venue, the podcast gives audiences “more of a sense of [the comedian] as a complete person” than the comedian’s stage act alone can provide.

The idea of the self-reflective, and more purely self-representational comedian is a concept that is only beginning to emerge as an understanding of the comedian as a cultural figure also develops in cultural and textual studies. Taking a more traditional approach to cultural understandings of the comedian, Tony Moon argues that despite the cultural ubiquity of comedians, they remain “elusive,” rarely revealing their motivations or the creative processes behind their works. As Moon writes, the lack of self-reflective revelation provided by stand-up comedians leaves numerous questions unanswered about the people who do the work of comedy, performing as spokespersons for specific cultures through humour: Who are comedians, how do they regard their audiences, and can we trust anything they say? In searching to uncover who stand-up comedians are as people, Moon looks to representations of the stand-up in both stage and screen fiction. However, I propose that through the virtual stage of the comedian podcast a more promising opportunity to understand individual comedians appears. Speaking as themselves, comedians may now be more easily identified as people and as practitioners of comedy, and their podcast performances may
shed light on the cultural position of comedians more generally. In this essay, I argue that the comedian podcast provides a unique venue for comedians to perform a hybrid form of both humour and honesty, acting as a new media reinvention of the introspective and unstructured alternative comedy of the 1990s. In this humour-honesty hybrid, there is evidence of Freud’s theory that humour is the triumph of the ego and the pleasure principle: in joking about adversity, humour creates distance from it and allows one to minimise the adversity’s power. Through the discourse of the comedian podcast, the comedian engages in a performance of self that demonstrates how humour is at work in facing the comedian’s off-stage life, and invites their audience to a space of limited behind-the-curtain access to share in the process.

The routine in which a comedian presents a version of themselves on stage through personal and confessional material is not an entirely new concept. However, the expectation that the comedian might reveal at least something personal or private, revealing who they really are on stage, has not always been the norm either. Oliver Double credits the “sick comedians” of the 1950s, such as Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce, with introducing “the idea of stand-up as self expression.” Sahl and Bruce’s style introduced a casual and conversational mode to stand-up comedy, which coloured the comedian’s material with their personal opinions and point of view. Prior to this, engaging with political and social critique that could potentially divide an audience was considered an on-stage taboo for the stand-up. From their place within a post-World War II beatnik counterculture in the United States, the “sick comedians” dismantled the taboo against articulating their own potentially divisive personal opinions in the form of social and political commentary. Sahl and Bruce in particular are credited with “challenging the status quo during a historically conservative time,” encouraging both audiences and fellow comics to question contemporary social order by representing their own authentic point of view in their comedic stage material.
Closer to the contemporary context, it was the rise and fall of the US comedy club boom of the 1980s, and the backlash against the impersonal setup-punchline style of material cultivated in comedy clubs of the same decade, which led to the development of another kind of comedy counterculture. The “alternative” comedy scene of the 1990s, featuring comedians such as David Cross, Patton Oswalt, Marc Maron, and Janeane Garofalo, was typified by the performance of “subjective [and] self-referential material” that had been uncommon in the comedy club system. While still widely used, the term “alternative comedy” has since become largely redundant in reference to contemporary North American stand-up comedy. Many comedians of the alternative scene have achieved mainstream popularity and stylistically influenced subsequent generations of comics, continuing in the tradition of the self-reflective material of the 1990s and giving the style a prominent place in the contemporary mainstream comedy landscape. At the time, however, the alternative label was quite fitting. In mid-1990s New York City, young comedians performed on stage in ways that were informal, unpolished, and experimental: a mode that was a clear alternative to the traditional comedy club act.

With the mainstreaming of alternative comedy throughout the early part of the twenty-first century, advances in digital media distribution platforms have given rise to a new venue for raw, informal, personal, and self-reflective humour where the comedian performs more transparently as their off-stage self. Brett Mills argues that comedians occupy a unique space in celebrity culture, drawing on the tropes of both star and celebrity performance in the way that they are granted cultural permission to move between performed states of “acting and being” as themselves. This hybrid performance takes place while the comedian also keeps both forms of performance under the umbrella of the name of comedy, giving no explicit indication of a clear boundary between the two states. This is unlike, for example, the film star, whose performances exist in
clearly demarcated modes, where they are either “acting” while performing as a screen character and “being” while performing their public persona for an interview or publicity event. The comedian’s performance also differs from the reality TV star’s mode, since the latter constantly performs as a version of themselves that is rarely understood as “acting” in a public performance as if upon a literal stage. Their performance, rather, is generally constructed as “being” only the performance of a private self in public. By contrast, the stand-up comedian who appears as a panel guest on a late night talk show often uses modified chunks from their stage act in place of the kinds of personal anecdotes that may be expected from celebrities in such a forum. The stand-up is ostensibly not performing the “act” of themselves in that moment, yet by bringing elements of their stage performance into the performance of their “being”, the lines between the two identity positions are blurred. In this context, the comedian podcast could be considered a new genre or adaptation of mainstream-alternative comedy, where comedians consistently perform in off-stage states of “being” themselves before a non-co-present audience, rather than “acting” themselves through their pre-prepared stage routine for a live audience in a room.

The comedian podcast gives comedians, as both podcast hosts and interview subjects, a forum that allows direct and intimate communication with audiences in ways unmediated by content regulations, advertiser requirements, or the politics of comedy club bookings. The stand-up comedian podcast often takes the form of an unstructured interview between host and guest, as in Marc Maron’s WTF or Pete Holmes’s You Made it Weird, or an unstructured conversation between two hosts, such as in Anthony and Behrendt’s Walking the Room, or in its Australian sister podcast TOFOP with Wil Anderson and Charlie Clausen. It may even allow for the monologue of a single comic, such as in Bill Burr’s Monday Morning Podcast or in the introductory self-reflective monologues from Maron on WTF. The flexible, unstructured form of the podcast allows comedians to
self-reflexively dissect stand-up comedy as both a craft and a business, enabling them to comment on their place in the industry and their experiences as comics. The podcast is the place where a story may be told for the first time, only later refined into a performed joke or chunk of stage material. It is the raw, experimental testing ground for new material and for the working through of thoughts and ideas about current events or personal circumstances, although it is without the burden of a financial imperative or a co-present audience who requires the comedian to constantly and consistently attempt to elicit laughter.

In his writing on comedy podcasts, Vince Meserko claims that the distinction between comedian and podcaster is becoming increasingly difficult to identify within the current Los Angeles comedy community.15 The same trend can be seen emerging among Australian stand-ups. For example, the online guide to the 2014 Melbourne International Comedy Festival highlights an extensive list of almost thirty podcasts hosted by Australian comedians, including those of Wil Anderson, Justin Hamilton, Peter Helliar, and Josh Thomas. Comedians are embracing the podcast as a tool of both artistic expression and self-promotion that allows them to reach their audience in “the most direct, intimate way.”16 The nature of the podcast as a portable, on-demand form of entertainment that can “time-shift and place-shift content”17 allows audiences to actively seek out the specific type of content they want, usually with no additional cost beyond that of the listener’s existing internet connection and a portable digital audio device, be it a smartphone, tablet device, or other MP3 player. The accessibility of the podcast allows the listener to integrate it into their daily routine whenever and however they want: commuting, exercising, working, doing everyday household chores. Michael Bull writes on the everyday use of music on portable MP3 players like the iPod, arguing that the portable, on-demand music library has the ability to isolate an individual from the sociality of public spaces, turning the user’s
focus inward and onto a personal soundtrack of their own choice, a “personalised narrative” set to a personalised soundscape.18

By listening to the comedian podcast, the individual’s attention to the social world is similarly focused on themselves and the conversation they are now privy to, as a third party and after the fact. The individual may be disconnected from their immediate surroundings through sound but, for the listener of a podcast such as Walking the Room, they are also immersed in the backstage world of their chosen comedians. The individual’s inward focus generates personal reactions to the conversation to which they are an absent aural observer. They may react with laughter or pathos, agree or disagree with opinions or behaviour, or identify elements of the discussion that allow the listener to mentally nod along, registering their recognition of the podcaster’s story as something that relates to their own life. The integration of the podcast into the everyday lives of listeners, paired with the immersive nature of the mobile listening device that disconnects the listener from their immediate surroundings, adds to the sense of intimate and direct communication between podcaster and listener.

It is Walking the Room’s originating principle of candid conversation between two comedians whose careers in the entertainment industry have not exactly turned out as they had hoped that works to endear the listener to the comedians in their acts of “being” their off-stage selves. Both originating in the San Francisco alternative comedy scene of the early 1990s, Greg Behrendt and Dave Anthony’s comedy careers had reached a stalling point at the time of the podcast’s inception in 2010. Behrendt’s sudden fame in the self-help world as co-writer of the bestselling book He’s Just Not That Into You, as well as his multiple appearances on Oprah, and a stint as host of his own daytime talk show (on which Anthony also worked as a writer), had put him in a position at odds with his self-image as a stand-up. His comedy shows had begun to attract audiences whose members were more often interested in relationship advice
than in comedy. As his audiences dwindled, Behrendt repeatedly considered quitting stand-up entirely. Anthony, meanwhile, after what he describes as a history of self-sabotage that resulted in his own stunted career, took a break from performing stand-up comedy to care for his young son, working primarily as a writer and commercial actor. It is out of these trying circumstances that Walking the Room began. For somewhere between sixty to eighty minutes per week, Anthony and Behrendt’s conversations, which occasionally include guests, chronicle the ups and downs of their lives and careers through the discourses of honesty and humour, creating a performance that fellow comedian and podcaster Paul Gilmartin encapsulates in his description of the show as “funny and honest and dark and wrong.” By aiming to be a candid reflection of the two comedians’ lives and selves, the podcast seeks to illustrate, as Anthony describes it, that “just because your hopes and dreams died a horrible, fiery death doesn’t mean that you can’t still have a great life.”

With its open depiction of things not always going right for the two hosts, Walking the Room becomes not only a weekly hour or so of comedic entertainment for the regular listener. Rather, as the listener identifies with or forms a parasocial bond to the podcasters, the show also becomes a social event that is akin to the practice of checking in with friends. Episodes act as serialised instalments that form an ongoing narrative of Behrendt and Anthony’s lives, so that as the listener tunes in to hear what is happening they also seek to engage with the latest in an ongoing collection of narrational plots. What are the latest stories about Anthony’s assortment of bizarre and annoying neighbours, for instance, characters who are already well known to frequent listeners by codenames such as Crickets, Linus, and the Hobotangs? What personal or professional misfortune has caused Behrendt to once again consider quitting stand-up comedy in favour of professionally designing pants, focusing on his instrumental surf music band, or going to barber college? Has
either of the comics been through a particularly rough weekend of shows with idiotic hecklers, brawling audience members, or near-deaths in the crowd? And what is the latest addition to the pair’s recurring comedic riffs, which often span multiple episodes, such as the fictional podcast about dollhouse construction called Little Big Dollhouse Explanations, or the duo’s bemused fascination with the Juggalo culture of the rap-metal band Insane Clown Posse?

Mark Rozeman draws a comparison between Walking the Room and HBO drama The Wire for the way in which each episode builds on the one previously podcast.24 Walking The Room develops through the elaboration of Behrendt and Anthony’s continuing day-to-day life stories, recurring jokes, and references, and the expansion of the ever more refined lexicon of the show, which has itself elicited a fan-written glossary that is designed to bring new listeners up to speed on the language of the show and its listeners, who are themselves christened as “cuddlahs.”25 The show confirms the podcast as a form that encourages the interested listener to keep returning in order to find out how its hosts, in this case Behrendt and Anthony, are doing, and to stay involved in the ever-growing pool of in-jokes shared between the two comedians themselves, the comedians and their listeners, and between the podcast’s online community.

Double compares the relationship between the audience and on-stage comedic performer to other relationships formed in everyday life, noting the pleasure the audience finds in “think[ing] of the comedian as somebody we actually know.”26 The podcast is not only a venue for the comedian to perform honestly, to practise “being” their off-stage self, but also to engage in an intimate and direct communication mode with audiences, which, with the ongoing nature of regular instalments, enhances the parasocial bond the audience member feels for the comedian. The mixed discourses of humour and personal truth that are presented in the comedian podcast serve to position the comedian as a figure the audience feels they know, developing what is perhaps an even more enhanced state of
parasocial connection than would be achieved if the audience were to see the comedian’s stage performance alone. The comedian themselves becomes what appeals to the podcast’s audiences rather than the material they might talk about or their particular approach to material on stage.27

This is achieved not only through identification with the comedian’s sense of humour or take on the world, as would usually occur in the usual stage performance of stand-up, but because of the personal stories the comedian shares, and the way the comedian allows the audience into their lives and behind the curtain of their work, not only as stand-up comics, but as performers in the entertainment industry more generally. Through Walking the Room, listeners get to know the hosts not only as stand-ups, but through their tales of their other work as well: Anthony as an actor in commercials and television writer for programs such as Talking Dead and Maron; Behrendt as a musician and author of the dating self-help books whose notoriety he can’t seem to escape. The ongoing and personal nature of the one-sided conversation between podcaster and listener leaves the listener with the sense that the comedian is somebody that they know, and actively seeks them out each week to spend time with them through a new instalment of the show.

In the case of Walking the Room, an extended interruption to its weekly schedule left dedicated fans speculating on the reason for its absence, and reaching out to Anthony and Behrendt on social media. The candid honesty that both comedians had strived for throughout the podcast’s run, as well as the reaction from listeners to its absence, necessitated an honest explanation. After a six-week break in Walking the Room’s schedule in early 2013, the podcast returned in April with episode 144, “A Very Special Episode.” In this episode, as mentioned earlier, Behrendt discusses his relapse into addiction by way of his use of readily available dog painkillers. It is an inherently tragicomic event: that a husband and father who has previously detailed his struggles with addiction, anxiety,
and depression, should end a fifteen-year stretch of sobriety not by returning to alcohol, street drugs, or prescription pills, but by surreptitiously pilfering heavy-duty painkillers, intended for his elderly dogs. In talking about it on Walking the Room and explaining the podcast’s extended absence, Behrendt and Anthony recognise and acknowledge the absurdity of the circumstances of Behrendt’s relapse. After Behrendt admits he had not been sober for some time, the two play out a dialogue in which Anthony assumes an innocent and genuine enquiring tone, although he clearly knows the circumstances in advance:

GREG BEHRENDT    I wasn’t sober and I had not been sober.
DAVE ANTHONY    For a little while.
GB    Yeah, for about a year [laughs].
DA    Okay, so you were drinking?
GB    No, no, I don’t—no I wasn’t drinking
DA    So, you were doing cocaine?
GB    I did not do cocaine.
DA    So, you were—not meth, you don’t seem like a meth guy.
GB    No, no, no, the show would’ve been much better.
DA    No, yeah, I agree with that.
GB    There would’ve been no excuse for our show.
DA    So, you were taking, let’s say... like, codeine?
GB    No, but close.
DA    Like, you were doing like a cough syrup kind of thing?
GB    No, not cough syrup.
DA    You were taking vicodin?
GB    Yes!
DA    You were taking vicodin.
GB    Yes.
DA    What kind of vicodin?
GB    Well, here’s the thing. I was taking the dog’s vicodin.
DA    [laughs].

Throughout Behrendt’s honest retelling of the process of his relapse, the two continue to riff on the absurdity of Behrendt’s use of dog pills, introducing the dog in a drug deal metaphor, where Behrendt
secretly meets the dog to make the exchange, and joking that he has to attend Narcotics Anonymous meetings for dogs.

The podcast provides a unique stage on which to joke about something so tragicomic, confessional, and personal to the comedian. An addict making light of their recent relapse (dog pills or no) is a topic that could not be easily honed into a tight chunk of stage material designed to appeal to a broad audience unfamiliar with at least some of the personal history of the comedian. While the raw and unpolished tradition of alternative comedy is continued through the comedian podcast, the podcast benefits from being part of a larger serialised life narrative: 143 episodes of Walking the Room have come before this confession of Behrendt’s relapse. The listener has an extensive backstory of the person they have come to know as Behrendt, which includes the ups and downs of his life and career as he has shared them with the audience before reaching this point. His confession is contextualised, and discussing a serious personal issue through joking discourse does not diminish the gravity of the situation, but rather, realising the essence of tragicomedy, serves to temporarily suspend the weight of it.²⁸

The blend of comedy and confession in Behrendt’s retelling of his relapse is an example of the way the comedian podcast is positioned as a new form of alternative comedy. Switching to a serious, introspective tone, Behrendt references his history of depression and addiction as previously discussed on the podcast. He details the process of becoming addicted to the dog’s painkillers: this begins when he takes half a pill at a stressful period of his life; he then uses them on-and-off with greater frequency as a means of self-medicating his anxiety and depression; and, after the death of one of his two elderly dogs, an excess of unused pills becomes available to him. Behrendt eventually reveals that constantly withdrawing from his use of the painkillers has exacerbated his existing mental health issues and caused him to become suicidal. He matter-of-factly recounts hitting his rock bottom, doing so in a way that is both
confessional and seeking of understanding, not only from Anthony, his friend and co-host, but from the podcast’s listeners as well:

GB: This is something that I can say and I just know people will get it and then so I don’t have to explain it. Everybody has shit.

DA: Yeah.

GB: And everybody has shit that they don’t deal with. Some of that shit is buried in there from their early lives and the problem with it is—here’s something about getting old: that shit wants out, and it grows and grows and grows. And if you don’t go to a therapist, and tell the therapist the fucking truth when you pay for them, and you don’t go to your meetings and you don’t have a sponsor, and you don’t even tell your best friend who you do a podcast with every week—

DA: Yeah.

GB: Shit starts to build up.

DA: Yep.

GB: And suddenly your life is completely unmanageable, even on the Lexapro. And I fucking... just one weekend, boom. I took, like, five.

DA: Five of the dog pills?!

GB: Over about a three- or four-day period, during a very, very stressful time in my life... Anyway, the point is, I hit the wall.

DA: Yeah

GB: I told my—you know. I just fucking... I had to go—I had to get help.

DA: Yeah.

GB: And I went for help.

DA: You told everybody, you went for help.

GB: I went for help, ’cause I didn’t want to die.

DA: Yep.

GB: And I didn’t want to keep lying and I just... so it just—I went for help.

This conversation stems from the private recording space of the Walking the Room closet, intended to be heard through the intimate broadcast context of the podcast, and integrated into the everyday activities of the listener. Its confessional nature and the illusion of one-on-one communication that the podcast offers is not a type of communication that would be found on the traditional live comedy club stage. There is no humorous intent on the part of Behrendt and Anthony in this part of the conversation, but rather an invitation into
Behrendt’s headspace that encourages the audience to identify with his situation. Speaking of his situation in terms of a universal experience—affirming that everyone has emotional issues that burden them and our human instinct is to not reveal them to others—Behrendt creates an allegiance between the comedians and the audience. As laughter acknowledges and forges a sense of allegiance between comedian and audience, and among members of the audience in a live stand-up comedy performance, so too does the sharing of personal experience in the humour-honesty discourse of the podcast.\(^{30}\)

An example of this kind of serious, tragicomic, and emotional revelation incongruously appearing in a live comedy stage context occurs in Tig Notaro’s \textit{Live}. In this recording of an August 2012 set at a Los Angeles comedy venue, Largo, Notaro takes the stage a few days after being diagnosed with breast cancer.\(^{31}\) Throughout the set, Notaro unloads about a series of personal tragedies happening in a short amount of time: being hospitalised with pneumonia and a life-threatening intestinal infection, the sudden death of her mother, breaking up with her girlfriend, and her cancer diagnosis. Responding to audience applause, Notaro opens the set with an overly bright “Good evening, hello, I have cancer, how are you?” The audience’s laughter becomes increasingly sparse and uncomfortable as they begin to realise that Notaro is serious. It is simultaneously a personal revelation and a non-comedic topic: a combination not typically expected from a stand-up comedy performance. In addition, as the cliché dictates, comedy equals tragedy plus time: but here, time is not a factor in the equation, and thus this disrupts the formulaic expectations of comedy. Notaro uses the stage to work through her personal tragedies as they are still in the process of happening.

Throughout the set, Notaro repeatedly apologises to the audience for her inability to tell any of her pre-written jokes and the heavy, personal tone of the set. Attuned to the audience’s reaction, she often stops to assure the audience that “it’s okay,” calling out audience members for laughing too much, or making sympathetic
sounds. When she asks the audience if she should just transition into her jokes, the audience vocally responds in the negative, and supports Notaro in her obvious need to work through her current situation on stage. When she ends the set with one of her pre-prepared jokes, the conceit of the joke (frustration at being passed by a bee while stuck in traffic) is recognised by the audience as incongruously false as against the rest of Notaro’s set. The audience is appreciative of the authenticity of Notaro’s soul-baring performance, and her tragi-comic attitude has the effect of uniting the audience in a raw, human moment. Live is a recorded performance so unique in its break from the typical expectations of live stand-up comedy performance that it garnered Notaro a significant amount of media attention, and praise from other comedians, including Louis C. K., who released Live as a digital album through his website.

The unusualness of the raw honesty of Notaro’s Live set is something that is made less out of place in the comedian podcast by key features of the form, such as the lack of both a co-present audience and the pressure to be consistently funny. The comedian lets the audience in to their lives in ways previously unavailable in the context of comedy stage performance. The intimacy of the podcast form and the strong sense of a parasocial bond between listener and performer is continually negotiated on the emerging virtual stage of the podcast. In Walking the Room’s “A Very Special Episode,” Anthony expresses his annoyance with the gossip and speculation in which fans had engaged during the podcast’s hiatus. Both hosts express their appreciation for their fan base, but Anthony clarifies that, despite the way the comedians have invited the listeners into their lives, there is still a lot in their lives that remains private, details that the listeners would never know about:

**DA** A lot of you guys feel like you’re our friends and you are in a way, but we also don’t owe you anything... You don’t get to come into our lives as much as my sister or my best friend. You’re just not there, and I’m sorry if you can’t take that.
Here Anthony articulates the particular parasocial bond the listener feels for the comedian, and its inherently one-sided nature. While Anthony and Behrendt are seemingly accessible to their fans on social media platforms, like Twitter and Facebook, the volume of communication from listeners they receive makes it impossible, as Anthony goes on to point out, for significant (whether in quantity or quality) personal one-on-one interaction to take place. Therefore, the relationship between the listener and the comedian remains of a one-sided, parasocial nature. Yet this relationship can seem closer to the listener than the parasocial relationship that is forged with a comedian or other celebrity through traditional media venues, where there is a lesser sense of intimate, direct communication, and where the everyday integration enabled by the podcast is unavailable.

Lawrence Grossberg writes of the affective response and connection that fans feel to their chosen cultural texts, and how the fan uses a text in the construction of their own identity, “authoriz[ing]” the text to speak for them. Similar to the role of the on-stage stand-up comic acting as a spokesperson for the values of a culture, the comedian podcaster, in the state of performing the “being” of themselves in the more intimate setting of the podcast, can be thought of as acting as a spokesperson for the individual listener, or smaller community of listeners, rather than for the broader culture at large. In this seemingly more intimate, back-stage context, the fan may feel a stronger parasocial bond, or a stronger sense of entitlement to access the comedian’s off-stage life. However, here Anthony is emphasising the notion that, despite the back-stage nature of self-performance in the podcast, the form remains a public stage where elements of the comedian’s private self and private life can remain private. This reinforces the idea of the comedian podcast as a public venue for the comedian to perform the state of being themselves. While the comedian podcast provides a sense of access to the comedian’s backstage self, it remains a only a partially backstage self that is performed, by virtue of the
fact that an audience will eventually hear the podcast within a front-stage comedic frame.

While these boundaries of public and private are in place, the sense the audience gets of being given access to the comedian as a person and as a performer remains potentially beneficial to the comedian’s career, as audiences continue to respond positively to the comedian’s accessibility and the personal revelations this offers. Just as Notaro received increased mainstream attention after her raw and honest Live set, comedian podcasters who engage with introspective self-revelation have met with similar increases in mainstream attention and career progression. The most prominent example of this is Marc Maron of the podcast WTF. Setting an example that Behrendt and Anthony themselves followed, Maron began the podcast out of desperation as his career faltered. The podcast has brought Maron more recognition than ever before and, in addition to consistently drawing crowds to his live shows, Maron has subsequently released a book of personal essays, a stand-up special on Netflix, and a television series: IFC’s Maron, where Maron plays a fictionalised version of himself. While Walking the Room may not have achieved such a level of success as WTF, it has exposed Behrendt and Anthony to a wider audience, particularly as the podcast has been supported on social media by fellow comedian Patton Oswalt in its early days, and promoted to a large following in Australia through the podcast’s association with the locally popular Wil Anderson. Both Behrendt and Anthony have spoken on the podcast about how neither of them would be likely to have been still working stand-ups if it were not for the increased audiences that the podcast has brought to their live shows. Through comedian podcasts, niche audiences and comedy fans may find comedians who may not have otherwise received high levels of exposure in the entertainment industry. The intimacy of the podcast platform can forge a dedicated audience who wants to enjoy their favourite comedian podcasters both as comedians and as people, and support their live shows in addition to the virtually free entertainment that the podcast provides.
I have argued that the comedian podcast offers a platform for comedians to perform the state of being themselves, bringing what would typically be regarded in a mainstream comedy club context as a backstage identity to the front, allowing the comedian to present a comedian-as-person identity. As evidenced by *Walking the Room*, the ongoing nature of the podcast as a serialised narrative of the podcasters’ lives, and the intimacy created through the podcast’s ability to be integrated into the everyday lives of the listener, forges a deep parasocial connection between audience member and comedian. Freedom from commercial imperatives and the absence of a co-present audience allows the comedian freedom, diminishing their constant need to be funny, and opening up a space for personal reflection and introspection. That is not to say that all comedian podcasts are inherently dour or shoegazing, or even that the excerpts from episode 144 of *Walking the Room* presented here are entirely representative of the podcast’s form as a whole. (For example, only the first half-hour of episode 144 is dedicated to Behrendt’s relapse story: the remainder of the episode moves on to other topics, such as recent movies and television, and Anthony’s annoyance with the bad behaviour of other parents at a Malibu Easter Egg hunt.) There is plenty of comedy to be found in the self-performance of comedians. However, when that comedy is accompanied by the occasional personal confession of an existential crisis, career disappointment, or dog pill addiction, it can become, as Louis C. K. writes of Tig Notaro’s *Live* set, “A way to visit your worst fears and laugh at them... Not by distracting us from the terror but by looking right at it.” The humour-honesty discourse of the comedian podcast may occasionally reinforce the trope of the sad clown, but as *Walking the Room*’s Juggalo-mocking catchphrase suggests, perhaps it can be thought of as a case of “clown from the neck down.” From the neck up, there is the possibility we can all use humour both to pause on, and to distance ourselves from every private darkness, if only for a moment.
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Notes

2 I use the term “comedian podcast” to distinguish this form from the broader umbrella of the comedy podcast, which includes shows such as *Comedy Bang! Bang!, Doug Loves Movies,* or *Improv4Humans.* While these latter examples may contain elements of self-reflective conversation, they skew more obviously toward traditional comedic performance.
8 Ibid.
14 Since Clausen was required to depart TOFOP in 2012 due to his acting commitments on *Home and Away,* a variety of “guest Charlie” co-hosts have appeared with Anderson in a resurrected version of the podcast, titled *FOFOP.*
16 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
26 Double, *Getting the Joke*, 62.
27 Anderson, “FOFOP 87: Better Call Kenobi.”
29 On numerous previous occasions on the podcast, Behrendt had discussed the positive results of being prescribed Lexapro for his anxiety.
34 Louis C.K., e-mail to mailing list subscribers, October 6, 2012.
Arrested Development: Can Funny Female Characters Survive Script Development Processes?

STAYCI TAYLOR

This article is concerned with the ways in which recurring beliefs around women’s ‘funniness’ are argued and maintained, and how these gendered perceptions might manifest in the writing and production of feature film comedies. As part of my wider research, which explores the notion (or absence) of female perspectives in script development processes, this essay is aware of and speaks to the apparent paradox of being both a feminist and a comedy project. As Deborah Finding puts it, cracking a wry joke of her own, “In the mainstream, at least feminism and humour are rarely mentioned in the same sentence, unless ‘humour’ is followed with ‘less.’” Simultaneously, this research is aware of the growing fatigue around questioning the perceived women/funny binary, both within the industry—“the only disadvantage women have is [to] have to keep fucking answering the question of, ‘Is it hard and are women funny?’”—and in the academy where, as Hannah Ballou asserts, “it is unnecessary [to oppose the stereotypical notion that women are either not funny or not as funny as men] because female comic practitioners, their audiences and funny women
everywhere have and will continue to disprove the notion in both word and deed.” However, I argue that the very prevalence of these questions indicates continuing gendered prejudices around humour. I shall discuss these first before arguing that those biases might be practised in the processes of developing and writing screenplays, thus completing a circuit whereby the comic gender divide is perpetuated in popular culture via contemporary feature film comedies.

It is perhaps worth noting that for the purposes of this article my investigations turn to Hollywood, as the behemoth producer of popular film comedies and home of the US studio system from which, as script development consultant Stephen Cleary points out, the dominant screenwriting models arose. If “Comedy is one of the most important ways a culture talks to itself about itself,” then I am interested in the different and subtle ways women might be discouraged from, or denied, participation in this mode of transmission. As Helga Kotthoff reminds us,

In sociological and sociolinguistic works, it is frequently emphasized that comedians and humorists are often socially very influential. They define situations, and those who laugh along with them share these definitions. In the professional world, women were rarely allowed to define situations. It is no wonder that they less often created humor in this context.

Being aware of the temptation to conflate ‘humour’ and ‘comedy’, I believe it is useful to briefly discuss those terms. Of humour, Arthur Berger suggests, “it is useful to consider why people laugh, and what our laughter tells us about ourselves and others,” and offers up four historic schools of thought: superiority, incongruity, the unconscious, and the cognitive and communication theories. But, ultimately, he proposes that it is not possible to know why we laugh; it is only possible to know what makes us laugh.

Murray Davis agrees in the first instance, suggesting that “humor is too complicated to be comprehended by such single-factor theories, no matter how well they explain one of its aspects.” Kathryn Schulz, citing Moliére, gives another perspective, noting
that the seventeenth-century French playwright believed “the duty of comedy is to correct men by amusing them.”\textsuperscript{10} Comparing this with the superiority model—usually credited to Hobbes and Aristotle\textsuperscript{11}—she points out that

As different as they are in outlook, the self-improvement theory of humor and the superiority theory of humor have something in common. Both concern the substance of error: according to them we laugh at specific, recognizable mistakes, whether from a feeling of supremacy or from rueful identification.\textsuperscript{12}

This sense of ‘rueful identification’ is of particular interest because of the ways this identification is sought by mainstream comedy films, as I will later explain. And it is in this context of these films that I distinguish comedy from humour, using Geoff King’s explanation, whereby comedy is designed to provoke humour.\textsuperscript{13} In other words, one is a conduit of the other, and thus this definition contributes to a discussion that asks why using comedy to create humour (and therefore, as noted by Kotthoff above, “to define situations”) might be complicated by gendered biases. This discussion occurs during a curious climate for professionally funny women. On the one hand, women have filled coveted hosting roles for comedians during Hollywood’s 2013–15 film awards seasons, with US comic Ellen De Generes hosing the 86th Academy Awards, and compatriots Tina Fey and Amy Poehler fronting the Golden Globes for three consecutive years. On the other, Welsh comedian Jennie Collier made headlines when her booked appearance at a comedy event was cancelled to appease a client who did not “want too many women on the bill,”\textsuperscript{14} with Collier pointing out that this was indicative of “a widespread issue that many comics have experienced, the only difference in this case being that it was put into writing.”\textsuperscript{15} And while UK comedian Bridget Christie won the prestigious Fosters comedy award at the 2013 Edinburgh Fringe for her self-proclaimed feminist stand-up show, in the same year YouTube moderators took it upon themselves to remove a satirical video made by New Zealand law
students as a parody of the sexist double standards in pop star Robin Thicke’s music video *Blurred Lines*. And as Sony’s co-chairman Amy Pascal has noted in reference to the optimism around *Bridesmaids* (2011) and female-centered film comedies produced around that time, “You’re talking about a dozen or so female-driven comedies that get made over a dozen years, a period when hundreds of male-driven comedies got made.”\textsuperscript{16}

But what remains consistent through this uneven terrain of apparent advances and regressions, is the assumption that a woman’s ability to be funny is, in fact, still up for debate. As New Zealand comedian and journalist Michele A’Court reveals,

I’m regularly interviewed for print, radio and television and asked whether I think women are funny. Or whether they’re as funny as men. Or whether it is harder to do comedy if you’re a woman. Or why there are fewer women than men in the industry. Or some other gender-angled query about the work I do… Comedy still seems to be a place where we’re regularly made to feel “other,” where we’re asked the kind of questions that make you wonder if maybe you weren’t supposed to turn up.\textsuperscript{17}

With arguably most feminisms also concerned with the perception of women as ‘other’ and, as Chris Beasley proposes, the notion that “Mainstream political thought offers a conceptual schema in which viewpoints associated with men are taken as the view, the standard or rational/sensible/proper universally applicable view,”\textsuperscript{18} it would follow that women’s marginalised (or, at least, consistently interrogated) place in comedy directly reflects our place in mainstream political thought. With Beasley then turning to Greek philosophy and, in particular, Aristotle as a source of the perspectives influencing present-day Western politics and culture,\textsuperscript{19} it is interesting to note also his centrality to theories of comedy, as previously mentioned. By way of demonstrating the possible reach of these culturally entrenched beliefs, it is worth remembering that Christopher Hitchens told us “Why Women Aren’t Funny” in *Vanity Fair* as late as 2007, and the assumed veracity in the essay’s title points to ingrained, essentialist beliefs around gendered ‘funniness.’\textsuperscript{20} As
Linda Mizejewski points out, Hitchens’s controversial rationale is paradoxically useful for a feminist reading of humour given “the gist of his argument—that women are rewarded for what they look like and not for what they say—is one of feminism's most basic cultural critiques.”

When examining historical and present-day sit-com casting—underlining the prevalence of “the funny-looking husband and his requisitely lovely wife”—Mizejewski also notes that

In films the same dynamic allows comical bodies Seth Rogan and Jack Black to be coupled with the likes of Katherine Heigl (Knocked Up, 2007) and Kate Winslet (The Holiday, 2006) respectively.

It follows, then, that female protagonists in comedy films are not necessarily required to make us laugh. As Tad Friend writes, “Being funny is the first criterion for comic actors, and somewhere down the list for comic actresses.” In case we might be in any doubt about what some of the more leading criteria might be, Friend goes on to explain that “A leading agent told me, ‘What Anna has going for her, to be crass, is that guys want to nail her.’” As well as this apparently crucial ‘nailability,’ something else to be considered as a potential obstacle to a female character’s comic agency is the issue of ‘likeability’: a word that I can attest from experience appears with alarming regularity in script development processes—that is, processes whereby teams (made up of, for example, producers, executives and consultants) work with writer/s to develop their stories and/or scripts. The issue of ‘likeability’ is especially prevalent, I would argue, when the central protagonist of the script or story in question is a woman. As Helen Jacey points out, “Everyone in the creative process of developing a heroine is going to be concerned about her audience appeal.” Hadley Freeman, interviewing Diablo Cody about developing her screenplay for Young Adult (2011), reveals that even Cody’s long-time collaborator, director/executive producer Jason Reitman, had his doubts about the lead (female) character’s likeability. Cody herself points out the contradiction:
There are so many comedies in which a guy plays a man-child and that’s seen as funny... Also, women are always supposed to be likable in movies, it’s men who get the juicy parts. I wanted to make a female character who was unlikable but also interesting.\textsuperscript{28}

Jacey identifies two factors for the enduring existence of screen clichés for female characters: traditional notions of how women should be, and, which is useful when considering script development processes, “the tricky business of writing a heroine and pleasing the many people you write for.”\textsuperscript{29} Citing Lizzie Francke’s \textit{Script Girls}, which contains an in-depth exploration of how scriptwriters “were pressured by producers and executives to tone down strength and complexity in their female characters,”\textsuperscript{30} Jacey points out that although Francke’s book was written in 1994, one can still “feel under pressure to make [your heroine] softer, warmer or nicer.”\textsuperscript{31} Thus with mainstream script development processes potentially so insistent upon these various levels of audience appeal in female characters, perhaps as a result of how gendered cultural biases might be practised in the processes of script development, it is useful to explore how screenwriting is another area grounded in Aristotelian influence.

In his preface to Ari Hiltunen’s \textit{Aristotle in Hollywood}, Christopher Vogler writes that the author “shows how Aristotle’s profound observations on human nature and the effect of drama on an audience can still inform the work of modern writers.”\textsuperscript{32} However, and crucially for the women in these stories, Aristotle’s ‘observations on human nature’ include, as Beasley notes, the argument that

\begin{quote}
while the ‘rational soul’ is ‘not present at all in a slave, in a female it is inoperative, [and] in a child underdeveloped.’ Aristotle linked ‘rationality’ to ethical values (moral qualities) and self-control.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

I propose that while scholars, analysts and teachers of storytelling, including comedy, continue reaching to ancient philosophies, women’s subordinate status is likely to be carried over into these contemporary models. An example comes from Hiltunen, who
explains that he has “taken Aristotle’s idea of the correspondence of storytelling technique and emotional experience at face value simply because it seems totally rational: a good story brings about pleasure.” This rational thinking, which, lest we forget, is inoperative in women according to Aristotle, quickly leads to an exploration of pleasure (in preparation for an analysis of Aristotle’s oikeia hedone or ‘proper pleasure’):

The audience experience the pleasure of a good story communally but, when asked individually, they name different things as the cause of the pleasure. One person thinks it’s the good acting, another thinks it’s the attractive women, a third says it must be the beautiful scenery, and a fourth person says it’s the genre.

The inclusion of attractive women amidst other pleasures, including scenery, recalls Beasley’s assessment that “women are defined in terms of men’s needs regarding pleasure, provision of services, children and so on.” In other words, the status of women as agents of our own stories, funny or not, has a long history of culturally entrenched beliefs to overcome—beliefs that are perhaps then doubly rooted in Aristotelian models of screenwriting.

The three-act structure, for instance, “which is claimed to be the basis for every mainstream American screenplay… is derived from Aristotle’s broad notion that all dramas have a beginning, a middle, and an end.” Discussing the “hierarchical organization reflected in classic storytelling’s privileging of one character and his point of view,” Christina Kallas is conclusive: “In screenwriting, of course, it all goes back to Aristotle.” Perhaps this is why, as Jacey points out,

none of the screenwriting guides have paid much attention to the differences between men’s and women’s lives and to what happens if the hero is a heroine. None of them have seriously worked out what happens to the rules and conventions if a heroine leads the action.

This default male perspective in screenwriting discourse might then be manifested in how stories are transmitted and received in a
culture already steeped in gendered mainstream political thought. Previewing a handful of female-centred films released in 2013 for *Variety*, Pat Saperstein identifies a small window of time within which these films get their US releases. He suggests we should call this period “the kitchen and bitchin’ weekend” and notes that “For the past four years, the studios have let the blockbusters play themselves out in May, June and July, reserving the first or second weekend in August for femme-targeted pix.” From this analysis it would appear that ‘blockbusters’ and ‘femme-targeted pix’ are mutually exclusive categories, and that it is more than enough that only one weekend a year be reserved for the opening of films like *Austenland* (2013), which, according to Sony Picture’s Michael Barker, has “a real female perspective.” In other words, female centered narratives are the exception to the rule. And so too, as I argue, is the female comic protagonist. If comedy is a departure from what we understand as ‘normal,’ then what gendered expectations are being brought to the development process when, as Beasley argues, woman is already defined negatively in relation to the standard model, or the ‘norm’ that is man?

In considering comedy protagonists, a notable perspective is that explained by UK writer, director, and comedian Ricky Gervais:

Nobody wants to see unfeasibly handsome, clever people do brilliant things brilliantly. Who wants to see that? You want to see a putz having a go and failing and then coming through at the end.

I would suggest that this role of the ‘putz,’ with whom, to recall Schulz’s previous observation, we can ‘ruefully identify,’ is almost exclusive to male comic protagonists. The only discernible female equivalent is that of the ‘klutz,’ as described by US writer and comedian Mandy Kaling:

When a beautiful actress is cast in a movie, executives rack their brains to find some kind of flaw in the character she plays that will still allow her to be palatable. She can’t be overweight or not perfect-looking, because who would pay to see that? A female who is not one hundred per cent perfect-looking in
every way? You might as well film a dead squid decaying on a beach somewhere for two hours.

So they make her a Klutz.

The hundred-per-cent-perfect-looking female is perfect in every way except that she constantly bonks her head on things. She trips and falls and spills soup on her affable date... Despite being five feet nine and weighing a hundred and ten pounds, she is basically like a drunk buffalo who has never been a part of human society.47

The klutz is usually, if not always, a romantic comedy protagonist, but being the female protagonist in a romantic comedy is no guarantee of being a comic character and especially, perhaps, not a ‘putz.’ Steve Kaplan describes the very essence of the ‘putz’ character when, in his master class, Steve Kaplan's Comedy Intensive, he provides his formula for what he names the essential comedy protagonist—the ‘non-hero.’ This figure is “an ordinary guy, struggling against insurmountable odds, without many of the required skills and tools with which to win; yet never giving up hope.”48

David Shumway puts another name to this specific type of comic protagonist when he identifies him as either the ‘Schlemiel,’ or the ‘Nebbish.’49 With overlapping definitions and connotations, the Schlemiel and the Nebbish are described variously as bunglers, inept or ineffectual persons, blunderers, dopes, nerds, and drips.50 Keith Giglio similarly writes of this character when, having diligently varied his use of pronouns for the first 129 pages of his comedy screenwriting guide, he also begins to default to the masculine pronoun:

We want to laugh at characters. We want to see the flaws... Your comedic hero was going through life as best he could. He had flaws he was dealing with, but for the most part he was resigned to be who he was.51

There are exceptions to this almost exclusively-male figure; I would argue that Toula in My Big Fat Greek Wedding (2002), Liz Lemon in 30 Rock (2006), and Hannah Horvath in Girls (2012) all qualify as ‘the putz’ within their narratives. These examples have perhaps appeared
more often, however, in television shows other than films, as in the case of the latter two texts. But significantly for this discussion they have all proved to be comically successful. While acknowledging that “successful” is a difficult and relative term, it is notable that Tina Fey and Lena Dunham have both won major industry awards for the characters they have created and portrayed. In the case of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, the film broke box office records despite the fact “[Nia] Vardalos stuck to her guns” in the face of “pressure to... conform to Hollywood romantic comedy standards.” Despite these putative successes, and despite that *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* remains one of the most profitable movies of all time (“It’s 4000% return ranks it with *Star Wars* and *Gone With the Wind*”), the ‘putz’ continues to be a male-dominated category in mainstream comedy films. The heteronormative standards of the Hollywood romantic comedy, such as those to which *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*’s writer and star Nia Vardalos famously refused to conform, remain, it seems, steadfastly in play.

As previously suggested, I propose that these standards persist because women’s lead roles in comedies are most often conceived of in the context of romantic comedies—a genre with its own tropes, rules, and implications for women. The first thing to consider is how the notion of ‘comedy’ is to be understood in this context. King suggests the term ‘romantic’ should be understood as a simple description of the sub-type of comedy that the film constitutes:

> In its use as a noun, comedy seems to suggest the relatively more solid object of a genre. ‘Romantic comedy’, for example, suggests a particular adjectival take (romantic) on the noun-object, comedy.

But Tamar Jeffers McDonald’s definition has a different implication, where comedy is not, as King suggests, the ‘relatively more solid object.’ Jeffers McDonald proposes instead that “a romantic comedy is a film which has as its central narrative motor a quest for love,” and a text that “portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion.” Later, she explicitly points out that her definition
does not insist that romcoms are necessarily funny, although this might seem implicit in the term ‘comedy.’ I have used the word ‘light-hearted’ in the definition to signal that, while films of the genre generally end well and may elicit laughs along the way... [it is also possible to highlight] the mixed emotions these films commonly both depict and elicit.56

Indeed, contemporary romantic comedies have more than simply laughter to offer to their consumers, but these other pleasures may also be the obstacle to the comic potential of the female protagonist. Such a protagonist may be there, as Jeffers McDonalds implies, simply for commercial reasons:

While most romantic comedies do not want to hint that the whole edifice of true romance might be as mythical as Santa, we as audience members, consumers and film scholars need to remember that big business relies on our urge to make ourselves loveable through the consumption of goods (make-up, shoes, underwear, grooming products... ).57

Claire Mortimer goes a step further than Jeffers McDonald, suggesting that women are not only excused from comedic duties but are no longer even required at the centre of the narrative. As she writes of the contemporary “male-centered romcom,” a “particularly successful direction taken” by this genre

moves the narrative away from the female perspective to embrace a more male-centred narrative. Films such as Knocked Up and Forgetting Sarah Marshall have taken the romcom to a male audience... employing gross-out humour, reassuringly imperfect leading men and gorgeous women who fall at their feet.58

This notion of the ‘reassuringly imperfect’ recalls the putz/klutz dyad, which I introduced earlier.59 As noted by Kaling, this clumsy trait is a contrivance placed upon female romantic comedy protagonists who are otherwise “perfect in every way.” It seems that a female protagonist’s best shot at attaining comic agency is outside of the romantic comedy genre, such as is demonstrated in action and buddy flick The Heat (2013), written by Katie Dippold, where two women police officers are tasked with taking down a mobster.60 As Jacey notes, “Why are we so reluctant to make com-
edies for heroines that are just funny situations? Maybe we don’t always need a man.\textsuperscript{61}

Perhaps this question reflects an overall reluctance to put women in a position where they, to use an industry expression, can own the ‘gag.’ Australian television and radio personality Chrissie Swan reports being denied such an opportunity: “One time, early in my radio career, I was told by a male boss that my role was specifically to ‘be fun, but never funny.’ The funny bits,” Swan emphasises, “would be covered off by the man I was working with.”\textsuperscript{62} Similarly, in a 1997 \textit{Saturday Night Live} episode starring Sylvester Stallone, cast member Cherie Oteri was not cast as Adrian, the wife of Stallone’s famous character, Rocky (from the film of the same name), in a sketch. Instead, Oteri’s cast mate, Chris Kattan, played the role in drag, notwithstanding Oteri’s desire for the part, her physical similarities to Talia Shire, who originally played Adrian in the \textit{Rocky} movies, and, as Tina Fey indicates, Oteri’s expert ability to impersonate the character.\textsuperscript{63} Of course there is the belief, as expressed by Christopher Hitchens in his previously mentioned \textit{Vanity Fair} article, that women are simply not genetically predisposed to be funny. And although it might be argued that Hitchens’ essay was deliberately provocative, his sentiments continue to run through script development practices. As writer-comedian Adam Carolla remarked in a 2012 interview, “Don’t hire chicks… They make you hire a certain number of chicks and they’re always the least funny on the writing staff.”\textsuperscript{64} These two sets of examples reveal a double cultural prejudice: that women either \textit{are not} or \textit{should not} be funny. In other words, there is a contradiction whereby women are repeatedly constructed as ‘unfunny’ and yet, as in the cases of Swan, Oteri, and undoubtedly many other women in similar roles, women are also specifically excluded or barred from being funny. If this suggests an insidious repression of female comedy, perhaps what advances have occurred for women working in comedy might be less a legacy of progression than a triumph against poor odds.
As Tina Fey writes of Amy Poehler, in a tongue-in-cheek nod to her having overcome these apparently evolutionary odds, “I mean, she’s not Kattan in a dress, but considering the Darwinian limitations on women in comedy, she does well for herself.”

However, it is not just the underrepresentation of female perspectives that is a concern when it comes to women and humour, but also the discourse around the overrepresentation of female perspectives in comedies. As Amanda Dunn points out,

There is an entrenched assumption that what men have to say is universal, while what women have to say is largely of interest only to other women. When it comes to comedy women seem to be in an invidious position. If they talk too much about being women, there is the constant eye-rolling about the abundance of period jokes; if they are too “masculine” in their style, that’s supremely unfunny as well.

Thus female perspectives are maligned as sites for humour—and not just by men. In reviewing comedian Whitney Cummings’ eponymous sitcom in 2011, Mary Elizabeth Williams begins with a byline that asks the question, “Who’s ready for more cellulite jokes?” She continues by starting the article with a joke of her own: “Ladies, don’t you just hate it when you’re ovulating? And guys are, like, not? Am I riiiiiiight?” As the panning draws to an end, Williams offers this overview:

Sunday night’s female Emmy nominees and winners—smart, complicated, breathtakingly goofy women like Melissa McCarthy, Martha Plimpton, Jane Lynch and Tina Fey, among others—prove that you can be funny and a woman without constantly having to be funny about simply being a woman.

Despite her positive conclusion, the angle Williams takes when she critiques the narrative choices of female comedy is worth noting—for it is the overrepresentation of a female perspective she perceives as most irritating. These kinds of discourses are prevalent around women in comedy, for example, in The New York Post’s scathing review of Fey and Poehler’s Golden Globes hosting (“Too much estrogen!”) and any number of commentaries on Lena Dunham’s Girls (2012–).
As Jacey writes of script development processes, and the creation of female characters within them:

It is all too easy to narrow the scope of your story ideas and concepts when you have a heroine in mind. It’s as if we still want to give our heroes and heroines very different territory to roam in the worlds of our stories. We are still risk averse in what we allow heroines to do and be.71

This ‘risk-aversion’ that Jacey describes is exemplified in Sarah Silverman’s acknowledgement of 2007, when she was developing her eponymous sitcom for Comedy Central, that “In theory, at least, it was already risky to center the show on a female.”72 It might be argued, then, that the disallowing of women to be funny is a significant consequence of that “narrow scope” in female character development to which Jacey refers. Thus, redressing women’s status within comedy might mean challenging dominant script development processes.

When Kaplan suggests that “Drama helps us dream who we can be [and] Comedy helps us live with who we are,”73 he makes a strong case for the usefulness of a form that, as King notes, is “rarely one of the more prestigious or award-winning forms,” and yet also “often subject to critical neglect.”74 But I have argued that while this affirming description of the role of comedy is made manifest in male characters—specifically male protagonists in mainstream comedy films—this is not also true of female comic characters. When a twenty-first-century screenwriting guide acknowledges that in mainstream film comedies “the central character is more often male than female,” it acknowledges that what has been perpetuated on screens has constituted a range of complicated and culturally entrenched gender assumptions around comedy and humour.75 Resisting those same assumptions in script development processes, and broadening the scope of funny female film protagonists within and beyond romantic comedies, might give female characters, and thus women, the cultural capital of using humour to, as Kotthoff writes, better “define situations.”76 It might also go some way toward inspiring women to live, as Steve Kaplan says, with who we are.77
Stayci Taylor is a third-year PhD candidate at Melbourne’s RMIT, researching screenwriting in the context of comedy and female perspectives. Originally from New Zealand, where she most recently spent a decade writing for television, Stayci also has a background in theatre and live comedy.

Notes


8 Ibid., 6.


12 Schulz, *Being Wrong*, 322.

13 King, *Film Comedy*, 2.


Ibid., 6.


Ibid., 1.

Ibid., 20.

Friend, “Funny Like a Guy,” 54.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid., 180.

Ibid.


Ibid., xv.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.

See King, *Film Comedy*, 5.


Ibid., 132.


Ibid.


Ibid., 10.

Ibid., 15.


It is worth noting that both of these terms, which are borrowed for my argument from two non-Jewish comedians, come from Jewish comic traditions, as do the aforementioned “Schlemiel” and “Nebbish.” And while it is outside the scope of this article to delve further into the ethnology of these terms, I note there is further exploration to be undertaken in this area. This is especially clear in consideration of the fact that Christopher Hitchens attributes masculinity to Jewish comic women, and thus identifies Jewish women as exempt from his claims. See Hitchens, “Why Women Aren’t Funny.”


Fey, *Bossypants*, 206.


Ibid.

Ibid. Emphasis mine.


Kaplan, “What is Comedy?”

King, *Film Comedy*, 1.


Kotthoff, “Gender and Joking,” 57.

Kaplan, “What is Comedy?”
Dogsbody: An Overview of Transmorphic Techniques as Humour Devices and their Impact in Alberto Montt’s Cartoons

BEATRIZ CARBAJAL CARRERA

Introduction

While conventional textual narratives can access a wide range of linguistic mechanisms to enter the humoristic mode,1 cartoons access graphic techniques to allow for the concretion of abstract ideas as well as providing visual stimulation through images. Cartoons, being graphic jokes, mainly rely on dislocation, which is often used in caricature, but also in other techniques that create incongruity. Although cartoons as we know them today first appeared in the early nineteenth century, incipient pictorial humoristic representations have existed since the pre-Christian era. From the antecedents of cartoons, we know that anamorphism in the representation of non-human and human entities has recurred in comical images throughout history. It is expected that a journey through some illustrative samples of these transfigurative representations will shed light on the evolution of shape reversal in cartoons, and offer a comparative means both to contextualise contemporary cartoons and to better understand the pragmatics of graphic humour.
This paper focuses on the imagery published in *Dosis Diarias* (www.dosisdiarias.com), an award-winning blog by Chilean cartoonist Alberto Montt. Montt’s consistent employment of anthropomorphism justifies interest specifically in his work. The cartoonist follows in the footsteps of Gary Larson, especially in his exploitation of animal imagery, and, in his blog, Mott admits a direct influence from the North American cartoonist. In particular, Mott refers to anthropomorphism and decontextualisation as perspectives he has adopted from Larson. Decontextualisation and transfiguration are very closely related concepts. In fact, anthropomorphism is a type of decontextualisation that places an animal or object in a human position. The transfigurative techniques analysed in this article include anthropomorphism and zoomorphism. Anthropomorphism in cartoons is understood as the depiction of a nonhuman entity with human traits. It is illustrated by the dog character in figure 1, who shows a human expression and posture in addition to exhibiting the gift of oratory. On the other hand, zoomorphism in cartoons consists of the representation of human figures with animal features. The human character in figure 1 is wearing a flea collar, an accessory typically worn by dogs, and he is, in fact, less persuasive as a logician than his dog. In zoomorphic cartoons such as this, then, the human figure is dehumanised through such a characterisation.

This paper aims to define the scope and typology of transfiguration in visual narratives in order to explore its humoristic elements and functions, as well as to contrast its canonical uses against innovative ones. Specifically, it will discuss how, despite being diachronically remote, transfigurative representations remain surprisingly consistent in their basic function: they generate incongruity. There are, however, deviations from the genuine humoristic use of shape reversals. At the core of these deviations is the relationship between artist and reader in the current context, ruled as it is by digital exchanges, interactivity, and information overload. In particular, the latter phenomenon increasingly takes an active role in
the achievement of humour. This appears distinctly in interactive cartoons—such as in samples that require the reader to fill in a gap in a cartoon’s caption—but also in any cartoon containing external references. The reader’s active role becomes increased relevant as there progressively more information around us requires condensation into visual anecdotes.

Yet the reader’s visual literacy is also guided by their identification of hints in the narrative. Importantly, it is argued that transmorphic techniques add a positioning cue, helping the reader to interpret cartoons. Thus, anthropomorphism performs an empathic function drawing the reader nearer to an alien character. In the words of Suzanne Keen, “when an animal is drawn as if it had a human face, it may make an easier target for empathy than alien and potentially dangerous human beings.” In contrast, zoomorphism provokes in the reader disdain for the caricature, eliciting disagreement with the values the character stands for. Zoomorphism is particularly prevalent in political caricatures, which often portray public figures with exaggerated traits, such as by turning mouths and noses into snouts. The animalistic product in political caricature conveys a criticism or disagreement. Rather than caricaturising politicians, Montt mostly mocks situations. For example, figure 1 caricatures the owner-pet relationship through inversion. The dog figure inspires sympathy in the reader, whereas the foolish values, represented by a degraded human figure, generate feelings of disagreement.

Transmorphic Techniques in Visual Media

The notion of anthropomorphism, a predisposition to conceptualise and portray nonhuman characters as humanlike, has been studied widely across disciplines, and specifically in the arts. Although common in the field of written literature, the stylistic feature of prosopopeia or personification, together with its counterpart, dehumanisation, can also be found in different media. Because of their multimodal nature, cartoons achieve transfiguration both
through image and text. Their meaning is strictly condensed into a single-frame space. Thus, the logic of discourse is very direct, but the reiteration of a certain topic or humoristic technique produces an echoing effect in the reader’s mind that allows a holistic significance. Indeed, a reader familiar with Montt’s consistent use of anthropomorphism will more effectively process his cartoons than a reader in a first contact with one of his drawings.

As emphasised by the anthropologist John S. Allen, the pervasiveness of anthropomorphic images in current media-driven cultures reveals its potential to articulate an assortment of messages. In this article, the hypernym “transmorphic” has been adopted from Peter J. Ward’s study on visual narrative in order to incorporate a number of transfigurative processes in the humoristic message
beyond the phenomenon of humanlike convergence. The label transmorphic has been chosen since it is an umbrella term that incorporates anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and transformational (a combination of human with magical or mythological beings), drawing together these three techniques, which are employed by cartoonists to convey incongruity.\(^{11}\) Out of these subgroups, the transformational will not be considered in this paper, as it is understood to be a subcategory of anthropomorphism (see figure 7).

Within the transmorphic category, zoomorphism (also known as dehumanisation) can be identified as the mechanism that nourishes caricature in political cartoons through “the attribution of animal traits to human beings, deities, or inanimate objects.”\(^{12}\) The exaggeration of defects usually leads to an animalistic depiction of the individual. As foreshadowed in the introduction, Montt is an author of situational caricatures, including social and folk caricatures. Unlike political caricature, situational cartooning focuses on the circumstances of a specific situation, rather than on the specific character of the protagonist. As such, it tends to employ anthropomorphism rather than dehumanisation.\(^{13}\)

It is unsurprising that anthropomorphism, or “the attribution of human characteristics to non-human entities,” is a constant in Montt’s work given the undeniable influence of Gary Larson on his style.\(^{14}\) In fact, Charles D. Minahen coined the term humanimal to describe “a hybrid humanised animal/animals with something extra” and anihuman to name “humans with something missing” in reference to Gary Larson’s cartoon series *The Far Side*.\(^{15}\) Both Mott’s and Larson’s approaches imply a standard of explicit role reversal between animals and humans.\(^{16}\) Yet Montt proceeds a step further than Larson by applying anthropomorphism to trees, fruit, and other objects, and by materialising humans in a process generally described as reification. A common place to find the latter process is in Mott’s couple cartoons, where a man and a woman may be portrayed as having heads comprising everyday objects, such as clocks (see figure 2).
Both anthropomorphism and zoomorphism may also occur within a single cartoon. Nineteenth-century cartoons that depict Charles Darwin and his evolutionary theory are good examples of this, and a cartoon entitled “Prof. Darwin” constitutes an especially representative text. On the one hand, Darwin is depicted in an ape-like manner: his body is completely animal, his mouth is deformed in imitation of a monkey, and, in the context of the cartoon, he shows his reflection in a mirror to a monkey. On the other hand, the monkey that stands next to Darwin adopts a humanlike expression of surprise, exuding an elegant and sophisticated attitude in his erect, upright posture. Each of these techniques provides a divergent positioning cue: anthropomorphism gives the reader an alien perspective, disorienting them, while zoomorphism degrades the human’s character, thus giving the reader a sense of superiority.

Despite the advantages of starting from a detailed taxonomy of the transmorphic practice, a degree of overlap can occur between the techniques I have described as anthropomorphism and zoomorphism. A cartoon, for instance, may indeed pose a legitimate question of whether the cartoonist aimed to mock humanity or to mock a specific individual. When the caricature merges the human and the animal components in equal measure, it is hard to ascertain what inspired the cartoonist in the first instance. Perceptions in those contexts can vary so that while one reader may see a deformed human, another sees a humanised animal. Still, for the purposes of humoristic discourse, what is interesting lies in the way these two interpretations modulate the response of the text’s comic message. In political caricature, if a reader perceives the cartoon as dehumanising, it then translates into a text that ridicules a public figure. An alternative is that the reader may be so focused on the animal imagery that they remain incapable of recognising the individual who the cartoonist sought to target. In that case, the reader may be missing an external reference that may be necessary to interpret the joke.
In a review of the key elements of humour—superiority, relief, and incongruity—it may be noted that all of these elements feature in the transmorphic techniques so far described. Indeed, there is a sense of superiority, held by both the reader and cartoonist, in the deformation or satirisation of an individual by means of animalisation. This is even present in the attribution of stupidity, vices, or fears to animals. By targeting somebody through a transmutational metaphor, the cartoonist positions him- or herself above the one who is mocked. Often, the subjectivity of the artist is transferred to a fictional animal conscience. Minahen’s analysis of Gary Larson’s cartooning identifies this phenomenon when it compares Larson’s cartoons to the poetic resources used by surrealist poet Francis Ponge, who he argues “takes the side of a thing by lending it his own subjectivity, in order to reveal something about substance or essence.” The relief constituent can also be recognised in the hidden criticism that transmorphic characters convey within the spatial limitations of the single-panel cartoon. Finally, incongruity is probably the most salient feature of humour in transmorphic depictions. The inconsistencies that emerge from any transposed ordinary scene produce both an unexpected shift in perspective and what Arthur Koestler named “bisociation.” In the context of cartoons, bisociation is the simultaneous mental association of an element within the graphic anecdote with two fields that are usually not related to one another. In figure 1, the concept of the flea is associated with both its metaphoric and literal meanings. The Spanish expression “tener malas pulgas” (to have bad fleas) implies that, in metaphorical terms, the owner is bad-tempered and, in literal terms, that he would accordingly require an actual flea collar.

Every graphic joke will determine its unique function through the contents of the cartoon and the linguistic mechanisms it uses. For example, political cartoons are predominantly subversive, confronting, or transcendent, and, in the extreme instances of the cartoons published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, political cartoons
can create a diplomatic crisis. Humoristic cartoons by Montt, on the other hand, are usually devoid of any such serious intention, their only function being to amuse the reader. There is, nonetheless, an empathic intent in Montt’s social criticism of urban tribes, stereotypical gender roles, hypocrisy, and superstition, even as this criticism also undoubtedly entails a degree of critical or correctional motivation on Montt’s part. In his applied analysis of animals in fiction, Peter J. Ward alludes to the exclusive and important way in which representations of animals are able to mirror human concerns:

Animals can reflect human concerns in a way that the inanimate cannot, whether that be as transmorphic characters or the employment of animals as imagery.

However, Montt also employs objects in his transmorphic processes. His most frequently adopted resource is the use of household appli-
ances and their lexicon to reflect relationship concerns. For instance, figure 2 depicts clock-headed characters, and plays with the temporal lexicon of a late menstrual period in order to imply the possibility of the woman’s pregnancy. The female character expresses her worry that her menstrual date has passed, and the male character pleads a timeout in relation to the situation, conveying an implicit allusion to bad timing.

In terms of humoristic tone, the anthropomorphic and the zoomorphic could be part of a satirical or even black-humour style, especially in political cartoons. However, inoffensive animals facilitate the creation of innocent humour, given their ability to attract sympathetic regards. As previously mentioned, Montt designs trivial jokes in a benevolent style, such as in the linguistic puns in figure 2. Yet, black humour can also be found in his viewpoints about religious and political hypocrisy. An illustration
of black humour in Montt’s work appears in figure 3 (above), which represents a duck hunter and a priest hunter. The former is carrying a duck-shaped whistle to attract his target, while the latter is using an altar-boy-shaped whistle, in what become multiple layers of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism. All the same, when talking about the transmorphic component in his cartoons, absurd humour is inescapable. Indeed, these kinds of cartoons incorporate an incongruity among images (or images and text) that cannot be logically resolved, as seen in figure 2.

According to Robert Mankoff’s taxonomy of cartoons, a graphic joke can belong to one of four different categories—real, unreal, surreal, and a “slice of life”—depending on the combination of the variables of real and unreal to image and text. That is, the author designates the different types of cartoons with a focus on the allocation of the incongruity trigger. Unreal and surreal cartoons often include anthropomorphism, whereas caricatural zoomorphism tends to appear in “real” and “slice of life” cartoons. As stated in my introduction, Montt’s work is characterised by a consistent use of anthropomorphism. This observation is reinforced by Mankoff’s remarks on the predominance of the unreal category over the rest in cartooning: “Most gags,” he writes, “consist of an unreal image with a rather ordinary caption.”

In the creative process of transfiguration, image selection criteria are based on either the physical or metaphorical (when the process seeks to symbolise an abstract quality) similarities that an image has to the idea or notion that the cartoonist intends to present. Just like any other inductive process, transmorphic cartoons produce inferences that are based on scripts that serve to fill in an intended communicative gap. Mental scripts activate expectations about topic recognition, communicative intention, and the internal structure of cartoons. In figure 2 the information gap lies in the simultaneous analogies and contrasts that pertain to time, and which are featured in the cartoon. Analogies can be drawn among
a number of graphic and textual elements referring to the theme of time, whereas a contrast is established between “late” and “a bit more time.” In this context, scripts enable the reader the mental space to compare the concepts of time and relationships, assisting the interpretation process. The relevance of similarity in the selection criteria is perhaps best represented by figure 2, which establishes a comparison between humans and clocks, suggesting their comparable dependence on time, and implying the human ‘biological clock.’ While calendar-headed characters would still create an effective stimulus and, in conveying the same signification, be akin to these clock-headed characters, the choice of shapes unrelated to time objects, such as window-headed characters, would lack the pre-condition in which the human-time analogy can be made.

The persuasive role of humour has been widely studied in advertising and education. Like humour, anthropomorphism plays an influential role in conveying meaning to the reader. This specific type of depiction predisposes readers to particular emotions, even before they access the text. Animals depicted with human facial expressions and postures, for instance, comprise a more immediate object of identification than nonhuman beings, resulting in what Suzanne Keen labels an “effective ambassadorial narrative empathizing.” In order to resolve the incongruity in transfigurative cartoons, the reader either empathises with the nonhuman figure, because of the presence of anthropomorphism, or adopts a position of superiority in relation to the nonhuman figure, which is based on zoomorphism. In the following section, my overview of transfiguration in different stages of art will serve as an illustration of transfiguration’s significance according to a number of variables, providing a comparative ground for Montt’s work.

Evolution of Transmorphic Techniques in Cartoons

Despite the existence of sporadic instances of zoomorphism dated from the Upper Palaeolithic period, these examples of zoomorphism
bear no apparent relation either to cartooning or to a humoristic intention on the part of the artist. Hence, precisely how these zoomorphic images should be interpreted remains a mystery. However, the discovery of certain archaeological remains in Egyptian tombs has revealed the presence of caricatures in the pre-Christian era. The first acknowledged caricature-like representation, for instance, is a drawing that depicts Senenmut, Hatshepsut’s Egyptian steward in the eighteenth dynasty, highlighting the wrinkles on Senenmut’s face. If it is interpreted as a purposeful distortion of reality, then this portrait may be acknowledged as the first caricature in history.

But in spite of the broad consensus that identifies this work as inaugurating the birth of caricature, there is only enough evidence to determine that the portrait represents a degree of divergence from the idealistic representations of such figures—a departure from the mode that had been typical of Egyptian frescoes and sculpture—and a turn to a more realistic form of representation. Furthermore, caricatures in general have a humoristic aim, and are not commonly associated with burial monuments. However, archaeologist Patrick F. Houlihan claims that a sense of humour was a common quality in Ancient Egypt, despite that this civilisation is often associated with rigidity. Thus our interpretation and recognition of cartoons take place in time with the disclosure of their respective creators’ cultural customs. In particular, the Egyptologist Thomas Garnet Henry James emphasises a tradition of funerary art in Egypt that serves to mock the deceased’s afterlife aspirations. While the typically idealistic representation of those who have died in Ancient Egypt would seek to hide any of their imperfections, caricatures are defined exactly by their exaggeration of these defects, including those in the physical appearance of the depicted characters. Therefore, even if Senenmut’s sketch was meant to be realistic, portraying the blemishes of his ageing skin, such a mode of representation also converges with the concept of caricature.
Deformity, on the other hand, leads to the transformation of the character depicted into the grotesque, which often implies a transition from a human appearance to a bestial one. In this sense, anthropomorphism and zoomorphism coincide. A caricature of an identifiable individual shown as an animal creates zoomorphism, while a drawing where the target of humour is not recognisable would involve anthropomorphism. This raises the question of the boundary between the two concepts and how any overlapping between them may be articulated within the creative process.

In the case of Senenmut’s depiction, the drawing can be said to be the embryo of caricature. Although there is no trace of zoomorphism in it, the drawing contains the essence of a cartoon through its caricaturisation of Senenmut’s wrinkles, which constitutes an initial step towards anthropomorphism and zoomorphism. A closer approach to the deployment of personification can be found in the Satirical Papyrus, a document that shows animals performing common and everyday human tasks. By means of the anthropomorphisation of animals in various situations—an antelope and a lion playing senet, a cat herding geese—the author parodies artistic representations of the kind that the Pharaohs had commissioned for their tombs. A latent incongruence can be identified in this portrayal of animals with abilities clearly not possessed by the beasts, as well as in the artist’s burlesque intention, clearly referencing the professions of their human equivalents, and thus honouring the Pharaoh’s on whose tombs they appear as solemn funerary sketches. Parallels can be drawn with Montt’s work. In figure 4 (below), a cat plays cards with a mouse, stating “Okay, one more round, but this is the last one. If my mum sees me playing with my food she will kill me!” In this instance and in that of the funerary sketch, personification enables the reader to adopt the animals’ perspective, providing an empathising agent. In Montt’s example the reader can picture the cat’s ‘killer instinct’ from a sympathetic perspective, which allows us to joke about the nature of predation.
As noted by ancient Greek literature scholar Richard Buxton, the subject of transformation was a common element in Greek mythology, constituting a source of inspiration, especially for Roman and Renaissance arts. The Roman poet Ovid based his book of transformation, *Metamorphoses* (first published in 8 AD) on such Greek myths. At the intersection of the epic and didactic genres, *Metamorphoses* anticipates the moral tone of Aesop’s original fables, but offers a transforming process that is absent from Aesop’s work. Both Ovid’s and Aesop’s works have thoroughly influenced Western literature and the arts since their appearance. Whereas fables combine didacticism with a humoristic tone, metamorphosis myths generally do not. Metamorphic myths focus on transfiguration as a form of punishment, while fables offer praise to wit and intelligence in light-hearted, humorous stories. Implying an anthropomorphic element, fables narrate interactions among animals as well as provide the

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**Figure 4.** Cat: Okay, one more round, but this is the last one. If my mum sees me playing with my food she will kill me!
reader a lesson to be learned. Despite their anthropomorphic imagery, illustrations of fables did not appear until the nineteenth century, when Jean Grandville’s *The Tortoise and the Hare* was published (a story in which the tortoise is depicted, in a humanising attempt, running on two legs). Montt recreates his personal version of this fable by depicting a sharp-witted, behind-the-scenes appropriation of this narrative. In a reference to Aesop’s fable (figure 5), the tortoise is depicted dropping sleeping medicine into the hare’s glass, thereby subverting the original fable and altering the reader’s ability to maintain an empathetic response in respect of each character.

In addition to myths and fables of Greece, Pompeii and Herculaneum show caricatures in their graffiti, conveying a humoristic message. Of particular note is the use of zoomorphism to ridicule Christian cults, as in the Alexamenos graffiti, sometimes known as “Crucified Ass.” Found in Domus Gelotiana in 3 AD, the work is
an inscription that depicts a crucified donkey and bears the caption “Alexamenos worships God.” This is a representation that entails a further step in the development of cartoons during the progression to their present-day form. The sarcastic aim of the graffito is evident in its critical allusion to Christianity. Furthermore, the image is accompanied by a caption, as is customary in modern cartoons. In view of these circumstances it is actually possible to associate this work with one of Mankoff’s categories: it is an example of what Mankoff describes as an “unreal” cartoons, which combines an impossible or extravagant image with a quotidian caption or text. It is also worth noting that, like this grafitto, Montt’s work is also often characterised precisely by this kind of religious mockery, both of gods and specific doctrinal beliefs. For instance, one of his most irreverent cartoons, in figure 6 (above), plays with the polysemy of

Figure 6. If you wanted to get a woman pregnant, you should have sent a dove, just like I told you. You can’t complain now if everyone says that your son is the son of a woodpecker [‘carpenter’].
the term “carpintero” in Spanish, which can mean both the bird or a ‘carpenter,’ in order to suggest that Jesus Christ’s father was not the symbolic holy dove, but a woodpecker.

Montt’s work routinely personifies stereotypical representations of the Christian God and Satan, imbuing them with simplistic, dichotomous views in order to portray them as a feuding humanlike couple. And while the reader can easily relate to the divine in Montt’s cartoons, they can relate even more readily to the irreverent, and this is all achieved by means of personification. In figure 6 (above), the spiritual characters of God and Satan are humanised, enabling the reader to adopt an empathic approach.

In the Middle Ages, the cartoon medium diversified into manuscripts, marginalia, tapestry, stained glass, and sculptural caricature. Animal allegory appeared in tapestry, on church windows, and on walls, supplying a humorously illustrated vehicle to instruct those who were illiterate. Nevertheless, the most relevant medieval contribution to transmorphic representation was the bestiaries. These were structured compilations of images from the animal kingdom with an autonomous meaning. Bestiaries differ from caricature in both their fantastic origins and their cohesive significance. Physiologus, a text often dated to have appeared between the second and fourth century AD, was followed by the medieval treaty De humana physiognomia (1586), and later Physiognomy (1775–1778), each of which contributed to the subgenre of caricature by developing animalistic imagery. Due to their allegoric nature, bestiaries are charged with significant symbolism. Montt, like one of his contemporary cartoonists, Fernando Krahn, surpasses traditional symbolism, however, creating imagery that arises from the reader’s empathy. This approach relates to the concept of mental scripts, which I introduced earlier. The active role that is played by the reader is promoted by anthropomorphism, among other mechanisms. By creating empathy between the reader and the characters, Montt gains the reader’s complicity in his humour.
The Renaissance movement promoted a highly artistic development of caricature. Leonardo Da Vinci chose to depict people with deformities in what were dehumanised models of human life that reinforced the viewer’s emotive or affective perceptions of beauty, albeit in a way that was not humoristic. As for the representation of personification, Hieronymus Bosch’s grotesque allegories contain creatures endowed with human features. And although the interpretation of Bosch’s painting *The Garden of Unearthly Delights* (1490–1510) is controversial, an ironic viewpoint is achieved by means of the anthropomorphic elements as well as anachronisms that Bosch renders in his triptych. Likewise, Montt combines humanisation and decontextualisations with a similar purpose. A good example of this appears in his graphic anecdote of a unicorn pair missing Noah’s ark (see figure 7, above), with one of them complaining about the other having spent too much time window-shopping. Rein-
forced by an anachronism, anthropomorphism here provides an empathising effect not simply with an animal, but with a mythical, and ultimately distant creature.

The nineteenth century marks the transition from cartoon as work of art to cartoon as mass media device. In the twenty-first century context of mass literacy and information overload, the original artistic and the subsequent political meanings of cartoons have not been lost so much as relegated to secondary functions, at least in their typical forms. The body of popular references that are now often condensed in cartoons targets a reader with a background in art history and other fields. But before the appearance of mass media, cartoons appeared in Francisco Goya’s Los Caprichos (1797–1799), a collection of critical prints that militate against irrationality and superstition embodied by, among others, anthropomorphic donkeys. Charles Philipon pursues a similar transforming portrayal in La Métamorphose du roi Louis-Philippe en poire [“The Metamorphosis of King Louis-Philippe into a Pear”] (1831): a model for the cartoons and caricatures in satirical English publications such as Punch. Charles H. Bennet initially uses the anthropomorphic techniques to illustrate Aesop’s fables, but moves on to mock Darwin’s theory of evolution through the staged transformation of a domestic appliance or animal into a person. Bennet’s use of objectification constitutes a major degradation of both Darwin’s theory and the utterly inanimate element (who is now a human), inviting the reader to cast a superior glance upon the depicted and apparently ‘evolved’ individual. In a similar way, Montt depicts household item-headed couples to ridicule human relations (see figure 2).

When discussing postmodern contributions to the transmorphic imagery in cartoons, Gary Larson provides a key reference point. And since Montt’s most immediate reference is Larson’s The Far Side, this reinforces the claim that the presence of personification in both of their works is a parodic criticism of humans’ egocentric
and anthropocentric perspective. Both cartoonist’s transcend the Aesopian notion that was enhanced by the Neo-Darwinist emphasis in so-called “radical anthropomorphism.” In Montt’s work, transmorphic characters coexist with popular culture, performing in both literary and biblical scenes, and articulating numerous media references. Therefore, the inference process becomes more complex than that in which the reader decodes humour in fables. As a norm, fables involve universal knowledge, while Montt’s intricate system of up-to-date and historical references challenges us to comprehend a more complex message. If the reader is unaware of the original reference, they may be unable to interpret its reformulation in the graphic joke. Reformulation often occurs in linguistic humour, for instance, and figure 8 (below) recreates the idiom ‘curiosity killed the cat’ with an anthropomorphic technique.

Figure 8. ...His last words were: ‘Can I ask you a question, just out of curiosity?’
Montt's work often incorporates references to idioms but, being culture-bound, only a few of them can be successfully translated. Indeed, figure 8 represents an exception to the norm because it works literally in both languages: “la curiosidad mató al gato” means the same thing as “curiosity killed the cat.” Furthermore, the cultural load contained in such idioms is not always accessible to readers not familiar with the language. This relates to this essay’s earlier premise of information overload in contemporary cartoons, where personification acts as an empathising cue for the reader, allowing for an expansion of information and affect. Thus, regardless of the opaqueness of the references within a particular joke, anthropomorphic cartoons can help the reader to alternate between a compassionate perspective and a merciless one based on the positive or negative charge that is associated with each animal, through such anthropomorphic traits as as their facial expressions.

Conclusion

Contemporary cartoons, exemplified by Montt’s work, contain influences from the early stages of art, when caricatures did not yet exist. On top of the canonical functions (didactic, universal, or anecdotal) and their traditional methods and topics, innovative uses of transmorphic techniques have emerged. Readers now have more responsibility in interpreting the humoristic messages of cartoons in that they need to possess previous knowledge about a variety of historical and contemporary cultural reference points. Such a task is a challenge in the era of digital encounters and information overload, and may lead to an overwhelming focus-dispersive phenomenon that makes knowledge acquisition difficult. The shift from the didactic form of transmorphic humour to a more demanding transmorphic device defines the current time as distinct from the era of fables and bestiaries in the past. ‘Getting the joke’ in a cartoon now entails the understanding of references from other cultures and periods. And even when authors attempt to employ universal
humour, they may often draw allusions to contextual characters or events. In contrast to ancient graphics, contemporary cartoons contain external references to numerous public figures, potentially restricting or curtailing humour’s reach.

A cartoonist chooses their method of depiction according to the effect that they wish to have on their reader. Anthropomorphism seeks the reader’s empathy, while dehumanisation tends to promote the reader’s adoption of a superior stance by degrading the depicted individual. The use of either of these techniques ensures that a cartoon maintains a strong connection with humour. In fact, transmorphic cartoons contain all the elements of a humoristic message: incongruity, superiority, and relief. Of the two transmorphic techniques, Montt’s predilection for anthropomorphism is partly motivated by his cartoons’ genres and themes. Indeed, the author creates situational caricatures, focusing on the circumstances of the cartoon rather than on the depiction of dehumanised protagonists, as in zoomorphism. Figure 6 shows the figures of the Christian God and Satan, performing human roles, and engaged in human conversation, deconstructing the circumstances in which the immaculate conception is understood to have occurred. As in this case, a great many of Montt’s cartoons accord with Mankoff’s unreal and surreal categories, which are especially relevant to anthropomorphism. And on the whole, anthropomorphism prevails over zoomorphism in Montt’s work.

This detailed summary of the comic function of transfiguration has made a comparison between transmorphic illustrations in early stages of art and in current contextual caricature, applying this comparison to Montt’s work. Although Montt’s paradigm adopts characteristics of previous transmorphic visual media, some of his cartoons’ features challenge cartoons’ traditional interpretation. Specifically, this paper has presented cartoons which represent object-headed humans as one of the consistencies in Montt’s work. This is a case of overlapping between anthropomorphism and dehu-
manisation. On the one hand, where objects have human bodies, they may be regarded as humanised items. On the other hand, the objects do not have facial gestures, so they may also be interpreted as dehumanised people. Montt’s innovative yet uncertain imagery thus addresses an active reader, requiring them to critically analyse the cartoon. A second particularity is Montt’s use of anthropomorphism, which is linked to linguistic humour, and the cultural barrier for translation, which needs to be addressed on its own in further research. Distinguished by its consistent use of anthropomorphism, Montt’s work provides a comparative ground through which this paper has analysed the transmorphic thorough visual media history.

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Notes
5 The captions in this article are translated from the original Spanish by the author of this article.
6 Interactive cartoons are graphic jokes that require the reader’s participation to complete the message, either by mentally filling a gap in the captions or by completing the visual component.


16 Ibid., 239.


23 Montt’s ‘blogger’ profile describes his blog as a medium through which he can express random thoughts: “Ahora estoy haciendo lo que hace mucho quería, dibujar las idioteces que tengo en la cabeza” [“Right now I am doing what I wanted to do long time ago, which is to draw the foolish ideas that I have inside my head”], accessed June 21, 2014 https://www.blogger.com/profile/08151545008436598322


25 Katja Gelbrich, Daniel Gäthke, and Stanford A. Westjohn, “Effective-


27 Ibid.


30 Keen, “Fast Tracks to Narrative Empathy,” 145.


35 Houlihan, *Wit and Humour in Ancient Egypt*, 65.

36 James, *La Pintura Egipcia*, 60.

37 Other of Montt’s cartoons that are unrelated in shape are, however, related in aim. Examples include when Montt mocks the Spanish Ecce Hommo restoration, or portrays the Egyptian pyramid construction as a fraud.


42 Hurtado notes that medieval bestiaries in Arreola’s work are a tool that Arreola uses to satirise masculine and feminine idiosyncrasies. In his use of humour, with its emphasis on the animal imagery and the fantastic to mock human vices, Montt’s graphic work shares common ground with Arreola’s narrative. See Milena Miriam Hurtado, “Humorismo sexual y humorismo doméstico en Bestiario doméstico de Brianda Domecq y en La señora Rodríguez y otros mundos de Martha Cerda.” PhD diss., University of California, 2006, esp. 35-36.


Bakhtin and *Borat*: the Rogue, the Clown, and the Fool in Carnival Film

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In the faux-reality mockumentary *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, Kazakh journalist Borat Sagdiyev and his producer (and at least one unseen, unnamed camera man) travel from Kazakhstan to the United States to document American culture for the edification of Kazakhstan’s citizenry. Upon arriving in America, Borat alters the documentary’s course of action without informing his producer, using his cross-country tour of America to set about finding and marrying Pamela Anderson, whom he sees on television in his New York City hotel room in an episode of *Baywatch*. Borat nevertheless continues to meet and interview a diverse assortment of Americans, all the while surreptitiously plotting his route to Los Angeles to find Anderson. Throughout the movie, Sacha Baron Cohen, who is one of the film’s producers and screenwriters, as well as the creator of and the actor playing Borat, invites audiences to laugh both at Borat and the Americans he encounters. And for American audiences, *Borat* becomes an opportunity both to witness and to question the limits of their tolerance, hospitality, and open-mindedness.

A more kairotic moment for *Borat* to have debuted in the United States is hard to imagine. The film capitalised on the popularity of reality television in the United States at the time by taking on the
style of a documentary, providing a seemingly realistic record of Borat’s trek through the United States. At the same time, popular celebrity-centered reality television shows such as The Osbournes, The Anna Nicole Show, The Simple Life, Rob & Big, and The Hills—all of which aired between 2002 and 2006, the year of Borat’s release—contradicted the notion that celebrities are special and separate from the everyday person, and not easily accessed by anyone who wishes to drive to Los Angeles and find them (as Borat eventually does with Anderson). At the same time, various twenty-four hour global and national news channels offered Americans increasingly partisan, hyperbolised news and entertainment, the lines between which have sometimes been difficult to discern. In this context, Borat was notable as a risible “reality” movie about a foreign journalist’s quest to find and marry an American celebrity.

When Borat debuted, praise from prominent American film critics was widespread: Peter Rainer, of The Christian Science Monitor, lauded the film’s “painfully funny” achievements. Manhola Dargis, in a review for The New York Times, praised Borat’s “brilliance,” and Peter Travers of Rolling Stone declared the film “a tour de force that sets off comic and cosmic explosions in your head.” Metacritic.com, an online aggregator of movie and television reviews, lists Borat as having achieved 89% in its critic approval system, which the website labels “Universal Acclaim.” Despite this resounding critical acclaim, discussion of the film among the general American public and cultural and political commentators revealed its controversial nature. For example, only a few weeks after Rolling Stone featured Cohen, in character as Borat, in the November 13 issue, in 2006—a sign of the triumphant success of Cohen’s “tour de force”—George Saunders articulated in The New Yorker the unease that some American viewers felt about the film. As he wrote, Borat’s performance had exposed “what hypocrites Americans really are,” leading them, using his strategy of apparently naïve provocation, to anger, frustration, and the point of utter exasperation.
Borat, like other examples of political or satirical comedy in contemporary American culture—such as Chappelle’s Show, The Colbert Report, The Daily Show, and Idiocracy—might best be understood as something Americans were not necessarily supposed to be either for or against. To see the film as merely an attempt to divide or deride Americans oversimplifies its textual significance, reducing the film’s complex operations largely to a matter of comedic style. In scene after scene, Cohen uses ambivalent humor to demonstrate that Americans do indeed have a breaking point, despite their view of themselves—at least as it is depicted in the movie—as tolerant of others’s cultures, customs, and values. When Borat elicits ambivalent laughter from those with whom he interacts, such laughter is directed toward tolerance as an American value, signifying the Americans’s best intentions for multiculturalism and diversity. At the same time, this laughter also plays a substitutive role, becoming one of the reasons that Americans in the film withhold criticism of Borat’s questionable or problematic values. In using ambivalent humor, Cohen asks Americans not to reject but to question the confidence that they have in their tolerance, destabilising the Americans’s apparent belief that their acceptance of cultural difference is not only noble, but limitless.

Borat is one of a few eponymously named American satirical programs that use this subversive, ambivalent humor to highlight problems and contradictions in American culture. Like Chappelle’s Show and The Colbert Report, Borat can be understood to function in accordance with Mikhail Bakhtin’s description of the carnival text that “overcomes all oppressive social norms” by giving voice to folk truth through “grotesque realism.” In each of the above named programs, the author or director creates characters in whose guise he then performs, acting in the service of making a broader social commentary through their ridiculous and ridiculing behaviours. Of these performances, Dave Chappelle’s is the most directly personal. Chappelle introduces into these skits, which he co-writes and in
which he plays various characters, a series of brief comments that appear to express Chappelle’s own thoughts and opinions. In contrast, the main character on *The Colbert Report* is Stephen Colbert, but it is widely understood—though never explicitly addressed on the show—that the real Stephen Colbert’s own left-leaning politics contradict those of the right-wing character that he plays. But Cohen’s *Borat* represents a figure whose views are even further distanced from those of their author. However, because these are visual rather than written texts, their creators physically embody the characters who are part of the satirical, and often carnival acts. This embodiment makes it all the more difficult for these creators to maintain their distance from the characters’s actions. Such a permeable relation between author and character presents audiences with the difficult task of determining the extent to which the author can or should take responsibility for the characters’s behaviour. It also prompts the audience to identify who exactly is the target of these characters’s carnival subversions, leading them to wonder whether they now also form a part of that target.

As Bakhtin’s discussions of carnival culture and literature make clear, the problem of determining the subject of subversive laughter is commonly asked in relation to carnival texts. The difficulties audiences can have in determining who bears responsibility for carnival subversions may be illuminated in part by examining such carnival texts as *Borat* in accordance with Bakhtin’s theorisation of what he called “carnival character masks.” These masks—the rogue, the clown, and the fool—can be plotted on a spectrum of naïveté based on whether or not they in fact express the genuine view of the author. In addition to a textual function that Bakhtin referred to as the “author image,” this spectrum of characters can be helpful in enabling us to reconsider film’s carnival significance, as well as in predicting or determining the range of responses that audiences may have to carnival texts. Because carnival texts like *Borat* push the boundaries of what may be acceptably ridiculed in
mainstream culture, audiences may have difficulty recognising that carnival texts often ask us to question our own values and ideologies. Accustomed to authors who are prepared to bear responsibility for whatever offensive behaviour they perform, audiences may respond to carnival texts by critiquing the performer rather than by considering whether they themselves, and mainstream culture at large, should bear any responsibility for the absurdities or contradictions that such a carnival performance serves to reveal. In what follows, I summarise Bakhtin’s comments on carnival character masks, and then review some of the ways that each mask is used in *Borat* to achieve the film’s critical objectives. I conclude with brief observations about how analysing the use of carnival character masks in visual texts like *Borat* can lead to more fruitful and nuanced discussions of the significance of both carnival and satirical cultural commentary.

**Bakhtin’s Theory of Carnival Character Masks**

Wherever in literature they are found, rogues, clowns, and fools are agents of the carnival or carnivalesque. Rebellious and oppositional, the carnival is a literary attribute that Bakhtin characterises as “A boundless world of humorous norms and manifestations opposed to the official and serious tone” of “feudal” or mainstream culture. Bakhtin’s writings on carnival characters spreads across much of his corpus, but perhaps the most detailed description of these figures appears in his essay “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel.” In this essay, Bakhtin devotes the entire seventh section to defining the roles and potentials of the carnival characters, beginning with a definition of the chronotope—the way in which time and space is configured in prose—to which the mask characters are crucially related. Bakhtin observes how these characters are connected to the space of the public square and spectacle, which he notes are both carnival locations. Defined by their unfamiliar and alien status, these characters are metaphorical reflections, he argues, “of some
other’s mode of being.” Consequently, these masks “simply do not exist” beyond their function as outsiders or others; they function only as “prosaic allegorizations” or “prosaic metaphors” that reveal and subvert the falsity of official culture at the same time as they serve to endorse certain folk truths.

Bakhtin suggests that when carnivalisation arises in literary texts by means of these masks, it does so in accordance with the absence or presence of naïveté in the character who serves to mock that text’s official culture. “Prose,” Bakhtin writes,

offers two responses to high pathos and to seriousness and conventionality of any sort: the gay deception of the rogue—a lie justified because directed to liars—and stupidity—also justified, as it is the failure to understand a lie.

The rogue stands in opposition to the fool in terms of their awareness of being an agent of carnival; the former responds to deception with deception, while the latter remains unaware that such deception even exists. Bakhtin describes the clown as a “synthetic form” of the rogue and the fool, making the binary into a spectrum. Performing a sustained but deliberate naïveté, the clown oscillates between the playful deception of the rogue and the utter stupidity of the fool.

Bakhtin distinguishes the rogue from the clown and fool early on in “Forms,” claiming that, unlike the other carnival masks, “the rogue still has some ties that bind him to real life.” Thus, the mask most closely aligned with the author and with extratextual reality is the rogue, who Bakhtin describes as the “gay deceiver” who “continually dons and discards [other] masks so as to expose the falsity of those who presume their roles and institutions are natural.” Rogues maintain at least two important ties to the real world outside of the text: their relationship to their audiences, and their relationship to the text’s authors. The actions of rogue characters allow audiences to make certain assumptions about the author’s intentions because, at least in carnival texts, rogues target the very persons and ideologies of an official culture that the author selects as their
target. For example, a rogue and his audience will understand the ways in which his trickery targets both his fellow characters and his audience, as it is this trickery that results in the mockery of the same mainstream ideology to which both the characters and audience subscribe. Despite his “deliberate stupidity,” the rogue fully understands the implications of his actions: accordingly, he must ensure that his audience realises this too so that he can laugh (back) at them for laughing at his parodies of their culture. Thus, a rogue will in some way reveal to his audience his “unmasked” self, implying the motivations that lie behind his deceptions. In this way, the rogue implicates his audience in a triangle of mockery in which, by virtue of being masks for their authors, they deceive their fellow characters and mock their own audiences.

The rogue’s close relationship to the author—both as a function of the text and as a biographical entity—also tethers him to reality because he represents “precisely the stance of the novelist.” Bakhtin asserts that, after the emergence of “‘autographed’ literature,” audiences required some information about authors in order to make assumptions about the text’s historical, cultural, socio-economic, and ideological provenance. If, as Bakhtin asserts, members of the audience were to recognise that a rogue has deliberately feigned his foolishness, then it would be natural, in Bakhtin’s formulation, for them to see the rogue as the author’s direct mouthpiece in the text: an vehicle only of the author’s true beliefs.

Like rogues, clown and fool characters instantiate carnival inversions of mainstream culture, but they are less directly connected to their authors’ intentions and the world outside their texts. The rogue purposefully transforms himself in order to allegorise the people and ideologies associated with the normative or official culture. Knowingly appropriating “the language of priests and monks, kings and seigneurs, knights and wealthy urban types, scholars and jurists,” the rogue uses imitation as part of his mockery, reappropriating the same ideologies that are also latent
In the languages and practices of his audience. In contrast, the clown and fool appear not to realise that they “represent a metamorphosis of tsar and god... Under such conditions man is in a state of allegory.” Yet, like the rogue, these characters also “degrade” official culture by eliciting the audiences's laughter at the ideologies they parody. But unlike the rogue, neither the clown nor the fool takes pleasure in letting the audience in on the joke. This is in part because the extent to which the clown and fool understand that they serve as parodic allegorisations of a culture remains unclear. Unlike the rogue, the clown and the fool seem to hope for, and even sometimes to assume, that they have the approval of mainstream culture, which the rogue rejects, preferring to laugh at his audience as much as with them.

Clowns and fools are also distinct from rogues in that they can seem otherworldly. Rogues clearly understand the world outside the text and have an interest in ridiculing it. But because clowns and fools do not understand the extratextual world, they clearly do not belong to it, remaining detached from the audience’s reality. However, it is because these characters “are ‘not of this world’ [that] they possess their own special rights and privileges” for degrading the ideologies of ‘the world’s’ official culture. This otherworldliness complicates the relationship between audiences and these two characters. An audience can depend on the rogue’s irony, trusting that he understands that, while he wears a mask, his words and deeds are not in earnest. But the same assumptions cannot be made of clowns and fools because, unlike the rogue, these figures appear genuinely to espouse offensive or objectionable feelings in their words, actions, and thoughts. Moreover, these characters’s bizarre behaviour distinguishes them from the audience, granting them an exclusive “right not to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life.” While clowns and fools may seem unreal to their audiences, these masks, Bakhtin asserts, are “not invented” but “rooted deep in the folk” and grounded in their audiences’s foundational senses
of reality. Consequently, audiences will often look to these characters, perhaps even subconsciously, for implicit information about the author’s intentions. And while rogue characters can provide audiences with a more direct understanding of these authorial intentions, uncovering a kind of truth, audiences cannot be quite so assured of the clown’s or fool’s ability to clarify the text. Whether the clown or the fool functions as the *medium* or the *target* of the author’s mockery remains uncertain, as neither offers any direct clarification about their relation to the extratextual or real world.

Because the clown’s place on the spectrum of naïveté falls “Between the rogue and the fool... as a unique coupling of the two,” he exhibits neither unqualified deception nor total stupidity. A clown’s foolishness retains an unrevealed and unspoken irony because he is, in fact, “a rogue who dons the mask of a fool in order to motivate distortions and shufflings of languages and labels, thus unmasking them by not understanding them.” The clown’s form of parody, like the rogue’s, engages in a “malicious distortion” of the values of mainstream culture. But the clown neither laughs at his audience nor acknowledges that his actions degrade their values. Just as a clown in court, this character mask never removes his mask before his audience. By laughing at his parodies, the clown’s audience degrades their own ideological structure, confirming their place and role in a culture that both sanctions the clown’s spectacle and is its very subject. To determine whether a character is in fact a clown, audiences must be given some indication that the character’s naïve foolishness is a mask behind which lies an unspoken and ulterior objective: to carnivalise the official culture. In identifying such a dichotomy, audiences can recognise clowns as embodying their authors’s intentions, albeit with some degree of ambiguity.

The fool, in contrast, hopes for mainstream culture’s endorsement, but invariably fails to understand why he cannot earn it. His naïveté about what society expects from people is entirely sustained and, as such, the fool’s behaviour cannot be considered a “mask” of
his true self. The fool’s foolishness leads us to dismiss that he masks or hides the same parodic intentions that are harbored by the rogue or clown. Because the fool does not explicitly indicate to audiences that he is a “transformed” mockery of mainstream culture, there is even greater potential for the audience to become confused about whether he is the agent, instrument, or subject of the author’s parodies. As Bakhtin explains, the

fool introduced by the author for purposes of ‘making strange’ the world of conventional pathos may himself, as a fool, be the object of the author’s scorn. The author need not necessarily express a complete solidarity with such a character.29

Though fools may not directly express the opinions of the author in the way that rogues and, more indirectly, clowns will usually express them, by “regarding fools or regarding the world through the eyes of a fool,” Bakhtin notes, “the novelist’s eye is taught a sort of prose vision, the vision of a world confused by conventions of pathos and by falsity.”30 In witnessing this vision, audiences may find it frustrating to attempt to read the fool as a direct reflection of their author’s carnivalesque intentions. If the fool resists being understood by audiences in the simple way in which rogues and clowns may be understood, it is because the author’s intentions are so much more indirectly expressed through a fool’s actions, if they are even expressed by them at all.

It may seem that Borat, having just one main character, cannot demonstrate the complexities of all three carnival character masks. And yet, because of the direct involvement of the author in both the creation and performance of that main character, Cohen’s film becomes an ideal exemplification of Bakhtin’s theorisation of these carnival characters. In the following sections, I will examine some of the ways in which the rogue, the clown, and the fool are manifested in Borat, arguing that the film effectuates a carnivalesque contestation of American ideology as it relates both to multiculturalism and tolerance.
Sacha Baron Cohen: Author and Rogue

Given Bakhtin's definitions of rogue characters, Cohen himself, as the creator, writer, and actor who portrays Borat, can be understood as the film's rogue. To look at Cohen as the rogue, however, is to recognise Cohen as a function of his own text, or what Bakhtin calls the “author image.” Bakhtin makes a distinction between the author as “he himself is somehow embedded in the novel” and what Morson and Emerson describe as the “author-as-creator”: the biographical person whose creative efforts produce the text, but who remains “always outside the work, or tangential to it.” Bakhtin asserts that while audiences cannot help but seek out the author's image, aiming to anchor the text in an historical, cultural, or ideological moment, this image remains relatively unhelpful in this enterprise. Certain of the text’s more concrete features, Bakhtin argues, could indicate its historical, cultural, and ideological context at least equally well, if not altogether more effectively. In the end, however, Bakhtin does not deny that helpfulness of the author-image, which remains a relevant consideration so long as it “is deep and truthful.” Under these circumstances, Bakhtin notes, the author-image “can help the listener or reader more correctly and profoundly to understand the work of the given author.”

In view of Bakhtin's observations, it is clear that Cohen can never be a character in Borat in the same manner that Borat himself is a character in the movie. As Bakhtin qualifies, the “image of the author cannot, of course, itself enter into the fabric of images that makes up the literary work.” Yet because Borat may also be seen as a continuation of Cohen’s previous performance strategies, the film also reminds us of the extent to which Cohen is himself embedded in the text, performing (as is his custom) as the same character that he has also created. In other words, Cohen's particular author image—an image with which many viewers will be at least partly familiar—demonstrates many of the characteristics of the rogue. Part of Cohen's comedic strategy is to “continually don and discard
masks,” just as any rogue does. In addition to Borat, for instance, Cohen plays a number of characters, including those that whom he plays on *Da Ali G Show*, such as “Ali G,” a character who apes youth gangsta culture, and “Brüno,” a parody of certain fashionisto and homosexual stereotypes.

Cohen based Borat on a Russian doctor named Alexi Krickler, a man who Cohen met in Astrakhan. “He had some of the elements of Borat,” Cohen explains in his *Rolling Stone* interview, “but he had none of the racism or the misogyny or the anti-Semitism.” By refiguring Krickler as a journalist from a highly fictionalised Kazakhstan, Cohen “transforms” a character with whom he had already become familiar, subverting a normative archetype in a way that is similar to that which Bakhtin describes as “transformation” in his essay on carnival masks. But Cohen’s choice to represent a character from Kazakhstan is strategic: “it was a country,” he remarks, “that no one had heard anything about,” and which allowed him to “essentially play on stereotypes [Americans] might have about this ex-Soviet backwater.” In thus inventing Borat, Cohen creates one of the three masks that he adopts in *Da Ali G Show*. The mask of Borat enables Cohen to exercise what Bakhtin calls one’s “right” to question the norms and values of official culture. But in *Borat*, Cohen does not switch masks as he does on *Da Ali G Show*; and nor does he explicitly admit to the film’s American audience that he is wearing a mask (as any typical rogue would do). Rather, if he performs as a rogue, then his performance is not limited to exactly these textual operations. Instead, his roguishness arises from the fact that he, as the biographical author of the text, appears in his own text. It is this fact that creates for Cohen an author image that is already familiar to audiences, connected with another text outside of *Borat*: namely, *Da Ali G Show*. Cohen does not directly declare his intentions to the audience, but rather uses his physical presence to remind us that he is only playing Borat for the duration of this film. In the style of a rogue, Cohen’s inextricable association with the character
reminds us that he has worn other masks before this one, and will eventually take off the mask of Borat too, proceeding to play other characters. In the same way, however, the fact that Cohen dons only one mask for the entire length of the feature film may contribute to the depth of Cohen’s “gay deception,” confusing audience members who are not familiar with *Da Ali G Show* or with Cohen’s comedic performances outside of this text, and causing them some difficulty in understanding the falsity of Borat’s naïveté.

If Cohen were to suggest in *Borat* that he rejected any association between his author image in the text and his biographical identity (or author-as-creator), such as, for example, by using a pseudonym, then he would establish more distance between himself (as the author of a carnival text), and the film or text itself. But Cohen has never denied his creation of Borat (or of other character masks), neither on *Da Ali G Show* or elsewhere. And although they have been infrequent, in Cohen’s interviews about Borat and other characters he plays from *Da Ali G Show*, his candor in discussing himself as the creator of these texts and characters indicates that it is his desire that his audience should know that Cohen himself understands what he is doing when he is within the text, such as when he is playing Borat. (It is, as it were, an “open secret.”) But in order for Cohen to achieve his goal of transparent deception (as the rogue), the audience must have acquired a degree of this extratextual information, whether it concerns Cohen’s intentions or at least about the process of film production and distribution in America. Perhaps Cohen-as-rogue assumes that audiences may know that Cohen is a Cambridge-educated British Jew, a person whose performance as a racist, misogynistic, anti-Semite they can only assume to be parody. Or perhaps Cohen-as-rogue assumes that, regardless of their familiarity with Cohen’s authorial identity, audiences will understand that the creator of Borat must not actually share Borat’s values or support his behaviours, as it would be unlikely for any movie with as wide a release as *Borat* to have been sanctioned by authorities, such as the Motion Picture Association of America, or
the studio funding the production of the film, if it did, in earnest, promote Borat’s clearly misanthropic values. This second assumption, of course, suggests a risk on the rogue’s behalf; it requires audiences to share the rogue’s understanding of the extratextual world or his view of its official culture and its authorising structures. But it also establishes the space in which audiences also become the very subject of the rogue’s trickery. If the audience does not share Cohen’s understanding and, as a result, misunderstand the satirical objectives of the film (and instead interpreting as sincere and taking seriously Borat’s offensive acts), then such an audience would only further the film’s larger critical objective to scrutinise the cultural discernment and sensitivity to difference of those living in America.

Cohen-as-Borat: The Clown

Because the clown is a “synthetic form” that blends the worldliness of the rogue with the otherworldliness of the fool, we cannot say that any single character or “image” is the clown in Borat. Rather, the clown is a blend of Cohen as the author image and Borat as his foolish carnival mask. When Cohen plays Borat on-screen, he becomes the clown in the “public spectacle,” a figure whose parodies of official culture are not only sanctioned by his audience but performed for their entertainment. And as the clown, Cohen wears the mask of the fool, never removing it while within the audience’s gaze. Yet in order for Cohen to be a true clown, his audience must also somehow perceive that his foolish behaviour is a mask, a guise behind which he is also actually laughing.

This is perhaps most easily perceived in the film during a scene in which Borat and his producer arrive at a bed and breakfast, run by a Jewish couple who also live there. Borat and his producer become anxious and paranoid when they realise that the bed and breakfast owners are practicing Jews. The owners bring sandwiches, drinks, and dessert to their new guests’ room, and then sit on the beds to chat. Borat feigns cordiality by taking a bite of one of the
sandwiches, only to then spit that bite into a napkin, in view of the camera, while the couple is distracted. During the night, Borat and his producer awaken to find two bugs crawling on the floor near to their bedroom door and begin to exclaim that “the Jews have shifted their shapes!” Borat then throws dollar bills on the floor near the door because, he says, he thinks the money will appease them, but when that fails, Borat and his producer flee the house in the night, driving away in escape. In this scene, the audience is expected to realize that Borat’s actions and attitudes are outrageous and offensive, regardless of whether the audience actually know that Cohen, the actor and writer, is himself Jewish.

As with the rogue, this expectation creates a space in which audiences bear the burden of determining the subject and scope of Borat’s carnival antics. In this space, audiences may become the subjects of the joke in at least two respects: if they fail to recognize that Cohen is a clown wearing a mask, and so take the film as a serious endorsement of the clown’s on-screen action, or if they themselves laugh at or with the clown as he reacts in fear to his kindly hosts, they mistake Borat’s prejudice against and fear of Jews as real.

Borat: the Fool

As the main character of the film, Borat is the primary agent of the carnival laughter whose “simpleminded incomprehension” jettisons etiquette and “overcomes all [of the] oppressive social norms” that are part of the official culture. Carnival laughter is deeply ambivalent, affirming both the right to laugh at official seriousness and the futility of doing the same. According to Bakhtin, the “grotesque realism” of carnival subversions affirm the ambivalence of life. His primary example of carnival literature comes from the literature of Rabelais, in whose “work,” Bakhtin notes, “the material bodily principle, that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecations, and sexual life, plays a predominant role.” In carnival texts, these grotesque representations of the human body
are “presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life,” but are now made public, presented “as something universal, representing all the people.” In this reversal of public and private, the common and grotesque, carnival literature embodies the duality of ambivalence that typifies folk culture’s contestation of mainstream culture.

In true Rabelaisian carnival style, Borat the fool exposes one of “life’s prurient little secrets” by presenting a bag of his own faeces to the host of a dinner party. Apparently a sign of his appreciation for dinner, Borat is led to present the fecal gift after she declares that Borat could easily fit into American culture, ignoring his many offensive remarks, including his proposition of sex to his fellow dinner guests, and his many inappropriate allusions to her physical attractiveness. By offering the gift of offal, which serves as a punch-line to his hostess’s seemingly indefatigable attempts to accommodate her unusual guest, Borat becomes the tool of Cohen’s ambivalent laughter, which tests the limits of official American culture of tolerance. As Saunders observes, it is likely that most Americans would be provoked to scorn and object to Borat’s actions, and yet Borat’s host herself appears relatively unperturbed, allowing Borat to stay among the guests. Rather than rebuking Borat and his gift, she merely demonstrates to him how to flush the faeces in a toilet. Shortly after this incident, Borat invites his friend Luenell, a prostitute, to the party. Harborine no ambivalence about Luenell’s occupation, Borat affirms the sex worker’s presence, having already bragged (at the beginning of the film) that his sister is the “number four prostitute in all Kazakhstan.” When Luenell arrives, however, Borat’s hosts call the police to have Borat removed from the premises, demonstrating that their tolerance, far from sacred, has its limits. Audiences, however, are left to question whether Cohen’s grotesque carnival inversions of American ideology are really fair; as Saunders suggests, Borat’s carnival performances seem to push the boundaries of social custom simply too far. While Borat seems
to be well-intentioned, his host seems quick to judge Luenell, and equally quick to dismiss Borat for associating with her. And yet, Borat’s actions also “push the boundaries” of social custom, going beyond the point at which most Americans could be expected to remain comfortable. But the scene’s ambivalence, and Borat’s ambivalent moral position, is part of its carnival subversion; like all carnival texts, it asks the audience to accept the fool’s transgressions, and to take responsibility for their own reactions to the fool and the structure of their own cultural norms.

Using what Bakhtin calls “the time-honored bluntness of the fool’s language,” Borat the fool draws attention to Americans’s inability or unwillingness to take seriously the offensive or bigoted words of someone from another culture, even when those words appear to be delivered sincerely. When Borat visits a gun store and asks the middle-aged white male behind the counter to advise him which gun is best for killing Jews, the clerk selects a weapon and describes its capabilities. In no way does the clerk advise Borat against purchasing a gun for the purpose of killing Jews. Rather, when the clerk ultimately refuses to sell Borat a gun, it is not because of this stated intention, but because Borat is not an American citizen, and is therefore ineligible to obtain the firearm under American federal gun control laws. Ignoring Borat’s anti-Semitism, the clerk allows this social wrong to remain unchecked, while observing the gun laws in no uncertain terms. Perhaps if Cohen had removed his fool’s mask and let the clerk in on the joke—revealing that he was not a buffoon or an anti-Semite—the clerk may have explained that he had ignored Borat’s remarks out of uncertainty and ambivalence, not knowing how to discourage the man’s anti-Semitism. But Borat’s mask is not lifted, and the clerk remains silent in the face of Borat’s outrageous suggestions and requests. Using Borat to expose and contest the American man’s preparedness to tolerate bigoted, and potentially even lethal, hatred for another group of people without question, Cohen
exposes the unstable and volatile aspects of American tolerance and the orthodoxy of cultural naïveté.

Borat often performs as this sort of foreign, otherworldly guest among Americans in his travels, but as the fool he never fully comprehends why they do not see the world as he does.47 At the end of an interview with three American women, Borat laughs at their suggestion that women and men possess brains of the same size, and, referring to one of the women, explains to his audience (in overdub): “I could not understand what this old man was saying.” At another point in the film, when Borat attempts to pay for antiques of America’s Confederate States with pubic hair, he claims that his home country values the body hair highly, using it as a form of currency. At this suggestion, the owners of the antique store, like the feminist women that Borat had interviewed earlier, lose their temper. But the store owners also take what little cash Borat can offer in order to ensure that he goes away as soon as possible. In these examples, and in many more throughout the film, Borat evinces an almost complete naïveté, seemingly baffled that he cannot convince Americans of the apparent propriety of his actions. But as the wearer of the mask, Cohen realises that Americans do not see the world as Borat does. Using the mask of the fool, Cohen as Borat “makes strange” the Americans’s conventions, asking both his viewers and interviewees to explain, reconsider, and even justify their ideological norms as against Borat’s actions and apparent expectations. By testing the limits of his interviewees’s patience, Cohen demonstrates to his American audience that tolerance is not only often ridiculous, but can in fact defeat its apparent purpose: to permit and allow for the inclusion and affirmation of difference.

Cohen’s Carnival Purposes, Bakhtin’s Further Implications

At the end of the film, Borat reflects on the lessons he has learned in America while a montage depicts his many interactions with Amer-
ican citizens and residents. The lesson Borat takes home with him is that, like Americans, Kazakhs should value cultural tolerance and diversity. In the final scene, Borat is depicted having returned to his home village in Kazakhstan, where, as he claims, “We no longer have a Running of the Jew. It’s cruel!” Having married Luenell and brought her back with him to his home village, Borat apprehends a queue of villagers, each of whom stands outside their home, presenting a flower to their new resident. But ultimately, Cohen does not share what he calls Borat’s “abstract and deadened idealism” about mainstream culture.\footnote{Borat, as a carnival film, reveals life’s grotesque reality through Borat’s foolish actions, provoking the audience to laugh not only at Borat but at most of the Americans he encounters too. Bakhtin characterises such a communal laughter as “the laughter of all the people.” Since it is actually “universal [and] directed at all and everyone,” however, this laughter is also ambivalent: “it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives.”} Borat’s particular ambivalence is emblematic of the two valences between which this film and other carnival texts operate. On the one hand, there is the mockery of the carnival masks, which is a procedure carried out through their interactions with other characters, the latter of whom usually represent the persons of an official or mainstream culture. On the other hand, there is the author image’s critique of that culture. As an abstract concept, such a critique underlies the entire movement of the text, supervening upon the masks’s individual acts of mockery. As part of the mainstream culture that the masks ridicule, audiences might respond to the carnival spectacle with a degree of apprehension or disdain, since they may not becoming themselves the punchline of a joke, or the subject of the film’s critique. At the same time, to understand that the mockeries carried out by the masks are part of a larger, more general cultural commentary offered by the author image, would be pointless if audiences were also to hold the author image
responsible for the mask characters and their grotesque, reprehensible, and unfair behaviours. Any criticism of carnival texts along these lines would miss the point, as it would sidestep the question of whether the larger critique offered by the author is to any degree legitimate. For example, audience members might agree with Saunders when she suggests that, even when Cohen’s characters push the Americans they interact with to unreasonable limits, this does not indicate the contradictoriness or flawed nature of the Americans’s values of tolerance and multiculturalism. But it is the very outrageousness and grotesqueness of the masks’s actions that allow the carnival text to subvert the expectations of mainstream culture. To imagine that the primary concern of the carnival text is to explain a certain culture’s expected norms of behaviour, or to respect the culture’s boundaries or borders of politeness, would be to miss the point that (or to ignore the question of whether there are) problematic elements about the way in which Americans practice cultural tolerance. *Borat* and Cohen do not accept responsibility for that expectation, nor does the film provide audiences with solutions to the problems its confrontations and interventions point to. Instead, the audience itself must adopt the responsibility of determining both what is the subject of the film’s ambivalent critique, and how they should respond to the film and its critical position.

Bakhtin’s analysis of the rogue, clown, and fool in carnival literature can be usefully applied to other carnival and satirical visual texts as well. For example, questions have arisen as to whether Stephen Colbert, the author image that we meet in the Colbert Show, should be held responsible for racially insensitive comments made on Stephen Colbert’s Twitter account (the account belonging to what may be seen as Colbert’s carnival mask). Essentially, in Bakhtinian terms, this situation could be understood to generate a question of whether Colbert should be treated as a rogue who, like Cohen, is aware that racism would offend his American audience but should also be held responsible for the racist remarks of his carnival mask.
persona. For Colbert and other satirists like him, Bakhtin’s analysis of carnival masks allows us to scrutinise the relationship between the comedian’s character mask and the comedian as author-creator, appealing to the world outside the text: What level of naïveté can the audience detect in the action or speech of these characters? To what extent can we ascribe the behaviours of carnival masks to their authors? And, to what extent does it matter that these identities might have shared intentions when we set out to determine the legitimacy of the author’s intentions, or his responsibility for the masks’s actions? What larger criticism, if any, may be prompted by the masks’s actions or remarks, and what responsibility should both the author and the audience bear in relation to those critical issues? Such questions may encourage a more substantive discussion of texts like *Borat*, which draw from the rich history of the carnival tradition in challenging audiences to reconsider their values and ideologies.

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**Notes**


7 See Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 1989. Stam’s book is foundational for Bakhtinian film studies, and particularly the carnivalesque in film. Also influential for my own study is the premise of Dean McWilliams’s essay “Bakhtin in Brooklyn: Language in Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*.” McWilliams notes that, by definition, film offers greater opportunity than the novel for demonstrating and instantiating (linguistic and therefore ideological) dialogue, as the former is simultaneously aural, visual, verbal, and textual. Therefore, film “might be termed the ultimate carnival of the arts and of the modes of discourse they encounter.” See McWilliams, “Bakhtin in Brooklyn: Language in Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*,” in *Carnivalizing Difference: Bakhtin and the Other*, eds. Peter I. Barta, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 248. I proceed from precisely this understanding of film as a novelised genre that provides literary opportunity for witnessing the interactions of characters and languages. Because of this potential, Stam notes, “the encounter of Bakhtin with film might be viewed as virtually inevitable” (17).


9 M.M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 259-422. See also Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, 84-258. Commentary on these carnival masks occurs in the introduction to *Rabelais* and “Discourse,” but with less specificity than in “Forms.” In the *Rabelais*, Bakhtin treats these masks as a trinity of unique characters whose common function in the text is to provide an opportunity to create an “other” whose status as an outsider provides the author an opportunity for critique. His treatment of these characters in “Discourse” differentiates among the functions and potentials of the masks but is more brief than in “Forms.” In this essay, I draw mainly from “Forms” and “Discourse.”

10 In the introduction to *Rabelais*, Bakhtin writes that, after class stratification, comedy separated from “official” seriousness, and became the province of folk culture, while official culture appropriated seriousness. Comedy belonged, then, to public locations such as the public square and theatre as opposed to courtrooms and church sanctuaries (6-17).


12 Ibid., 159.

13 Ibid., 166.


15 Bakhtin, “Forms,” 162.

16 Ibid.


23 Ibid., 159.
24 Ibid., 162.
25 Ibid., 161.
26 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 404.
30 Ibid.
31 For further commentary on the author image, and the distinctions Bakhtin makes between the biographical author (the biological, biographical person) and the “author image” (textual indications of an authorial decision and creative act, such as the construction of a carnival mask character), see Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 429-32.
33 Bakhtin, “Forms,” 257.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 70.
36 In Bakhtin’s schema of carnival mask characters, “transformation” occurs when a character from an official culture appears in a parodied form. The transformation of such a character into a carnival mask typically results in the creation of a clown or fool, not a rogue: see Bakhtin, “Forms,” 161. Notably, Borat’s character simultaneously transforms or parodies two “official” professions esteemed by Americans: a doctor and a journalist.
37 Coincidentally, Bakhtin himself was exiled in Kazakhstan from 1930-1936. See Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 253-8. I wish to thank Dr. Frank Farmer for imparting this information to me.
39 Borat has, however, denied any association with Cohen. Strauss quotes the former as saying, “I’d like to state I have no connection with Mr. Cohen and fully support my government’s decision to sue this Jew.” See Strauss, “The Man behind the Mustache,” 62.
40 As Bakhtin clarifies, without sanction from official culture, carnival could not go on. The carnival celebration in medieval times marked an officially-sanctioned moment in which members of the folk culture could laugh at otherwise sacrosanct official culture: *Rabelais*, 8-10. Bakhtin acknowledges that carnival “did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no second life. On the contrary, [official culture] sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it” (*Rabelais*, 9). See also Ruth Coates, “Christian Motifs in Bakhtin’s Carnival Writings,” *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 141-2.
41 With the exception of his *Rolling Stone* interview, Cohen almost always promotes *Borat* on talk shows and premieres while in character, as Borat.
44 Ibid., 19.
45 Bakhtin, “Forms,” 163.
46 Ibid., 161.
Bakhtin’s predicts that, in a carnival text, “the fool is often coupled with another character—with a poet, a scholar, a moralist, or a priest... who presumes, and then tries to explain how the fool has failed to comprehend.” Quoted in Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 360. Similarly, Borat typically has some sort of American foil for his foolishness. In his effort to understand American culture, Borat interviews and consults a variety of Americans, including Congressman Alan Keyes, three feminists, a car dealer, a group of college men, a driving instructor, a humor consultant who specializes in telling jokes, an etiquette teacher, and members of polite Southern society. When any of his American “guides” correct him, Borat expresses both surprise that his actions were transgressive, and his inability to see why the Americans might not agree with what he believes to be appropriate and proper. Following Bakhtin’s hypothesis, Borat rejects the help of his American interlocutors, invoking the “right” of the fool to not understand.


Ibid., 11-12.

I am not really surprised that my Aboriginal background has been a great asset in theatre. The Nyoongah language was always full of humour and music. Theatre, in a bush area, is the very essence of an Aboriginal corroboree and performances there are often full of brilliant dance and mime.

—Western Australian and Nyoongah playwright and poet, Jack Davis (1917–2000)

For indigenous Australians, the 1960s and 1970s were significant times within this nation’s post-colonial history. By means of stronger public presence, Indigenous people called for greater social justice and cultural recognition. The performing arts proved a powerful avenue for Indigenous Australians to challenge negative assumptions held about them by a great many non-Indigenous Australians. Humour was—and still is—a significant element of this endeavour.

This paper looks at the renaissance of Indigenous Australian theatrical performance, from the early 1970s to its prominence in the lead-up to the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. It focuses on the specific ways that humour has been used by Indigenous Australian performing artists to highlight unpleasant social issues in their communities, such as poverty, alcohol abuse, and the removal/stealing of children from their families. In conjunction with witty rep-
artee, visual comedy both in movement and mimicry is often used by Indigenous performers. Philosopher Henri Bergson, well-known for his contributions to humour studies, claims that the physical humour in inflexible, repetitive, or exaggerated movements is inherently funny. Bergson argues that rigidity of movements or “something mechanical encrusted on the living” makes comedians appear inhuman and, as a consequence, this makes people laugh. Contemporary philosopher and humour theorist Simon Critchley notes that the opposite is also true: We often find it funny when people give the impression of being all too human. For Critchley, the recognition of predictable behaviours is just as funny as any automated actions.

By the turn of the new century, Indigenous plays such as *The Seven Stages of Grieving* and *Box the Pony* focused on Indigenous artists telling autobiographical narratives to mainstream audiences. These later productions in particular often rely on the Indigenous style of oral dialogue known as “yarning.” According to Dawn Bessarab and Bridget Ng’andu, yarning is a form of cultural communication traditionally used by Indigenous people in conversations. It is an informal storytelling tool and a way of sharing traditional information and knowledge. Indigenous artists often employ this style of casual communication to draw audiences into their confidence to convince them to consider their traditional knowledge and alternative social perspectives. Christine Watson notes Indigenous women’s autobiographies are personable “acts of witness” with a generic status that promotes a commonality of Indigenous peoples’ experiences and their veracity. Watson writes that “narratives are constructed to affect the audience such that the story might be told or remembered outside the literary space.” Yarning in theatre allows Indigenous performing artists, in a personal and unthreatening manner, to share historical information about the injustices and difficulties faced by many Indigenous people with non-Indigenous audiences. Humour is also an important component of this disarming strategy, and of
these two latter works. At times, both plays incorporate elements of the physical humour noted by Bergson and Critchley. Humour allows Indigenous artists to lighten the negativity surrounding the significant personal and political tragedies of many Indigenous Australian’s lives. Psychologist Sigmund Freud, who is also well-known for his humour theories, discussed the functions of humour used by Jewish people within the anti-Semitic environs of Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. Freud’s speculations can frequently be paralleled with the social functions of humour used by Indigenous Australian artists. This paper will investigate the role of humour in Indigenous Australian drama, highlighting the consistent forms and functions of humour in this arena.

The Socio-Political Backdrop to Humour in Contemporary Indigenous Australian Theatre of the 1970s

The winds of change that saw Indigenous Australians strive for greater political access and amendments to Australia’s Constitution gathered into growing public protests and activism in the 1960s. All over the country, Indigenous people undertook civil rights campaigns to articulate their communities’ social and political desire to be treated as legitimate members of this independent, post-colonial Australian Nation. Federation of 1901 had denied most Indigenous Australians citizenship rights and benefits, leaving these issues to the whims of various States’ legislation. By 1962 all Indigenous Australians had finally won the Federal right to vote; however, they were still precluded from State elections in Queensland until 1965. In 1967, two sections of the Australian Constitution were amended as the result of a national referendum. The first amendment was made to Section 52 (xxvi) or the so-called ‘race power,’ and enabled the Federal Government to assume responsibility and to legislate uniformly for Indigenous people in all states and territories.
second amendment, to Section 127, allowed for Indigenous Australians to be counted in the national census. While the latter amendment has been identified by many to have allowed for the provision of citizenship rights to Indigenous Australians, this is not strictly true. Citizenship rights had been granted to Indigenous Australians on a state by state basis: that is, in a disjointed and ad hoc fashion. The referendum sought to remove any lingering legal impediments for Indigenous people resulting from their status as ‘protected’ people.

These two amendments effected a national standardisation in the governing of Indigenous Australians that was an important marker for future positive reforms. Moreover, it was a significant step towards constituting Indigenous Australians as ‘normalised’ subjects of Australia’s liberal democracy. Indeed, soon after these changes, in 1971, Neville Bonner became the first Indigenous Australian to sit in the Australian Parliament, when he was chosen to fill a casual vacancy in the Senate caused by the resignation of a Queensland senator. Bonner was later elected to this position in 1972, as well as in 1974, 1975, and 1980. In 1972 a Federal Labor Government was elected, following twenty-three years of Liberal government (since 1949). This new government sought to address a broad range of social justice issues pertaining to Indigenous Australians. Furthermore, it developed a stronger focus on the National Arts, reorganising the Australia Council (formally known as the Council for the Arts) to include specialist subsidiaries, including the establishment of the Aboriginal Arts Board, with fifteen Indigenous Australian members. These initiatives gave Indigenous artists greater access to funding, both under the Board as well as through the existing Federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

The greater social acknowledgment and appreciation of Indigenous people occurred in tandem with these political changes. Some Indigenous Australians, such as Oodgeroo Noonucal (known at that time as Kath Walker) and Kevin Gilbert, achieved a level of
mainstream respect for their literary and artistic works, forms of dramatic and creative writing in which they articulated Indigenous concerns with government policies and called for greater social justice for Indigenous Australians. Oodgeroo is widely acknowledged as the first Indigenous Australian to produce and publish a book of poetry in Australia, with _We are Going_ in 1964. Gilbert is credited with writing the first Indigenous play in English, _The Cherry Pickers_, written in 1968 and first performed in 1971. In parallel with these artistic achievements, both writers actively participated in Indigenous political organisations and protest campaigns. From the early 1960s, Oodgeroo was secretary of the Queensland Council for Aboriginal Advancement and Federal coordinator of the campaign for changes to Australia’s Constitution. Gilbert also helped establish the Aboriginal Tent Embassy at (old) Parliament House in Canberra in early 1972, a powerful public symbol of Indigenous political protest and calls for land rights claims. The range of developments outlined in the preceding paragraphs led to greater socio-political support and acknowledgment that was essential to the advancement of Indigenous arts and foundational to the establishment of Indigenous Australian theatre.

Black Theatre movements began in Australia in the early 1970s as a direct result, and in support of, this climate of heightened Indigenous social and political activism. These early Indigenous theatre groups were cooperative enterprises that stemmed from mainstream non-Indigenous organisations. Melbourne’s New Theatre Movement created the company _Nindethana_ in 1972. _Nindethana_ is a Victorian Koori word that Indigenous playwright Gerry Bostock defines as “a place for corroboree,” or a place for communal gathering. Sydney’s first contemporary Indigenous theatre company, _Black Theatre_, originally staged street performances in the early 1970s, supporting Indigenous Australian political protest rallies. In 1972, a Federal Government development fund grant was provided to launch a permanent company, _The National Black Theatre_ (NBT).
Like Nindethana, this company’s first production, Basically Black, was a joint project with non-Indigenous theatre group, The Nimrod Theatre Company.\textsuperscript{39}

Basically Black was a series of satirical sketches presented in revue-style.\textsuperscript{40} It was created by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers, yet the production had an all Indigenous cast that included Aileen Corpus, Gary Foley, Zac Martin, Bob Maza, and Bindi Williams.\textsuperscript{41} According to Indigenous theatre expert Mary-rose Casey, “The revue was intended to present the Indigenous view of Australia in a satirical form, not just to entertain but also to communicate with and inform both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences.”\textsuperscript{42} Basically Black presented audiences with a unique Indigenous perspective on Australian life, complete with its socio-political inequalities and racism. Indeed, the stage play was so successful that in 1973, the NBT was approached by the Australian Broadcasting Commission to create a television series.\textsuperscript{43} This resulted in the production of only one pilot episode, but this was to become notable as the first Australian television program to have an all-Indigenous cast.\textsuperscript{44} Several skits from this pilot can still be found on the Internet.\textsuperscript{45} The pilot shows that sketches were often cheeky and arguably quite shocking for their original audience, presenting Australian life with a subversively political and satirical view. One sketch (from the television version) shows black actors wearing white masks, portraying a ‘white’ crew filming an Indigenous Australian man (Bindi Williams), attired in a stereotypically ‘traditional’ loincloth, with face and body painting.\textsuperscript{46} Williams greets the camera with a broad smile, and says “Good morning. I am a human being.” Next, the white-masked director (Bob Maza) cuts the action and, turning to the crew, notes the poor treatment that Indigenous Australian people have received in post-colonial Australia. He implores a sensitive, more politically correct approach to this Indigenous Australian man. Maza then turns to Williams, incongruously stating, “Cue the boong.”\textsuperscript{47}
This skit plays on, and laughs at, familiar black/white typecasts: the binary of a white person in authority ‘directing’ the actions of a ‘traditional’ Indigenous Australian. The sketch effectively ‘takes the mickey’ out of Indigenous and non-Indigenous stereotypes. According to Australian humour scholar Jessica Milner-Davis, taking the mickey is a form of humour that operates in Australia as an “acculturating ritual.”\(^{48}\) Assisting in the social assimilation process of reconfirming particular Australian cultural ideologies and norm, it often causes embarrassment and, through this, subliminally ensures that people do not act in a way that is overly pompous.\(^{49}\) In fact, Australian historian Inga Clendinnen suggests that signs of Indigenous Australians’s delight in taking the mickey out of those in authority can be seen even in records of the first British colonists and their early dealings with Indigenous Australians.\(^{50}\) In her book *Dancing with Strangers* (2005), Clendinnen highlights the frustrated ruminations recorded by First Officer William Tench in his 1791 account of Indigenous Australians’s laughing and mimicking British slips and stumbles in the foreign Australian landscape.\(^{51}\) The pilot skit of *Basically Black* also employs the use of visual humour in mimicry. Although attired in traditional ‘savage’ garb, the Aboriginal man, Williams, fidgets and grins in a warm and cheeky manner. His physical appearance and movements express a sense of fun that mocks the very portrayal of the Indigenous stereotype frequently that is identified as fierce and alien to the mainstream Australian public. Bergson claims that comedy depicts characters that we have come across before: “It aims at placing types before our eyes.”\(^{52}\) Stereotypes trigger understandings in our minds about how characters ought to act. As Critchley notes, we often laugh when we recognise predictable human behaviours in all their habitual absurdity.\(^{53}\) However, the subversive nature of Indigenous actors playing roles that mock and mimic themselves, as well as white stereotypes, provides a disarming element of surprise and contrast that Bergson also notes as particular to the comic tradition.\(^{54}\) Indigenous academic
Lillian Holt suggests that Indigenous Australian humour is cathartic, bringing “perspective and relief” to the issues at play.\(^{55}\) Holt says that this humour, in part, is “a spoofing of the stereotypes, both black and white… [a process of] laughing at ourselves and at others and then letting it go.”\(^{56}\)

The word “boong” was, and still is, an offensive word for Indigenous people, a term of derogation when it is used in mainstream Australia.\(^{57}\) The Indigenous actors in *Basically Black* subversively ‘reclaim’ this offensive word by using it mockingly. Such humour, with its self-styled superiority and indifference to historically racist images and language, deliberately attempts to shock audiences. As academic Roberta Sykes notes, Indigenous Australian people should “get in first” and call themselves racist, derogatory names such as “bastard” or “nigger.” Then, Sykes notes, there would be nothing left for non-Indigenous Australians to taunt Indigenous persons with.\(^{58}\)

Such humour can be considered a form of ‘black’ (more recently known as “blak”) humour. “Blak” is a term first coined by Indigenous photographic artist Destiny Deacon in 1991, and used in the title of her art exhibition *Walk and Don’t Look Blak.*\(^{59}\) Deacon contends that this word takes the “c” out of the offensive phrase “bloody black cunts.”\(^{60}\) Additionally, “blak” continues Indigenous Australian artists’s use of phonetic wordplay for a word that has a long history of racist intent in many western countries.\(^{61}\) Blak humour is a form of comedy tinged with morbidity, often lacking in ‘taste’, and almost always crossing the virtual line that determines what is and what is not socially appropriate. Patrick O’Neill argues that the term is used “to mean humour which is variously grotesque, gallows, macabre, sick, pornographic, scatological, cosmic, ironic, satirical, absurd, or any combination of these.”\(^{62}\) A frequently discernible element in Indigenous Australian comedy, this form of edgy humour is adopted to shock and lighten the social stigma attached to various taboo or unpalatable topics. The white masks worn by black actors in the *Basically Black* skit are a visual, mocking parody of the tradition of non-Indigenous Australian actors
“blacking-up” with make-up to play “authentic” Indigenous roles in post-colonial Australia. This latter practice, known as “blackface,” had occurred in Australian mainstream theatre from early colonial times. For example, in the 1834 Euro-Australian melodrama Bushrangers, English writer and producer Henry Melville created an Indigenous black chief character, Murrahwa, who was played by a white man made up in blackface. By contrast, the white masks from Basically Black serve as a protest against mainstream society’s dismissal of Indigenous participation and their inability to portray themselves in post-colonial performance, forming symbols of Indigenous presence, indicating the extent to which Indigenous Australians were active members of Australian society.

Another skit from the pilot of Basically Black introduced Indigenous Australian superhero “Super Boong,” aka “Lionel Mouse.” A character who resembles the superman/Clark Kent persona, and played by actor Zac Martin, Super Boong is a parody of popular Indigenous world champion boxer, Lionel Rose. Superheroes have always been identifiable stereotypes in western cultures, exhibiting greater physical, intellectual, and moral attributes than mere “ordinary” human beings. Rob Lendrum notes that early mainstream popular comics (1930s–1950s) did not include people of colour. And there were certainly no Indigenous Australian superheroes produced in mainstream Australian society in the early 1970s. Therefore, Super Boong’s typecast image of moral ‘righteousness’ and ‘goodness’ made a clear point about the exclusion of Indigenous people from popular Australian mythology. Furthermore, Bergson observes that the art of caricature plays on exaggerations, such as superhero characteristics, in order to highlight a comic element. An extract from the pilot skit presents a humorous play on the familiar Superman idiom:

Is it a bat? Is it a crow? Is it the flying doctor? No! It’s Super Boong! Strange visitor from a northern tribe, who came to the city possessing powers far beyond those of mortal praise. Faster than a killer boomerang, and able to leap over tall gum trees... Super Boong uses his secret identity as mild-man-
nered Indigenous Australian ex-boxing champion Lionel Mouse to fight a never-ending battle against racism wherever it may be found!

In one skit, Lionel Mouse hears a cry for help (the result of a racist attack) and the distant dinging of boxing bells (another reference to boxer Lionel Rose). He dashes into a local pub to change into his superhero identity. However, within a short time, Lionel Mouse is back out, still wearing his regular clothing. When he is asked why he has not transformed into his superhero identity, Mouse notes ironically that Indigenous people are restricted from entering the pub. The satirical humour of this skit subversively points to the injustice of the discriminatory laws imposed on Indigenous Australians until the late 1960s, such as the prohibitions placed on the supply of alcohol to them. The existence of such hypocritical injustices were only very infrequently acknowledged by non-Indigenous Australians.

More than simply a means of reclaiming the offensive ‘boong’ label, Super Boong also represents the physical appearance of an Indigenous character in a heroic pursuit of justice, providing a positive symbol and role model for Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences alike. Once again, such techniques are specific attempts to assist non-Indigenous audiences to face issues of hypocrisy in Australia with humour. Basically Black’s Indigenous actors believed that entertainment was a great teaching medium. Bob Maza has said that they did not want to shock non-Indigenous audiences, dissuading them from attending their performances. Rather, difficult messages to communicate to the mainstream about the plight of Indigenous people were best conveyed, Maza felt, with humour rather than with sadness, anger, or moral condemnation. Humour theorists Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering similarly contend that humour encourages audiences to think about issues in a more creative manner than by using more sombre emotional techniques. They suggest that humour can “bring out the viewpoints of... marginalised groups, and cut through pomposity, lies, deceit and doublespeak.”
Freud notes the benefits of deploying such “rebellious” forms of humour, especially by those beleaguered peoples who do not hold positions of social power. According to Freud, humour is not resigned, but rebellious. Feelings of anger, indignation, and injustice against those in social authority can remain significant psychological “obstacles” for oppressed people, but humour is well-suited to attacking the socially esteemed and powerful. Minority people, such as Indigenous Australians, are able to replace socially unacceptable behaviours with tendentious jokes and humour in environments where other forms of violence are disdained and forbidden by law. In this context, humour represents a form of rebellion against authority and the expression of an inner freedom from the oppression it imposes. The style of comedy achieved through Super Boong’s character provided pleasure to Indigenous Australian actors and Indigenous audience members. Indigenous actor Gary Foley says of this performance:

... the best part for us blackfellas from NBT was that the humour itself was subversively political in terms of presenting a direct challenge to prevailing racial attitudes, and we were not only able to get away with saying things to whitefellas that might have got us shot in other places at the time, but we also managed to get people to seriously think about the issues.

Humour gave Indigenous people an outlet to vent pent-up frustrations within a post-colonial socio-political system that had already disadvantaged their communities on so many levels. Allowing them to express issues of cultural loss and grief in mainstream public, humour became a vehicle to communicate these issues where other forms of political protest, expressed in a serious or dramatic fashion, may have angered audience members. Humour’s ability to shock in a ‘non-bona fide’ frame allowed Indigenous Australians to innovatively and originally express a range of issues that non-Indigenous Australians had long ignored or neglected.

The greater access to government funding and support for the Arts that Indigenous artists enjoyed in the 1970s also saw a National Arts Seminar held for the first time in 1973. This seminar provided
clear directions for the development of Indigenous Australian Arts on a national basis.\textsuperscript{82} Black theatre companies were proposed for each state, and this led to both the establishment of Brisbane Black Theatre and the “Black Theatre Arts and Cultural Centre” in Redfern, Sydney, in 1974.\textsuperscript{83} In addition to providing performance space, the centre ran acting programs for Indigenous theatre students.\textsuperscript{84} Access to regular, professional training and performance assisted Indigenous artists to gain the acting skills and experience required for their admission into mainstream theatre environments, which offered larger audiences and greater opportunities for social kudos. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has written about the existence of “symbolic” systems in society, and the way in which they work to provide such esteem and acceptance.\textsuperscript{85} These systems nurture forms of “cultural capital,” a form of social wealth more subtle and sometimes less volatile than that represented by monetary or material value. The value and nature of cultural capital is contingent on the knowledge, skills, and behaviours of dominant groups in society.\textsuperscript{86} Politically established institutions, management bodies, and education qualifications are universally acknowledged as “guaranteed” cultural capital sources, giving their members and recipients the right to share in mainstream society’s “profits of recognition.”\textsuperscript{87} From the early 1970s and onwards, in addition to better training in the dramatic arts, greater access to mainstream financial assistance and support from established non-Indigenous theatre companies helped generate better exposure for Indigenous Australian artists, who increasingly began to appear before mainstream (white) Australian audiences.

Indigenous performance expert, Dr Maryrose Casey, has noted that the 1970s were a ‘transition period’ for individual Indigenous actors who formed collective enterprises in order to gain at least some production control in Australian theatre work.\textsuperscript{88} Indigenous playwright Kevin Gilbert wrote at this time:

In my view, Black Theatre should be aiming, for the time being, at social comment. Give onstage blacks’ views of the white society—the hard truth
about its history, values. But we also have to attack apathy and laziness in our black society as well.\textsuperscript{89}

In the context of such specific aims, it was not until later, in the 1980s and 1990s, that Indigenous drama departed from the production of collaborative theatre whose role was to address “community concerns,” and began to represent trained performers who achieved greater mainstream attention.\textsuperscript{90}

**Humour in Indigenous Australian Theatre of the late 1980s**

Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo contend that, although Indigenous people had so little to celebrate themselves, the 1988 Bicentenary celebrations of British colonisation proved an impetus for Indigenous theatre, leading a broader array of Australians to pay more attention to the form.\textsuperscript{91} This increased consciousness was, they suggest, partly the result of increased media awareness about the impact of colonisation on Indigenous people, itself partly an outcome of the First National Black Playwrights’ Conference and Workshop\textsuperscript{92} held at Australian National University, Canberra, in 1987.\textsuperscript{93} A number of new playscripts were workshopped at what became an annual conference, including Jimmy Chi’s *Bran Nue Dae*, which wasworkshopped at Macquarie University, Sydney, in 1989.

*Bran Nue Dae* is credited as the first Indigenous Australian musical of note in the tradition of modern western musicals.\textsuperscript{94} It is an energetic blend of rock opera, song, and dance, all mixed in with liberal doses of humour and romance.\textsuperscript{95} Serious issues of importance to Indigenous people, such as land rights, sovereignty, and the accuracy of historical injustices are all covered, although that are handled in a manner that is unique, memorable, and often uplifting. Writer Jimmy Chi, an Asian-Indigenous man from Broome in Western Australia, along with the band, *Kuckles*, composed the songs that Chi later turned into a musical.\textsuperscript{96} The play was first performed by the
non-Indigenous West Australian Theatre Company for the Festival of Perth in 1990, but included a predominantly Indigenous Australian cast.\(^9^7\) The play’s script reveals that Bran Nue Dae is full of comic—often slapstick—dancing and catchy, satirical songs with cheeky lyrics.\(^9^8\) The upbeat dancing and singing about issues ordinarily considered serious and even negative provide a powerful physical incongruity that is both surprising and vivid. In addition, the script contains many Aboriginal-English phrases which assert the validity of this vocabulary.\(^9^9\) Theatre critic Katherine Brisbane notes that the play is as far-fetched and “silly” as that of any European grand opera.\(^1^0^0\) Focusing on the 1960s journey of Indigenous Australian teenager Willie, the narrative details Willie’s travel from a church-run school (an Indigenous boys hostel) in Perth as he returns to his home in Broome. Willie’s journey is both physical and psychological as he discovers his heritage, his family, and love along the way. After helping himself to a few illicit Cherry Ripes and a Coke, Willie is expelled by Father Benedictus (or, as the boys say, “Faada”), who castigates Willie in stereotypically harsh German tones: “You vill never change: You are zer leedle Hitler! You are leading der boys astray.”\(^1^0^1\) In defiant response, Willie dances and sings, bursting forth with one of the musical’s funniest, catchiest songs:

There’s nothing I would rather be
Than to be an Aborigine
And watch you take my precious land away.
For nothing gives me greater joy than to
Watch you fill each girl and boy
With superficial existential shit.

Now you may think I’m cheeky
But I’d be satisfied
To rebuild your convict ships
And sail you on the tide.\(^1^0^2\)

In sardonic rhyme, this song challenges mainstream assimilation policies and non-Indigenous claims to sovereign rule of Australia. It also voices what is often an unspoken Indigenous desire for non-In-
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Indigenous people to return to the place from which they came. After running away from school, Willie meets eccentric old Uncle Tadpole, who is coincidently also from Broome. Tadpole wishes to return to his Country before he dies, as the hard life of droving and drinking that he took up after losing his wife to another man draws to an end. On their journey back to Broome, Willie and Tadpole meet up with hippie German tourist “Slippery” (Wolfgang) and his Australian girlfriend, “Marijuana Annie”—two characters who typify the free-spirited, liberal ideals of young non-Indigenous backpackers. After a staged “accident” in which this naïve couple is led to believe that they have run over Tadpole in their van, they agree to take him and Willie all the way to Broome. This cheekily references the familiar Australian stereotype of a cunning Indigenous Australian person, this incident reappropriates a trope often used by non-Indigenous Australians as justification for punitive treatment of Indigenous peoples. Following a stint in jail, the gang makes it to Broome, where a series of revelations and reunions occur. In a delightfully funny, ironic and particularly “Indigenous” manner, we find out that, in the end, not only are most of the main cast members Indigenous Australians, but a number of them are actually related to one another: Tadpole is Willie’s mother’s long lost husband and his father, “Slippery” is Willie’s half-brother and Father Benedictus’ son, and even Marijuana Annie is a “stolen generations” Indigenous Australian, allowing the idea of a genuine reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to take on a very potent, personal, but hilarious tone. To top off the climax in which these farcical and happy reunions occur, the unrequited love between Willie and Rosie is also finally consummated in these scenes.

Filled with Aboriginal-English phrases, such as “What they bin doing to you my boy, they bin hit you!” the script’s dialogue generates a comical yet authentic representation of Indigenous Australians in its parody of phonetic dialect. References to alcoholism,
Indigenous forays with the penal system, and even dealings with social security are all mocked in the play, confirming Holt’s argument that humour may be used to represent difficult truths that are hard to accept:

Humour is a brilliant vehicle for conveying those unpalatable truths that we all would prefer not to confront... [because its]... power is that it is invariably invested with a sting of truth.\(^{105}\)

Again, the Indigenous tradition of taking the mickey out of social authority and “serious” issues is noteworthy. Such mickey-taking liberties can be seen to have firstly arisen in Indigenous theatre in the 1970s *Basically Black* pilot skit, which includes Bob Maza’s characterisation of a pretentious “white” film producer.\(^{106}\) Taking the mickey can also be seen in the early colonial Australian records of First Officer William Tench who recorded Indigenous Australians mocking and mimicking British pomposity and awkwardness in the Australian Bush.\(^{107}\) Moreover, catchy, funny songs are frequently repeated and sung in moody styles that match their respective scenes. For example, the song “Is U Mah Baby” is sung at one stage as a romantic love song, another as a mother’s plea to find her child, and again, in German, when Father Benedictus and his son Wolfgang are reunited.

Such repetition reminds us of Bergson’s suggestion that humour is found in habitual and simple contrivances.\(^{108}\) Bergson observes how the light comedy of the early twentieth century often employed repetitious methods, which led characters to reproduce a series of incidents, or to re-experience a series of similar accidents in increasingly varied circumstances.\(^{109}\) We delight in such familiarity and “coincidences,” and especially in those that also include a twist or a surprise.\(^ {110}\) Furthermore, frequent references to sex are scattered throughout the script. Christian symbolism and Latin idiom are mockingly teased, for example, incongruously likened to a well-known brand of Australian soap:
Furthermore, Father Benedictus’ use of the Latin phrase “Lux in Tenebris” also operates as a clever allusion to the farcical comedy of the same name, written by German playwright Bertolt Brecht in the early 1900s. According to Herbert Knust and Leonie Marx, Brecht’s play mocks the biblical symbolism of darkness and light that distinguished sinful from non-sinful acts, providing an ironic critique of (western) social corruption. Bran Nue Dae also shamelessly mocks the use, primarily in western religious and legal arenas, of Latin, a long-dead language. But such mockery is also a form of the characteristically belittling humour of Australians that, similar to mickety-taking, is colloquially known as “cutting down the tall poppy” or as “tall poppy syndrome.” This playfully denigrating humour implies that traditions such as the use of Latin are implicitly ostentatious. Milner-Davis argues that such typically Australian styles of humour help to ensure that people do not impute to themselves any unwarranted airs or graces. “Big-noting” and modes of pretentious self-regard are often ripe subjects for ridicule in Indigenous Australian comedy, indicating the form’s familiarity with the well-known Australian egalitarian ideology of a “fair go” for everyone.

The title of the play itself, Bran Nue Dae, is made up of colloquial, phonetic words with multiple references—both to colonial attempts to impose a ‘new reality’ on First Australians, and the hope that, in the end, we can all believe that a “nue dae” in which reconciliation may be achieved. The reality of humour as a process through which self-actualisation and resilience may be achieved during life’s journey is reinforced in this unique and uplifting farce. Although upbeat and funny, the play also pokes fun at the authority of colonisation and challenges governmental assimilation policies. In the end, Bran Nue Dae constitutes a celebration of Indigenous
Australian cultural survival and identity. And even though plays such as this were instrumental in allowing Indigenous theatre to achieve a greater mainstream presence and wider audiences, the independent Indigenous theatre companies of the 1980s that produced them ultimately closed. However, these companies helped lay the foundations for the establishment of the Indigenous drama companies that were to arise in the 1990s, many of which remain viable entities today. These newly formed companies effectively transferred creative control of theatre productions to Indigenous Australian artists.

**Independent Directions for Indigenous Australian Theatre**

During the 1990s, many Indigenous Australian artists emphasised their pride and the validity of unique Indigenous cultural practices. Humour is one of the essential tools used to help achieve this aim. In Australia’s socio-political climate of the 1990s, many publically esteemed Australians challenged the validity of Australia’s post-colonial history and its representation of the treatment of Indigenous peoples. Ushering in the “history wars,” these challenges were exacerbated by the 1997 International Human Rights Commission Inquiry and subsequent report (1998) into practices of removing Aboriginal children from their families. The need for Indigenous people to tell a wider Australian (and world) audience about their experiences of living in post-colonial Australia became vitally important in light of the contentious socio-political climate of this period. Indigenous Australians often used artistic means to refute and speak back to the denialist perspective of Australia’s Indigenous history, as well as to humanise the face of their struggles.

Under the artistic direction of Wesley Enoch, a Minjerribah man from Stradbroke Island, the Brisbane-based Indigenous theatre company *Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts* staged
The Seven Stages of Grieving in 1995, a play that toured nationally in 1996. Following its successful Australian tour, the play went to London and Zürich in 1997. The script is a one-woman performance by Deborah Mailman, written by Enoch and Mailman herself. Mailman is an actress of Indigenous Australian (Bidjara) and New Zealand Maori descent. Both she and co-author Enoch graduated from Queensland University of Technology with Bachelor Degrees in Performing Arts in 1993.

The play’s title and themes borrow from Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s seminal 1969 book On Death and Dying, which proposes the five psychological stages of grief experienced by the terminally ill in their journey towards death. But Kübler-Ross’s formulation is now reconfigured so as to express the seven phases of Indigenous Australian history: namely, Dreaming, Invasion, Genocide, Protection, Assimilation, Self-Determination, and Reconciliation. The play takes audiences on an emotional journey through an Indigenous Australian “everywoman’s” grief in the face of the deaths of her family members, mirroring the historical “death” and “grief” experienced by Indigenous communities more broadly. Despite her hardships, it is nonetheless with joy that the woman reflects on her life and hard experiences, acknowledging Indigenous peoples’ propensity to “cry, laugh, and tell their stories together.” This positivity sets the scene for the use of humour by Indigenous Australians as a self-creating and empowering life attitude. As Indigenous author Gayle Kennedy observes of much Indigenous humour, “[I]f you didn’t laugh, you’d bloody well have to cry.” The dialogue is presented as a traditional yarn, involving many elements of the storytelling genre, including allegorical metaphors. This manner of conveying information to audiences is inclusive, forming a relatively unthreatening tool through which Indigenous performers may canvas their perspective on justice and injustice to audiences without the appearance of moral condemnation. Tragic issues are frequently doused in ironic humour, providing a poignant sense of paradox and incongruity. Mockery and
superiority are used in humorous teasing about English colonisation, providing a form of release for Indigenous people from a range of social injustices. Self-deprecating humour indicates the ongoing racism that is faced by Indigenous Australians in this country.

Freud suggests that to understand the complete ambit of pleasure that self-directed humour can provide, we must first understand what it does to the listener—or, in this case, the audience. Freud claims that listeners might expect tellers (here Indigenous performers) to show signs of affect from their experience of certain injustices: they may be expected to get angry, complain, or otherwise express despair. However, Freud notes that by using humour instead, such expectations are disappointed. Rather than express negative or judgmental emotions, Indigenous performers make jokes. As Freud claims, “There is no doubt that the essence of humour is that one spares oneself the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise and dismisses the possibility of such expressions of emotion with a jest.” The surprising and incongruous operations of humour enables audiences to process unpalatable issues without experiencing excessive guilt or defensiveness. On experiencing such an unusual response, suggests Freud the lister or audiences is given permission to follow suit and to experience a more relaxed form of pleasure in the performance. Humour here represents a metaphorical olive branch, warranting a respectable mediation between Indigenous performers and their audiences. A humorous example from The Seven Stages of Grieving in relation to the first arrival of the European colonists demonstrates the effect:

Oi. Hey, you! Don’t you be waving back at me! Yeh, you with that hat! You can’t park here, eh! You’re taking up the whole bloody harbour! Just get in your boat and go. Go on, go on get!

Audiences are invited to laugh at this sassy vocabulary, which appears familiar and quotidian to their ears, echoing the directions
of a parking inspector. But this joke also underscores the contentious issue of colonisation (or invasion), which had been exacerbated by the “history wars” of the 1990s. While the parodic presentation of the issue is humorous, the exchange also goes to the heart of continuing Indigenous land rights and sovereignty debates. On the question of identity, audiences of *The Seven Stages of Grieving* can laugh at a matter that has been the ongoing cause of shame and embarrassment for many Indigenous Australian people: the colour of their skin. As Mailman’s character asks at one point,

> Have you ever been black? You know when you wake up one morning and you’re black? Happened to me this morning. I was in the bathroom, looking in the mirror, “Hey, nice hair, beautiful black skin, white shiny teeth ... I’m BLACK!”

With irony, Mailman’s persona suggests that many Indigenous Australian people have felt the need to deny and hide their Indigenous heritage in order to avoid discrimination and racism. Referencing a well-known, and arguably overused, term in contemporary Australian political context—“reconciliation”—*The Seven Stages of Grieving* features Mailman’s character’s recital of a poem of that selfsame name:

> The boats are ready for departure, if you don’t want to stay.  
> A Wreck on arrival,  
> A changing flag,  
> A Con,  
> A Silly pride for sale,  
> My Nation knows my identity,  
> A sun,  
> A land,  
> A people, travelling.  
> What a mess.

As the poem is read, such punning and phonetic words as “Wreck,” “Con,” “Silly,” and “Nation” are also projected onto a large screen. As a term that is easily recognised by Australian audiences, “reconciliation” reminds those familiar with the reconciliation debate
of recent Federal Government attempts to evoke national harmony between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.\textsuperscript{138} This word-play sarcastically exploits the deployment of “reconciliation” in current government marketing and policymaking documents, making it an emblem among references to a series of terms used by governmental attempts to deal with the post-colonial breakdown of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The purpose of such humour is, as John Morreall notes of much political humour, to undermine and subvert such governmental propaganda.\textsuperscript{139} By and large, the play suggests that in the face of overwhelming post-colonial sadness and grief, Indigenous people are still able to laugh and survive the injustice of living in a largely bigoted country.\textsuperscript{140} Humour is, as Freud explains, a triumph of narcissism, which enables the victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability. \textit{The Seven Stages of Grieving} demonstrates how Indigenous egos refuse to be distressed by the provocations of reality, expressing the resistance of all and any temptation to wallow in suffering.\textsuperscript{141}

\textit{The Seven Stages of Grieving} was originally produced for one of Australia’s most significant artistic events, \textit{The Festival of Dreaming}.\textsuperscript{142} In the lead-up to the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, Australia staged various cultural events, including a series of annual festivals that were held all over the country from 1997 until 2000.\textsuperscript{143} Directed by Bundjalung woman Rhoda Roberts,\textsuperscript{144} Sydney’s Olympic Arts Festival series included \textit{The Festival of Dreaming} as a celebration of world Indigenous peoples.\textsuperscript{145} Staged in September–October of 1997, it encompassed traditional visual arts, dancing, singing, and storytelling from seven hundred world Indigenous artists, including the biggest display of Indigenous Australian performing arts ever showcased.\textsuperscript{146} It also incorporated the pivotal \textit{Wimmin’s Business} series of plays, which comprised seven monodramas about Indigenous Australian, Maori, and Native American women’s lives.\textsuperscript{147} The festival’s Indigenous Australian plays, like much work by Indigenous artists of the time, focused on the telling of personal narratives to main-
stream audiences. This tactic of personalising Indigenous narratives continues to evoke a level of accountability from audiences as they are brought face-to-face with a ‘real,’ living, breathing Indigenous Australian: a person who has faced the hardship of bigotry and suffering in their life. Although these works are often morally challenging, humour is a very significant element in them, allowing the performer to soften the harsh reality of their character’s (and often also the actor's) lived experience.

Another successful Indigenous play from this series, *Box the Pony*, was written by Indigenous writer and actress Leah Purcell and non-Indigenous playwright Scott Rankin. Playing at the Sydney Opera House in September 1997, *Box the Pony* is a semi-biographical representation of Purcell’s life, a narrative in which, after growing up in Murgon Queensland, she “escapes” to Sydney as a young adult. Purcell plays all seventeen characters, including the main protagonist, Steff, her mother, Flo, Nanna Daisy, a range of nameless male characters, herself, and even a cow, delivering her story in a feisty, animated, stand-up comedic style. Purcell narrates the story and speaks the dialogue as the narrative jumps from past to present in a format that keeps audiences “on its toes,” covering such difficult issues as racism, alcoholism, poverty, ill health, and violence. These serious themes are veiled or softened, however, with a sharp and subversive wit that helps Purcell to face them without sentimentality and with much humour. Describing herself as “a bit of a joker,” Purcell uses humour as an important element in her work. As Purcell explains, humour was integral to *Box the Pony*’s appeal, inviting audience’s to identify with Indigenous issues through generating in them unusual responses. As Purcell reflected on the play: “[i]t was jokes, more jokes… and then next minute you’re down into this big issue… And then the audience thinks, well if they’re laughing about this stuff, then I can join them.”

In fact, Bergson has written that in order to produce comedy, a person must undergo a temporary numbing, or an “anesthesia of
the heart.” Expressing sadness or anger at the injustices of post-colonial Indigenous experiences could evoke in audiences feelings such as guilt, anger and rejection. These negative emotions could effectively prevent mainstream audiences from comprehending alternative Indigenous perspectives of Australia’s history, and stop them hearing about the experiences of life for Indigenous Australians in this country. The comic pursuit, Bergson suggests, is actually an intellectual, and not an emotional, enterprise. Indigenous performers, such as Purcell, specifically put aside their sadness or anger in order to elicit a less threatening and a more humorous response in their audiences about Indigenous affairs. Indigenous artists such as Purcell appreciate that mainstream audiences are infinitely more receptive to their perspective when it is presented in a humorous yarn rather than in condemnatory terms. Purcell concedes that from an early age, she knew that she could tell a great yarn. In the play, she addresses the audience directly, setting up lines of intimate communication that enable her to employ this traditional Indigenous mode of narratorial address. Stylistically, this technique is warm and personable, yet it also remains morally challenging. Purcell’s humorous storytelling becomes a way in which she convinces non-Indigenous audiences to explore the possibilities of their moral culpability in supporting or passively endorsing the same social systems that have caused such severe trauma in so many Indigenous lives. Her story, in a sense, functions like one of the stages from The Seven Stages of Grieving, veiling and guising an uncomfortable or confronting issues in a personal and intimate façade that is both comical and cutting.

Humour is, as Freud suggests, a doubled-edged sword, hiding and concealing its disparagement as it also expresses something whose articulation is socially “forbidden.” In this way, Indigenous humour is similarly a tool that attempts to challenge and transform established structures of power in mainstream in a subversive manner yet effective political manner.
Comedy is introduced to the audience right from the beginning of *Box the Pony*. Playing ten-year-old Steff, Purcell is cajoled into singing and dancing as the 1980s song “Kung Fu Fighting” plays in the background. Steff performs in a style that both takes the mickey out of the song itself, as well as satirises her own character’s childish persona. Suddenly, however, reverting to childlike embarrassment, Steff goes all “myall”: shy and reticent. Then switching back to her adult self, Steff announces the following lines in a self-deprecating tone:

Gunnar gunnar, eh... like my mum said, you can take the girl out the mission, but you can't take the mission out of this myall little black gin for up'ome'der!158

The play uses much traditional language, Aboriginal English, and even mainstream Australian slang to situate it as a humorous Australian, and specifically Murri, story. People can be “solid,” “deadly,” or even excellent “like John Wayne” (apparently a folk hero in Murgon). Girls can also find themselves “poxed up” (pregnant), or “charged up” (drunk). A good friend is a “cuss” (cousin) and a white person a “gubba” who is perhaps about to step in dog “gunung” (animal dung or droppings). The meaning of these words is readily grasped within the context of the sentences, yet such colloquial vernacular heightens the humour and accessibility of the text, enhancing Steff’s (Purcell’s) mode of intimately yarning with the audience in what is a constant interaction: at times, Steff looks at the audience for a fight, at others, she warmly addresses them as “cuss,” and at other times again she invites them into an Indigenous Australian kinship relationship, asking them about their heritage (“Are you Murri, Koori, Nunga?”).

Boxing is a theme that is woven into the text of *Box the Pony* and represented as a form of defensive bravado, suggesting Steff’s defiance by indicating that no situation can “box” her (the pony) into a corner or dent her resilience. Purcell’s character talks about the long line of boxing heroes in her family, bemoaning the prevalence
of sexism in an incongruous and ironic line: “The boys got all the deadly things: the trophies, the Golden Gloves... the brain damage.”

Throughout the play, boxing is a multi-faceted thematic: it is at once a prized possession, a triumphant show of strength, a bitter cruelty, and a “necessary” tool of survival in a racist world. And yet the boxing metaphor is also tempered with humour, enabling Steff to rationalise the presence of physical aggression in her young life and in the lives of so many Indigenous Australians. At the same time, boxing also symbolises the innermost desires and struggles that Steff has faced—and will continue to face—in her life. Her feisty vigour and funny moves (hitting a large boxing bag, dancing and miming), contrast sharply with her experience of times of emotional rejection, trauma, and sadness. The expression, through boxing and physical activity, of her physical energies and vulnerabilities only enhance the emotional roller-coaster that the play presents as Steff’s life. Drama and humour work hand-in-hand, disarming audiences, yet also keeping them attentive and receptive to those issues that are important to Purcell’s character.

Festival Director Robyn Archer has described Boxing The Pony as a play that is, in many ways, a story about losers. However, because the narrative is related to the audience with such feisty humour and delightful vitality, it becomes, in effect, an affirmation of life. Steff’s ability to laugh triumphantly in the face of violence, poverty, and racism, provides an effective device for raising these issues with audiences who, while not ordinarily disposed to thinking about their own attitudes, may now be able to laugh at themselves and their prejudices vicariously through Purcell’s characters. Through the persona of Steff, Purcell shows that she has consistently overcome her difficulties by laughing at them. As Freud notes, humour is not a sign of resignation, but of defiance, signifying a person’s ability to assert themselves in an unjust world. Following its state performances, Box the Pony went on to play theatres around Australia, and then overseas: in Edinburgh, Scotland, at London’s
Barbican Theatre, and finally to Broadway in New York. Purcell was awarded the Premier’s Literary Award in New South Wales and Queensland both for the playscript and her acting. The script has since been included as an audition monologue in Australia’s premier drama school, NIDA. In 2004 Purcell was awarded a US “Eisenhower Fellowship” for outstanding leadership, the first Indigenous Australian to receive this prestigious award. These accolades and the staging of this play at such prominent venues can again be seen in terms of Bourdieu’s description of the attribution of cultural capital or cultural esteem. However, it would be wrong to suggest that such Indigenous theatrical “success” as Purcell’s represents an act of valorisation of, or a kowtowing to, mainstream cultural structures. Rather, this success, which enables Indigenous performers to receive such mainstream public exposure, should be considered among one of the many ways in which Indigenous artists have been able to better persuade and convince mainstream Australians and others to reconsider the existence of Indigenous worldviews, and even to adopt a part of their unique perspective.

Indigenous plays such as The Seven Stages of Grieving and Box the Pony successfully demonstrate the important contributions that Indigenous Australians make to Australia’s cultural industries. In 2000, Indigenous novelist Melissa Lucashenko recognised this success and the lucrative potential of Indigenous Australian cultural capital. Playfully alluding to a popular Australian advertising campaign of the time, Lucashenko wryly ruminates: “What the bloody hell did Australians give their overseas relations before Aboriginal Australiana was invented?” Before this, back in 1995, theatre critic Katherine Brisbane emphasised the potential of Indigenous theatre, although she also noted that few of these plays could be considered major works, and that just as few were ready for international showcasing. But since 1995, the proverbial tide has turned. Indigenous Australian artists can now “hold their own” in mainstream discourse, constituting a significant artistic presence in theatre productions both nation-
ally and internationally. Many Indigenous plays from the 1990s and early-2000s have also now been adapted for the screen as successful movies and for television: *Box the Pony* was, in part, filmed and made into a teaching resource for Australian high school students in 1999; *Bran Nue Dae* was made into a mainstream hit movie in 2010; and *The Sapphires*, an Indigenous play from 2004, was also made into a very successful film, forming a further testament to Indigenous performance excellence. In these decades, the stage had been set for Indigenous Australian artists to become leading voices in Australian theatre discourse, and a familiar artistic entity on the world’s stage.

This had been predicted in 1989 in the prophetic words of Indigenous political leader, Charles Perkins AO. Perkins observed that a “growing appreciation” for Black Australians was being realised, and that a greater sense of self-confidence, forged in the fires of oppression and activism, had helped to articulate proud and strong contemporary expressions of Aboriginality. Humour is an integral part of this endeavour. And although conclusions about the primary purpose of the use of humour in Indigenous Australian performance are subject to theoretical and literary-critical study and speculation, humour remains an empowering force and life attitude. Indigenous Australians frequently employ humour to surprise and shock mainstream audiences, prompting them to consider matters from their distinct perspectives. Indigenous worldviews are often tied to grief and loss that, with the use of strategies such as humour and incongruity, may provide narratives with elements of uplifting power. Such a strategy of humour suggests that, in the end, despite such overwhelming negativity, survival and hope is possible for Indigenous culture and identity. Humour is, as Freud claims, an empowering force used by long-suffering people. Validating, articulating, and popularising the artistic practices of Indigenous Australians, humour provides a more accessible avenue for social critique. Ultimately, humour provides a unique way of opening up conversations about serious issues that other forms of communication do not.
Karen Austin is currently in the third year of her PhD at Flinders University, South Australia. Her thesis investigates the use of humour in the artistic discourse of Australia's Indigenous people within a post-colonial setting.

Notes

4 Ibid., 18-19.
6 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 38.
9 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 147.
13 Ibid. For example, on page 108 Freud writes that the stories and jokes created by Jews that “have grown from the soil of Jewish popular life” are particularly funny because Jewish people understand the nature of their good and bad points so much better than outsiders do. This paper will show that this is also true of much Indigenous Australian humour, which also reveals a propensity for insider Indigenous protagonists to laugh at themselves.
16 Australian Federal Government,


18 “Documenting a Democracy: Australia’s Story.”

19 On 10 April 1967, Indigenous leader and referendum campaigner Bill Onus was reported as saying: “Australians must vote to give the Aborigine full citizenship rights.” Attwood claims that this is how the campaign for the referendum was represented. However, Onus also notes that the campaign was a question of basic human rights and recognition of Indigenous Australians as a race of people and these points were not reported as clearly. See Bain Attwood, Rights for Aborigines (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2003), x.

20 For example, in 1962, the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement published a brochure on the lack of consistency between the five States and the Northern Territory with regards to Indigenous rights. Indigenous Australians did not have the right to vote in WA and QLD; they could not marry freely in WA, QLD, and NT; they could not move around freely in Vic, SA, WA, NT, or QLD; and they could only own property and receive award wages in NSW. See this pamphlet, set out in Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, The 1967 Referendum, or When Aborigines Didn’t Get the Vote (Canberra, ACT: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1997), 13.


22 “Australian 1967 Referendum.”


24 Ibid.


28 Ibid., 96.


30 Kath Walker, We are Going (Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, 1964).

31 Casey, Creating Frames, 18-19.


33 Ibid., 341-343.

34 Shoemaker, Black Words, White Page, 111.
Austen: Humour in Indigenous Australian Theatre


37 Ibid., 67-70.

38 Casey, Creating Frames, 52.


40 Casey, Creating Frames, 53.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., 54.


44 Ibid.


46 Ibid.

47 Ibid. Also see “The National Black Theatre.”


49 Ibid., 39.

50 Inga Clendinnen, Dancing with Strangers (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2003), 201-203.

51 Ibid.

52 Bergson, Laughter, 80.

53 Critchley, On Humour, 59.

54 Bergson, Laughter, 19-20.


56 Ibid.

57 Although the origins of this word are not entirely certain, online sources suggest that it is a derivative of an Eora or Cadigal (NSW) word, “boonga-boonga,” which means “bum” or “arse.” See http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Boong&defid=4114897.


60 Ibid.

61 An example is the blackface minstrels tradition, in which white people blacken their faces and performing songs and dance in imitation of African-American or Caribbean peoples. This tradition began in the USA, but it also has a history of representation of black people as dimwitted in other western countries, such as the UK and Australia. Eric Lott claims that blackface minstrel shows had their origins in the nineteenth century slave trade and “the quite explicit “borrowing” of black cultural materials for “white dissemination (and profit).” See Eric Lott “Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of


66 In 1985, Indigenous Australian visual artist Lin Onus created a graphic comic character, “Kaptn Koori” (1985, gouache and ink on illustration board, 67.0 x 44.0 cm) for his son, recognising a lack of positive Indigenous role models in the medium. See Margo Neale,  *Urban Dingo: The Art and Life of Lin Onus 1948–1996* (Sydney, Australia: Craftsman House, 2000), 64.


68 “The National Black Theatre.”


70 For example, after a successful meeting held in 1963 between Prime Minister Menzies and an Indigenous delegation for constitutional change, Menzies was surprised to be told that he was breaking the law by offering Kath Walker/Oodgeroo an alcoholic drink. See Attwood and Markus,  *The 1967 Referendum*, 32-33.


72 Ibid.


74 Ibid.


77 Freud,  *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, 100 and 102.

78 Ibid., 100.


82 Casey,  *Creating Frames*, 96.

83 Ibid., 97-98.

84 Ibid., 106-7.


88 Casey, Creating Frames, xxvi.

89 Kevin Gilbert, Because a White Man’ll Never do It! (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973), 122.


91 Gilbert and Lo, Performance and Cosmopolitics, 50.

92 Ibid., 50-53.


95 Ibid., 14.

96 Ibid., vii.

97 Ibid., viii.

98 Ibid.


101 Chi and Kuckles, Bran Nue Dae, 15.

102 Ibid.

103 Ibid., 17.

104 Ibid., 19.


106 Basically Black, YouTube.

107 Clendinnen, Dancing with Strangers, 201-203.

108 Bergson, Laughter, 38.

109 Ibid., 45.

110 Ibid., 44-45.

111 Chi and Kuckles, Bran Nue Dae, 84.


113 Chi and Kuckles, Bran Nue Dae, 84.

114 “Tall poppy syndrome” refers to the propensity for egalitarian-loving Australians to castigate successful people or issues (to “cut them down a peg or two”) for fear that they might be considered overly elevated or important. This concept was made popular by NSW Premier Jack Lang in his 1934 parliamentary speech when he referred to making some deserving “tall poppies suffer.” See “The Premier’s Plan: Signing by Mr Lang, admitted by party member,” Canberra Times, July 19, 1934, accessed May 20, 2014, http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/2364407.


116 Casey, 195.

117 Ibid. The Ilbijerri Theatre Company was established in 1990; the Yirra Yaakin

Casey, Creating Frames, 195.

119 Termed the "culture wars" or "history wars," these challenges stemmed from an article that historian Dr Geoffrey Blainey wrote in Quadrant Magazine in 1993 (vol. 37, nos. 7/8) in which he suggested that Australians had taken on a 'black arm-band' view of history, and that in fact Indigenous people had not been treated as poorly in colonial Australia as other historians, such as Manning Clark and Henry Reynolds, had previously suggested. Prime Minister John Howard joined Blaney's bandwagon by supporting these claims in his 1996 Sir Robert Menzies Speech. In this speech, Howard claimed that "The 'black armband' view of our history reflects a belief that most Australian history since 1788 has been little more than a disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination [...] I believe that the balance sheet of our history is one of heroic achievement and that we have achieved much more as a nation of which we can be proud than of which we should be ashamed." See http://www.menzieslecture.org/1996.html, accessed September 4, 2014.


123 Ibid., 34.


127 Ibid.


129 Prior to English colonisation, all Indigenous Australian cultures had oral language traditions. These oral traditions incorporated a storytelling genre, frequently labelled "Dreaming stories" by non-Indigenous Australians who have grappled to understand these complex, often lengthy, narratives. Indigenous stories encompassed messages about creation, morality, laws, rights and responsibilities for living in communities and were integral elements of traditional societies. See Larissa Behrendt, “Indigenous Literature: We’ve Always Been Storytellers,” in Indigenous Australia for Dummies, (Milton: Wiley Publishing Australia, 2012), 293-4.

130 Freud, “Humour,” 162.

131 Ibid.
132 Ibid.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid.
136 Ibid., 52.
137 Ibid., 69.
139 John Morreall, ‘Humour and the Conduct of Politics,” in Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour, 80.
141 Freud, “Humour,” 162.
146 Casey, Creating Frames, 246-247.
147 Gilbert and Lo, Performance and Cosmopolitics, 66.
149 Ibid., inside cover.
150 Ibid.
152 Ibid.
153 Ibid.
154 Bergson, Laughter, 3.
155 Ibid., 2-3.
158 Rankin and Purcell, Box the Pony, 27.
159 Ibid., 29.
160 Robyn Archer, “Foreword,” in Box the Pony, x.
163 Ibid.
165 “Leah Purcell.” Also see the Eisenhower Fellowships website: http://


In this country everybody is shocked because I say motherfucker on TV, but nobody gets outraged when they see kids washing car windows and asking for money on the streets, that's called folklore.

Good night and may God forgive us.

—Jaime Hernando Garzón Forero (1960-1999)

Garzón, My Dad, and Us

NICOLÁS LLANO LINARES

At the time, laughter was all we had and they killed it. In the wee hours of the 13th of August, 1999, Jaime Hernando Garzón Forero, a beloved Colombian comedian and social activist, was shot six times on his way to work. Garzón, a key member of two of the most celebrated comedy TV shows in Colombian recent history, ¡Quac! El Noticero (1995–1997) and Zoociedad (1990–1993), was the modern heir of the country’s (tragic) political comedic tradition. Known for his acute satiric style, he developed a variety of characters that depicted the worst (and best) traits of Colombian society: the semi-professional anchorman who would break out of character during the transmissions; the wacky doorman of a building that metaphorically represented the country; the personal cook of the president who would share the latest gossip about her boss; the archaic right wing political commentator; the radical Lieutenant
General; the national version of a socialite; the leftist revolutionary student; the sports correspondent; the massively beloved shoe shiner turned interviewer who didn’t hold anything back. Garzón, one of the most adored public figures in the country, was not only the people’s favourite comedian; he was also considered a beacon of common sense. His imitations were celebrated by many and feared by those who were the aim of his subversive performances. People have said of Garzón that he wasn’t a simple imitator; that he stole his guest’s souls; that sometimes the imitation was better than the original. In a country where all the dimensions of social life had been tinted with the drug money and “narco” aesthetics, Garzón’s characters were mediums, live canvas for expressing his views about the corrupt nature of Colombian political culture, the proclivity towards easy money and the in-your-face violence that defined those days.

The most important facet of Garzón’s talent was his courageous ability to laugh at the absurdity embodied in the Colombian armed conflict without choosing sides. For him, any actors or institutions that had an impact on Colombian life—the military, the guerrillas, the politicians, the paramilitary groups;—were open for dissection. Garzón had a sensibility few possess. He would say the most shocking (and truthful) things in a way that everybody could relate to them. He was the outspoken people’s commentator, sharing opinions that were thought by many but spoken by a few. The importance of Garzón’s comedy was felt beyond the spheres of popular culture, it had a significant impact on society. His performances almost single-handedly made the average citizen remember that humour and courage were necessary tools for active criticism, that laughing was a much needed response to the ubiquitous threats of violence and fear, that political humour could be much more than simply bashing ideological opponents, and that laughter and its intrinsic community value could be the basis of a civic anti-violence movement.
I used to think my dad was the funniest person in the world. His comedic range was so broad: spot-on imitations, politically incorrect skits, site-specific comedy, raunchy jokes, there wasn’t much he couldn’t nail. Growing up, he often had lengthy talks with my brother and me about his comedic heroes. I remember him chattering passionately about Mel Brooks, The Three Stooges, Klim (Lucas Caballero Calderón), several French cartoonists, from nineteenth-century legend Honoré Daumier, to contemporary figures such as Plantu, who were definitive and direct influences on his “style.” But since the mid-90s, Jaime Garzón rose to the top of my dad’s comedic pantheon and never left. To this day he is still at the top.

I used to watch Garzón’s shows with my father and mother on Sunday nights. I remember my father’s non-stop guffawing during the show, repeatedly using the routine he had just seen Garzón do as a starting point for a rampant monologue that covered a wide range of topics, from the rotten foundations of our civic culture to classic fart jokes. Who was this guy that my father admired so much and made him laugh like nobody else? Besides his ironic and satirical sketches about specific political actors and circumstances, my dad particularly admired Garzón’s use of humour as a cathartic experience in a time of despair and brutality. I used to watch Zoociedad and, a couple of years later, ¡Quac! as a way to bond with my father. Although I couldn’t understand half the jokes, I would rapidly start following my dad’s laughter with a more hysterical giggling of my own. I developed a sharp laughing reflex, motivated by a son’s attempt to get closer to his dad. I wanted him to know that I too could recognise good comedy; that, just like him, I knew we were lucky to see one the brightest minds this country had produced in years. I just wanted him to see that I knew what funny was, and that, by osmosis, I could be funny too. But that desire didn’t last long. As soon as I started to get Garzón’s jokes, he quickly displaced my dad at the top of my comedic pantheon.
... and Us

It was a regular Friday morning. That meant we didn’t have to stand in the central square of the school for our daily prayer and the pseudo-philosophical thoughts of the school’s director while we froze our butts off at 7:00 a.m. Fridays were TV mornings, a time for a broadcasted religion connection. We would stand in front of the TV and (supposedly) pray. The ritual was led by some poorly prerecorded footage of our priest, and followed by the latest edition of the school’s news program. It was a regular Friday morning, a stinky classroom filled with a bunch of spoiled brats that couldn’t wait to finish the day and go back to their homes for a quick masturbatory session, followed by an unrestrained intake of cheap national and Caribbean spirits. Yet, almost immediately after the teacher turned on the TV, the “Breaking News” sign popped up on the screen: “Attention. The comedian and social activist Jaime Garzón has been shot dead.” At age 14, his assassination was the second tragedy that I watched unfold on the television screens in our classroom. As the news about his assassination began to spread, the local TV networks started to collect the citizens’s reactions to the tragedy. I especially remember the testimony of a woman with dark hair, in her midthirties whose voice was so broken I could barely understand her. As the interviewer mumbled some impromptu, consoling words, the woman looked straight into the camera and repeatedly started to yell: “Who’s going to teach us how to laugh?” Even though most of us didn’t immediately understand the magnitude of what had just happened–some of my classmates were carrying on their usual routines, bullying some poor kid, or eating Doritos for breakfast–I remember sensing a dark veil fall over the whole place, and a feeling of certainty that things would never be the same again. What started as a regular Friday morning had turned into an unmistakably defining moment of our generation. Laughter was all we had, and we still don’t know who killed it.
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Winnie the Pooh, as told by Cormac McCarthy

TOM DOIG

Note: To be performed as part of a comedic “variety night,” preferably when the audience is suitably “warmed up.” (For example, after an ‘ironic’ synchronised jazzercise dance-routine, performed to an 80s classic hit, such as Devo’s “Whip It” or Bonnie Tyler’s “Total Eclipse of the Heart.”)

Stage is empty and dark with a single spotlight, centre. NARRATOR walks into spotlight, holding a copy of Winnie the Pooh, by A. A. Milne.

NARRATOR opens the book and reads.

NARRATOR: It rained, and it rained, and it rained. Winnie the Pooh had never seen so much rain before. Ditches became streams, streams became rivers, and the river became an inland sea.

   It was very exciting for a Bear of Little Brain.

   Pooh sat in his treehouse by the window, listening to the pitter-patter of raindrops, and the distant screams of excitement. Soon, he fell asleep and began to dream. He dreamed he was a polar bear, lying on a green hill, in a green land—in Greenland. A little penguin came over the hill, then another, then another—a whole line of penguins sliding on their bellies, over the hill and into his mouth, one by one by one.

   Gulp gulp gulp.

   Yum yum yum.
But just as Pooh was licking his lips, he started to tremble, and wobble—the hill started to tremble, and wobble—Greenland started to tremble, and wobble, and melt! Pooh found himself falling, falling, down a dark crevasse towards the icy cold water—

Pooh woke with a start. He had slipped out of his chair and was lying in the water—silly bear!

“What a mess,” said Pooh. “Someone should really do something about this. I must have an escape.”

Pooh ran to his cupboard and grabbed a big glass jar of honey and climbed out of his treehouse onto a branch high above the water. Then he climbed back inside and escaped with another jar. When he had completed his escape, he sat on his branch, dangling his feet next to twenty jars of honey.

Two hours later, Pooh was sitting on his branch, dangling his feet next to fifteen jars of honey, when he heard a small noise from below.

“Help me Pooh!”

It was Piglet. The water was up to his neck.

“The water!” spluttered Piglet. “It’s rising! My house—it’s gone! You’ve got to help me!”

“Um, yes, well, I’d really like to, Piglet,” said Pooh, “but the thing is, it’s already quite crowded up here, what with me and all my honey, I just don’t think—”

But before Pooh could finish his sentence, a big wave came and washed Piglet away, the pig’s little tears adding to the storm surge. Pooh sighed and cracked open another jar of honey.

Two hours later, Pooh was sitting on his branch dangling his feet next to ten jars of honey when he heard another noise.

“Help me Pooh!”

It was Eyeore. The water was up to the donkey’s neck.

“Eyeore,” said Pooh. “Shouldn’t you be at home?”

“The water!” said Eyeore. “It’s rising. My house—it’s gone! You’ve got to help me!”
“Don’t you have insurance or something?” said Pooh.
“Too late!” cried Eyeore. He scratched furiously at the tree trunk with his hooves.
“Sorry Eyeore,” said Pooh, “but there’s just not enough room up here, what with all my jars of honey, besides I’m starting to run low on honey, stay away from my honey.”

But the donkey was already scrambling up the tree, determined to get his dirty hooves on Pooh’s honey. Pooh had no choice. He picked up an empty jar of honey and brought it crashing down onto Eyeore’s skull.

Eyeore gave a grunt of surprise and fell into the water, where he lay twitching and bleeding. Pooh sighed and cracked open another jar of honey.

Two hours later, Pooh was sitting on his branch dangling his feet next to his last five jars of honey when he heard another noise. “Help me Pooh!”

It was Kanga. The water was above her neck. The kangaroo bounced pitifully, trying to keep her mouth above the waterline.

“Kanga?” said Pooh. “First the pigs, then the donkeys—now you. What’s wrong with you creatures!”

“The water!” Kanga spluttered. “It’s rising. My house—it’s gone! You’ve got to help me!”

“Look Kanga,” said Pooh, “I can’t just have every marsupial and his dog climbing up my tree, looking for a handout. I mean, I do what I can—everyone does what he can, I mean, we’ve all got to do our bit, it’s not just up to me you know Kanga.”

“Please!” said Kanga. She started inching her way up the tree. Pooh had to think fast. He broke the top off a glass jar and plunged the jagged edge deep into Kanga’s pouch. A scream came from inside. Pooh pushed the glass further in, twisted it and pulled it out. Kanga’s guts and baby roo poured from her pouch onto the tree trunk. Kanga looked at Pooh with terrified, uncomprehending eyes, and died.
Pooh tried to kick Kanga off the tree, but her silly intestines got caught on a branch and he had to cut them loose. Pooh sighed and cracked open another jar of his honey.

Two hours later, Pooh was sitting on his branch finishing the last drops of his last jar of honey. When it was all gone, he sighed and threw the jar into the rising water. Then Pooh had an idea, and for a Bear of Very Little Brain it was a very good idea.

“Time for this bear to find more... honey,” Pooh said.

Much later, a soggy, dishevelled grey tea towel of a thing hauled itself up the tree trunk and onto the branch. It was Piglet! He was not dead, but he was very weak and scrawny.

“Help me, Pooh,” he whispered. But Pooh was nowhere to be found. Piglet tried licking the honey jars, but there was nothing left. Piglet tried the pantry door, but it was locked.

“There’s a reason this is locked,” Piglet muttered. He took a run-up and charged the door with his shoulder. The door flew open and Piglet tumbled down the stairs.

It was cold and dark and it smelt very bad.

In the gloom he saw naked animals huddled against the back wall. Owl was pinned to the wall with a bicycle spoke through his chest. Tigger was tied up in a corner. On a mattress lay Christopher Robin, his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt.

“Help me,” Christopher Robin whispered. “Help me.”

“Jesus,” said Piglet, backing away. “Jesus.”

“Please,” said Christopher Robin, scratching at Piglet with fingerless hands.

Piglet turned and made for the stairs, but he heard a noise that made him stop. At the top of the stairs, there was Pooh, wearing a kangaroo fur cape and holding a red and jagged glass jar.

“Pooh!” said Piglet. “But, but...”

“Honey,” said Pooh.

Blackout.
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This story was inspired by Alan Alexander Milne’s *Piglet is Entirely Surrounded by Water* (London: Methuen, 1976), and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (London: Picador, 2006).
Literary Hijinks: Lorrie Moore’s *Bark*


LUCAS THOMPSON

From all available evidence, Lorrie Moore’s readers divide pretty neatly into two camps: those who see her seemingly endless supply of witticisms, quips, and “ba-dum tish” one-liners as gratuitous and pointless, and those who view them as purely mimetic. For the latter camp, Moore’s idiosyncratic comic sensibility both reproduces and illumines their experience of life; for the former, her reliance on humor is at best an irritating indulgence, at worst a pointless tic. In the long-awaited new collection, *Bark*, Moore shows no sign of easing up on this most polarizing element of her work—in fact if anything, the collection has an even higher density of jokes-per-page than her previous collections, *Self-Help* (1985), *Like Life* (1990), and *Birds of America* (1998).

Since Moore’s most recent short story collection was published more than sixteen years ago, it’s worth taking a quick tour through Moore’s bag of comedic tricks. The stories comprising *Bark* contain straightforward puns (“One of his Concertos in Be Minor”), surreal conjunctions (“In the chrome of the refrigerator she caught the reflection of her own face, part brunette Shelley Winters, part potato”),
and glibly tossed-off one-liners (one character describes Kentucky as being just “like Ireland but with more horses and guns”). There are also witty epigrams (“You could lose someone a little but they would still roam the earth. The end of love was like one big zombie movie”), vaudevillian slapstick (“The Juniper Tree” has a literal pie-in-face finale), and good old-fashioned wordplay (“a bazillion Brazilians”). For those who prefer their comedy in a darker hue, there are grimly comical asides on death, risqué child-abuse cracks (“A self-described ‘ethnic Catholic,’ he once complained dejectedly about not having been cute enough to have been molested by a priest”), as well as several gags for which the term “gallows humor” doesn’t quite go far enough: as in “Wings,” when Milton quips, “Of course she has on her gravestone alone at last. So, I’m putting on mine not so fast.” In fact, in Moore’s universe, life itself has impeccable comic timing. The closing scene of “Paper Losses,” for instance—in which tourists holidaying in the Caribbean witness freshly hatched baby sea turtles making their way back to the ocean—starts out as an ecstatic vision, lovingly rendered in self-consciously lyrical prose: “The squirming babies were beginning to heat up in the warming sun; the goldening Venetian vellum of their wee webbed feet was already edged in desiccating brown.” But just as this idyllic scene is beginning to come into imaginative focus, Moore provides an unexpectedly macabre punch line: “one by one a frigate bird swooped in, plucked them from the silver waves, and ate them for breakfast.”

In the same vein, the story “Foes” exploits a culinary “witticism” (“Tomatoes stuffed with avocados and avocados with tomatoes”), while many characters discover puns hidden within everyday speech: “… he was really into English country dancing. Where eventually he met a lass. Alas.” Of course, another big specialty of Moore’s is her effortlessly witty banter. In fact, I’m convinced that rigorous statistical analysis would bear out my inkling that her characters trade more bon mots than anyone else in literary fiction:
“Nature can be cruel,” said Pete.
“Nature can be one big horror movie!”

Moore is also a master of showing how relationships are so often built on a mutual comic sensibility, revealing the way that couples co-create their own little private languages, full of obscure jokes and arcane references understood by precisely two people. In “Wings,” for instance, KC and Dench’s relationship is full of insider exchanges, and the relationship begins to crumble when their private language itself breaks down. In such stories, Moore also dramatises the constant tension between humor and awkwardness: in a recent interview, she points out that her stories explore “the makeshift theatre that springs up between people at really awkward times—times of collision, emergency, surrealism, aftermath, disorientation.”

Of course, none of these examples is likely to convince someone already predisposed to see Moore’s comedy as a tic to pick up this collection. And if you’re a long-time Lorrie Moore fan, you will most likely have already read all of these stories in the magazines in which they initially appeared (The New Yorker mostly, but also Harper’s and The Paris Review). But it’s probably worth reflecting a little on just what Moore is up to with her relentless japery, which defines her work in a way that seems unparalleled within contemporary American fiction. As hinted at earlier, I think that the best defense of her method has to do with mimesis—with seeing Moore’s fiction as motivated by a genuinely realist impulse. Seen in this light, the stories in Bark make us aware of the ways in which we all leaven everyday conversations with both deliberate jokes—“I keep thinking of the hereafter: I walk into a room and say, What am I here after?”—and discovered half-jokes: “Here, have some gin. Goes in clean and straight—like German philosophy!” And since so many of the witticisms either conceal an unspeakable sadness or gloss over what is inexpressible, they gesture toward the countless ways in which we use comedy as a kind of semantic red herring, a way of tiptoeing around an underlying unpleasantness. Tonally, it
helps no end to read these stories with Moore’s own sleepily gauzy reading voice in mind, which conveys just the right mixture of humor, sadness, and world-weary irony. (Is it just me, or does Lorrie Moore always look and sound as though she just rolled out of bed?) Footage of her readings is readily available on YouTube, so if you’re a skeptic and have never heard her voice, knock yourself out: you’ll never read her stories the same way again.

Ultimately, complaining about either the quantity or the quality of Moore’s comedy seems sort of beside the point. If Moore’s chief aim is mimesis, then you either agree or disagree with her take on what constitutes reality. Virginia Woolf thought that the writer’s duty was to “inflict his own perspective upon us so severely that as often as not we suffer agonies,” a thesis that seems particularly relevant here: if you find it impossible to acquiesce to Moore’s “makeshift theatre” view of the world, at least for the duration of a short story, then you’ll have a hard time enjoying this collection. A strong reaction against these short stories may in fact reveal more about your own worldview than Lorrie Moore’s.

Another way of looking at Bark’s particular sensibility is to see Moore’s witticisms as attempts to coax the reader into paying attention to the collection’s broader themes. At their best, her stories ripple out to encompass questions of gender (“Debarking”), environmentalism (“Paper Losses”), psychology (“Referential”) or, as is more often the case in this particular collection, politics (“Debarking,” “Foes,” etc.). Indeed, Bark’s stories frequently explore explicitly political content: Moore’s characters have “John Kerry sticker[s]” on their suitcases, others discuss the racial politics at play in Barack Obama’s election (who is playfully recast as either “Brocko” or “Barama,” depending on one’s political persuasion), while the particularities of character and event often take place against the backdrop of international warfare. The story “Foes” is Moore’s most explicitly political piece—about an ideological opponent whose conservative beliefs, it ultimately emerges, stem from her experience of being
inside The Pentagon on 9/11—but almost all of these stories contain characters whose personal lives mirror broader political realities. Through such narratives, *Bark* investigates the precise degree to which the personal really is the political; Moore is incredibly deft at revealing both the ways in which everyday expressions and figures of speech can conceal or distort the truth, and how political rhetoric and international warfare infiltrate the lives of private citizens.

But in spite of *Bark*’s highly sophisticated comic sensibility and the broader investigations that such a sensibility facilitates, the collection does have its faults. In fact, despite having one or two superlative stories (“Paper Losses” and “Thank You For Having Me”), *Bark* falls short of the precedent set by Moore’s previous collection, *Birds of America*, surely one of the high water marks for the American short story. Part of this collection’s disappointment arises through its tireless insistence on finding as many variations as possible on the word bark. To name just a few, there is the “Debarking” of the opening story, a dog’s bark (though the dog is, of course, named “Cat”), the “outer bark of the brain,” and a further permutation, in a wife’s accusation to her husband, “You bark at [people].” (Though one wonders how Moore missed the obvious phonetic pun *debacle*, which would have worked in “Debarking” or elsewhere.) Beyond such insistence, Moore hammers the point home in the three epigraphs hovering over the book, referring variously to a dog’s bark, the “pre-verbal” Neanderthal grunts that may as well have been barks, and to tree bark growing “around the wire fence like a grin.” There’s also the occasional vagueness and imaginative impenetrability of her prose: although *Bark*’s stories are memorable, what’s memorable about them are their character sketches, tonal colors, jokes, and moods, rather than particularly vivid or striking images. Occasionally, as in the aforementioned turtle-massacre or in the honk-for-peace scene in “Debarking,” rendered as a gorgeous, “wild chorus of futility,” Moore’s scenes jump sharply into focus and clarity, but for the most part the reader’s visual detachment mirrors her characters’ ironised
distance from their own lives. (Can I be the only person who wishes that Lorrie Moore would give the reader more concrete images with which to anchor the stories in the imagination?)

Finally, there’s the alarming number of typographical errors scattered throughout the text—an extra t in “litttle”; a backwards quotation mark; a bonus parenthesis slipped into “(dead and wed!),” among others—all of which would be unbelievably petty to mention if such editorial sloppiness didn’t contrast so strongly with the meticulous precision of her prose.

Another slightly irritating aspect of Bark is its continual literary name-dropping: characters routinely mention novelists like David Foster Wallace, Edith Wharton, Don DeLillo, and Martin Amis, along with a veiled reference to Moore’s own 1987 children’s book The Forgotten Helper. Moreover, a “wiry old American pothead” with “the Dickensian name of Daniel Handler” turns up in “Paper Losses,” whose real-world namesake apparently won an online charity bid for the privilege of having a Lorrie Moore character named after him. Although such inclusions might seem fairly innocuous, they suggest that Moore’s fiction might be growing both increasingly cloistered and more self-consciously literary. And though the imaginative reworkings of Henry James’s The Wings of The Dove (“Wings”) and Nabokov’s “Signs and Symbols” (“Referent”) are potent appropriations if one is familiar with their original source texts, they also confirm the sense that Bark is far more insular and cliqueish than her two previous collections.

But aside from these few complaints, Bark is a compelling and endlessly entertaining collection. Essentially, these stories are like Lorrie Moore’s earlier work, only more so. In many ways, she seems to be pickling (as it were) in her own juices: becoming a more concentrated version of her former self. Here’s hoping that the next collection has an even deeper exploration of personal/political intersections, and that it extends the sophisticated interrogation of comedy that is Moore’s most powerful literary weapon.

RYAN WITTINGSLOW

If the recent appearance of a spate of new research centres in universities across the globe is any indication, the study of the history of emotions has seen something of a renaissance. Embarrassingly, it is also an area about which, I confess, until recently I knew very little. Thankfully, the book under review, *Doing Emotions History*, edited by Susan J. Matt and Peter N. Stearns, has proved helpful in redressing this lack.

Owing a debt to the twentieth-century emotions scholarship of Lucien Febvre and Peter Gay, and providing something in the way of a general overview of the scholarship within the field, *Doing Emotions History* is divided into four parts. Beginning with a broad discussion of the methodological concerns inherent in tracking something as ambiguous as emotional content or qualia, we are then led into emotions history (Part II), analyses of China and Eastern Europe that serve to highlight not only the fact that emotional content is temporally contingent, but also spatially and culturally so. Part III, meanwhile, provides examples of scholarship that probes the history of specific emotions, and how the characters of certain emotions—such as joy or romantic love—are necessarily subject to certain social, political, or economic realities. Finally, Part IV—the
longest section—presents a series of papers analysing the relationships that emotions have with social order and the structures that help constitute it: religion, political systems, and the media.

Of the historical and philosophical issues touched on within *Doing Emotions History*, there are two that are, I think, of particular interest—especially for those scholars, such as myself, who may be new to the subdiscipline. The first is a historical claim, regarding how the texture of emotional life in the West has shifted in response to prevailing political and technological norms. Particularly among those scholars writing about the historical expression of emotions in the West, there is a clear assumption that modernisation has caused a concomitant shift towards emotional interiority, and that this emphasis upon interiority has had a material effect on our collective emotional experience. That is to say: just as the Industrial Revolution sowed the seeds for the rise of the middle class, so too did it sow the seeds for “middle-class respectability,” at least insofar as industrialisation provided the base conditions under which those mores could develop. The newly minted middle class, being deeply and irrevocably aspirational, began to actively emulate their social betters, thus propagating a new kind of emotional disposition wherein one must at all times preserve their unflappability, restraint, and politeness. However, with the adoption of this new emotional disposition, public displays of emotion were slowly and inexorably rendered forbidden. Emotional experience, rather than being performative and exterior, became a primarily interior phenomenon.

In chapter six, Pamela Epstein maps some of these changes, with specific reference to the feeling of romantic love, and by examining personal ads in Victorian newspapers. According to this scholarship, it is only during and after the Industrial Revolution that experiencing romantic love became part of the selection criteria for finding a spouse. Although youthful limerence was undoubtedly experienced prior to this period (*cf. Romeo and Juliet*), it was only when internal emotional content became prioritised, by virtue of
a decreased emphasis on public displays of emotion, that partners would select one another on the basis of sustaining that feeling of excitement and mutual attraction. No longer were relationships understood solely with regard to their social, performative function; instead, they were also expected to fulfil an internal function. If Stearns and Epstein are to be believed, romantic love is but one emotion that has experienced material changes at the hands of various social and economic exigencies—and the book is littered with many more similar examples.

However, assuming the scholarship is sound, there is a second, more philosophical view that these claims raise—a question which seems to have attracted only very short shrift in this volume, both at the hands of the editors and the contributors. That is to say: if emotions are historically, economically, socially, or geographically contingent, as is the overriding claim, then to what extent are our emotions constructed? Although we might naively hold the view that our emotions, by virtue of their power and seeming authenticity, are somehow essentially just so authentic, the work in Doing Emotions History makes it quite clear that this view is little more than a conceit or convincing fiction. So what then are they? It seems to this reviewer that, in least in this respect, this volume leaves us with an unfortunate paucity of satisfying answers. This is a focus on which one hopes Stearns and Matt will concentrate in their later work.

Nonetheless, it is clear that Matt and Stearns, rather than attempting to provide a comprehensive précis of one particular corner of the emotions history corpus, are attempting to make clear the breadth and richness of emotions history as a whole. Although a dedicated scholar of the history of emotions may be disappointed by the lack of historical depth, and a philosopher or neuroscientist disappointed by the dearth of definitional provisions, it is likely that new researchers or readers in the field will find this work of significant value.

PETA GREENFIELD

Amanda Lotz’s study, Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the Twenty-First Century, is an examination of the contested site at which male characters define and—more appropriately—struggle to define, acceptable forms of masculinity. It focuses on the expression of masculinities within a society that historically carries a narrow definition of hegemonic masculinity—an image of masculinity correlated with heteronormativity. In its introduction and first chapter, Lotz’s study carefully delineates the frame of the discussion, clarifying the limits of such theoretical terminology as “hegemonic masculinity” and “post-second-wave” feminism, naming the constraints of industry factors relating to cable versus free-to-air broadcast, and explaining her idiosyncratic selection of television programs for analysis.

In chapter two, Lotz focuses on programs concerned with both the personal and professional aspects of their male protagonists’s lives. This is reflected in the issue of how to be a good father, whose persistence in these programs Lotz attributes to the rising influence of feminism in “redefining hegemonic masculinities.” Moreover, Lotz argues that the connection between male identity and fatherhood is constitutive of these “male-centred series.” A central tension arises from the protagonists’s desire for companionate marriage and
active involvement in parenting, and their longing to hold on to a patriarchal masculinity, which designates the husband or father as a strong provider. Thus Lotz identifies the anxieties of the post baby-boomer generation. Raised by fathers with a strong conceptualisation of patriarchal masculinity, the protagonists of these series face a crisis of definition, since they have also been raised in a culture that increasingly reflects the influences of second-wave feminism.

Chapter three focuses on the struggle of the “Straight White Man,” offering detailed analyses of *Breaking Bad*, *Hung*, *Dexter*, *Sons of Anarchy* and, to a lesser extent, *The Shield*. Lotz focuses on how the protagonists in these series operate outside the law in order to affirm, reclaim, or build a sense of identity in a world of shifting gender scripts where patriarchal masculinities are consistently interrogated. Lotz argues effectively that these challenges reveal the increasing influence of feminist masculinities, and the evolving nature of orthodox masculinity in the twenty-first century.

Turning to homosocial relationships, *Cable Guys*’s fourth chapter explores how conversational dynamics can serve to reinforce elements of heteronormativity. Significant in Lotz’s consideration of homosocial relations is how homosexuality is discussed (or not discussed) in *The League*, *Entourage*, *Men of a Certain Age*, and *Rescue Me*, where the question of sexual identity becomes a means of policing masculinities. Consideration is given to the negotiation of “straight panic,” the different values ascribed to transgressive humour, and the uneven acceptance of women into homosocial groups. However, a gap in the study emerges at this point, as the issue of misogynistic talk within homosocial groups is not addressed in detail. Lotz notes earlier that both misogynistic and homophobic talk dominates depictions of conversation in homosocial settings, so a greater attention to the issue at this point of the study would seem appropriate.

Chapter five, the final chapter, explores the representation of intimate, dyadic friendships between men. Lotz consciously broadens her examination of programs to include broadcast series *Boston*
Legal and Scrubs. The conclusions that Boston Legal has a claim to challenging heteronormativity, while Scrubs explicitly endorses it, are well supported by Lotz’s detailed analyses of these contemporary shows. As Lotz acknowledges,

It is utterly counterintuitive that the depictions of the most intimate friendships originated from broadcast networks that have been excluded from analysis up to this point for lacking the novel masculinities examined here.

In drawing attention to this exclusion, Lotz identifies the real challenge for her idiosyncratic approach to these subjects. While the distinction between cable and broadcast series has some value, Lotz implies a dichotomy only to draw attention, in this chapter, to its falsity. Lotz’s study could negotiate this challenge by acknowledging that, if post-second-wave influences have permeated the television culture, then they have done so at all levels of television broadcasting, albeit in different ways.

Despite restricting her study to the terms of “post-second-wave feminism,” Lotz defines “hegemonic masculinities” as those which are presented as acceptable within the narrative under discussion. Thus Lotz always consciously keeps the influence of third-wave feminism at the periphery of her study—even though it also defines her approach to masculinities. In her introduction, Lotz asks “How might audiences make sense of emergent gender dynamics relative to the contradictions of a cultural medium that remains full of characters that offer up old patriarchal norms?” But this question serves as the ground for further discussion, as the question of the audience is not the focus of her text. Although Cable Guys could have restricted its text selection to provide a more in-depth focus, the breadth of the texts that Lotz considers enables her to make broad claims on the changing nature of masculinities on American television in a way that is accessible. A point of criticism may be made, however, of Lotz’s choice to quote Michael Kimmel’s Manhood in America in her book’s conclusion. Lotz defers to Kimmel’s suggestion that the “biggest shift in American masculinity has taken place quietly.” Such
a view undercuts the far-from-quiet struggles that Lotz has clearly observed in her work on the difficult negotiation of masculinities on American television. And even if there has been something quiet about the continuing negotiation of masculinities in society, certainly there has been nothing quiet about the explicit depiction of these contested masculinities on contemporary American television.

A review copy of *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the Twenty-First Century* was kindly provided by Footprint Books. See www.footprint.com.au for this and other titles.