

Editorial Preface

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“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.”¹ 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-

ing it to that historical non-place to which Aristotle adverted. In his 2002 monograph *On Humour*, Simon Critchley crystallises the problem aphoristically, averring that “a joke explained is a joke misunderstood.”² When too much analysed, and made subject to systematic scrutiny, a joke can be stripped of its spontaneous potentiality, 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 disciplines and specialties.³

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 cultures 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 contemporary 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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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 kinesthesia. 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.⁷

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.⁸ 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 *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 *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 *Metamorphosis* (or, *The Golden Ass*, a play of 175 BCE) to compose his *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 *Spitting Image*, *Charlie Hebdo*, *Private Eye*, and *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 Carnavalesque," 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 Stacy 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 Bakhtin’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

problematizes “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 Austin’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 storytelling 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.¹³ And, in its heterodox spelling of the very word from which this journal takes its 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

- 1 Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. Samuel H. Butcher (London: Macmillan and Co., 1902), 21 (1449b).
- 2 Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 2.
- 3 Ibid. Also see Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W.Norton, [1905] 1963); Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloude-sley Brereton (New York: Macmillan, 1914).
- 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.
- 6 Vince Gilligan (dir.), *Breaking Bad* (California: Sony Pictures Television, 2008–2013).
- 7 Aristotle, *The Poetics*, 21 (1449b).
- 8 See "Racist Word Association Game," *Saturday Night Live*, December 13, 1975, <http://www.ebaumsworld.com/video/watch/214912/>, accessed February 5, 2015.
- 9 See Charlie Chaplin, *The Tramp*, dir. Chaplin (Chicago: Essanay Studios, 1915); Chaplin, *Modern Times*, dir. Chaplin (California: United Artists, 1936).
- 10 See Critchley, *On Humour*, 19, 65.
- 11 Aristophanes, *The Frogs of Aristophanes*, trans. W.C. Green (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1888).
- 12 Apuleius, *The Metamorphosis, or Golden Ass, of Apuleius*, trans. Thomas Taylor (Birmingham: Universal Press, 1822); Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. John Payne (Philadelphia: The Bibliophilist's Library, [1353] 1903).
- 13 See *OED Online*, s.v. "filament," noun 2, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/filament>, accessed February 4, 2015.