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British TV Comedies

*Cultural Concepts, Contexts
and Controversies*

EDITED BY
JÜRGEN KAMM
BIRGIT NEUMANN

British TV Comedies

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Cultural Concepts, Contexts and Controversies

Edited by

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1

Introduction: The Aesthetics and Politics of British TV Comedy

Jürgen Kamm and Birgit Neumann

1 Comedy matters

TV comedies make up some of the most watched, most profitable and most controversial productions on British screens. Not least due to the role of public broadcasting, TV comedy in the UK enjoys a tradition and success probably unrivalled anywhere. Firmly embedded in the British media culture and shaped by the specific dynamics of the British television industry, British TV comedies are immensely powerful cultural media, which have developed distinctive filmic formats and nationally inflected narrative traditions (Dannenberg 169). The great popularity of the British TV comedy has certainly much to do with its formal and cultural flexibility. Even if its primary aim is to be funny and to entertain, comedy typically touches upon a whole range of cultural topics and explores a variety of ideological conflicts (Feuer 69). Typically oscillating between appreciation and denigration, affirmation and subversion, British TV comedy plays a significant role in the formation, dissemination and reflection of cultural values, structures of identification and notions of difference: concepts of class, gender, ethnicity, disability, sex, family, work and domesticity find a most intriguing and provocative expression in TV comedies. Consider, for instance, *Men Behaving Badly* (ITV/BBC1 1992–1999), probably the signature sitcom of the 1990s, whose depiction of the ‘new lad’ propelled debates about new concepts of masculinity and the historical dynamics of gender relations. Since British TV comedies, with very few exceptions, pick out central themes that concern British society in general or particular social groups at the time of production, they offer a rich source for gauging the intersections of British (popular) culture, history and media.

It is surprising that relatively little academic work has as yet been done on a genre that is as popular and entertaining as it is intellectually challenging. Up to now, British TV comedies, including their generic variety, filmic history, humour politics and cultural impact, have rarely been studied in a comprehensive and systematic manner. Of course, the present volume

cannot fill this lacuna; however, it can provide an overview of some milestones in this history of British TV comedy in an exemplary manner. We start from the assumption that TV comedy needs to be taken seriously (Palmer). There is no longer any need to defend the status of comedy against the charge of cultural triviality and aesthetic insignificance. Instead, we propose to examine particular features and functions of British TV comedy over time. The aim of this volume is to offer concise interpretations of major British comedies, ranging from the beginnings of the sitcom in the 1950s to the current boom of 'Britcoms', as well as to explore their cultural concerns, generic tendencies and historical developments. Some of the key questions to be addressed in the contributions include: which cultural concepts and topics are negotiated in TV comedies? How does comedy use symbolic codes and aesthetically condensed images to negotiate cultural issues? How and to what end is humour used? Who are the spectators and who are the objects of the comic spectacle? How are genre conventions and filmic formats taken up and further developed? How does (popular) seriality work and how do the dynamics of seriality connect to popular aesthetics? How does seriality bear on the negotiation of ideological conflicts? And what role is played by the British television industry, marketing strategies and the audience? By examining these and other questions, this volume wants to present the multifaceted generic variety and humour politics of British TV comedy, stimulating a debate about its cultural impact as a mode of public address.

2 Comedy and transgression

Being closely intertwined with cultural and social configurations, there is hardly any topic and social arena of British culture that is not playfully negotiated by TV comedy, and yet TV comedies never operate in a purely mimetic manner. Rather, they use the imaginative and aesthetically condensed space of fiction to exceed the status quo of established concepts, to creatively subvert established norms and to humorously probe new forms of identification (Chambers; Emig, 'The Family' 151–152). Following the conventions of comedy, the playful discussion of cultural topics is not an end in itself, but aims at entertaining audiences and creating laughter among them. Whatever topic is taken up in TV comedy will therefore inevitably be depicted in a comically exaggerated or satirically distorted manner (Jacobson 1–38; Emig, 'Taking Comedy Seriously' 20). Comedy and the comic, however, are notoriously difficult concepts to define and no single definition exists to date. Generically, comedy relies on transgression, cultural deviation and, sometimes, deformity and monstrosity. 'All instances of the comic, of that which is specifically designed to be funny', Neale and Krutnik rightly point out, 'are founded on the transgression of decorum ... on deviation from any social or aesthetic rule, norm, model, convention or law. Such deviations are the basis of comic surprise' (Neale and Krutnik 86). Deviation entails a break

with established norms and standards of decorum, and frequently involves a relocation of specific forms of behaviour to a 'teasingly inappropriate framing' (Weitz 93), thus producing humorous incongruities and anarchic disorder. The range of possible deviations is vast and complex, including deviations on the level of generic conventions, language, social behaviour, physical appearance and performance. Deviations from established generic forms, generic mixing and hybridisation are essential to TV comedy and might well be considered central to its historical development and constant innovation (Nelson). Just think, for instance, of *The Office* (BBC2/BBC1 2001–2003), which radically breaks with established representational forms of the sitcom and playfully exploits the aesthetics of another television mode, namely the documentary, to engage with contemporary, post-industrial aspects of the workplace and to curtail the openly flaunted artificiality that was the hallmark of TV comedies for decades (Mills, 'Comedy Verite' 67).¹

Comedy temporarily suspends the rigid regimes of normality with performances, behaviour patterns, practices, dialogues and images of surreal absurdity, grotesque exaggeration and drastic vehemence, inviting viewers to interrogate the moral ground of cherished norms and established values. Typically, British TV comedies feature highly eccentric, overblown characters who struggle to move beyond the conventions of their specific class, gender, ethnicity or occupation (Dannenberg 172) and who incessantly and sometimes stubbornly transgress social norms. Through the dynamics of this character constellation, TV comedy typically ridicules hegemonic norms and counteracts the construction of singular and authoritative orthodoxies. In *Fawlty Towers* (BBC2 1975–1979), Basil Fawlty, a snobbish hotel owner, delights in insulting his guests rather than serving and supporting them.² *The Royle Family* (BBC2/BBC1 1998–2000, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2012) makes much of 'the "not-quiteness" of family life' (Hartley 79), depicting the family as an accumulation of various dysfunctions and a site of constant conflict and 'dismal non-communication' (Dannenberg 176).³ And in *Absolutely Fabulous* (BBC1 1992–1996, 2001–2004, 2011–2012), Edina's egocentricity, her absolute failure at domestic tasks, her drug abuse and her ostentatious lack of interest in her daughter Saffron violate the generation contract and 'propose a blazing critique of conventional representations of motherhood and family life by ridiculing the maternal instinct and notions of women's liberation' (Chambers 169).⁴ Such playful transgression, however, 'is not an abhorration nor a luxury, it is rather a dynamic force in cultural reproduction – it prevents stagnation by breaking the rule and it ensures stability by reaffirming the rule' (Jencks 7). In this sense, many TV British comedies are indeed 'worldly' (Said 4). By portraying alternative, marginal and eccentric patterns of behaviour, they offer new, unprecedented ways of depicting and experiencing the world.

Resonating with the tradition of theatrical comedy, TV comedy abounds with puns, repetitions, interruptions, digressions, illogicality, double entendres

and misunderstandings. Conversations and sentences are interrupted, left incomplete or finished in an unconventional, nonsensical or ungrammatical manner. Comprehension and 'ordered turn-taking in conversation' (Emig, 'Taking Comedy Seriously' 19) are consciously thwarted by interfering background noises, music or individual speech habits such as the use of slang or dialect. Foregrounding the breakdown of communication and crisis in understanding comedy lays bare the many pitfalls and challenges inherent in seemingly ordinary, logical and economically structured conversation. But communicative failure, nonsense and misunderstanding also have a pleasurable and creatively liberating potential for they temporarily release viewers from the self-imposed obligation of communicating effectively and grant the (childish) pleasure of suspending everyday rules.

The humour of many of these transgressions fundamentally relies on performance and embodiment: physical appearance, voice, gestures, facial expressions, movements – all commingle to accent the physical presence of the bodies whose expressive powers reach well beyond the possibilities of verbal signification. British TV comedy has always harked back to a tradition of physical comedy to highlight 'the physicality of comic acting' (Mills, 'Contemporary Comedy' 131). Brett Mills is right to point out that: 'Much comedy draws on the physical, whether it be a joke about sexual behaviour, the pain of slapstick or laughter at fat people, even if 'civilised' societies condemn such humour' ('Contemporary Comedy' 133). In comedy, the body serves as a 'complex and polyvalent instrument of expression' (Buckley 251), which is not only linked to the dramatic action; more importantly, the body conveys emotions, impulses and affects that cannot be expressed other than through bodily enactment. Due to the frequent use of slapstick and idiosyncratic physical performance, seemingly ordinary, everyday situations may be turned into absurd or surreal moments. It is in scenes involving physical comedy, silly faces, movements and voices, and sudden changes in energy that the 'comic excess' (Mills, 'Contemporary Comedy' 137) characteristic of the situation comedy is probably most obvious. Physical comedy, such as we find it in *Little Britain* (BBC3/BBC1 2003–2006) or *The League of Gentlemen* (BBC2 1999–2002), turns the body into an eloquent body, that is, a major site of comic intervention (Mills, 'Contemporary Comedy' 131), which confronts viewers with a pre-semiotic realm of absurd, gross or dark physicality. Intensely affective and highly sensual, the absurd, monstrous, abject or disgusting body conveys suppressed cultural taboos and elicits strong emotions and a pleasurable uneasiness. But it is worth remembering that the grotesque, deformed, loose, abject or even monstrous body is not only funny – it frequently constitutes an ideological site through which established notions of physical appearance, beauty, perfection, cleanliness, age and normality are critically negotiated (Feuer 68).⁵ The abject and monstrous body counters the primacy of the civilised and disciplined cleanliness of the modern body. It allows for an encounter with otherness that

hints at repressed realities and possibly tabooed desires. What is more, the openly showcased physicality of comic acting reveals the centrality of performativity to constructions of gendered, ethnic or class-specific identities, illustrating that these rely on acts which have been 'rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again' (Butler 526). TV comedy is a particularly productive space for exploring the complex interrelation of performativity and identification through exaggerated, farcical deconstructions of social norms and transgressive performances.

TV comedy and humour feed upon a disparity or incongruity between the characters' social behaviour and physical characteristics on the one hand and established norms and expectations on the other (Critchley 2–3; Morreall 195; Weitz 93). Humour or, more specifically, the provocation of laughter arises from 'the surprise of confounded expectations' (Mills, *The Sitcom* 82), that is, an incongruity between cultural conventions and unexpected, absurd or deviant situations. Through inappropriate framings of situations, actions and experiences, comedy enacts a constant shifting game (Sommer 239) that produces humorous incongruities and ambivalences. Drawing on the incongruity theory, John Morreall maintains that the cognitive experience of incongruity, that is, the deviation from standard expectations, typically provokes some sort of cognitively troubling uneasiness – unless it is made clear that incongruity and deviance themselves follow specific rules, such as those provided by the generic conventions of (TV) comedy (Morreall 195). In this case, the incongruent situation affords pleasure and cognitive stimulation rather than eliciting negative feelings. In a situation of generically framed incongruity, the violation of standard expectations can be enjoyable precisely because it offers recipients a temporary respite from the rigid norms of everyday life, allowing them to playfully adopt alternative, distancing and critical attitudes (Mills, *The Sitcom* 82). In other words, the transgressive humour of comedy can provide a borderline experience, an experience of in-between-ness, created by the confrontation with unexpected and absurd situations, which attract and fascinate by generating a feeling of pleasurable uneasiness (Billig 57–85). Seen from this perspective, comic transgressions are central to what the French philosopher Jacques Rancière (13) called the 'distribution of the sensible', understood as 'the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience'.

3 The politics of humour

Given comedy's emphasis on deviation and transgression, it is perhaps not surprising that comedy and humour have often been interpreted in terms of their subversive functions, as sites for criticising social norms, unsettling hierarchies and depicting 'the unsayable' (Mills, 'Comedy Verite' 64). Within

theories of humour, the understanding of humour as subversive or even radical has a long tradition and reaches back to Sigmund Freud (1905/1953), one of the earliest modern theorists of humour and jokes (Billig 139–172). Freud understands joking as the expression of something culturally tabooed and hence as a symptom of the repression of unwanted thoughts and bodily drives. Operating along the principles of displacement (or substitution) and condensation, jokes temporarily bring to the surface what remains otherwise unsayable in society. To the extent that jokes thrive on the largely anti-social *id*, they ‘will abound’ whenever subjects are confronted with rigid norms and social restrictions (Billig 154). Humour may therefore be a means of communicating messages which cannot be articulated seriously since they violate accepted behavioural rules (Mulkay 79–83). According to Freud’s psychoanalytical understanding, joking is closely related to ‘the rebellious unconscious’ (Billig 144) and as such is comparable to dreams, lies and slips of the tongue, but also to child’s play. This does not mean that jokes are culturally ineffectual; on the contrary, Freud maintains that jokes are central to challenging the status quo, existing power structures and the primacy of rational thought. The pleasure of joking, Freud continues, precisely resides in the capacity of undermining the norms of reason once the reality principle and the potentially repressive rules of the adult world have been internalised by the child. Their status as mere symptoms, however, considerably limits the strategic use of jokes as a means of cultural subversion. The psychoanalytic assessment of humour indeed fails to take into account ‘the active production and the conscious use and interpretation of humour’ (Dunphy and Emig 25).

The strategic use of humour and its potentially ideologically subversive functions move centre stage in Mikhail Bakhtin’s seminal study *Rabelais and His World* (1965/1984). Elaborating his theory of the carnivalesque, Bakhtin accentuates the utopian function of humour as a means of questioning and countering social hierarchies, centres, orthodoxies, habits and normalcies. Humour, Bakhtin argues, involves a temporary suspension of everyday norms and anarchically subverts established boundaries between high and low, the arts and life, inside and outside:

This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank, created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life. This led to the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times. (Bakhtin 10)

According to Bakhtin, carnival and its central element, humour, are a special ‘type of communication impossible in everyday life’ (10): they can unsettle power structures, thereby often making them visible in the first place and

opening them up for further negotiation. Humour therefore particularly thrives in moments of social crisis (Bakhtin 10), when existing values and established orders come under fire. Probing alternative norms and rules, humour powerfully transgresses the status quo and is thus essential to propelling cultural self-reflection and social change. Wielding enormous cultural and social power, humour prevents cultural stagnation by temporarily breaking established rules; however, at the same time, it fosters social stability and continuity by ridiculing social deviance. Indeed, the specific achievement of TV comedy might well be to teasingly tackle conflicts and social challenges that seem irresolvable at the time of enactment, thus not so much showing a way out of cultural predicaments, but rather allowing to assess them from a different, transgressive perspective. This might be one reason for the popularity of comedy in times of cultural change and instability.

Along the lines of Bakhtin's understanding of humour, numerous analyses of British TV comedies have highlighted their subversive potential. Eccentric characters often both exploit and subvert cultural stereotypes, and can thus challenge habitual modes of representation, rebel against established clichés and deprive comfortable reassurances of their symbolic value. The heroines of the cult series *Absolutely Fabulous*, Edina and Patsy, are prime examples in this respect. As quintessentially 'unruly women', to use Kathleen Rowe's felicitous term, they are characterised by various excesses, most prominently excessive drinking, smoking and shopping. They thus radically break with existing norms of femininity prominent at the time of production. Edina and Patsy, to quote Feuer, embody 'a critique of more conventional notions of the proper behaviour for a sitcom wife' (68). Due to comedies' proclivity for deviation, they are indeed central to probing new concepts of identification, which can go beyond existing norms and values. Yet by no means do comedy and humour always operate in a subversive way. On the contrary, they can also have conciliatory and even conservative effects, thus fostering the playful and imaginative reconciliation of cultural difference (Marc 118). Not least because many British TV comedies (and sitcoms in particular) cyclically return to a familiar situation and tend to re-establish the status quo at the end of each episode, they often refute the possibility of change, embracing continuation, and sometimes even harmony and consensus instead (Marc 118).⁶ Moreover, there is something deeply ambivalent about laughter; it 'asserts and denies, it buries and revives' (Bakhtin 12). Because comedy and laughter often take the edge off controversial topics, they can, according to Rainer Emig, 'assist the integration of difference and the problematic homogenisation of culture clashes' (Emig, 'The Empire' 176).⁷ In his seminal study *Laughter*, Henri Bergson even goes so far as to claim that humour and laughter play a disciplinary, corrective role in society since they aim at ridiculing the deviant behaviour of others and thus 'pursue a utilitarian aim of general improvement' (Bergson 20). What seems safe to say is that humour typically facilitates the digestion of culturally problematic, tabooed topics,

releasing the tension and uneasiness that politically and socially challenging issues entail. The Asian British comedy *Goodness Gracious Me* (BBC Radio 4 1996–1998, BBC2 1998–2001), for instance, exploits the rhetoric of racism to enact a comedy of reversal. A number of scenarios evoke common stereotypes held by white British people about Indians, but ascribe them to Indian characters. By depicting Indians behaving in an expressly discriminatory manner towards white British persons, numerous sketches reverse ‘standard’, that is, British behavioural patterns, thus critically exposing prototypically clichéd attitudes firmly entrenched in British mainstream culture (Emig, ‘The Empire’ 178). The question, however, of whether the mere reversal of stereotypes and prejudices already entails a subversive potential or, on the contrary, serves to confirm clichéd attitudes and to affirm rules – that is, whether we laugh at racism or whether we laugh it away⁸ – is certainly open to debate (Weaver 119–123). In fact, more recent comedians like Omid Djalili and Shazia Mirza continue to struggle with the conflicting powers of subverting or confirming standards, partly because they attract the hostility of their own ethnic communities (Lockyer and Pickering, ‘Breaking the Mould’ 121–122) and partly because of the essential instability of humour:

Asian comedians from North America and the UK develop reverse discourse and anti-racism, while also rearticulating ... racist meanings. All of the Asian comedians mentioned [that is, Russell Peters, Omid Djalili and Shazia Mirza] likely have non-racist or anti-racist intentions, yet there are racist readings to be found in the material. Although humour is an aesthetic enterprise, and it may not be the intention of the comedian to produce a political act, jokes that contain reference to race fall into a category of humour that has always had political and social implications as a form of intended or unintended rhetoric. (Weaver 147)

Comedy, after all, resists single, unified readings, and it might well be that it is precisely this openness that also accounts for the popularity of TV comedy. Thanks to the polysemous nature of humour, TV comedy can speak in several tongues at once and cater to the divergent tastes of diverse audiences.

It would therefore be wrong to prematurely dismiss TV comedy as a conservative medium with little critical potential. Judged in terms of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital and cultural exclusiveness, TV comedy has repeatedly been considered a low cultural form, being snobbishly castigated by the cultural elites as expressive of what Bourdieu calls the ‘Disgust of the “Facile”’ (488–500), since it seems to cater for popular audiences and relies heavily on serialisation and repetition rather than on experiment and artistic originality. Yet, a range of TV comedies such as *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* (BBC1/BBC2 1969–1974),⁹ *Blackadder* (BBC1 1983–1989)¹⁰ or *The Young Ones* (BBC2 1982–1984),¹¹ which abound with references to high culture, philosophy, literary and cultural history,

primarily cater to the tastes of highbrow, educated and liberal viewers. Only viewers sufficiently familiar with a range of cultural topics would be competent enough to decipher and enjoy the multiplicity of meanings that this kind of intellectual comedy produces. Moreover, it may also be argued that the absurd humour and increasingly aesthetically complex structure of many British TV comedies pervasively challenge, subvert and disturb common perceptions of what is considered to be normal and deviant, acceptable and unacceptable, serious and funny, thus engaging viewers in a constant and open game of cognitive dissonance (Morreall 195). In this respect, many TV comedies might well constitute a 'self-test' (Emig, 'The Family' 155) for our normative flexibility and forms of tolerance in an increasingly complex and contingent world.

Rather than prematurely belittling the simplicity or by emphasising the subversive functions of comedy and humour, then, we propose to analyse comedy as a complex site of dialogue, dissent and negotiation (Medhurst 19). To come to terms with the politics of humour, it is necessary to address the following questions (Malik 177–178; Medhurst 15): who makes the joke and with what possible motives? Who is the butt of the joke and who is the implied recipient? Who laughs and why? How are jokes related to power relations and contemporary ideologies? Do we laugh with or at comic portrayals? And, finally, if comedy relies on deviation, who serves as a norm and who has the power to define normality in our increasingly pluralised society that has long ceased to be defined by a single set of values? Therefore, we understand the politics of humour not only as an aesthetic instrument of ridiculing certain political, social and cultural phenomena, such as racist or misogynist attitudes, political corruption, Thatcherism, or snobbism; rather, in a broader sense, we conceive of humour as an operative strategy of affectively regulating 'practices of opinion-forming, distribution of information and the possibilities of self-articulation' (Lüdeke 384). Through the production of affects and affective forms of identification, humour configures relations between inside and outside, us and them, and thus actively intervenes in the fabric of existing social configurations. But humour, in particular in its drastic, absurd and surreal form, may also make visible its own operating principles and thus subtly induce viewers to negotiate how this 'we' is constructed 'both in relation to the sources of laughter and the rationale of ethical values' (Pickering and Lockyer, 'Introduction' 14).

4 The politics of broadcasting TV comedy

Comedies usually have their own political agendas which are largely dependent on the cultural contexts at the time of production. However, such political commitments are not infrequently at odds with the politics of broadcasting (Mundy and White 102), especially as far as the BBC is concerned. When the British Broadcasting Company was converted into the

British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 1926, it received a Royal Charter which secured its independence from governmental influence. The current Charter came into effect on 1 January 2007 and will have to be reviewed towards the end of 2016. The document clearly defines the public purposes which the broadcaster has to fulfil, that is: '(a) sustaining citizenship and civil society; (b) promoting education and learning; (c) stimulating creativity and cultural excellence; (d) representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities' (Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport 2). While the impact of devolution and decentralisation is a more recent development, the major goals of public-service broadcasting have remained untouched since 1926: 'The BBC's main activities should be the promotion of its Public Purposes through the provision of output which consists of information, education and entertainment' (Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport 3). John Reith, who served as first Director-General of the BBC from 1927 to 1938, insisted on firm programming standards and on a strict moral tone. The priorities were clear: providing the nation with unbiased news and offering uplifting educational programmes via radio transmission were deemed infinitely more suitable to the medium than dubious forms of sleazy entertainment (Briggs 35–106).

With the founding of Independent Television (ITV) in 1955, the BBC was faced with tough commercial competition. While ITV had to arrange its programme along the lines of majority taste, the BBC stuck to its policy of 'Public Purposes'. This rivalry resulted in the setting up of the Pilkington Committee in 1960, which presented its report to Parliament two years later. The Committee criticised ITV for the triviality of its undemanding programming, which offered no intellectual challenges to its audiences, whereas the BBC garnered praise for its responsible and thoughtful media management (Viscount Hailsham n.p.). And yet, such competition had to be taken extremely seriously and, given the rather liberal climate of the 1960s, the BBC under its newly appointed Director-General Hugh Greene was prepared to act. His idea of bringing fresh air to the BBC's programme structure was supported by Michael Mills, Head of Comedy, and by Tom Sloan, Head of Light Entertainment (McCann 41–46). All three felt that the televising of variety shows based on the music-hall format had become outdated (Crisell 126) and that the future belonged to well-made situation comedies which were so true to life that audiences could identify with the characters and their circumstances. As a consequence, Sloan was not particularly happy about a satirical and irreverent show such as *That Was the Week That Was* (BBC 1962–1963), while he defended a controversial situation comedy like *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC1 1965–1975). In a pamphlet published in 1970 under the title *Television Light Entertainment*, Sloan explained his broadcasting philosophy which rests on three key factors, that is, 'the writers, the performers, and the producer' (Sloan 12). He further argued that the success of any

sitcom largely depends on the excellence of the producer since it is his job to bring flair to the production:

What is flair? I wish I could define it ... Flair is production that brings the qualities of the script and the abilities of the artists face to face with the limitations of the medium, and then adds the magic ingredient, *x*, which makes the whole a memorable experience for those who watch. It is style, it is pace, it is polish, it is technique: it is all these things controlled in harmony, without a discord, and when you see it, you know it. And when any *one* element is missing, you know that too. (Sloan 13)

Sloan's concept of 'flair' and 'magic', although admittedly hard to define, may however serve to explain why some productions have received canonised status while others have been lost to oblivion. If there was any situation comedy which completely matched his requirements for perfection, it was *Dad's Army* (BBC1 1968–1977), and it will presently be shown that neither Sloan's philosophy nor this particular situation comedy have lost any of their topical appeal.¹² The enduring success of *Dad's Army* impressively demonstrated that the BBC could attract large audiences with well-made productions which did not have to resort to controversial issues and/or the lampooning of political figures. In fact, Hugh Greene's policy of liberalising the BBC's programme structure during the 1960s did not go unchallenged, as he found a formidable opponent in Mary Whitehouse, who launched the campaign 'Clean Up TV' in 1964 and who founded the 'National Viewers' and Listeners' Association' (NVALA) in the following year. Whitehouse used the NVALA as a platform to criticise the media in general and the BBC in particular for lowering the moral standards in the country by propagating violence, bad language and sex (Sendall 259–261). Her book *Cleaning Up Television* (1967) includes scathing criticisms of BBC programmes like *That Was the Week That Was* and *Till Death Us Do Part*, and of numerous comedians like Benny Hill and Dave Allen.¹³

Despite such fierce resistance, the BBC continued to produce popular TV comedies throughout the following decades and, due to increasing competition with ITV and Channel 4, it was forced to develop a slightly more lenient attitude towards light entertainment. Successful productions such as *The Young Ones*, *Absolutely Fabulous* and *The League of Gentlemen*, to name but a few, while not strictly conforming to the NVALA's ideals of respectable family entertainment, gave proof that the BBC was willing to move with the times and was prepared to target younger audiences. However, a lurking suspicion remains that 'Auntie' still takes pride in somewhat more dignified productions such as the *Life* series (BBC1 1979–2009) by a national institution such as the naturalist David Attenborough, Simon Schama's best-selling *A History of Britain* (BBC1 2000) or the highly educative documentary *Coast*

(BBC2 2005–) presented by Nicholas Crane and Neil Oliver. The current *Codes of Guidance* (2003), slightly reminiscent of the Hollywood Production Code of 1934 (quoted in Belton 135–149), formulate a comprehensive body of standards to give guidance especially to the portrayal of violence, sexual conduct and rules of taste and decency which broadcasters are called upon to follow (Broadcasting Standards Commission 2). The document offers detailed advice on observing transmission times, particularly with a view to the watershed of 9 pm, on how to be careful as to feelings of grief and bereavement as well as religious sensibilities, offensive language, racial prejudices, violence, rape, incest, child abuse and cruelty to animals, etc. What seems at first sight to amount to little less than a straitjacket of artistic creativity, has quite obviously not proved an impediment to more recent TV comedies such as *Little Britain* and *Psychoville* (BBC2 2009–2011).¹⁴ In the present period of fierce competition between broadcasters for audience ratings, the central rule of the trade is ‘pushing the envelope’, that is, not being mindful with regard to standards of taste and decency, but, quite the opposite, to transgress such standards in grotesque and occasionally downright unpalatable fashion.

5 The future of British TV comedies

Towards the end of his study *The Sitcom* (127–136), Brett Mills assesses the current trends in TV comedy and adumbrates a number of possible future developments. He argues that there is still potential in mockumentaries like *The Office* and in realistic, lifelike formats as represented by *The Royle Family*. In addition, he identifies a third trend in such shows which privilege the image over the story, which are less bent on dramatising than on demonstrating. Formats such as *Arrested Development* (Fox 2003–2006) may, for want of a better term, best be described as meta-comedies since they draw the viewer’s attention to the very conventions which underlie TV comedies. While it will be interesting to see what the future holds in store, it seems that the strategy of ‘pushing the envelope’ may well have reached its limit since it apparently collides with the hardly less powerful policy of political correctness. Indeed, the call for decency and for policing comic contents and forms enjoys a time-honoured tradition. As early as 1625, Francis Bacon in his essay ‘Of Discourse’ admonished writers that certain subject matters should not be exposed to ridicule: ‘As for jest, there be certain things which ought to be privileged from it; namely, religion, matters of state, great persons, any man’s present business of importance, and any case that deserveth pity’ (Bacon 102). Despite the fight in the 1960s against the Lord Chamberlain as the embodiment of censorship as carried out by Penguin Books over the publication of D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* or by the Royal Court Theatre over Edward Bond’s *Saved*, Bacon’s sentiment has lost little of its argumentative rigour. As was pointed out above, race,

ethnicity and, in addition, religion have emerged as particularly sensitive areas of comic presentation in the postmodern context. Michael Mulkey draws attention to the different frames of perception which induce members of different cultures to interpret events, situations and contexts extremely differently (Mulkey 54–55). In plain terms, what may be funny for some may be offensive for others (Critchley 66). Not least because stereotypes and comic meanings are frequently imbued with associations and values that may reach well back into the past, the ethical line and social acceptance of jokes has to be negotiated over and over again (Pickering). In this vein, the essays collected and edited by Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering in *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour* all serve to draw the boundary lines between what is currently considered permissible and what is offensive in comedy. The central concern of the book is whether everybody may say anything about anybody with complete impunity: 'There is no general acceptance of this even in contemporary Western societies where standards of acceptance in comedy are broader and more liberal than they have been for at least a couple of centuries' (Pickering and Lockyer, 'Introduction' 14). While humour in comedy and satire is located in the realm of fiction and hence in an imaginative space of a playful 'as-if', it can have a number 'of serious effects' (Weaver 2). The 'Jyllands-Posten Muhammad Cartoons Controversy' of 2005 and the cold-blooded assassination of many of the editors of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015 provide this argument with a frightful authority.

From a diametrically opposed position critics like Howard Jacobson fervently hold on to the liberty of expression as an essential civic right and argue that in a truly democratic society, there 'can be no drawing of lines within comedy' (Jacobson 37–38). However, the UK Parliament drew such lines by passing the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005, which rules that anyone judged to have stirred up religious hatred through threatening, abusive or insulting behaviour is liable to a maximum of seven years in prison. In the run-up to this legislation, numerous writers, actors and lawyers stepped forward who criticised the bill for infringing on civil liberties. The most eloquent critic at the time was Rowan Atkinson, who insisted on 'the right to cause offence' (quoted in Helm) as a fundamental freedom in a democratic society. While he dismissed racist jokes as 'irrational', he claimed that criticising ideas, including religious ideas and beliefs, was and is a civic right. In 2012 he again raised his voice against the creeping 'culture of censoriousness' (quoted in Martin), which restricts the comedian's satirical power since 'merely stating an alternative point of view to the orthodoxy can be interpreted as insult' (quoted in Martin).

The controversy about the limits or the limitlessness of comic presentations is hardly a merely academic debate, but has far-reaching political, social, religious and, indeed, artistic consequences. In an undated entry an anonymous British blogger expressed his deep-seated dissatisfaction with the increasing

dominance of political correctness by quoting an incident where, following one complaint, the BBC 'agreed to remove the word "PAKI" from a 23 year old episode of "Only Fools and Horses"' ('Political Correctness: The Awful Truth'). Anxious that 'our old and cherished comedies' might be studded with bleeps and silences if the BBC were to extend censorship of this kind, the author wondered what might happen to the 'Major in Fawlty Towers explaining the difference between "Niggers" and "Wogs"' ('Political Correctness: The Awful Truth'). In January 2013, the Major's speech was victimised for the sake of political correctness as the BBC showed a repeat of 'The Germans', that is, episode six from *Fawlty Towers*, first broadcast in October 1975. Although the episode had never caused offence during the past 38 years, the BBC felt that it was necessary to cut out a line of dialogue in fear that it might be construed as a racial insult. Reporting for *The Guardian*, Mark Lawson clearly but circumspectly approached this sudden point of contention:

It is impossible to discuss properly the censored dialogue without quoting the line. Very sensitive readers should stop now and it should not be assumed that I, the Guardian – or, indeed, John Cleese and Connie Booth, the show's writers – endorse the general or casual use of such terms. In his anecdote, the Major [Gowen, played by Ballard Berkeley] tells Basil Fawlty that he went to the test with a woman who 'kept referring to the Indians as niggers. "No, no, no," I said, "the niggers are the West Indians. These people are wogs"' (Lawson)

And Lawson goes on to argue that the decision to censor the dialogue was only partly due to the fact that the episode was aired at 7.30 pm, that is, in a pre-watershed slot. Rather, the decision 'is in line with a general TV policy of suppressing a certain strain of racial comedy from the 1970s' (Lawson).

Opinions about the future of TV comedy seem to be divided, to put it mildly. In an article published in the *Daily Mail* in March 2007, headlined 'BBC Chief Wants to Return to Wholesome Sitcoms without Sex and Swearing', Paul Revoir announced the impending renaissance of classic English comedy arguing that viewers, especially families, had been deprived of 'wholesome' TV fare for far too long. Although Tom Sloan's philosophy of the sitcom is not explicitly mentioned, a softly nostalgic longing for the golden age of family viewing and for new shows 'in the spirit of Dad's Army' (Revoir) is difficult to overlook. In fact, John Beyer, at the time Head of Mediawatch-UK, applauded the BBC's strategy of returning to 'real comedy': 'I think there is a thirst for good entertainment that does not rely on offensiveness and bad language ... A lot of people are just sick and tired of the things that they are seeing on TV' (Revoir).

What is fairly remarkable about these statements, apart from the yearning for the good old days, is the use of metaphors from nourishment ('wholesome', 'thirst', 'sick'), suggesting that consumption of TV is a physical process

which can, like any diet, be invigorating as well as unhealthy. David Jason, the former star of *Only Fools and Horses* (BBC1 1981–2003, 2014) and *Open All Hours* (BBC2 1973, 1976–1985) complains in a recent article in *The Telegraph* that ‘Political Correctness is Killing the British Sense of Humour’. While he acknowledges the presence of ‘edgy and quite hard-hitting and modern and fashionable’ comedies, he argues that most viewers would appreciate a more balanced nutrition: ‘There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s fine. But you can’t have a diet of just potatoes. You’ve got to have meat and two veg’ (Jason).

Faced with so much nostalgia and conservatism and in addition confronted with institutional policing via political correctness, it is not surprising that the advocates of ‘edgy’ and ‘hard-hitting’ comedy formats are called upon to defend their ground. By reference to such diverse and successful productions as Sacha Baron Cohen’s mockumentary *Borat* (20th Century Fox, 2006), David Walliams and Matt Lucas’ *Little Britain* and Ricky Gervais and Stephan Merchant’s *The Office* and *Extras* (BBC2/BBC1 2005–2007) the stand-up comedian, writer and director Stewart Lee has come forward as a spokesman of his faction and insists on the survival of ‘Guilt Free Pleasures’. He argues that the exploration of boundaries, of social limits and their transgression in comedies is and has always been at the core of the genre. To substantiate this claim, he quotes Merchant and Gervais, who admit that they regularly agonise over parts of their dialogues, being frequently uncertain whether certain jokes and repartees might be morally and intellectually defensible:

Often we’re all unsure of what to say, for example, in the company of someone who is disabled. These are areas ripe for comedy because of social anxiety, not because the subject itself is intrinsically funny. A joke about race, and about how we react to race, is not necessarily a racist joke. That is fundamental. Political correctness has made the world better for those who might otherwise have been unfairly marginalised, but there is the problem of the idea that you cannot discuss different areas for fear of being politically incorrect. (Merchant, quoted in Lee)

It is a sentiment apparently shared by many representatives of the trade. The American stand-up comedian and self-styled ‘Queen of Mean’ Lisa Lampanelli recently stressed the fact that comedy is subjective and that not every jester can be expected to cater for every taste: ‘Going to my show and expecting me not to cross the line of good taste and social propriety is like going to a Rolling Stones concert and expecting not to hear “Satisfaction”’ (Lampanelli). Rather than laying down rules for acceptable behaviour and appropriate language, she equates the policies of political correctness with censorship, which is itself politically incorrect and thus easily assailable.

Censoring a comedian’s jokes because of political incorrectness is, Lampanelli feels, on a par with censoring Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* because of Huck’s occasional racist remarks in the novel. When taken to extremes,

Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* stands in dire need of being cleansed of Petruchio's misogyny and *The Merchant of Venice* deserves to be purged of its latent anti-semitism. Despite repeated attempts to do just this, the comedies have survived in their original design because they are rightly conceived as works of art reflecting particular moods and attitudes prevalent at the time of composition. If, however, the BBC believes that certain episodes of celebrated TV comedies like *Only Fools and Horses* and *Fawlty Towers* could be offensive to contemporary audiences and that the dialogues can consequently be tampered with to suit the dictates of political correctness, these productions are obviously not ranked as autonomous works of art. There is arguably a grave danger involved in policing TV comedies in whatever fashion because they are artistic in the sense that they lend expression and give a voice to dispositions and anxieties at the time of production, which although 'edgy and quite hard-hitting' expose such tensions to laughter. It might be useful in this context to heed the advice of an earlier comic writer who was worried that the art of laughing might be lost for good:

Humour at present seems to be departing from the stage, and it will soon happen that our comic players will have nothing left for it but a fine coat and a song. It depends upon the audience whether they will actually drive those poor merry creatures from the stage, or sit at a play as gloomy as at the tabernacle. It is not easy to recover an art when once lost; and it will be but a just punishment that, when, by our being too fastidious, we have banished humour from the stage, we should ourselves be deprived of the art of laughing. (Goldsmith 168)

The passage is taken from Oliver Goldsmith's essay 'Sentimental Comedy' (1765), in which the playwright voiced his fear that a morally upright but essentially dull format like the sentimental comedy might spell out the death of the infinitely more entertaining comedy of manners, which did not praise virtues but exposed human follies to ridicule. Perhaps a similar impasse has been reached at the moment with the nostalgia for the golden days of TV comedies, as represented by *Dad's Army* on the one hand, and brash but progressive and innovative shows like *Little Britain* on the other, where boundaries are continuously transgressed. Such transgressions usually do not take place for the sake of transgression itself, but, as Stewart Lee perceptively argues, taboo-breaking demonstrates 'what we might also stand to gain, if we step outside the restrictions of social convention and polite everyday discourse ... It's comedy, the noblest of all the arts, and it goes way back' (Lee).

Notes

1. See Philip Jacobi's contribution in Chapter 20 of this volume.
2. See Paul Davies' contribution in Chapter 7 of this volume.

3. See Angela Krewani's contribution in Chapter 17 of this volume.
4. See Rainer Emig's contribution in Chapter 13 of this volume.
5. See Stephan Karschay's contribution in Chapter 23 of this volume.
6. 'If we merely look at the sitcom's "narrative architecture", no sitcom can be transgressive because the episodic format forces us to return to the familiar status quo with which this week's episode began' (Feuer 68).
7. See David Grote, who remarks that the sitcom has 'overturned more than two thousand years of comic traditions and established an entirely new and unique form of comedy' (12), which is no longer defined by its subversive social functions, but by its repressively commercial ones.
8. See Jochen Petzold's contribution in Chapter 12 of this volume.
9. See Alexander Brock's contribution in Chapter 4 of this volume.
10. See Gerold Sedlmayr's contribution in Chapter 10 of this volume.
11. See Eckart Voigts' contribution in Chapter 9 of this volume.
12. See Bernd Lenz's contribution in Chapter 3 of this volume.
13. The antagonism between Hugh Greene and Mary Whitehouse is brilliantly captured in the BBC TV docudrama *Filth: The Story of Mary Whitehouse* (2008), written by Amanda Coe and directed by Andy DeEmmony, starring Hugh Bonneville as the Director-General and Julie Walters as the spokeswoman of the NVALA.
14. See the contributions by Oliver Lindner and Stephan Karschay in Chapters 22 and 23 of this volume.

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Part I

The 1950s and 1960s: Beginnings of the British Sitcom and the Satire Boom

2

A Golden Age of British Sitcom? *Hancock's Half Hour* and *Steptoe and Son*

Richard Kilborn

1 Introduction

For someone who was already around when shows like *Hancock's Half Hour* and *Steptoe and Son* were first broadcast, being given the opportunity – for the purpose of this chapter – to revisit this ‘classic’ period of British TV comedy is very much a nostalgia trip. It is, however, not just fond personal memories of family listening and viewing that are recalled when one reviews this material; one quickly becomes aware of what these shows have come to represent in terms of the overall development of British TV comedy. *Hancock's Half Hour* and *Steptoe and Son* are now generally regarded as having played a significant role in the development of TV comedy. They enabled the sitcom to establish itself as the television genre on which channel controllers would increasingly come to rely in the coming decades as a major weapon in their scheduling armoury.

What one also has to remember in a retrospective assessment of these shows is their enormous popularity with audiences. Both series were originally transmitted at a time when there were only three terrestrial TV channels in the UK. In those days, having a show to which the TV audience could easily relate would translate into viewing figures that are – by today's standards – astronomically high. Indeed, audiences for *Hancock's Half Hour* and *Steptoe and Son* are some of the highest ever recorded in the history of British broadcasting.¹

What also doubtless endeared these shows to British TV audiences was that they were not only humour-filled pieces of light entertainment, but they also appeared to offer some trenchant social commentary on issues relating to national and cultural identity. What audiences witnessed being played out on television seemed to strike a chord of recognition, in the sense that viewers could recognise in these light-hearted sitcom scenarios aspects of the day-to-day ‘worlds’ they inhabited. As with all the best comedy, then, *Hancock's Half Hour* and *Steptoe and Son* were in many ways a cultural seismograph providing some insightful commentary on issues of class, gender and socio-political attitudes (Medhurst 18–20; Rudin 21–22; Wagg 1–2).

Thus, whilst *Hancock's Half Hour* and *Steptoe and Son* cannot be regarded as containing any extended social critique, both shows are very much products of their time and can be seen as reflecting a number of contemporary concerns. Both were launched at a time when Britain was having to adjust – sometimes rather painfully – to the harsh realities of the post-war world. Both also reflect to some extent the frustrations of members of working-class communities whose lives were still being negatively impacted by the persistence of class-bound attitudes.

2 *Hancock's Half Hour*: a major landmark in British sitcom history

Hancock's Half Hour was originally conceived as a radio programme. First transmitted in 1954, it brought together the consummate performance skills of actor-comedian Tony Hancock and the creative talent of scriptwriters Ray Galton and Alan Simpson. In this respect alone, it put down an important marker for the further development of British sitcom in that it helped cement the tradition of 'authored comedy' (Tunstall 126), the type of comedy that depended as much on the creative input of a scriptwriting team as it did on the talent of the actors chosen to play the lead roles. The *Hancock* show also brought to the attention of a wider public a group of talented comedy actors, Sid James, Hattie Jacques, Bill Kerr and Kenneth Williams, all of whom were to become household names in British film and television comedy over the next few decades.

Hancock's Half Hour represented what was essentially a new kind of televisual comedy, one that was less dependent on the joke-telling ability of an individual comedian, but was, rather, a piece of narrativised dramatic entertainment that was played out over a 30-minute programme. Each episode of *Hancock's Half Hour* centred on the figure of Tony Hancock playing an 'alter ego' version of his real-life self, much like Jack Benny in the *Jack Benny Program* (CBS/NBC 1950–1965) or Larry David in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (HBO 2000–2011). The character of 'Hancock' is a masterful comedy creation: eternally misguided and forever programmed for failure, but still in his own way a lovable though rather lugubrious character.

Hancock's Half Hour was developed at a time when radio was still the dominant broadcasting medium. The early radio scripts were written very much with the perceived 'needs' of the listening audience in mind and the show certainly skilfully exploits the strengths of the radio medium. Despite the continuing popularity of radio, however, the 1950s were a time when the new medium of television was beginning to get into its stride. It was also a period when the BBC, for the first time in its history, was facing competition from the recently launched ITV channel. It was partly for this reason that in 1956, the BBC attempted what was then regarded as the bold move of transferring the *Hancock* show from radio to TV, where – rather to the surprise of some radio stalwarts – it proved to be just as successful.²

Whether in its radio or television manifestations, *Hancock's Half Hour* represents a groundbreaking moment in the development of British TV (and radio) comedy. It shifted the emphasis away from the type of show based on comedy sketches and joke-telling acts usually associated with the old music-hall tradition and towards a new form of comedy that was situationally focused and character-centred.³ Thus, a typical *Hancock's Half Hour* episode would centre on a series of actions and exchanges involving Hancock and his associates that are triggered by a particular occurrence or event that acts as an enabling device for a series of narrative repercussions.⁴

Each *Hancock* episode follows a similar narrative pattern and foregrounds the character of an undistinguished actor-cum-comedian Anthony Hancock living in the rather insalubrious surroundings of East Cheam, a London suburb that has certainly seen better days. Hancock's full name, Anthony Aloysius St John Hancock – a name that he will parade at every available opportunity – provides a clue to the character's pretentiousness and refusal to accept that he is actually a most incompetent individual. It is from these basic ingredients that the scriptwriters Galton and Simpson were able to create a seemingly endless series of episodes, all of which centre on the 'Hancock' character getting entangled in situations where all his hopes and dreams of success are brought to nought by his ineptitude, his delusions of grandeur or simply by his tenuous hold on reality.

The comedy of *Hancock's Half Hour* is, as suggested, largely character and situation-based. Hancock is characterised by his pomposity and priggishness. Much of the humour therefore springs from the audience being positioned in such a way that they can witness the clear disjuncture between Hancock's constant desire to better himself and the altogether sadder reality of his day-to-day existence. The episode 'The Knighthood' (BBC 1959), for instance, shows Hancock at his most aspirational as he attempts to acquire a knighthood in appreciation of what he regards as his supreme acting abilities. Inevitably he proves woefully inadequate in the roles in Shakespeare plays for which he auditions. And, as ever, he experiences the customary comeuppance.

Hancock is one of the first in a whole line of British sitcom characters who reveals himself to be a bumbling incompetent, not only in his dealings with those close to him but also with the world in general (see also Mills 41).⁵ That we feel able to laugh at such a character results from the fact that Hancock – just like David Brent in *The Office* (BBC2/BBC1 2001–2003) several decades later – is so cock-sure of himself as to positively invite the bubble of pomposity to be pricked. This is sometimes an undeniably painful spectacle, but the saving grace for audiences – what allows them to find such situations comic rather than tragic – is that what is being held up to ridicule is Hancock's pretentiousness rather than the person himself (Langford 20). For the audience there is, in other words, always the comforting knowledge that what they are confronting is a fictional creation, one in which a range of all too familiar character traits,

failings and idiosyncrasies have been artfully enhanced in order to achieve comic effect.⁶

Perhaps the most fondly remembered of all the *Hancock's Half Hour* episodes is the one entitled 'The Blood Donor'. It is set in a hospital where the Hancock character is attending a blood donor clinic. Full of false bonhomie and apprehensive about what the consequences of this 'bloodletting' will be, Hancock first of all makes a nuisance of himself with the hospital staff by his constant posturing and his always wanting to be treated as a special case. He then seeks to strike up conversations with his fellow donors, all of whom are demonstrating the customary British *sangfroid* and are resistant to his overtures. The dramatic climax of the episode is reached when Hancock is informed that he has a rare blood type. This is music to his ears because he thinks he has finally got the proof that he is, indeed, – as he always fondly imagined – a cut above the rest. This results in some highly entertaining exchanges in which Hancock seeks to persuade the long-suffering medical staff that he should be the one to decide which privileged individual should receive the blood he has donated. Once again we see how, as in so many sitcoms of the period, comedy is being used to provide a socio-cultural critique of prejudiced attitudes relating to class and race (see also Mills 11–13, 19–20).

The success of *Hancock's Half Hour* is also partly attributable to the fact that the show occupied a weekly slot in the TV schedules and, as such, was able to build a large and loyal audience that looked forward to the pleasures that a new Hancock episode would deliver. The great popularity of the show was also very much grist to the mill of the BBC. Not only did it further enhance the reputation of the Corporation as purveyors of quality comedy, it also provided evidence that the BBC was fulfilling its public service remit of informing, educating and entertaining the nation.

From the perspective of the scriptwriters Galton and Simpson, the series format was also advantageous in that having a central core of characters to call upon enabled them to go on creating a seemingly endless series of Hancock episodes, each of them exhibiting a similar narrative structure and drawing on familiar characters (Ross 58–59). And as far as the audience was concerned, the regular appearance of *Hancock's Half Hour* at the same time each week in the broadcast schedule also encouraged the illusion that the 'world' of Hancock was somewhat akin to those other fictional worlds evoked by the popular soaps with which audiences were becoming increasingly familiar during this period. In the same manner in which TV soaps would enhance their claim to verisimilitude by sometimes including references to living persons and actual events, so the *Hancock* scriptwriting team liked to remind viewers that the world Hancock inhabited was not so distant from their own by also working in the odd reference to a real-world event or to a well-known contemporary personage.⁷

3 *Steptoe and Son*: character-centred sitcom par excellence

There is a widespread consensus amongst critics and observers that *Hancock's Half Hour* had a significant impact on the future course of British sitcom. It established a new set of structural and narrative conventions that progressively shaped audience expectations as to what a sitcom could and should deliver. From now on, the sitcom 'norm' became that of character-centred comedy played out in social milieus that would be familiar to the majority of viewers and that would focus on events and situations to which audiences would easily relate. And as far as narrative structure was concerned, there was an expectation that each sitcom episode would be relatively self-contained (thus catering to the needs of the occasional 'drop-in' viewer).

Whilst much of the success of *Hancock's Half Hour* was undoubtedly attributable to the comic genius of actor Tony Hancock and the acting talent of other members of the cast, it was still heavily dependent on the creative input of the scriptwriters Galton and Simpson. When Hancock parted company with his scriptwriters in the early 1960s in order to pursue other projects, it left Galton and Simpson free to start developing ideas for new comedy shows.⁸ Amongst other things, they had been asked by the Head of BBC Light Entertainment Tom Sloan to produce scripts for a series of 30-minute plays under the general title 'Comedy Playhouse'. For one of these comedy playlets, they had come up with the idea of bringing together two characters who were business partners in a rag-and-bone business. The idea of two similarly aged men in a business partnership was, however, quickly shelved, though the rag-and-bone connection was retained. What finally emerged was the 40-minute comedy play entitled 'The Offer' set in the home of a father and son who are running a not entirely successful rag-and-bone business in the East End of London. It was in this way that *Steptoe and Son* was born.⁹

'The Offer' (screened in January 1962) was by far the most successful of the six playlets transmitted in the 'Comedy Playhouse' slot and the BBC was quick to recognise that this was a concept that could be developed into a potentially long-running series. It therefore immediately commissioned Galton and Simpson to produce material for a six-show series with the title *Steptoe and Son* that ran from June to July in the same year. *Steptoe and Son* was to remain a regular fixture in BBC1 schedules for over a decade.¹⁰ From 1962 till 1974, a total of eight series of the show were produced as well as a number of Christmas Specials and two feature films.

As with so many other successful sitcoms such as *The Odd Couple* (ABC 1970–1975), *The Likely Lads* (BBC2 1964–1966) and even *Absolutely Fabulous* (BBC1 1992–1996, 2001–2004, 2011–2012), the comedy centres on the relationship between two lead characters, Albert Steptoe and his son Harold. Central to the plot development of each *Steptoe* episode is that father and

son have, for many a long year, been living cheek by jowl with each other in the claustrophobic confines of their run-down East End home, which also serves as a base for their business operations. The basic narrative premise of the *Steptoe* series is that, much as Harold would like to break free of the shackles that bind him to hearth and home, he is never able to summon up enough courage to extricate himself from this stifling environment. It soon becomes clear to the audience, then, that Harold and Albert will remain unhappily bound to each for the rest of their natural lives – or at least as long as Galton and Simpson chose to continue to churn out further *Steptoe and Son* episodes.¹¹ From now on, every episode of *Steptoe and Son* secures some narrative ‘gain’ from the situational dilemma in which each of the protagonists is caught up (see also Langford 27).

It is this constant desire on Harold’s part to escape from his confined or bounded existence, coupled with his regular and inevitable failure to realise this ambition, which becomes a thematic leitmotif for the whole of the *Steptoe* series. What frequently provides the narrative ‘backbone’ for a *Steptoe* episode is thus the juxtaposition of two distinct worlds – the ramshackle home that Harold shares with his father and the outside world to which Harold feels constantly drawn, but to which he never succeeds in gaining access – that provides the narrative arc for many of the individual *Steptoe* stories.¹² As Neale and Krutnik have commented:

Steptoe is a sit-com which centrally depends upon a dislocation between ideological and structural convention. The ‘inside’ to which it returned each week is the inverse of respectable, familial normality. Normality lies, instead, on the outside. As such it must remain an unattainable impossibility in order for this particular sit-com to continue. For *Steptoe* the world of conventional domestic sit-com is always, therefore, elsewhere. (Neale and Krutnik 6–7)

Given that there is constant narrative focus on father and son throughout the *Steptoe and Son* series, the show was particularly well served by being able to call upon the services of two classically trained actors, Wilfrid Brambell and Harry H. Corbett, to take the parts of Albert and Harold respectively. However, as *Steptoe and Son* became ever more popular, both Brambell and especially Corbett began to recognise that the show was enjoying such popularity that as actors they were becoming increasingly identified with their *Steptoe* roles. There was a strong fear that this would inhibit the development of their respective acting careers (for more on this, see Ross 118–119).

Given that sitcoms return to the same basic situation with such unerring regularity, the settings of *Steptoe and Son* are of fundamental importance to our understanding and enjoyment of the everyday dramas in which the Steptoes, father and son, become involved. In the Steptoes’ case, it is clear from the outset that they are living in reduced circumstances, surrounded

by the junk that they have picked up in many years of totting activity.¹³ It is this particular *mise-en-scène* that for many in the audience would have brought uncomfortable reminders of the grim years of the Depression and the austerity experienced in the immediate post-war period.¹⁴ Moreover, the setting would have provided a kind of visual reinforcement for the jaundiced comments made by Albert or Harold referring to the yawning gulf between the fine rhetoric of political leaders (for instance, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's assertion 'You've never had it so good') and the harsher realities of life in Britain of the early 1960s.

Many of the plots of individual episodes of *Steptoe and Son* (perhaps most notably 'A Box in Town' (Series Four) and 'Any Old Iron?' (Series Five)) are activated by Steptoe Junior's constant but always unsuccessful attempts to break free of the circumstances that he experiences as a form of entrapment. As Langford perceptively notes:

From Hancock onwards, British sitcom has focused on protagonists whose ineradicable yet unrealisable desire to be different encounters its ultimate horizon of impossibility in the very limits of the form in which they have been conceived. (Langford 22)

This nagging sense of confinement that Harold suffers from is one that is seen to have two aspects. In a strictly economic sense, he is portrayed as a man who – though already in his late thirties – is unable to stand on his own two feet. In a more emotional sense, he is seen as being still very much beholden to a father who is adept at using every manipulative trick in the book to block any attempt his son makes to become fully independent. As scriptwriter Ray Galton reflects:

Harold Steptoe is now on the threshold of 40, a man who realises that he's trapped by his father, but still yearns for the miracle that will take him out of the situation. Harold can be nasty to the old man and the old man can be nasty to *him*. To use the old cliché, it's love-hate. Harold can't walk out on the old man because of this filial bit. (Quoted in Kemp 51)

Where Galton and Simpson are able to extract considerable comedy mileage out of the father-son relationship is by endowing the father with a lot more worldly wisdom than his somewhat naïve son, who frequently acts like an overgrown child. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the opening episode of the first series of *Steptoe and Son* entitled 'The Bird'. Here Harold has high hopes of making a romantic conquest, only to see these hopes dashed by a devilish piece of intervention by the old man who cruelly contrives to make it appear that Harold's date has stood him up.

Whilst much of the comedy in *Steptoe and Son* stems from the constant thwarting of Harold's ambitions and aspirations by his wily old father, it

is important to bear in mind that it is this particular paternal quality that allows the situation to become a comic one. If the father had been less tough and resourceful, then the Steptoes would be locked into a different sort of relationship: one that would have placed too much emphasis on Albert's vulnerability and on his fear of being abandoned in his old age by his unfeeling son. It is, indeed, old man Steptoe's resourcefulness and low animal cunning that frequently provides the necessary trigger for the narrative development of many *Steptoe* plots. The audience quickly latches on to the fact that in any given situation, Albert will prove more than a match for his ever-aspiring son. Frequently, therefore, the plot will involve a theatrical turn of events in which Albert succeeds in turning the tables on the hapless Harold by pulling off something that his son has set his heart on achieving. A good example of this occurs in the episode 'A Box in Town', in which Harold finally stakes a claim to independence by getting his own place in town. Although he can only afford to rent a miniscule bedsit, it is at least somewhere where he feels he will be free to entertain some of his old flames without having his father poking his nose in the whole time. As he exclaims as he settles down in his newfound living quarters: 'Now I know what a tiger feels when he escapes from the zoo!' However, as so often occurs when he ventures into the outside world, Harold is like a fish out of water in this unfamiliar domain and fails miserably in his bid for independence. But to make matters worse for him, in his absence, his father is having a whale of a time. We see him being literally besieged by a series of women suitors, all anxious to renew their acquaintance with him now that he has rid himself of his troublesome son.

With an episode such as 'A Box in Town', much of the comedy derives from the audience's anticipation that there will be a turn in events that will result in Harold yet again experiencing frustration and defeat at the hands of his forever-scheming father. In these cases the moment of narrative resolution is very much character-based insofar as the role-reversal that occurs at the end of the episode – with Albert rather than his son taking on the Lothario role – is rooted in Harold's gaucheness and the father's canniness. In other episodes, however, the 'pay-off' moment is linked to an entirely unexpected turn of events where the narrative resolution involves a sudden and disturbing incursion of the outside world, which will have the inevitable outcome of bringing father and son together again.¹⁵

An example of this is found in 'Men of Letters' (Series Seven), an episode in which the old man's penchant for using colourful and earthy language has unanticipated consequences. The narrative starting point is an innocent game of Scrabble in which Albert, true to form, insists on using a series of rude words to improve his chances of winning the game, much to the exasperation of his more prudish son. The theme of 'rude language' – and society's attempts to maintain a censoring control over the use of certain 'inappropriate' expressions – is continued throughout the episode.¹⁶ The final moment of reckoning comes when the local vicar, who has commissioned

the Steptoes to make contributions to a special issue of the church magazine, gets charged under the Obscene Publications Act for allowing Albert's saucy crossword to appear in a publication for which he was responsible.

Though no one has ever had any doubt that *Steptoe and Son* should be classified as a sitcom par excellence, there are still moments in these ongoing tales of a fractious father-son relationship where the series threatens to move into altogether more sombre territory. Some critics have seen this particular 'black humour' trait as a generic feature of British sitcoms that distinguishes them from their American counterparts, which – generally speaking – favour narratives that have far more of an upbeat quality (Mundy and White 113). Throughout the *Steptoe* series there is, indeed, a distinctly dark undertow that will occasionally make audiences feel that the comic and the potentially tragic are being held in a precarious balance.

As often as not, these darker moments are evoked when the psychological or emotional pressures resulting from living with his father become too much for Harold and he begins to show signs of serious psychological disturbance. In 'Divided We Stand' (Series Seven), for instance, the constant bickering with his father finally becomes too much for Harold. Driven to the point of desperation, he comes up with a hare-brained scheme to divide the available living space into distinct father and son territory. Nowhere in the whole of the *Steptoe* series is the bleakness of Harold's entrapment more poignantly expressed than here, to the extent that the episode acquires distinctly tragic overtones. However, the inevitable return to the status quo comes when – in a rather melodramatic dénouement – a fire engulfs the whole property. The scene then rapidly switches to a hospital ward where father and son are being treated for injuries sustained during the attempt to rescue them from the fire. Reunited in this way (they are both seen occupying adjacent beds), it is not long before Harold and Albert resume their traditional skirmishing.

In 'Loathe Story' (Series Seven), by contrast, the love-hate relationship of father and son finds, if anything, even starker expression. Early on in this episode, there is a sequence in which Harold is presented experiencing a somnambulist episode. Clearly with murderous intent, he is seen approaching the sleeping figure of his father and is about to decapitate him with a meat cleaver. The act of patricide having been averted, Harold submits to a course of treatment from a psychiatrist. The sequence with the slightly crazed psychiatrist takes up most of the rest of the episode and includes some extended flashbacks in which Harold recalls earlier humiliating put-downs at the hands of his father. 'Loathe Story' is of particular significance in that the sequences where the psychiatrist and Harold discuss the latter's problems also present the scriptwriters with an opportunity to discourse on the possible reasons for Harold's aberrant behaviour. It comes as no surprise to learn that the most likely causes, as diagnosed by the psychiatrist, are his patient's sense of entrapment within a stifling home environment and his constant frustrations at always being subject to humiliation by a domineering father.

4 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life!'

Even though the humour expressed in *Steptoe and Son*, just as in several other British sitcoms of the period, frequently has a painful and uncomfortable edge to it (Goodwin and Whannel 129; Langford 21–23; Mills 41), these occasional socio-critical reflections on the darker aspects of life are never allowed to override the primary concern of such series – that of entertainment. With both *Hancock's Half Hour* and *Steptoe and Son*, there is always a sense in which it falls within the audience's 'horizon of expectations' that there will be a commingling of the serious and the comic, but that, just as assuredly, comedy will always prevail at the end of the day.

This will always mean that the plot in any sitcom episode will need to turn full circle to ensure that the status quo is regained.¹⁷ Hancock will suffer another ignominious defeat brought about by his posturing and pomposity, whilst Harold Steptoe will once again have to reluctantly concede that he and his father will probably go on living together and quarrelling with each other for as long as they have breath in their bodies.

The privileging of the comic over the tragic is closely connected to the way in which the sitcom narrative is structured according to well-established generic criteria. *Hancock's Half Hour* and *Steptoe and Son* are thus equipped with a series of generic markers that clearly identify them as having sitcom status. In the case of *Hancock's Half Hour*, for instance, it is the opening credits sequence, with its tuba-based signature tune and the voice of Hancock announcing, with a slight stammer, 'H-H-Hancock's Half Hour' that prepares viewers for another laughter-filled episode. With *Steptoe and Son*, on the other hand, it is the jaunty clip-clopping signature tune accompanying shots of Harold driving his horse and cart that are used to cue the audience for yet another attempt by Harold to liberate himself from his imprisoned state.

An important role in signalling the sitcom status of the work is also played by the laughter track, a standard feature of most sitcoms of the period. With both *Hancock's Half Hour* and *Steptoe and Son*, the laughter track is produced by having the actors perform before an invited studio audience. For both radio and TV audiences, this not only created the impression that they were witnessing a live performance, but also provided a set of helpful indicators or cues as to when and possibly to what degree it was permissible to laugh. This 'cueing for laughter' is especially important in a sitcom like *Steptoe and Son* where there is always a somewhat precarious balance between the comic and the potentially tragic. As Mills has commented:

Sitcom can be most usefully defined as *a form of programming which foregrounds its comic intent*; these characteristics are so aligned with the genre that when other programming signals its desire to be read comedically it often becomes defined as a sitcom hybrid. (Mills 49)

An additional function of the laughter track is that it implicitly carries with it a reminder that an audience's readiness to laugh at certain situations or people is something that binds us to the larger cultural community to which we belong.¹⁸ Our readiness to laugh when Harold suffers an embarrassing knock-back resulting from another failed attempt to rise above his present lowly station may, for some members of the audience, bring uncomfortable reminders of moments of frustration in their own lives when they have experienced similar 'put-downs'. It is, arguably, the capacity of *Steptoe and Son* to evoke this empathic and knowing response that goes some way towards explaining the astonishing success that the series enjoyed. In other words, there will have been many in the audience who recognised in Harold elements of their own experience of living in a society where the relative lack of social mobility was still a contentious issue at a time where class-bound attitudes still prevailed (Bowes 129–130). To be able to laugh at the way in which two wonderful comedy creations – a loveable rogue of a father and his aspirational but slightly less intelligent son – coped with the business of scraping a living and getting on with each other could therefore be decidedly cathartic.

All in all, then, *Steptoe and Son* remains one of the most fondly remembered sitcoms of British broadcasting history. Not only are its two leading characters firmly lodged in the collective memory of succeeding generations of viewers; the show itself has also had a significant impact on the further course of TV sitcoms. When, for instance, on the occasion of the show's fiftieth anniversary, a group of scriptwriters joined Galton and Simpson to discuss the legacy and comedic influence of *Steptoe*, all were agreed that the series had 'set the gold standard for future generations of British sitcom scriptwriters' (Jackson).

Notes

1. Viewing figures for *Steptoe and Son* were generally very high. The opening episode of Series Six, 'Robbery with Violence', for instance, was watched by 7.6 million households, an estimated 28 million viewers.
2. The radio version of *Hancock* continued running till December 1959, while the television version ran from July 1956 until June 1961. For more on the relationship between sitcom and developments in broadcasting, see Mills 14–19.
3. For more on the shift of *Hancock's Half Hour* from radio to television, see Ross 11–14.
4. The fact that viewers had quickly become acquainted with the show's central core of characters and all their quirks and idiosyncrasies meant that Galton and Simpson were able to play off familiar characters one against the other, thus avoiding the need to insert new characters into the narrative.
5. Jeremy Tunstall makes the point that: 'The big successes of British [TV] comedy have focused on the oddball and zany, and on working-class loners, misfits and bigots' (126).
6. Some critics, including Rolinson, consider *Steptoe and Son* to be an example of how key discourses of masculinity are explored in sitcoms of the period.

7. One episode, for instance, refers to the re-introduction of petrol rationing at the time of the Suez Crisis; another makes reference to industrial action on the railways during the 1960s.
8. For more on the circumstances surrounding Galton and Simpson's break with *Hancock* and the genesis of *Steptoe and Son*, see Ross 7–56.
9. In some ways *Steptoe and Son* could be seen to reflect some of the inter-generational tensions that were discernible in post-war British society. The same tensions arguably led to cultural manifestations such as rock 'n' roll or the group of playwrights and novelists known as the 'angry young men'.
10. There was a break in the production of *Steptoe and Son* between November 1965 and March 1970.
11. For more on the idea of a shared living and working space, see Eaton 37–38.
12. The episodes that best illustrate Harold's aspirational yearnings are 'The Piano' (Series One), 'The Diploma' (Series One), 'Is That Your Horse Outside?' (Series Two), 'Homes Fit for Heroes' (Series Three), 'A Box in Town' (Series Four) and 'Without Prejudice' (Series Five).
13. Their home also includes the stable occupied by the horse that draws the cart used in their collecting activities.
14. Analogies can be made in this respect between *Steptoe and Son* and many of the social-realist kitchen-sink dramas such as John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) and novels like Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), adapted into the 1960 film by Karel Reisz starring Albert Finney as Arthur Seaton.
15. For more on the cyclical structure of sitcoms, see Langford 17–21.
16. Scriptwriters Galton and Simpson had various run-ins with the BBC during the time they were producing *Steptoe and Son* scripts regarding how much 'colourful' language they could employ. By the same token, throughout the *Steptoe and Son* series, Harold is constantly embarrassed by his father's complete lack of social graces, as well as by the gritty 'earthiness' of his language. Harold's exasperated exclamation of 'You dirty old man!' has become one of the best-known catchphrases of the whole *Steptoe and Son* series.
17. For more on the narrative structure of sitcoms, see Feuer 138–160. Insofar as the status quo never appears to be seriously challenged in most sitcoms, the majority of them seem to have an inherently conservative thrust (for more on this, see Neale and Krutnik 281–289).
18. For more on issues relating to the politics of humour and issues of cultural identity, see Medhurst 9–38.

Filmography

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The Tony Hancock Collection. Directed by Duncan Wood, written by Ray Galton and Alan Simpson. London: BBC, 2007. DVD.

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3

'Your Little Game': Myth and War in *Dad's Army*

Bernd Lenz

1 Introduction

In the annals of British television, no finer example of classic comedy exists than in the shape of *Dad's Army*, the Home Guard-based sitcom written by veteran writers Jimmy Perry and David Croft. ... they'll forever be remembered for their brilliant wartime comedy spotlighting the antics of the Walmington-on-Sea Home Guard, led by the irascible and pompous Captain Mainwaring. (Webber, *The Best of British Comedy* 1)

In retrospect, many critics pay tribute to *Dad's Army*, one of Britain's most popular 'classic' sitcoms, brilliantly scripted for a half-hour format by Jimmy Perry and David Croft, who both had served either in the Home Guard or in the Royal Artillery. *Dad's Army*, which was only intended as a six-episode series in 1968, ultimately developed into nine complete series, totalling 80 episodes (the last 68 in colour) and three Christmas Specials when it concluded in 1977. Initially, the results of an audience survey were rather disappointing (Webber, *The Best of British Comedy* 8), but viewing figures increased from 8.2 million (Series One) to 18 million (Series Five), reaching their peak in 1972 and averaging more than 12 million viewers per week over the span of the programme (Cullen 201).¹

The show's long-term success is corroborated by numerous reworkings and other cultural manifestations: radio adaptations of the television episodes, a film² and a stage version, regular BBC2 repeats, video and audio cassettes, the official *Dad's Army* Appreciation Society (DAAS),³ etc. In addition, *Dad's Army* has received many awards, for example, for the Best Light Entertainment Production and Direction or for the best comedy script (McCann, *Dad's Army* 100). According to a 1993 survey, *Dad's Army* was 'the most popular television comedy show of the past two decades' (Richards 353); in 2004, it ended up in fourth place in a BBC poll for Britain's best sitcom and, on the occasion of its fortieth anniversary in 2008, BBC1 celebrated the show with a one-hour TV special, looking back at four decades

of a much-loved sitcom and reuniting surviving members of the cast and crew. In the meantime, the name 'Dad's Army' has even become an endearing synonym for its historical counterpart, the Home Guard.⁴

Dad's Army has undoubtedly maintained its popularity throughout the decades and has carved out its own prominent place within the history of British sitcom. Apart from popular catchphrases and intertextual references,⁵ its impact can be most noticeably traced in two respects. 'One of the qualities of *Dad's Army* is its timeless humour making for good clean family viewing' (Webber, *Complete A-Z* 95). The show was also visible proof of the BBC's leading principle defined as 'best possible entertainment by the best possible entertainers' (McCann, *Dad's Army* 189). Thus, by being accessible to all ages, the sitcom assured both ideal family entertainment and long-standing success.⁶ In addition, war gradually became a respectable topic for sitcoms,⁷ even allowing the exploration of serious wartime issues such as conscientious objection ('Branded'; Series Three, Episode Eleven). *Dad's Army* therefore paved the way for later British war sitcoms like 'Allo 'Allo (1982–1992), the fourth series of *Blackadder* (*Blackadder Goes Forth*, 1989), the Sky1 series *Chickens* (2013) and the BBC military sitcom *Bluestone 42* (2013–2015).⁸

If, arguably, *Dad's Army* is a comedy masterpiece, the importance it attaches to historical veracity may still be questioned: 'Critics of *Dad's Army* claim it is a mythic rather than a realistic picture of wartime Britain. But that is not how its millions of fans would see it' (Richards 364). Rather, they regard it as 'a reasonably accurate portrayal of the Home Guard' (Cullen 201). This debate on *Dad's Army's* mythic or truthful representation of war is mirrored by a similar controversy among historians on popular myths about the Second World War: 'Much of what is written or said about the Home Front in the Second World War is myth rather than history' (Marwick 10). Sceptical historians have questioned widespread assumptions about this war – for example, 'the myths about national unity and heroism in the Blitz' – although other historians point out 'that there is some truth in the myths' (Marwick 11). Therefore, instead of focusing on the intricate entanglement of myth and reality, it might be more worthwhile to slightly shift the perspective and approach the representation of war from the angle of social history and popular memory, as Bill Cotton's statement, once Head of Variety at BBC, suggests:⁹

Dad's Army is, in my opinion, a wonderful document of social history – it captures so much of the atmosphere of the Second World War. I am positive that in a hundred years' time people will be watching it to get a feel of the period, probably in preference to the mass of factual material that will be available. (Quoted in Pertwee 12)

Thus, although *Dad's Army* may be ill-suited to provide critical insight into the reality of the Second World War,¹⁰ it can be used to scrutinise popular

wartime memories. While the First World War entered popular memory as the Great War, the Second World War 'remains predominantly a memory of national unity in a time of adversity' (Noakes, *War and the British* 23). This idea of a 'People's War' was first evoked by Churchill at a time when shared values and national identity were myths rather than realities.¹¹ As a medium of popular culture, *Dad's Army* reflects Britain at its best and contributes to preserving the memory of unity during a key period in British history.

Another more sitcom-specific question is to what extent a gruesome topic like war can become a meaningful target for comedy. Unlike Joan Littlewood and Theatre Workshop's *Oh What a Lovely War!* (1963),¹² whose very title signals an ironically distanced view of war, *Dad's Army's* comic potential is not derived from the war itself, but from the particular circumstances and happenings of a single Home Guard unit, consisting of 'a group of bumbling old men ... in an out-of-season seaside resort' (Richards 353).

Therefore, following on from the theoretical reflections, this chapter aims to, first, discuss the historical background and the media context, then, second, it examines how *Dad's Army* resorts to prevalent assumptions about wartime Britain, using Churchill's coalition government and his speeches as historical references. Finally, it analyses how hardly compatible topics like war and comedy are ultimately reconciled in this sitcom.

2 Text and context: the Home Guard

By 1968, when *Dad's Army* was originally launched, many British people had almost forgotten or, if they were younger, did not know at all what the Home Guard was. The new sitcom was an innovative, then unheard-of experiment, although humorous films about the Second World War, such as *Whisky Galore!* (1949), may have served as a model for *Dad's Army* (Richards 360). However, not all BBC officials appreciated the use of the Home Guard as a topic for BBC comedy. On reading the first script, the immediate reaction of Tom Sloan, the BBC's Head of Light Entertainment, was: 'Were we making mock of Britain's Finest Hour?' (quoted in McCann, *Dad's Army* 46–47).¹³ And Paul Fox, in his function of Controller of BBC1, was equally outspoken: 'I felt slightly uneasy about this series, as you know, when it was first discussed. After what I have seen so far, I think one must be allowed to wonder whether "Dad's Army" does indeed "advance Comedy's output into new areas". Is this really breakthrough territory?' (BBC Archive). One of the fiercest defenders of the sitcom was Michael Mills, Head of BBC Comedy, who, after an argument about the opening and closing titles of *Dad's Army*,¹⁴ strongly justified 'the first "new-look" programme of BBC-1':

The whole object of this comedy series is to contrast the pathetic, comic, but valorous nature of the Home Guard, who believed at the time that this (the Nazi hordes) was what they were up against. It seems to me not

only right but essential that this fact is brought home to the viewers – and it is, surely, our justification for doing a comedy programme on this subject. (BBC Archive)

One of the major difficulties of the series was, then, the tightrope walk between not belittling the feats of – supposed – war heroes and exploring the comic possibilities of a platoon who are constantly practising and preparing for an invasion which never occurs.

The Home Guard,¹⁵ originally called the Local Defence Volunteers, was formed on 14 May 1940 by the then Secretary of State for War, Anthony Eden, and firmly backed by Prime Minister Winston Churchill. A few months later, Churchill suggested the more appropriate name 'Home Guard', which was subsequently accepted as the official term. Outside the scope for call-up, that is, either too old or 'unfit', aged from 17 to 65 (hence the nickname 'Dad's Army'), they volunteered to serve as unpaid, part-time soldiers acting upon Churchill's maxim: 'we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be' (Churchill, *Speeches* 165).¹⁶ Therefore, it was their principal function to hold up the enemy in the event of an invasion. The government's expectation of 150,000 volunteers was surpassed within 24 hours; at its peak, nearly two million men had signed up. Because of this huge number, the Home Guard at first had to cope with a shortage of uniforms and arms, using shot-guns, umbrellas and broomsticks as makeshift weapons (which accounts for the sobriquet 'broomstick army'). However, as the years passed, the Home Guard gained public recognition 'more as a key contributor to civil defence ... than as a bona fide anti-invasion force' (McCann, 'Home Guard'). But when in the second half of the war the threat of a German invasion diminished, the Home Guard seemed no longer necessary and was disbanded on 3 December 1944. Once again, King George VI recalled the mortal danger the country had been in when the Home Guard was founded in 1940 and praised its merits in his farewell address: 'History will say that your share in the greatest of all our struggles for freedom was a vitally important one' (quoted in McCann, *Dad's Army* 33).

3 Darkest and finest hours: the use of history¹⁷

The start of a series has to fulfil the particular function of introducing the audience to characters, time, theme and setting. Although it is, therefore, slightly untypical of the comedy in general, an analysis of the very first episode, 'The Man and the Hour', may help to see how the principal problems of combining history, war and comedy are approached. The series opens – atypically – in 1968, the first audience's present day, in the fictional south coast seaside town of Walmington-on-Sea, the setting of the sitcom. This short frame introduces the by then aged main characters, headed by Captain Mainwaring (Arthur Lowe) and Sergeant Wilson (John Le Mesurier),¹⁸ and

gives Mainwaring the opportunity of linking past and present: the launching of the 1968 'I'm Backing Britain Campaign' provides the cue for wartime memories when 'we ALL backed Britain' in 'the darkest hour in our history'.¹⁹ Mainwaring's introductory speech has a truly Churchillian ring: 'The odds were absurdly against us, but, young and old, we stood there, defiant, determined to survive, to recover and, finally, to win. News was desperate, but our spirits were always high.'²⁰

After this framing prelude, the second element, an identifying feature of all episodes, is the theme song 'Who Do You Think You are Kidding Mr Hitler?':

Who do you think you are kidding, Mr Hitler
If you think we're on the run?
We are the boys who will stop your little game.
We are the boys who will make you think again.
'Cause who do you think you are kidding, Mr Hitler
If you think old England's done?

The opening sequence – first in black-and-white, later in colour – presents the viewer with a battle of icons: on an animated map of Western Europe, three Union Jack arrows represent the progression of the British forces into France and Germany, but these arrows are then 'on the run', pushed back to the coast of England by three arrows with Nazi swastikas. This symbolises the imminent threat of a German invasion, the central idea of the sitcom: false invasion alarms are a recurrent topic, as is the necessity of defending Britain, this beautiful and splendid island.²¹ However, the euphemistic metaphors of the theme song belittle the monstrosity and brutality of war: 'your little game' (war), 'we are the boys' (soldiers) or 'kidding' (invading, fighting) evoke the metaphorical notion of war as a Great Game, a sports competition between nations as in Henry Newbolt's heroic poem 'Vitai Lampada' (1892): 'Play up! Play up! And play the game!'²²

The light-hearted and enticing music of the theme song led many people to believe it was a real wartime song, composed to entertain the population and to confirm their patriotic sentiments. In reality, it was a superb pastiche²³ and the only song that was specifically written for the show. By contrast, brief clips of authentic popular war tunes serve to link the various scenes of an episode. The elaborate arrangement of the opening title and the theme song undoubtedly set the tone for the whole sitcom.

Only the final part of the prologue begins to introduce the idea of comedy. Although the series starts off like a newsreel with German tanks and planes in action, the cruelty of war smoothly transforms into its comic representation, showing the discrepancy between serious ends (fighting the enemy) and comic means (changing the direction of a road sign to mislead the enemy). Only after this sequence does the real story begin.

The idea of starting the sitcom with the birth of the Walmington-on-Sea Home Guard is ingenious since the recruitment of volunteers provides the opportunity of briefly introducing the main characters, using their individuality for comic intermezzos, as well as establishing historical background. The choice of characters, a modest microcosm of small town society, is based on several antagonisms which again guarantee comic effects: class (pompous, middle-class Mainwaring versus intelligent, 'aristocratic' Wilson); generation (80-year-old Private Godfrey and 70-year-old Lance Corporal Jones²⁴ versus dim-witted teenager Frank Pike); nationality (England-minded, patriotic Mainwaring versus true Scotsman Private Frazer and, later, the pushy Welsh photographer Mr Cheeseman); and gender (an all-male Home Guard, occasionally resembling a group of adolescent boys versus supportive, but sometimes rebellious, women).²⁵

Two examples may suffice to demonstrate the use of character comedy in this episode. Mainwaring, self-appointed captain of the platoon and as such in a superior position, is often outwitted by his intellectually dominant platoon sergeant, Wilson ('MAINWARING: I was a commissioned officer, Wilson, and I served in France ... during the whole of 1919. / WILSON: Yes, but the war ended in 1918 I thought, sir? / MAINWARING: Somebody had to clear up the mess!'). Private Pike, a mummy's boy, whose worldview is shaped by comics and movies, is continually humbled by Mainwaring ('You stupid boy') and bossed about by his mother ('MAVIS: Frank! It's your bedtime! / PIKE: I can't come now, Mum, I'm blowing up a tank! / MAVIS: Yes, well, you'll just have to blow it up tomorrow!').

Another comic effect results from the above-mentioned poor equipment of the Home Guard when the newly recruited volunteers are trained to use 'weapons' such as pouches of pepper, pikes and pitchforks in their fight against the Germans. What seems ridiculous at first glance often corresponds, surprisingly, with historical reality (Webber, *Dad's Army* 13): covering the years between 1940 and 1942, *Dad's Army* tells the story of Britain suffering badly from the shortages and hardships of war. A significant and not to be underestimated element is therefore the attempt to integrate the gloomy side of war; beneath the surface of comedy lie the hidden emotions of a nation in panic, which are – for comedy's sake – superseded by spivs, intrigues, love affairs and human eccentricities.

The sitcom's connection with history is maintained throughout the nine series, but perhaps most explicitly in the first episode. According to a dated memo on Mainwaring's desk, *Dad's Army* begins on Tuesday 14 May, when indeed the Local Defence Volunteers was formed. In an authentic radio broadcast, to which Mainwaring, Wilson and Pike are listening at their local bank, Anthony Eden announces the formation of the new force, asking British subjects to join. The start of the sitcom is thus firmly linked with the establishment of the Home Guard.

The key figure in knitting history and comedy together is Winston Churchill, who is omnipresent: either visible or, if invisible, as an encouraging leader in the background. He first appears in a newsreel sequence accompanied by a commenting voiceover: 'Is Tommy Atkins downhearted? We'll say he's not! Why should he be with a leader like this?' In addition, 14 May is the day after Churchill, as the new Prime Minister, made his warmongering speech 'Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat' to the House of Commons. This emphasis on historical accuracy, pretending to be authentic and conjuring up Churchill's power of endurance, occurs again at the end of the first episode when Mainwaring, addressing his soldiers, sums up the difficulties of setting up the platoon in both a comic and serious way:

Well, we're making progress. A short time ago we were just an undisciplined mob. Now, we can deal with tanks. We can kill with pikes, we can make them all sneeze with our pepper – and after all the Hun is a very poor fighter with his head buried in a handkerchief! But remember, men, we have one *invaluable* weapon on our side: we have an unbreakable spirit to win! A bulldog tenacity that will help us to hang on while there's breath left in our bodies.

The historical reality, with Churchill as figurehead ('unbreakable spirit to win', 'bulldog tenacity'), resembles to a great extent the mindset of the first episode. Churchill, who always held the real-life Home Guard in high esteem,²⁶ even visits the fictional Home Guard unit in the final episode of Series One (Episode Six, 'Shooting Pains'). On this occasion, a highly patriotic song, which became very popular at the outbreak of the Second World War, recalls the myth of Britain's unbreakable spirit: 'There'll Always Be an England.'

It may come as a surprise, given the emphasis on historical correctness in the first episode, that some critics, especially Home Guard veterans, argued 'that the BBC TV comedy series *Dad's Army* had, unfortunately, helped sustain a myth about the force' (Cullen 78). However, Cullen himself provides a convincing explanation for this incongruity: *Dad's Army*, despite its long run, concentrates more on the early stages of the Home Guard than the later years of increased competency and better equipment. Over the course of the series, however, 'the imperative was the comic situation, rather than accurate history' (Cullen 203).

"*Dad's Army*" became an instant classic with its gentle humour, nostalgia and pride in the men who gave their all for their country, whatever that all happened to be' (BBC Archive). It recounted the (mis)adventures of an extraordinary group of people who are not caricatures, because Croft and Perry focused on developing the show's characters over the course of the series and not reducing them to mere comedians. Since the majority of the main actors appeared in every episode,²⁷ the result was brilliant ensemble playing

and team interaction. The show remained lively and hilarious until the very last episode, 'Never Too Old' (Series Nine, Episode Six, 13 November 1977), which does not return to the present day like the first episode, but concludes with the threat of another German invasion in 1942 – again a false alarm. The series fittingly ends with all the remaining main cast members toasting the audience and making their dedication towards the camera: 'To Britain's Home Guard.'

4 Sitcom and war

The BBC press release, announcing the start of the new comedy, promised that 'although *Dad's Army* is set very firmly in wartime – the fun itself is timeless' (BBC Archive). This is true, partly. A dialogue like the following can be found in any sitcom:

MAINWARING: Occupation?

FRAZER: I keep a philatelist's shop.

MAINWARING: How do you spell that?

FRAZER: S-H-O-P.

MAINWARING: S-H... Thank you very much. (Series One, Episode One)

Like a true comedy, *Dad's Army* abounds in all kinds of humour: verbal punning, misunderstandings, slapstick and physical humour: 'the writers Jimmy Perry and David Croft, with consistent inventiveness and ingenuity, combined character comedy, verbal routines, broad farce and satire, literally something for everyone' (Richards 353).²⁸ These comic strategies and archetypal elements, especially the interplay between characters like Mainwaring and Wilson, make all episodes sparkling and funny.

However, considering the synthesis of war and comedy, it is essential that the comic effects are not simply timeless, but gain their deeper meaning from the realm of war, soldiery and battles, which is primarily – as in *Dad's Army* – a masculine sphere.²⁹ In the following, a few characteristic examples will be analysed which illustrate how *Dad's Army* tries to connect war and comedy.

After the regular opening title, but before the actual storyline begins, 'Shooting Pains' (Series One, Episode Six) shows images of the ongoing war and the practising Home Guard volunteers. A voiceover comments on the current state of war and the improving performance of the Home Guard:³⁰

Britain's citizen army, the Home Guard, jeeringly referred to as 'The Broomstick Army' by Dr Goebbels, is now fully armed. [Some of the soldiers are shown piercing a sandbag with the bayonet of their rifles] And if Mr Hitler does put his foot on our doorstep, the so-called 'Broomstick Army' will soon make a clean sweep of him! [Jones's bayonet gets stuck in the sandbag;

he is baffled, pulls it out and says 'Ooh!'] These men never spare themselves. [Private Walker whistles to his girlfriend, who appears upstairs at a window throwing down the front-door key] Day and night, every moment of spare time away from their civilian jobs is taken up with this one thought – in the words of Herbert Morrison, 'Go to it!' [Walker 'goes to it', entering the house for an amorous adventure] Loss of sleep is no obstacle to these men. After being put up all nights on manoeuvres, they straight go to their offices and factories, with no time whatever for any other activities. [Walker leaves the house wearily in the morning, looks guardedly around and disappears in the dawn] (Series One, Episode Six)

In this case, war and comedy are neatly interwoven, but are they really compatible? The comic effects result from the discrepancy between visual and verbal dimensions, with the pictures humorously deconstructing the ambiguity of the voiceover's heroic commentary on the war. If BBC1 controller Paul Fox was initially anxious that *Dad's Army* would mock Britain's wartime heroes, he may have meant such a scene. The audience may laugh at the Home Guard's chaotic 'achievements' or Private Walker's domestic act of bravery, but – simultaneously – such moments of satire interfere with British patriotism.³¹

Despite the ubiquity of war, the central joke of the whole sitcom is the lack of war essentials: the conspicuous absence of the enemy and the non-occurrence of the ever-feared invasion against which the activities of the Home Guard are pitted. Very rarely is the platoon faced with a real menace.³² In 'The Deadly Attachment' (Series Six, Episode One), the platoon finally encounters the enemy when they receive the order to guard some Nazi submariners. But the war with Germany is not seriously discussed; it only serves to superficially exploit national stereotypes ('bloody' Germans versus cheerful Britons) or to indulge in slapstick comedy. The Great Game turns into a farcical indoor war.

Since the real enemy hardly appears, it is replaced by an ersatz enemy, often represented by Air Raid Warden William Hodges, Mainwaring's 'bosom enemy', or, as in 'My British Buddy' (Series Six, Episode Two), by the American ally with whom Winston Churchill was about to establish a special relationship. The Americans, who in the meantime have joined the battle against Hitler, send a small advance party to Walmington-on-Sea and are given a treat in a traditional English pub. Although the method is basically the same as in 'The Deadly Attachment' – using national stereotypes as a means for comedy – this is one of the highlights of the whole sitcom. It is a brilliant mixture of subtle and slapstick comedy: wonderful phonetic puns (faucet, force it), linguistic misunderstandings (highball), meaningful references to America's unwillingness and reluctance to support Britain in both world wars (better late than never) and also broad physical comedy (the Colonel spits his beer and throws an unfortunate punch, which leads

to Mainwaring's black eye). But, again, despite the successful combination of war and comedy, war remains a mere pretext for comical purposes.

5 Conclusion

It has often been claimed that the sitcom's primary, if not sole, function is to entertain (Mills, *The Sitcom* 5). However, since *Dad's Army* has maintained a strong cultural position and still enjoys enormous popularity, it is not sufficient to simply dismiss it as an innocuous contribution to a 'pleasure-culture of war' (Dawson 233)³³ or as 'a form of escapism to a place where life seemed more gentle and relaxed' (Webber, *Complete A-Z* 8). Like many other sitcoms, *Dad's Army* provides insight into its culture's identity and ideology (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 9). Therefore, despite all affirmations that *Dad's Army* is first and foremost entertainment, the cultural and ideological implications must ultimately be considered. What, in Mills' words, can a show like *Dad's Army* 'tell us about the ideologies present in such programming' (Mills, *The Sitcom* 6)?

Jeffrey Richards attributes the continuing popularity of *Dad's Army* to what he calls the 'politics of nostalgia', 'a return to pre-existing ideas of national identity' (Richards 352), to Empire days and sentimental notions of Britishness.³⁴ The Second World War is traditionally memorised as a time of shared efforts and sacrifices, of common ideals and a justified struggle against the evildoers, above all Germany. The press release announcing BBC's new comedy in July 1968 already recalls 'that vintage spirit of Dunkirk' when 'Hitler was threatening to start an invasion of Britain', and particularly mentions the bravery of the Local Defence Volunteers who 'set about preparing themselves to fight to the finish' (BBC Archive). By assuming the Home Guard's historical function as bulwark against a German invasion, although in a comic representation, prevalent myths about Britain's national unity and its heroic role in the Second World War are confirmed. It was Winston Churchill who recurrently contended that Britain, at least for a certain time, had defended Western civilisation almost independently against Nazi Germany.³⁵ Immediately after the war, in his BBC speech 'Forward, Till the Whole Task Is Done', Churchill strikes a balance that confirms the above ideas:

the British Commonwealth and Empire stands [*sic*] more united and more effectively powerful than at any time in its long romantic history ... we only had to do our duty to win. We have played our part in all this process by which the evil-doers have been overthrown. (Churchill, *Speeches* 258, 262)

Mills has come to the following conclusion: 'The sitcom is both popular *and* niche, progressive *and* conservative, traditional *and* groundbreaking, serious

and funny, straightforward and complex' (*The Sitcom* 13). Seen in this way, *Dad's Army's* potential is rather limited and its ideological bias obvious: despite brilliant scripts and superb acting, it is, in essence, popular, conservative, traditional, funny and straightforward – nostalgic humour about a decisive period of Britain's history 'when the country was united against a common foe' (Webber, *Complete A–Z* 90), 'a restructuring of the past into an amalgam of myth, reality and ideal' (Richards 364).³⁶

The integral nature of the Second World War to British culture and national identity helps to explain *Dad's Army's* long-lasting success: 'The unity of the nation has become a thing of myth, a central theme of the popular memory of the war' (Noakes, *War* 23). Such a myth can easily resurge and serve as a safe refuge in times of crises and wars: the ultimate decline of the British Empire in the 1960s, the Falklands War in 1982 and the Gulf Wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are occasions when the memory of previous world wars, especially the unity of the nation, contributes to improving Britain's tarnished self-image and self-confidence. After all, *Dad's Army's* rather simplistic message implies that what Britain in fact needs are leaders like Churchill and the Home Guard's pragmatic spirit of 'muddling through'.

Notes

1. For detailed audience figures and audience report extracts, see Webber, *Complete A–Z* 17–19.
2. *Dad's Army* (1971), directed by Norman Cohen. Remoulding successful TV series into feature films is quite common, but neither Perry and Croft, the original scriptwriters who also scripted the big-screen version, nor the cast were happy about the cinematic changes, which met with mixed reviews (Webber, *Complete A–Z* 71).
3. This Society is dedicated to commemorating the sitcom; it accumulates video and audio material, set up the Dad's Army Collection and even created its own Dad's Army Museum (www.dadsarmy.co.uk).
4. 'The term "Dad's Army", which was not used during the war, has a high recognition value' (Cullen 201). This is confirmed by books like Cullen's *In Search of the Real Dad's Army* or Scott's *The Real 'Dad's Army'*.
5. See the examples listed under 'cultural influence' (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dad's_Army).
6. A BBC report acknowledged that *Dad's Army* 'had been an entertaining, warm-hearted series, one that the whole family could watch and enjoy' (quoted in McCann, *Dad's Army* 113).
7. In this respect, first reactions to *Dad's Army* were rather hostile: 'Don't the authors know the war's over?' (quoted in Webber, *Dad's Army* 26).
8. See also related sitcoms or series like *The Army Game* (1957–1961), which centred on post-war conscription, or *Secret Army* (1977–1979) and *No Bananas* (1996), two television drama series on the Second World War.
9. For the interrelated areas of war, memory and popular culture, which have been thoroughly investigated in recent years, see Evans and Lunn; Keren and Herwig;

Meyer; Noakes and Pattinson; and Paris. In her review of Paris' study, Lucy Noakes draws attention to the inextricable link between war and masculinity, referring to Paris' main argument 'that the ongoing representation of war as an exciting adventure has helped both to legitimate war as a means of settling international disputes; and to ensure the longevity of a militarised masculinity as an important model of British masculine identity' (Noakes, 'Review').

10. Considering the sitcom in general, Mills comes to a similar conclusion: it is 'a highly problematic genre, whose social consequences are negative and whose radical potential is muted' (Mills, *The Sitcom* 23).
11. Churchill's national government was a major factor in shaping such a national consensus. Churchill himself said on 20 August 1940: 'There is another more obvious difference from 1914. The whole of the warring nations are engaged, not only soldiers, but the entire population, men, women and children. The fronts are everywhere ... If it is a case of the whole nation fighting and suffering together, that ought to suit us, because we are the most united of all the nations' (Churchill, *Speeches* 181)
12. *Oh, What a Lovely War!* is both an entertaining and critical anti-war play about the First World War, one of Littlewood's great successes in the 1960s. It presents war in a series of comedic and musical sketches, revealing the horrifying but also farcical face of war.
13. For the term 'Finest Hour', see section 3 of this chapter. Bill Cotton, Sloan's successor at the BBC, remembered later: 'When David Croft told me he wanted to do a comedy about the Home Guard I told him that he was out of his head' (quoted in Pertwee 12).
14. Two alterations were required: '1. The shots (2) of refugees in the opening titles will be replaced. 2. The shots of Nazi troops (with the captions and the artists super-imposed) will be replaced by something entirely innocuous' (BBC Archive). Mills expressed his 'profound disquiet', but had to comply with the decision.
15. For the history of the Home Guard, see Carroll; Cullen; McCann, *Dad's Army* 13–34; McCann, 'Home Guard'; and Webber, *Complete A–Z* 97–98.
16. In this speech, Churchill expressed the same idea with almost identical words earlier on: 'we shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our island home' (*Speeches* 164–165) After the Dunkirk experience, defending the island against the imminent threat of invasion appeared as writing on the wall in several of Churchill's speeches; see, for example, 'Give Us the Tools', 9 February 1941 (*Speeches* 201–213).
17. The terms 'darkest hour' and 'finest hour' were both used by Churchill in his speech to the House of Commons on 18 June 1940. The Battle of France was over, described by Churchill as 'the darkest hour in French history' (Churchill, *Speeches* 177), but the Battle of Britain and the threat of invasion were looming large, which prompted him to one of his most famous perorations: 'Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, "This was their finest hour"' (178). When the war was over, on 13 May 1945, Churchill applied the first phrase to British history as well, speaking of 'our darkest hour ... we had in the Island' (260).
18. Other characters include Lance Corporal Jack Jones (Clive Dunn), Private James Frazier (John Laurie), Private Charles Godfrey (Arnold Ridley), Private Joe Walker (James Beck), Private Frank Pike (Ian Lavender) and ARP (Air Raid Precautions) Warden Hodges (Bill Pertwee).
19. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in this part are from Series One, Episode One.

20. Only a few days before the Home Guard was formed, the same mentality was expressed by Churchill in his famous speech to the House of Commons, 'Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat' (13 May 1940): 'You ask, What is our aim? I can answer in one word: Victory – victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival' (*Speeches* 149).
21. The island topos is an essential part of Churchill's speeches, often used in connection with the danger of Britain being invaded by Hitler.
22. Odone describes the first phase of the Gulf War in 2003 as 'pre-war comedy of terrors' and – quoting Newbolt's poem – attributes to the soldiers a 'Boy Scout Spirit' and 'the kind of stiff upper lip the rest of our culture seems to disdain' (Odone, 'Out There').
23. The theme song was written and composed by Jimmy Perry in collaboration with Derek Travenor. It was sung by Bud Flanagan, a 'music-hall veteran' (McCann, *Dad's Army* 72).
24. The age range ran from 17 to 65, but, at first, the age limit was not strictly enforced, so that even overaged soldiers were admitted to the Home Guard.
25. The question of gender is also historically correct. Since the nature of warfare was considered to be masculine, women were not admitted to the Home Guard, but they had organisations of their own, for example, the Women's Land Army and the Auxiliary Territorial Service (Carroll 86; Marwick 137–138; Noakes, *Women* 1–19). In *Dad's Army*, women act, stereotypically, as mothers, girlfriends or lovers; there is even one episode entitled 'Mum's Army' (Series Four, Episode Nine), but Mainwaring's idea of integrating women into the Home Guard is soon given up.
26. After the war, in his last speech as leader of the coalition government (13 May 1945), Churchill appreciated the merits of the Home Guard: 'Nearly one million of men, growing to two millions at the peak, although working all day, had been formed into the Home Guard. They were armed at least with rifles, and armed also with the spirit "Conquer or Die"' (Churchill, *Speeches* 261).
27. Arthur Lowe, John Le Mesurier, Clive Dunn, John Laurie, Arnold Ridley and Ian Lavender.
28. Richards sees *Dad's Army's* characters even in the tradition of Shakespeare and Dickens, whose 'great comic creations' also 'took on a life of their own' (Richards 355).
29. With regard to the wider cultural and political implications of warfare, Lucy Noakes has examined how key concepts like national identity, popular memory and gender have shaped wartime experiences (Noakes, *War*; Noakes, *Women*; Noakes and Pattinson). She has come to the conclusion that men in the armed forces are closely bound together by masculinity and common experience.
30. To illustrate the contrast between what is said and shown, I have added in brackets and italics what the viewer really sees.
31. A further example from the same episode is the cross-gender acting of Laura La Plaz, a crack shot who, disguised as a soldier, should help the platoon win a firing competition. While not very plausible, the storyline offers lots of laughs.
32. This is a major difference between sitcom and movie, in which Captain Mainwaring is confronted with the real enemy in the shape of three dangerous Germans. Another difference is that the film's verbal humour is often cruder, although the scriptwriters are the same. However, Captain Mainwaring's well-known line to Warden Hodges, 'I must ask you to keep your hands off my privates' (00:43:03–00:43:08), is really sublime comedy resulting from double entendre.

33. Dawson uses this term in his analysis of boyhood war fantasies which 'shed light on the general process of identification with soldier heroes and on its effects of imagined masculinities and their articulation to British national identity' (Dawson 240).
34. For a detailed discussion of Britishness and *Dad's Army*, see Richards (360–364). Noakes argues that: 'The continuing popularity with schedulers of television programmes such as *Dad's Army* and *No Bananas* illustrates that an audience still exists for drama and comedy focusing on the war years' (Noakes, *War* 104).
35. For example, in his wartime speeches such as the famous 'Wars are Not Won by Evacuations', 4 June 1940 (Churchill, *Speeches* 155–165); later, reviewing the war, he argued: 'After gallant France had been struck down we, from this Island and from our united Empire, maintained the struggle single-handed for a whole year' ('The End of War in Europe', 8 May 1945; Churchill, *Churchill Speaks* 860).
36. Richards mentions an interesting detail in regard to *Dad's Army's* long-term effect: 'Interestingly, sales of *Dad's Army* videos shot up around the fiftieth anniversary of VE Day when the media were saturated in images and memories of wartime Britain. A quarter of a million people converged on Buckingham Palace to salute the Queen Mother, the symbol of the "never say die" spirit of service and sacrifice that is seen to epitomize Britain at war' (Richards 364).

Filmography

Dad's Army: The Complete Collection Series 1–9 and the Christmas Specials. Directed by David Croft, Harold Snoad and Bob Spiers, written by Jim Perry and David Croft. London: BBC, 2007. DVD.

Dad's Army: The Movie. Directed by Norman Cohen, written by Jim Perry and David Croft. Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1971.

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4

‘The Struggle of Class against Class is a What Struggle?’ *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* and its Politics

Alexander Brock

1 Introduction

There is a general consensus that Monty Python’s feature film *Life of Brian* (1979) has strong satirical elements, and some targets of the satire are easily identified: left-wing political groups, religious fanatics, ‘trade-unionists and guerrilla organizations’ (Wilmot 250). At the same time, in spite of bans and protest by religious institutions in many countries, the Pythons insisted that the film was not directed against Jesus Christ or Christianity (Michael Palin, quoted in Morgan 248; Terry Jones, quoted in Chapman *et al.*, *Autobiography* 281). But to many, *Life of Brian* is still one of the most controversial films ever made about a religious topic. The apparent political slant of the film, its notoriety and the fact that it appeared some years after Monty Python’s TV output may lead to the generalisation that *all* of Python’s material was equally political. This assumption seems rash, and it appears useful to have a closer look at the question of how political the early Pythons were, specifically in the original TV series *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* (BBC1/BBC2 1969–1974), which ended five years before *Life of Brian* was released.

How political was *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*? Sketches like the ‘Upperclass Twit of the Year’, ‘Mrs Niggerbaiter Explodes’ or the ‘Party Political Broadcast’ immediately spring to mind, where a political dimension may be suspected. On the other hand, there are sketches like ‘The Fish-Slapping Dance’, which defy categorisation and seem extremely remote from any political agenda. Then there is the area of media politics, starting with the question of how provocative the TV show’s format really was at the time, for both the officials at the BBC and the TV audience. In this context, the issue also arises of how influential the Pythons were on subsequent comedians. In order to address the question of the politics of *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, not only must explicitly political contents of their shows be taken into account, but also the comedians’ backgrounds, the show in its historical media environment, its format and targets as well as the reactions of audience and critics. The following chapter is an attempt to do that,

even though space limitations allow only for a rough sketch of a complex situation.

2 The formation of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*

Out of the six members of the Python team, two studied at Oxford and three at Cambridge. John Cleese, Graham Chapman and Eric Idle made their way into television via the Cambridge Footlights, a Cambridge student theatre club, which produced a number of successful revues (Morgan 13–15). Terry Jones and Michael Palin participated in an Oxford revue and were later picked to write for *The Frost Report* (1966–1967),¹ a TV show hosted by David Frost, also a former Cambridge Footlights member. John Cleese, Graham Chapman and Eric Idle contributed material to *The Frost Report* as well. Immediately before *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Jones, Palin and Idle wrote for and acted in *Do Not Adjust Your Set* (1967–1969), nominally a children's programme, but enjoyed by adults as well. The American Terry Gilliam added some artwork to the programme. Cleese and Chapman were in *At Last the 1948 Show* (1967) together. Through common programmes like *The Frost Report* and noticing that *At Last the 1948 Show* and *Do Not Adjust Your Set* took a similar approach to comedy (John Cleese, quoted in Morgan 17–18), the Pythons got to know each other. The writer and producer Barry Took suggested a comedy show with the future Pythons to the BBC, who agreed to the project (Michael Palin, quoted in Morgan 28; Wilmot 195).

The fact that the Pythons almost exclusively came from an Oxbridge background seems significant here. A short glimpse at the list of famous actors, writers and comedians who emerged from the Cambridge Footlights alone – Salman Rushdie, Peter Shaffer, Peter Cook, Douglas Adams, Emma Thompson, Michael Frayn, Stephen Fry and more recently also Olivia Colman, David Mitchell and Robert Webb – shows that it was and apparently still is common practice to look for talent at Oxbridge. The recruitment of the Python members from this background is a political fact, as it favoured artists from a particular social group over others. This the audiences might have been aware of. If not, then the actors' accents were sufficient indication of their education.² The Pythons did not try to hide their background either, as becomes evident in sketches like the 'Summarize Proust Competition' (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 2: 105).³ There are two sides to this: on the one hand, one needs to know about Proust's lengthy style in order to understand why summarising him might be considered funny. This inside knowledge would have constructed a bond between the comedians and an intellectual audience. On the other hand, summarising an author's novels for a competition is a fairly irreverent way of handling an important writer. There are similar Python sketches where famous composers like Mozart and Beethoven are shown in everyday situations. This sort of treatment might have also appealed to audiences with a less intellectual attitude. Irrespective

of the fact that the Python members have fairly educated accents themselves, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* also occasionally ridicules posh accents, as the case of one Mr Anemone shows: '(imitation posh accent) "Oh, oh, no more buttered scones for me, mater. I'm off to play the grand piano"' (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 1: 207).

3 The format

Monty Python's Flying Circus consisted of 45 episodes of 30 minutes each in four series, originally broadcast between 1969 and 1974. In spite of some modifications, the format was basically a sketch show with links. These were sometimes provided by a man sitting at a desk in various locations, for example on a beach, who read out the lines 'and now for something completely different'. More often, however, there were links in the form of animated cartoons by Terry Gilliam. These often took some element from the previous sketch as their starting point, developed it into a mini-narrative and then led on to the next sketch. The connections occasionally followed an unexpected logic. This method of connecting sketches has often been referred to as a stream-of-consciousness approach (Wilmot 197). This impression was enhanced by the fact that many Python sketches did not end in a punchline, but were interrupted by links or simply petered out. In the late 1960s, such sketches were relatively uncommon, and after writing for *The Frost Report* (Johnson, *Life* 29), where they were expected to write punchlines (John Cleese quoted in Morgan 29), the Python members were relieved at having enough control over their material to do without them. This means that their humour became more processual and serial (Bergson 96) rather than concentrated in a single eruption of humour. Also, there was a certain amount of meta-humour involved, that is, humour that arises from breaking the conventions of humorous communication. The meta-humour was occasionally triggered by characters complaining about the poor quality of the lines written for them (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 2: 133), apologies for repetitiveness (1: 230) or extras who were not informed about the content of sketches they were supposed to act in (1: 195). A prominent example is an actor dressed as a bishop who appears repeatedly throughout a show, rehearsing his lines for one of the next programmes:

Pan away from the woodland clearing to an open field in which at a distance a bishop in full mitre and robes is pacing up and down holding a script. Mr Chigger in a suit approaches the bishop and we zoom in to hear their conversation.

Bishop: 'Oh Mr Belpit your legs are so swollen' ... swollen ... 'Oh Mr Belpit – oh Mr Belpit your legs are so swollen.' (Tries a different voice) 'Oh Mr Belpit...'

Mr Chigger: Excuse me, excuse me. I saw your advertisement for flying lessons and I'd like to make an application.

Bishop: Nothing to do with me. I'm not in this show. (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 1: 205) [EXT ENS]

The bishop appears again in the same show and interrupts another sketch (1: 217–218). Among the great variety of topics and settings – Attila the Hun, the First World War, a psychiatrist milkman – were numerous sketches which were set in a TV context, such as news programmes, chat-shows, documentaries, quiz shows, etc.

Another central aspect of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* is physical comedy. In the exaggerated presentation of human bodies, for example, the 'pepper-pots' – rotund elderly housewives in aprons, played by the Pythons themselves – or the long-limbed, rubbery John Cleese in 'The Ministry of Silly Walks' sketch, they continue the tradition of music hall, freak-shows and the comedy of the silent movies. This is best reflected in 'The Ministry of Silly Walks', where the minister (who has a silly walk, of course) presents an old film of 'silly walkers' to a newcomer. In the film, we see a sequence of people with uncommon walks: *'The film is old silent-movie type, scratchy, jerky and 8mm quality. All the participants wear 1900s type costume. One has huge shoes with soles a foot thick, one is a woman, one has very long "Little Tich" shoes'* (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 1: 184) The quotation of a (made-up) silent movie with silly walkers in a context where the Pythons themselves present silly walks can be read as a strong affirmation of a tradition which the Pythons continued.

In 'The Ministry of Silly Walks' physical humour is also present in the form of slapstick comedy, represented by the silly walks, cups falling over, etc. Another example of slapstick comedy is 'The Fish-Slapping Dance', which is described thus:

Cut to a quayside. John and Michael, dressed in tropical gear and solar topees. John stands still while Michael dances up and down before him to the jolly music of Edward German. Michael holds two tiny fish and from time to time in the course of the dance he slaps John lightly across the cheeks with them. The music ends; Michael stops dancing. John produces a huge great fish and swipes Michael with it. Michael falls off the quay into the water. (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 2: 70)

A great deal of the sketch's impact is created by the characters' strange costumes and exaggerated movements, including physical violence (but see section 4 below), much in the tradition of silent movie comedy by Laurel and Hardy, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton or Ben Turpin. In fact, the title of 'The Fish-Slapping Dance' sketch even bears an explicit reference to slapstick – a technique which the Pythons continued all through the *Flying Circus* ('Sam Peckinpah's Salad Days', 'Scott of the Sahara') and later in their feature films.

One important aspect of the format of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* is best explained with the help of the incongruity theory of humour, according to which humour arises from the introduction of an ill-fitting element into a horizon of expectation (Keith-Spiegel 7). An incongruity always has to be based on a specific expectation, such as the conventional meaning of a word, standard behaviour in society, etc. This expectation is called the 'Ansatzpunkt', the point of attack (Brock 213). In *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, any aspect of the ongoing communication seems to be a potential point of attack for incongruities: expectations about participants and contents of quiz shows (see the 'Communist Quiz' below), media of communication, for example, the 'Semaphore Version of Wuthering Heights' (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 1: 198), social taboos, for instance, the 'Undertaker Sketch' (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 2: 43), where an undertaker suggests eating a man's deceased mother as she looked 'quite young', etc. This construction of bizarre and far-fetched incongruities in *Monty Python's Flying Circus* almost appears like a game or competition among the Pythons and may have been motivated by the desire to be in full control over the show (Morgan 27), stopped by neither the BBC officials nor the audience's expectations of what a TV comedy should be like. The Pythons apparently wanted to remain unpredictable. The necessary result of 45 episodes of deliberate unpredictability was the odd passage of sheer genius in some Python programmes, but also some long-winded passages, which seem excessively laboured. The most damaging effect of ostensive unpredictability over a long period, however, eventually turned out to be the utter predictability of their unpredictability.

Lewisohn calls *Monty Python's Flying Circus* a 'series of crucial importance in the development of comedy ... on a global scale' and 'a show that seemed to break all the rules and then establish completely new ones' (Lewisohn 449). In view of the praise for the show, the question arises of how innovative the format of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* really was. John Cleese himself points out that the most influential shows are not always noticed sufficiently by the public and points out the importance of the *The Goon Show* (BBC Home Service 1951–1960), a radio comedy programme including Spike Milligan, Peter Sellers and Harry Secombe, for the format of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*: 'Milligan is the great God to all of us. *The Goon Show* influenced us enormously' (John Cleese, quoted in Margolis 116). Indeed, *The Goon Show* has many of the characteristics that Monty Python later became famous for: processual rather than punchline comedy, twisted logic, meta-humour and men speaking in silly, high-pitched voices. Milligan later beat the Pythons in establishing a TV comedy of a similar format without punchlines. The show was called *Q* and it premiered about half a year before *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Terry Jones comments: 'He did a show [where] one sketch would start and drift off into another sketch, things would drift into one another; he made it so clear that we'd been writing in clichés all this time' (quoted in Morgan 30; see also Wilmut 197). To be fair, it has to be said that *Q* came out

at a time when the Python members were already doing similar things in *Do Not Adjust Your Set* and *At Last the 1948 Show*. So the main influence on the Pythons still seems to be *The Goon Show*, but one should not forget comedians like the Marx Brothers or Buster Keaton, who served as role models at least for some Python members.

In view of all this, the format of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* was less original than it may seem, and shows like *Q*, *Do Not Adjust Your Set* and *At Last the 1948 Show* were simply unlucky not to have received the same attention as it. But the creative input of six established comedy writers and actors in *Monty Python* who had almost complete freedom to do what they wanted and a stretch of 45 episodes were an ideal basis to develop the format into their own original contribution to comedy history. Finally, if the Pythons were later considered a strong political force in the development of TV comedy formats, then their influence was slightly more due to the attention they received as an act perceived as innovative rather than to the actual creative impact they had as artists.

4 Targets: upperclass twits, village idiots and the BBC

Perhaps the most politically relevant aspect of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and indeed any other comedy show is what target(s) the humour is directed at. Initially, it was said that for *Life of Brian*, certain social and political groups can be readily identified as the butt of Python's humour. Very often, however, aggressions and their targets are more complex than that. Therefore, a glimpse at the categories of *aggression* or *superiority theory* (Zillmann) is in order.

Ever since antiquity, the view has been held that humour is based on an aggressive act against a person or group or on a feeling of superiority over them (Hobbes 20). The personnel of aggressive humour is often given as a triad of narrator/aggressor, victim and witness (Freud 90). In some cases, however, it is not easy to decide who the real target of a joke or sketch is. This becomes obvious in *Monty Python's* 'Dennis Moore' sketch. Moore is a dashing highwayman and the sketch opens with a shot where he holds up a coach, two pistols in his hands, shouting:

Stand and deliver! Drop that gun! (*The coach comes to a halt; the drivers hold up their hands but the postilion reaches for a gun; Moore shoots him*) Let that be a warning to you all. You move at your peril for I have two pistols here. (*Pause*) I know one of them isn't loaded anymore, but the other one is, so that's one of you dead for sure, or just about for sure anyway, it certainly wouldn't be worth your while risking it because I'm a very good shot, I practise every day, well, not absolutely every day, but most days in the week ... I expect I must practise four or five times a week, at least ... at least four or five, only some weekends ... like last weekend there wasn't much time so that moved the average down a bit ... but I should

say it's definitely a solid four days' practice every week ... at least. I mean, I reckon I could hit that tree over there ... the one behind that hillock, not the big hillock, the little hillock on the left. (*Heads are coming out of the coach and peering*) You can see the three trees, the third from the left and back a bit – that one – I reckon I could hit that four times out of five ... on a good day. Say with this wind ... say, say, seven times out of ten. (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 2: 195)

Who is the target of this sketch? Dennis Moore, a fictional character? Robin Hood, a folklore hero whom he resembles? Hero figures in general or the people who worship them? Or does Moore stand for authority figures, who are then pushed from their pedestals? Or, as the sketch bears some resemblance to some 'serious' Robin Hood films, TV or film versions based on the same material? Or is the sketch about pedants who lose sight of the important issues? Or about audiences who watch cloak-and-dagger films uncritically? Or about audiences who expect conventional contents in unconventional comedy shows? This seems impossible to decide.

Later, instead of jewellery and money, Moore demands all the lupins the passengers have got. When they actually produce them, we learn that we witness a world different from ours, where different values hold and targets may no longer be targets. This example shows that caution is required in analysing targets of humorous aggression and that multiple – direct and indirect – targets can often be assumed. Still, some targets can be made out quite easily, and a comparison with other sketches (many Python sketches target confused and pedantic authority figures) and statements by the Python members themselves may help in many cases. Finally, it seems likely that some sketches do not have a discernible target at all.

An example of such a 'targetless' sketch may be 'The Fish-Slapping Dance' sketch mentioned above. The end of the sketch bears a superficial resemblance to a comedy duo outdoing each other in a silent film of the Laurel and Hardy type, and the character impersonated by Michael Palin may appear to be the target of Cleese's aggressive fish attack. Yet the situation and the atmosphere of the sequence, brought about by the costumes, the music and Palin's strange dancing movements, are so strong and bizarre that this impression supersedes the one of the physical attack, which takes place only in the last three seconds of the sketch (Michael Palin, quoted in Johnson, *First 200 Years* 134–135). The character who falls into the water is subsequently swallowed by a big fish with a swastika drawn on its side, but the bluntness of this signals the absence of a (political) target. Here, the simple patterns of aggressor and target are either no longer applicable or do not matter. The same can be said of the bishop/actor mentioned above who keeps practising the lines 'Oh Mr Belpit your legs are so swollen'.

Who, then, are Monty Python's targets? Eric Idle points out in *Life of Python* (19.37–19.55) that their writing was directed at authoritarian figures

like teachers, army officers, judges and the like. Indeed, many sketches can be found in *Monty Python's Flying Circus* where doctors, judges and power figures in general act below expectation. The 'Dennis Moore' sketch is a case in point, where a supposedly superior highwayman gets constantly caught up in the details of shooting practise and plant taxonomy. A very similar case is 'The Spanish Inquisition' sketch, where Cardinal Ximenez loses count of the chief weapons of the Inquisition and thereby ruins the effect of his entrance:

Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition. Our chief weapon is surprise ... surprise and fear ... fear and surprise ... our two weapons are fear and surprise ... and ruthless efficiency. Our three weapons are fear and surprise and ruthless efficiency and an almost fanatical devotion to the Pope ... Our four ... no ... amongst our weapons ... amongst our weaponry are such elements as fear, surprise ... I'll come in again. (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 1: 192–193)

Another case is a court trial, where the judge has to guess the jury's verdict in a game of charades, gets it wrong and finds the defendant 'not gillcup' of the charges (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 1: 200–201).

In all of these cases, authority figures come across as fallible and weak. The question in the context of this chapter is just whether these sketches can be read as satirical and directed at a specific socio-political group. Here, I tend to agree with Terry Jones (*Life of Python*), who claims that Python's humour was not intended to satirise individuals in government or politics, but that the satire was situated at a general human level. Indeed, it seems that these sketches show the fallibility of humans in general, represented by incompetent judges, cardinals or highwaymen, rather than a satirical portrayal of the social groups of clergymen or highwaymen. This view is supported by the pains the Pythons took not to be accused of a genuine satirical attitude and hence seriousness. For instance, when in 'The Architects Sketch', a group of Freemasons are shown to manipulate the outcome of an architects' competition (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 1: 220–222), a superimposed caption with the word 'satire' starts flashing. With this, paradoxically, any hint of real satire is eradicated.

Now for a glimpse at some more immediately political contents of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. In the 'Upperclass Twit of the Year' sketch (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 1: 156–158), a competition among inbred, idiotic members of the upper class, the competitors miss the starting gun, fail to walk in a straight line 'without falling over', kick a beggar, run over an old woman and shoot a rabbit. Even though there is a real background to this sketch – John Cleese was annoyed about 'chinless wonders', that is, upper-class men, who slammed their car doors at night near his London flat (Johnson, *First 200 Years* 74) – the sketch in its extreme depiction of a social group cannot

be taken as satire. It seems more informed by the spirit of 'how far can we go', a parody of a social satire rather than satire itself. The sketch 'Today in Parliament' (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 1: 271) follows a similar logic. It exaggerates stereotypical portrayals of government members as sexually deviant, which again is a comment on stereotypes rather than the people portrayed. Neither the members of the upper class nor of Parliament are really targets of these sketches.

The opposite end of the social spectrum is focused on in the 'Village Idiot' sketch, which immediately follows 'Today in Parliament' in the programme. A village idiot – Figgis – is interviewed in a documentary style. He says in an educated voice:

Well I feel very keenly that the idiot *is* a part of the old village system, and as such has a vital role to play in a modern rural society, because you see ... (*suddenly switches to rural accent*) ooh ar ooh ar before the crops go gey are in the medley crun and the birds slides nightly on the oor ar ... (*vicar passes and gives him sixpence*) Ooh ar thankee, Vicar ... (*educated voice*) There is this very real need in society for someone whom almost anyone can look down on and ridicule. (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 1: 272)

Here, it is even more obvious than in the 'Upperclass Twit of the Year' or 'Today in Parliament' sketches that the target of this sketch is not a social class, but modern sociology, its jargon and maybe the style of certain TV documentary films.

In the 'Working-Class Playwright' sketch, a well-dressed young man with an educated accent comes back home to see his working-class parents after he has sought a different life. His father, who speaks with a heavy Yorkshire accent, criticises him for not continuing his parents' way of life. So far, everything seems to follow a regular kitchen-sink drama pattern. Then it turns out that the father is a famous playwright living in London and his son has started to work in Yorkshire as a coal-miner. The father says: 'Aye, 'ampstead wasn't good enough for you, was it? ... you had to go poncing off to Barnsley, you and yer coal-mining friends (*spits*)' (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 1: 23) This mismatch of careers, accents and outer appearance undermines any chance of a serious comment on social classes and the generation problem.

The Python sketch with the largest number of political figures is the 'Communist Quiz' sketch. Karl Marx, Lenin, Che Guevara and Mao Tse-tung are invited into a TV studio. Instead of a political discussion, the presenter starts a quiz game, asking them questions about football and the Eurovision Song Contest. When Karl Marx enters the 'special gift section' (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 2: 19), he is asked the following questions:

Presenter: ... The struggle of class against class is a what struggle? A what struggle?

Karl: A political struggle. (*Tumultuous applause*)

Presenter: Yes, yes! One final question Karl and the beautiful lounge suite will be yours ... Are you going to have a go? (*Karl nods*) You're a brave man. Karl Marx, your final question, who won the Cup Final in 1949?

Karl: The workers' control of the means of production? The struggle of the urban proletariat?

Presenter: No. It was in fact, Wolverhampton Wanderers who beat Leicester 3-1. (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 2: 20)

Rather than a political comment, this sketch is a study in Bergson's theory of humour, and the four communist leaders are not at all targets of humorous aggression; Bergson claims that the 'mechanical encrusted upon the living' (37) is the source of laughter.⁴ There are some aspects of the mechanical to be detected here, Karl Marx, for example, continues to quote elements from his own theory, even though the presenter has moved on to sports questions. The most obviously mechanical behaviour, however, is that of the TV presenter. Irrespective of the guests' status and background, he goes into his quiz entertainment routine with questions typical of such shows. This sketch not only illustrates Bergson's theory very aptly, but it also mirrors Neil Postman's claim that we live in the 'age of show business' (Postman 85), where even politics is presented in and affected by a context of entertainment (89).⁵ This example and a number of others suggest a target for Python's humour that seems to be present in many cases: the TV and film industry and specifically the BBC.

The discussion so far has shown that humorous aggressions against political figures, celebrities and social classes in *Monty Python's Flying Circus* are often neutralised or at least mitigated by various techniques, so that they result in statements about the human condition rather than political positions. However, aggressive comments against the TV industry and the BBC are frequent and often unmitigated. In one programme, a fictitious BBC employee is asked about his job:

Reg: You do a lot of this sort of thing, do you?

BBC Man: Quite a lot yes, quite a lot. I'm mainly in comedy. I'd like to be in Programme Planning actually, but actually I've got a degree. (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 1: 194)

In another programme, an art critic called Gavin Millarrrrrrrrrr appears and reads the following lines:

Some people have made the mistake of seeing Shunt's work as a load of rubbish about railway timetables, but clever people like me, who talk loudly in restaurants, see this as a deliberate ambiguity, a plea for understanding in a mechanised world. The points are frozen, the beast is dead.

What is the difference? What indeed is the point? The point is frozen, the beast is late out of Paddington. The point is taken. If La Fontaine's elk would spurn Tom Jones, the engine must be our head, the dining car our oesophagus, the guard's van our left lung, the cattle truck our shins, the first-class compartment the piece of skin at the nape of the neck and the level crossing an electric elk called Simon. The clarity is devastating ... (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 2: 7)

At that time, an art critic called Gavin Millar worked for *The Listener*, a magazine run by the BBC between 1929 and 1991. The quoted sketch led to an article in *The Listener*, which stated that Monty Python 'stung the hand that has fed it with praise' ('Serpent's Tooth' 879). Whereas the comment about the BBC policy to only employ people without university education as programme planners may be seen as a rather harmless dig, the art critic Gavin Millar is a very specific target of fairly hostile humour, and the nature of the criticism is blatantly obvious. Many other sketches in *Monty Python's Flying Circus* can be read as parodies of various TV formats, such as quiz shows ('Communist Quiz'), documentaries ('Village Idiot'), TV debates and news programmes, but usually they are not that aggressive.

Apart from critically reflecting other shows, the Pythons even managed to draw surrounding programmes into the comedy frame. At the end of one programme, seconds before the voiceover announcement of the programme after *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, the characters of two gay judges talk about the voiceover announcers on the BBC:

First Judge: But the ones I really like are those voice-over announcers on the BBC after the programmes are over.

Second Judge: Oh, aye, of course, they're as bent as safety pins.

First Judge: I know, but they've got beautiful speaking voices haven't they? 'And now a choice of viewing on BBC Television.'

Second Judge: 'Here are tonight's football results.'

Both Judges: Mmm. (*Fade out*). (Chapman *et al.*, *Just the Words* 1: 293)

After this ending, the subsequent voiceover announcement was of course framed as humorous, so that *Monty Python's Flying Circus* effectively extended its airtime by at least the length of the announcement.

The fact that *Monty Python's Flying Circus* targets programmes, structures and representatives of the BBC so frequently may have a number of reasons, three of which will be mentioned here. The first one is mainly technical. It was and still is convenient to write and perform sketches situated in a TV setting, such as chat-shows, documentaries, etc., as they are easy to reconstruct and the producers can rely on the audience's knowledge of the genres and formats reflected in the comedy. Also, the parodies sit nicely next to the formats parodied. The second reason seems to be a kind of secret

competition between the Pythons and the BBC as an institution: framing the voiceover announcement after the 'Gay Judges' sketch as humorous, for instance, undermines the BBC's broadcasting schedule; breaking taboos of sexual explicitness or cannibalism goes against the BBC's policy of content. Trying to get away with this sort of material makes *Monty Python* like a child playing tricks on a person of authority in a game of one-upmanship. The third reason is more serious and lies in the social structure of Great Britain at the end of the 1960s, when *Monty Python* started. By then, youth culture, pop music and student riots had seriously damaged the conservatism of post-war Britain, but in some areas the old values were still upheld. So, British TV, too, was torn between cosy, safe entertainment, represented by sitcoms like *Dad's Army*⁶ (BBC1 1968–1977) or shows like *The Morecambe & Wise Show* (BBC2/BBC1/ITV 1968–1983) and the more anarchic programmes written by people like Spike Milligan, Marty Feldman and the Pythons. *Monty Python's Flying Circus* can be seen in this context as trying to do for TV entertainment what the Beatles, the Who and the Rolling Stones had done for pop music five years earlier.

5 Reactions to *Monty Python's Flying Circus*

An analysis of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* some 40 years after it ended may be prone to distortions and misjudgement. Therefore, in order to ascertain the programme's political impact, it is vital to consider the reactions of the Pythons' contemporaries and original audiences. In retrospect, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* is often praised for being innovative, influential and 'of crucial importance in the development of comedy' (Lewisohn 449). Comedians like Dudley Moore and Steve Martin were also full of praise (*Life of Python*). Martin avows that: 'For us, they define English comedy' (*Life of Python*). All this points to the fact that over time, the Pythons became the representatives of a type of comedy which was innovative and influential in the 1960s, but which – as mentioned above – was not developed only by them. The fact that specifically from a US perspective, the contributions of comedians like Spike Milligan, Peter Cook and others were not seen very clearly is probably connected to the very successful live shows by *Monty Python's Flying Circus* in the USA in 1976 and 1980 (Johnson, *First 200 Years* 192). Most Americans probably knew the Pythons, but not their British contemporaries. Thus, the Pythons were very important for the American comedy scene in the absence of similar British acts.

Immediate reactions to *Monty Python's Flying Circus* were of a more mixed nature. On the one hand, as Lewisohn writes, the show 'built up a cult following ... appealing to a youthful audience hitherto more interested in rock music than TV comedy' (Lewisohn 449), and much praise came from audiences and critics alike. On the other hand, there were critical opinions like the one from *The Listener* cited above. An interesting and detailed record of

reactions to Python programmes can be found in the form of BBC internal *Audience Research Reports* quoted below, where viewers were asked about their opinions of programmes. Here we find for the first few programmes (October 1969) evaluations like (for 12 October) 'funny, witty and refreshingly "different"' and 'quite one of the most amusing and entertaining shows they had seen – inspired "goon-like" humour', but also 'funny in places but rather too silly in others' and even "'a load of rubbish" – a stupid and, frequently, quite meaningless programme that, far from being funny, was "one long bore"'. Some viewers 'found themselves completely out of step with this particular kind of humour'. More traditional comedy programmes from around the same time, like *Dad's Army* or *The Morecambe & Wise Show*, were given much better ratings and they attracted substantially more viewers. Over the years, the ratings for *Monty Python's Flying Circus* improved, but the impression remains that it did not reach the majority of the British population. As one reviewer writes about the very final show on 5 December 1974: 'Monty Python was an acquired taste and one which a sizeable group of those reporting did not possess.' Reviewers did, however, frequently stress that the show was 'inventive, varied [and] generally amusing'.

The mix of positive and negative opinions certainly shows that *Monty Python's Flying Circus* never was an easy and convenient programme; rather, it caused controversy and divided its audiences and the BBC alike.⁷ What seems important in this context is that some of both the positive and negative reactions explicitly refer to the *unconventional* nature of the show's format. It is therefore not surprising that the show was made a figurehead of 'progressive' comedy and was thus a vital political force in the development of TV comedy formats. Strong echoes of the *Flying Circus* can be detected in the anarchy of *The Young Ones* (BBC2 1982–1984), the meta-humorous techniques in *Blackadder* (BBC1 1983–1989),⁸ but also in the zany humour of *Reeves and Mortimer* in the 1990s, the slapstick comedy of *Mr Bean* (ITV 1990–1995) and *Bottom* (BBC2 1991–1995) and practically all subsequent sketch shows, such as *The Fast Show* (BBC2 1994–1997, 2000, 2011, 2014) and *Little Britain* (BBC3/BBC1 2003–2006).

6 Conclusion: how political was *Monty Python's Flying Circus*?

This chapter started with the question of whether *Monty Python's Flying Circus* was a programme with a political dimension similar to the Python film *Life of Brian*. I have argued that their recruitment for a TV comedy show from an Oxbridge background was certainly a political act. The format of the show continued tendencies that had started with other comedians, notably Spike Milligan. However, the attention given to Monty Python turned the programme into a political factor in the development of TV and entertainment in general, beyond the Pythons' own merit. Some of the targets of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* were indeed political, but by using the various

techniques described above, the group made sure to avoid any commitment beyond entertaining – and maybe shocking – their audience. One of the strongest means of immunisation seems to be the juxtaposition of potentially political sketches with passages of pure nonsense and beauty – like the ‘Fish-Slapping Dance’. The only relatively constant, unmitigated targets were TV culture in general and the BBC in particular. Reactions by audiences, critics and other comedians bear this out. In conclusion, it can be said that while *Life of Brian* was politically provocative in ridiculing left-wing groups, shop stewards and religious fanatics, *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* was provocative in its format, taboo-breaking and pushing the boundaries of TV entertainment.

Notes

1. All transmission dates and other details of the shows mentioned are taken from Lewisohn.
2. On the social importance of accents in Great Britain, see Hughes, Trudgill and Watt 10–11.
3. In the following, all *Flying Circus* sketches are quoted from the complete scripts provided in Chapman *et al.*, *Monty Python’s Flying Circus: Just the Words*, vols 1 and 2.
4. The Pythons – and particularly John Cleese – were well aware of Bergson’s theory. Margolis claims that ‘Bergson was like the mother lode to John Cleese’ (125).
5. Interestingly, Postman’s (not entirely serious) suggestion for a critical reflection of the age of show business are programmes like *Saturday Night Live* and *Monty Python* (167).
6. No criticism of these programmes is intended here. *Dad’s Army*, for instance, is a very well-written and well-performed sitcom. See Bernd Lenz’s contribution in Chapter 3 of this volume.
7. This is also reflected in the fact that after a prolonged cannibalism sequence at the very end of the second series, the BBC started censoring *Monty Python’s* scripts (Terry Jones, quoted in Morgan 135–136).
8. See Gerold Sedlmayr’s contribution in Chapter 10 of this volume.

Filmography

Life of Python. 20 of Something Completely Different. Directed by Mark Redhead, written by Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin. London: BBC/Palace, 1989. VHS.

Monty Python’s Flying Circus. Series 1–4. Directed by Ian MacNaughton and John Howard Davies, written by Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin. Culver City, CA: Sony, 2008. DVD.

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5

The Rag Trade: 'Everybody Out!' Gender, Politics and Class on the Factory Floor

Mary Irwin

1 Introduction

The BBC television situation comedy *The Rag Trade* (BBC 1961–1963, LWT 1977–1978) chronicled the weekly exploits of a group of female machinists employed at Fenner Fashions – a small clothing factory in east London. Led by their clever, manipulative shop steward Paddy (Miriam Karlin), the women are constantly in conflict with the factory's owner Harold Fenner (Peter Jones). Paddy is always ready to call a strike on the slightest of pretexts, initiated by her rallying cry and catchphrase 'Everybody Out'.¹ In total, five series of *The Rag Trade* were made. Series One to Three were broadcast on the BBC between 1961 and 1963 in a prime Friday night viewing slot. After a gap of 14 years, the series was revived by London Weekend Television (LWT) for a further two series from 1977 to 1978, broadcast on Sunday evenings. This chapter concerns *The Rag Trade's* first and most notable incarnation, although the reimagining of the series for the late 1970s will be considered towards the end when examining the further development of the series.

The Rag Trade followed what Mintz identifies as the traditionally recognised formula for a television situation comedy:

A half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters within the same premise. That is, each week we generally find the same people in the same setting. The episodes are finite – whatever happens in a given episode is generally closed off, explained, reconciled, solved at the end of the half hour. (Quoted in Mills 28)

Each week, whatever chaotic events took place in the factory, usually revolving around the women's attempts to evade work, schemes to make extra money, union disputes or the farcical mix-ups that ensued when strangers came into the factory, everything returned to the status quo by the end of the episode, with each fresh episode beginning as if nothing untoward had happened the week before.

The series was created by Ronald Wolfe and Ronald Chesney, who met professionally as writers on the BBC radio comedy *Educating Archie* (1950–1960), a series featuring ventriloquist Peter Brough and his dummy Archie Andrews. Wolfe and Chesney continued as a writing partnership working on a television version of *Educating Archie* (ITV 1958–1959). It was conceived at a time when some of the earliest British television comedies were being written and broadcast. Most significant and successful amongst these were *Hancock's Half Hour* (BBC 1956–1960) and *Steptoe and Son* (BBC1 1962–1974),² both written by Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, who are generally regarded as having created and established the blueprint for what became the British television situation comedy. *The Rag Trade*, like *Hancock* and *Steptoe and Son*, focused on the trials and tribulations of ordinary, everyday British life. At a period in the late 1950s and early 1960s when so-called 'kitchen-sink realism' and its gritty depiction of working-class life was emergent in British art, literature, theatre and cinema, *The Rag Trade*, with its factory-floor setting and female ensemble cast of smart, opinionated working-class women accorded with something of the current cultural mood. It is these women who are at the centre of the narrative, driving the action and constantly challenging the management personified by factory owner Mr Fenner. At the same time, the series offered, through these women's frequent triumphs over authority and limiting middle-class convention, an implicit celebration of female, working-class strength and ingenuity.

At the same time, *The Rag Trade* shared common ground with a popular film comedy of the period: *I'm All Right Jack* (1959). The general ineptitude of naïve, well-meaning Oxford University graduate Stanley Windrush (Ian Carmichael) means that he fails to secure a permanent job in industry. His unscrupulous uncle (Dennis Price) sets him up with a job in a local munitions factory, where Windrush's enthusiastic suggestions as to how to improve workplace productivity end up causing an all-out strike. *I'm All Right Jack* picked up on contemporary unease about the perceived growing strength of the trade unions and satirised such developments, with Peter Sellers giving a memorable performance as militant shop steward Fred Kite. Comic comparisons can be drawn between Kite and *The Rag Trade's* Paddy's constant rallying of their workforce to take action against what they perceived as unreasonable management demands.

The Rag Trade drew upon the working worlds that both Wolfe and Chesney knew from their own lives. In *Writing Comedy: A Guide to Scriptwriting for TV, Radio, Film, and Stage*, Wolfe wrote of *The Rag Trade* and its origins:

The first sitcom that Chesney and I wrote was set in a dressmaking factory. The one reason for the success of the show *The Rag Trade* was that we really knew what we were writing about. The setting was authentic and realistic. Chesney at one time had a business share in a clothing factory, while I had worked on the bench in a factory making radio equipment. (Wolfe 94)

Wolfe saw their experiences both as a fertile source for comedy writing and something that viewers would be able to connect with: 'From my experiences there, I always thought there would be a good series about factory life' (Wolfe 94). He continued: 'With our personal recollections we were never short of story lines for *The Rag Trade*. The secret of the show was not only we knew what we were writing about but many of our viewers worked in factories and could identify with the situations' (94).

The daily goings-on of the factory staff Wolfe and Chesney observed did indeed provide much of the raw material, which formed the basis of both plots and comedy in *The Rag Trade*. Such goings-on involved every possible ruse to avoid work or to do as little as possible while you were there. Wolfe recalled that: 'When work got a bit boring we'd creep into the toilets for a smoke and chat or sit in the cubicles for a quick read, do our football pools or have a little snooze' (Wolfe 96). Management's response as he recalled it, and the workers' reaction, is dramatized in encounters that he and Chesney wrote for *The Rag Trade*. Thus: 'The management worried about our low production – tried to time the workers in and out of the toilets. The workers immediately called a lightning strike and there was even less production' (Wolfe 96). He also recalled other activities that took place when work should have been going on: 'But life in the factory didn't just consist of skiving; there was also pilfering, petty larceny and romantic assignations between the factory boys and girls which usually took place behind the factory during working hours of course' (Wolfe 96). All the events described found their way into *The Rag Trade* plots.

Finally, Wolfe highlighted the type of disruptive real-life incidents that were to drive the highly physical comedy of *The Rag Trade*. He mentioned pranks played with the hated time clock on which the workers had to clock in every day: 'There were various ways of cheating the time clock. Sometimes we would squirt glue into the clock to slow it down; other times we would arrange for a couple of the lads to get in early and clock in the rest of us who staggered in later' (Wolfe 96). Also, 'fiddling the clock was great fun especially on the night shift. We'd clock in at eight o'clock at night, sneak out go home and come back at six a.m., creep in and pretend we had been working all night' (96). In Episode Three of Series One, the plot revolves around Mr Fenner's installation of a time clock to increase the women's productivity.

2 *The Rag Trade* and the female ensemble cast

What is particularly significant about *The Rag Trade* is that in contrast to the contemporary male-dominated domestic comedies which surrounded it, such as *Hancock* and *Steptoe and Son*, this series had a female ensemble cast, and moreover one located in the workplace. Such a cast and location were extremely rare for the television of the period, a time when women figured most frequently in their domestic roles as girlfriends, wives and mothers.

The only other real equivalent could be found in *Compact* (BBC 1962–1965), a soap opera written by *Crossroads* creators Hazel Adair and Peter Ling, and set in the offices of an upmarket women's magazine populated by a predominantly female staff.³ However, in comparison to the polite middle-class atmosphere of *Compact*, the working-class female factory staff was loud, boisterous, unruly and disruptive, the distinctive, uninhibited, collective, female working-class culture on display not being much in evidence on BBC television at this time. These workplace behaviours, which are the driving force of *The Rag Trade* and which positioned women as 'subjects of a laughter which expresses anger, resistance, solidarity and joy or those which show women using in disruptive challenging ways the spectacle already invested in them as objects of a masculine gaze' (Rowe 5), will be examined in greater depth throughout the chapter.

Filmed before a live studio audience, the style of *The Rag Trade* was overtly theatrical, with much of the action taking place essentially on one stage set divided into three spaces – the factory floor, Fenner's office and the women's rest room located at opposite ends of the stage. The dressing of the set, with bulky machines and cluttered work benches, nods again to the early 1960s 'kitchen-sink' films of social realism, in this case in particular to the opening scenes of the contemporaneous film *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) in which factory worker Arthur Seaton (Albert Finney) is seen working belligerently at his lathe, making it clear that he will do only as much for the management as suits him. This is an attitude that, in their own comedic way, the women at Fenner's factory share with him. In *The Rag Trade*, the television audience was watching effectively live theatre captured on camera. The performances of the cast are clearly inflected by the fact that they are playing to a physically present audience whom they can see and hear clearly in the television studio. The cast react to the laughter or gasps of surprise and pleasure which their schemes, antics and fast-talking rejoinders to management criticisms or complaints engender. The timing of the funny lines and the extension of bits of comedy business expands or slows down in response to audience laughter, and the cast members' interplay with each other is reactive, an instinctive response to how this interplay is going down with the audience. This style of comedy performance is in marked contrast to the low-key mockumentary style of another workplace comedy, Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant's *The Office* (BBC2/BBC1 2001–2003) in which the audience are meant to be watching people simply going about their daily workplace routines, with performances governed by the tropes of a documentary-style non-fiction naturalism.

The professional backgrounds of the principal cast members of *The Rag Trade* lay in theatre, film, radio, variety, dance and even music hall, which meant that they were skilled in delivering a performance in which one of the key elements was their ability to relate to a live audience. As will be demonstrated later in the analysis of a selected episode, the cast's ability

to sing and dance was drawn upon and exploited. The two leads, Miriam Karlin and Peter Jones, had had extensive professional careers prior to *The Rag Trade*. Karlin had attended the renowned Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) in London and featured in a number of theatrical revues, most notably a groundbreaking British musical theatre production about contemporary London working-class life, *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be*.

Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be, which ran from 1959 to 1962, was a musical about the London underworld set in a low-life Soho of the late 1950s, and starred a cast of thieves, prostitutes, gamblers and corrupt policemen. Lead character Fred, newly out of prison, returns to find his brothel and gambling den under threat and a London he no longer recognises. Music was by the composer Lionel Bart, who went on to write the musical *Oliver!*, and the writer Frank Norman was himself a former petty criminal. It was directed by the pioneering director Joan Littlewood and played at her improvisational theatre workshop company's base in Stratford East in the East End of London. Littlewood was noted for her experimental, left-wing improvisational style. Nadine Holdsworth describes *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be* as having 'flamboyant music hall style theatricality' (Holdsworth 23), and as for Karlin's performance in *The Rag Trade* Holdsworth's observations also hold true. Paddy is centre stage throughout each episode of *The Rag Trade*, implicitly engaged with both the studio audience and the wider audience beyond the studio with whom she communicates through the camera lens. Her delivery of her lines, her range of expressions and her knowing delivery have exactly the flamboyant music-hall style that Holdsworth documents.⁴ In addition, two other cast members who played young machinists had both starred in the Stratford East production of *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be*. They were Barbara Windsor, best known for her work in the *Carry On* series of British comedy films, and Toni Palmer. Peter Jones, like Miriam Karlin, had worked in the theatre as well as cinema. Of the other two main characters, Carol, Paddy's dizzy disruptive sidekick, was played by Sheila Hancock who had also attended RADA. She had made many stage appearances throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, and had a role in Joan Littlewood's theatre workshop production of the short novel *Make Me an Offer*.⁵ Reg Varney, who played hapless foreman Reg, had a background in music hall and variety, and had also worked in pubs and clubs. Finally, there was Esma Cannon, who played the diminutive, bewildered Lilly ('little Lill'); childlike both in stature and behaviour, she most often acted as a physical comedy stooge or foil for the rest of the cast. Cannon was an Australian who came to Britain as a young woman initially for a career in theatre, but subsequently appeared in a substantial number of successful British films as well as the *Carry On* series prior to *The Rag Trade*.

Although *The Rag Trade* ran for three series in its first incarnation, recordings remain of only the first two. Early television recordings are scarce, with limited numbers of titles having been preserved.⁶ The enormous popularity

of *The Rag Trade* and the commercial possibilities of exporting the format may go some way towards explaining why these two series have survived.⁷ In the next section, I will offer a textual analysis of the two selected episodes of the series taken from Series One and Series Two respectively. The episodes have been chosen because they are representative of the series as a whole and because they offer strong examples of the range of comedy performance and material to be found across the two series. In addition, they reflect stylistic changes in *The Rag Trade* from Series One to Series Two. While the formula of the women's disruptive behaviour and the ensuing trouble this causes remains unchanged throughout, as do the characters' behaviour and personalities, in the episode from Series Two, the performance is more overtly theatrical (in fact, essentially meta-performance) – the women are seen rehearsing and performing songs, dances, poems and recitations for a fundraising concert they intend to deliver. Such performances serve to reinforce a rich, long-established, shared working-class oral cultural heritage of stories, songs, recitations and verbal and physical jokes synergised with more topical references which they deploy constantly to undercut and sabotage the conduct and working performance expected of them on the shop floor. Further, their physical and verbal unruliness present a challenge to conventional contemporary assumptions around the types of behaviour that might be expected of women.

3 Topicality in *The Rag Trade*

This 'performance within the performance' trope is something that seems to have developed over the course of Series Two. That the cast are now well established and, as the viewing figures evidence, well liked, the viewers are given bigger, bolder exaggerated versions of these characters which play on the actors' own theatrical skills, exploiting their ability to sing, dance, play musical instruments and be something other than their comic *Rag Trade* incarnations. As in the case of *Hancock* or *Steptoe and Son*, it is the characters and anticipated reactions and behaviours of Paddy, Fenner, Carol and Reg, Lilly *et al.* more than any situation they encounter which lay at the heart of *The Rag Trade* as it developed.

The background to the comedy is, in both episodes and both series, a broad satirical take on the power of the unions in the British workplace of the period. However, the humour is not overtly topical, aside from infrequent throwaway references to events of the period. A nod is made to well-known political speeches of the time, such as Fenner's reference to then Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's oft-quoted comment on the much-improved British economic landscape of the late 1950s and early 1960s: 'Most of our people have never had it so good.'⁸ Fenner tells the women about how fortunate they are to work for him, remarking 'I know you've never had it so good' (Season One, Episode Two), and in reference to another Macmillan

speech given in Cape Town in 1960, popularly known as the 'Winds of Change' in which he signalled Britain's intention to grant independence to British colonies in Africa, Fenner tells his workforce in response to their poor performance that: 'The winds of change will blow through this workroom' (Season Two, Episode Seven). In the very first episode there is reference to how long ago clothes were cut out: 'That two-piece polkadot babydoll I cut out at the time of Suez' (Season One, Episode One).⁹

Rather, the action and humour were embedded implicitly within the culture of everyday working-class life in early 1960s Britain. There was humour at the expense of the fashions and customs of the period – the damage caused to fixtures and fittings by the girls' fashionable pointed-toed stiletto shoes, Carol's daily journey to the factory on her modish motor scooter, which caused her to arrive frequently late, flustered and to much comic impact, plus the girls' constant use of the omnipresent portable transistor radio to cause noise and disruption within the factory. Also much to the fore were the popular fashions of the period. The factory women wore tight skirts and sweaters, and had dark, heavy eye makeup and teased beehive hair in imitation of the look of film stars of the day such as Brigitte Bardot and Elizabeth Taylor. Their look and style is especially representative of popular working-class female culture. Finally, in the chosen episodes the women are making short 'babydoll' nightdresses and Capri pants, both of which first came into fashion in Britain in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The first episode to be considered is the sixth from Series One (the episodes were not named). The plot revolves around the girls' habit of eating in the workroom, which has resulted in food-stained garments and returned orders. The opening titles for Series One are different from those for Series Two. A vintage sewing machine is pictured with the words *The Rag Trade* being sewn through as if they were on a piece of cloth. The change in titles from the sewing machine, representative of the business of making clothes which the women were engaged in, to the later titles in which it is the rowdy character of the factory women themselves, as represented by the image of the cloth puppet, suggests that in Series Two, as will be developed shortly, the emphasis is as much on the women as characters over and above the situations around which the episode revolves.

The scene opens, as is frequently the case, in Fenner's office. It is a small, cluttered, disorganised space, every bit as chaotic as the factory floor and highly suggestive of Fenner's lack of control over what is actually going on. His staff exploit his lack of organisation and system, outwitting and tricking him with frequency and ease. Within this office space, a key trope of the series is perpetually re-enacted. Fenner is frequently presented offering assurances to buyers that the women are top-class workers and, above all, highly motivated. Inevitably there will be a cut to a scene in which the women can be seen doing anything but work. The workroom represents an almost exclusively female space in which a supportive female culture prevails and

one which pointedly excludes Fenner. It is appropriated as a place in which the women feel comfortable and is firmly established as their territory. The 'them and us' relationship is such that the women always have a tray placed outside Fenner's door which falls noisily to the floor, alerting them to his passage in and out of the office.

In this episode a client, Mr Lever, is angrily pointing out the poor quality of the clothes he has been sent. While Fenner protests the high quality of the work, Lever pulls out garments with a range of stains on them, most noticeably a large greasy black handprint clearly on the back of a dress. Fenner continues to extol the quality and workmanship of the garment, only for the client to extract lumps of cheese and pieces of lettuce from the pockets. The farcical, larger-than-life quality of the performances and situation is evident in this piece of theatrical business, as is Fenner's retort that 'there is no eating in my work room. I am adamant about this to the point of finicky' and 'my girls wouldn't dream of flouting my wishes'. Cut then to the contrasting environment of the women in the workroom doing exactly what Fenner says they are not. This is another comic set piece with the women working together as a comic ensemble. This feels very similar to a routine that might be performed on stage in a variety show or as part of a British pantomime.¹⁰ One of the women, Brenda, is frying eggs on an upturned hot iron, Carol is frying bacon on another, while Lilly wrestles unsuccessfully with dressmaking scissors to cut up a slice of bread – Paddy grabs the bread to soften it up in the clothing press, then Carol irons the damp pieces to warm them up. The set piece ends with Carol rushing over to use the kettle in which Lilly already has an egg boiling. The over-the-top demonstration of the girls' flouting of the no-eating rule is further underlined when Paddy hands round fish and chips and bread rolls with sausages inside. This provides the opportunity for one of the other key tropes of the series, which is Paddy reading out union rules to put Fenner in as awkward a position as possible: 'May I quote from section three of the Fenner's Union Amenities Agreement: twice a day staff will be allowed to stop work for a ten-minute tea period.' One of the sources of humour which runs throughout the series is the parodic use of trade union discourse, which is one of Paddy's most exploited strategies and which sends up the kind of language in circulation at the time. The fact that this language comes from women, especially when Paddy refers to them as 'brothers', adds further to the contemporary comedy of the situation in that it is women who are enforcing the union party line. Female workers and their concerns had little visibility in discourses of the late 1950s and early 1960s surrounding trade union discord.

The episode's other comic highlight comes when Fenner's response to this is the installation of a vending machine. The arrival of the machine makes for yet more physical comedy. Paddy's initial reaction is that the machine will prevent them from taking prolonged breaks to eat. Her response is sabotage, pouring a bucket of waste into the machine. Reg performs a series of

comedy falls as he slips in the liquid the machine then emits. It is discovered that shirt buttons will work as payment instead of money and women can be seen making ostentatious multiple purchases from the machine. Of course, the episode ends with the button ruse discovered and the machine broken. It does not reappear in the next episode: the slate is wiped clean and the status quo returns.

The second episode selected for close analysis is also full of physical comedy set pieces, double entendres and comic innuendos, but also contains song-and-dance numbers of the kind that might be expected to appear in a variety show, for example, the popular Sunday night televising of the weekly variety performance which took place at the London Palladium theatre. The overarching theme of the episode is illicit rehearsals for the Grand Union Concert to be performed by the Fenner's Workers concert party. In this episode, the actors' theatrical background is showcased as they perform songs, dance, play musical instruments and demonstrate the kind of comic repartee redolent of the music hall and the variety stage which preceded the television situation comedy, but in which many of the cast of *The Rag Trade* had significant experience and on which they drew for their television work. In this episode, the cast bring to the television situation comedy something of the liveness and dynamism of their theatre work, as well as a direct connection with both the live studio audience and the television audience whom they can be seen simultaneously addressing through their work with the studio cameras.

The episode opens with Lilly's ostentatiously bad rendition of the religious song 'Oh for the Wings of a Dove', drawing on her role as the innocent comedy stooge. This is quickly interrupted by Reg practising his accordion. That the actor Reg Varney was known for his musical skill again demonstrates the oscillation between the cast's portrayal of their fictional character and their own professional skillset. Paddy is also shown briefly practising her shop steward's song, done with the knowing confidence, which once more evokes the actress and performer Miriam Karlin beyond the role of Paddy the shop steward. Both performances demonstrate their real-life performing skills and personalities beyond the parameters of the fictional performances in *The Rag Trade*.

The concert party's rehearsals reappear further in the episode, but the action returns once again to the comic mix-up and disruptive behaviour, which will drive the plot element of the episode. Fenner has to produce an order of babydoll nighties. The women are, as always, behind schedule with the order and, in addition, Carol, tasked with modelling the garment for the customer, tries it on over her outdoor clothes, which looks ridiculous and causes the customer to say he wants to cancel the order. This plot point is, however, temporarily cast aside as concert rehearsals for the women take precedence. Once again, the atmosphere is that of the variety show, with all the cast dressing up and in this instance notably cross-dressing pantomime-style. Carol uses

a pile of feathered hats to perform a kind of comically pseudo-erotic fan dance. Paddy appears cross-dressed in a sailor suit making innuendos about the construction of the suit and how awkward the pockets and flaps would be if in fact she were male: a charade which she mock seriously carries out. If Paddy is playing with pantomimic male drag, then Reg, dressed in a comic parody of stereotypical Scottish Highland dress and wearing an extremely brief kilt, plays with female identity. Much is made of the kilt's resemblance to a woman's skirt, especially when Reg performs a jig, waving his kilt in an exaggeratedly feminine fashion.

Paddy and Reg's cross-dressing is the subject of much ribald comment from the rest of the women. Dressing up and especially cross-dressing are an integral part of the popular British pantomime theatrical tradition that informs the performance style of *The Rag Trade*. Dressing up and trying on costumes allows for the exploration of new identities – in the case of pantomimic cross-dressing, new sexual identities. In a comedy where women have the traditionally male upper hand, the further assumption of male identity by dressing in male drag reinforces the series' interrogation of traditional gender roles. Further, foreman Reg's adoption of feminine attire and behaviour reinforces his customary positioning, within the series, as under the direction and control of the women, in a sense playing a stereotypically 'female' foil to their 'masculine' behaviour. Indeed, throughout *The Rag Trade*, costume and performance allow for polysemic readings of gender identity by allowing the women to mock and undermine, most significantly, male authority by a parodic assumption of it. At the same time, male assumptions about femininity are questioned when stereotypes of feminine behaviour are presented, typically, again by Reg playing a woman contrasted with the very strong and assertive real women who surround him on the factory floor. As Judith Butler writes in her introduction to the tenth anniversary edition of her classic 1989 work on gender and identity, *Gender Trouble*: 'I sought to counter those views that made limits and presumptions about the limits and proprieties of gender and restricted the meaning of gender to prescribed notions about masculinity and femininity' (Butler vii). In its use of costume and disguise, *The Rag Trade* challenges such limits and restrictions surrounding notions of gender.

The remainder of the episode is dominated by costume and performance nominally dictated by the staff's ongoing concert rehearsals which are taking the place of any concentration on work. In fact, it seems almost as if the episode has become in effect a live variety performance. Lilly is attired as a mermaid and positioned along two chairs singing to a banjo accompaniment. Reg wears a Victorian bathing costume and practises his song-and-dance routine. The chaotic atmosphere culminates with Paddy in yet another male guise – this time as a cowboy singing a parody Country and Western tune, which makes fun of Fenner as a manager. Meanwhile, Carol and a group of women have put on a Charleston routine dressed as 1920s

flappers (in the order of babydoll nighties, which they have customised to their own purposes). This in fact resolves the plot as the buyer decides he would like to buy the refashioned nightdresses. The final scene has Fenner himself appear, apparently to catch the women out, only to be told that it is a benefit to raise money for Fenner himself. At this point, he bursts into song. In a broader sense, the women's forceful disruptive performances have effectively toppled the established order, and the women's use of costume and forceful evocation of their shared cultural repertoire have absorbed Fenner himself into this unruly female society which is now dominant. That a solution of sorts emerges from the chaos seems almost incidental. As before, the events of this episode have no impact on that of the next week.

4 *The Rag Trade* and seriality

Seriality is not significant to the structure of *The Rag Trade*, in the sense that there are no ongoing long-term plot developments such as might be seen in the demonstrably anti-traditional sitcoms, such as *The Office* or the ongoing political satire of *The Thick of It* (BBC4/BBC2 2005–2012), in which a definite progression in events and development of character can be observed. With Paddy, Fenner, Reg and the rest of women, the 'who' rather than the 'what' and 'why' is most important for those who watch. If, in *The Office*, one of the pleasures for the viewer is watching the development of character and situation – will Dawn and Tim finally get together and will David Brent finally understand and even begin to rectify his egotistical workplace behaviour? – in *The Rag Trade*, the overriding theme is to watch the cast of characters being absolutely and unreconstructedly themselves whatever the situation. Indeed, if anything, the characters seem almost to become even more exaggerated theatrical versions of themselves as Series Two progresses. It is these ever-expanding performances of the unruly self rather than narrative progression which become in effect the narrative of the series.

The Rag Trade was replicated almost exactly by Chesney and Wolfe in *Wild, Wild Women* (BBC 1969). Set in 1902, it was a reworking of *The Rag Trade*, with Barbara Windsor playing Millie who, like Paddy, led a group of women working this time in a hatmaker's shop. *Wild, Wild Women* lasted only one series. It did not, it would appear, have the appeal of *The Rag Trade*. Perhaps its location as a period situation comedy meant it lacked the contemporary, up-to-date appeal of its predecessor. While identifiable workplace battles, concerns and behaviours of the present day engaged the viewers, such issues located some 60 years earlier and in an historical context were possibly less likely to have the same kind of appeal. Such was the enduring popularity of the original *The Rag Trade* that it was revived and remade in 1977 by LWT, with Jones and Karlin reprising their roles as Paddy and Fenner. The remake ran for two series, most of the scripts being based on the BBC episodes from the 1960s. However in a Britain which had been

affected by widespread strike action in the mid-1970s and which two years later was to elect a Conservative government which took a very harsh line on union power generally, a militant trade union leader and her propensity to call out the workforce had much less appeal.

Actors from *The Rag Trade* went on to star in other comedies written for them by Chesney and Wolfe. Sheila Hancock took the lead in *The Bed-Sit Girl* (BBC1 1965–1966), playing a young typist living in a one-room flat (the eponymous bedsit) who wants to make more of her life. Most famously, Reg Varney went on to become one of the leads in one of Britain's most popular sitcoms *On the Buses* (ITV 1969–1973). The formula was broadly similar to *The Rag Trade*, with Varney as a bus driver who along with his co-workers spent their time trying to outwit the management in the bus depot where they worked. Although a great favourite at the time, *On the Buses* now makes for rather uncomfortable viewing, with much of the humour derived from what would today be unacceptable attitudes, in particular to race and gender. The female characters in *On the Buses* are very much subsidiary ones, most frequently the butt of any humour. Instead of the confident, outspoken and street-smart female cast of *The Rag Trade* women are generally depicted either as malleable sexy 'glamour girls' or unattractive objects of male derision and contempt.

The Rag Trade, with its ensemble cast of strong disruptive women orchestrating fast physical comic farce in the workplace, makes for very innovative female television comedy, unusual both for its time and more generally in the historical context of funny women on television. *Absolutely Fabulous* (BBC1 1992–1996, 2001–2004, 2011–2012), in which Jennifer Saunders and Joanna Lumley, surrounded by a female ensemble cast, play Edina Monsoon and Patsy Stone – hard-drinking, drug-addled party animals whose assertive physical comedy has been justifiably singled out for its spirited portrayal of women behaving very badly indeed. Yet this kind of pioneering female comedy could have been seen some 30 years earlier in *The Rag Trade*. The fact that it was not until 1992 that a comparable British female ensemble comedy could be found points to the singularity of kind of comedy that was *The Rag Trade* and the achievement it represented. It also of course alludes to the fact that despite the popularity of *The Rag Trade* and its female stars, the female comedy ensemble did not become a regularly replicated comedy format on British television. Although there is not the space to do so here, the absence of female comedies which follow the pattern of *The Rag Trade* is worthy of further investigation and debate. One reason for this could be the historical dearth of women writing British television comedy.¹¹

The Rag Trade, firmly anchored in the skills and traditions of stagecraft and live performance, might be adjudged as very much in the mould of early British television comedy. That it is a group of working-class women who create the comedy makes it a very significant series in narrative histories of British television comedy. Critically, in the women's deployment of

the traditions of British theatrical performance that the series opens up, spaces in which discourses of class, gender and identity surrounding these working-class women can be explored and interrogated.

Notes

1. The shop steward is the elected representative of a workplace trade union.
2. See also Birgit Neumann and Jürgen Kamm's introduction to this volume as well as Richard Kilborn's discussion on *Steptoe and Son* in Chapter 2.
3. *Crossroads* (1964–2003) was an ITV soap opera set in a motel in the Midlands in England.
4. British music hall, congruent with American vaudeville, denotes live theatrical variety performances, music, singing, dancing, comedy turns and speciality acts.
5. *Make Me an Offer* by Wolf Mankowitz was about an antique dealer in search of the Portland vase.
6. Dick Fiddy's *Missing-Believed Wiped: Searching for the Lost Treasures of British Television* (2001) chronicles the narratives and rationales surrounding historical television programmes' survival or disappearance, citing beliefs such as lack of storage space, the economies of recording over reusable videotape and a perceived lack of interest in black-and-white programmes with the advent of colour.
7. *The Rag Trade* has been remade by Australian, Norwegian, Portuguese and South African television.
8. Made in 1957, when Macmillan was speaking at a Tory rally in Bedford to mark 25 years of service by Mr Lennox-Boyd, the Colonial Secretary, as MP for Mid-Bedfordshire, the speech noted the strength of the British economy.
9. The Suez Crisis of 1956 occurred when the Egyptian nationalisation of the Suez Canal was announced by Egyptian President Colonel Nasser, which resulted in military action against Egypt by Britain, France and Israel.
10. In the British pantomime, fairytales and folk legends for children such as Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Aladdin and Jack and the Beanstalk are reworked. Building on the Italian tradition of *Commedia dell'arte* of a troupe of wandering players presenting a tale with a moral, the pantomime grew to encompass singing, dancing, slapstick, cross-dressing and audience participation. Middle-aged men would take the role of 'dame' (a grotesque and exaggerated parody of an assertive older woman), whilst the principal boy (supposedly the handsome leading man) would be played by a glamorous young woman. Popular personalities from the world of theatre and radio and then television would star, and the scripts would include topical jokes and references. The target audience is a family one and the pantomime is performed at Christmas, although the festival itself is neither the subject, nor is it mentioned. The cast of *The Rag Trade*, such as Varney and Karlin, regularly appeared in pantomime.
11. Comedy writer Carla Lane is perhaps the only exception to this observation. Lane's *The Liver Birds* (BBC1 1969–1978) featured two young, independent women flat-sharing in Liverpool whose comic exploits at home and work did manifest in gentle, knockabout comedy. Lane did, however, move on to less physical and more reflective work in subsequent comedies, such as *Butterflies* (BBC2 1978–1983), which tackles a middle-class wife and mother dealing with her dissatisfaction at how her life has turned out, and *Solo* (BBC1 1981–1982), whose lead character decides to end her relationship and leave her job after her partner is unfaithful.

Filmography

The Rag Trade. Directed by Dennis Main Wilson and Bryan Izzard, written by Ronald Wolfe and Ronald Chesney. London: BBC/LWT, 2006. DVD.

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Part II

The 1970s and 1980s: New Loyalties, Histories and Collective Identities – Post-familiar Paradigms

6

‘Sambo’ and ‘Snowflake’: Race and Race Relations in *Love Thy Neighbour*

Nora Plesske

1 Introduction

In 1972, *TV Times* announced the new and daring sitcom *Love Thy Neighbour* (ITV 1972–1976): ‘It is about racial prejudice – with a difference. It should make us laugh a lot ... and think a lot, too’ (quoted in Pratt). The main source of humour is the conflict that ensues when the black couple Bill and Barbie Reynolds from the West Indies move next door to the white bigot Eddie Booth and his long-suffering wife Joan. With its central presence of black characters and the neighbour’s squabbling as the prod of racial disputes, this sitcom, according to Alix Coleman’s promotion, constitutes ‘anything but another over-the-garden-wall comedy’ (Coleman 28). Indeed, *Love Thy Neighbour*’s approach to race and race relations has rendered the series ‘[o]ne of the more controversial sitcoms in the annals of British television history’ (Taylor and Perry 155).

With 14–17 million viewers, *Love Thy Neighbour* was just as popular as the all-time classic *Dad’s Army* (BBC1 1968–1977),¹ which means that nearly half of all British homes or 90 per cent of ITV owners tuned into each single episode. Moreover, the sitcom was successfully exported to the Netherlands and Australia, and in 1973 even spawned a feature film production. Still beloved by contemporary audiences, the series was later deemed politically incorrect and quietly dropped for ‘a duty and a desire to create new shows’ (Jones, quoted in Pratt). Today, *Love Thy Neighbour* is remembered mainly for its ‘dated and precarious comic premise’ and is reviled by most critics as ‘the epitome of [the] racist sitcom’ (Pratt). The characters and scripts of the series are labelled ‘flat, ramshackle, superficial and ... intermittently offensive’ (Pratt). However, rather than being painful in the sense of insulting, comedy should ideally induce laughter. Especially with respect to race, it is thus necessary to consider the ambivalent potential of humour.

This ‘Double-Edged Potential’ (King, quoted in Lockyer 130) entails contradictory ideological dispositions. On the one hand, comedy works with the modalities of power construction to firm up boundaries by means of

exclusion – for example, by promoting essentialised ethnic differences and fixed stereotypes. On the other hand, humour can also be the reverse, namely unifying and inclusive, a weapon against prejudice, a voice for the marginalised, striving to expose discrimination by highlighting the absurdities of established hierarchies of power (Medhurst, *National Joke* 19). Comedic effect mostly oscillates between these two poles, heavily depending on personal point of view, content and context (19). First, according to the ‘Alf Garnett Syndrome’ (Pickering and Lockyer, quoted in Lockyer 130), the bigoted person being satirised might become a source of celebration for a section of the audience. Second, the question is whether the comedy plays on or off well-entrenched racial stereotypes (Hall, ‘Black and White’ 21). Black comedy constitutes even more of ‘a double-edged game’ (21): the long-established clown stereotype makes it nearly impossible to figure out if the audience is invited to laugh with or at the black comic entertainer. When dealing with the concept of race, it is thus pivotal to assess who or what the target of the joke is in order to elucidate who holds the symbolic power and how race is eventually employed (Malik 177–178; Medhurst, ‘Introduction’ 15). Third, the altering popularity and critical controversy of *Love Thy Neighbour* as a period piece underlines the fact that comedy is always contextual (Medhurst, *National Joke* 12). As the sitcom emphasises the particularities of present circumstances, the history of so-called ethnic comedies becomes ‘a useful barometer of popular opinion on race at specific moments and over time’ (Malik 91). If media culture is no longer comfortable enough to tolerate *Love Thy Neighbour*, it shows how sensitivities, attitudes and even mentalities have changed (174). In this respect, ethnic sitcoms elucidate how a sense of Britishness is being (de)constructed and (re)imagined.

This chapter places *Love Thy Neighbour* in its cultural context with a focus on the crisis of race relations in 1970s Britain and the assessment of the sitcom with regard to (de)constructions of racial stereotypes. After some further background information on the sitcom itself, I will summarise the cultural contexts of post-war migration, racism and race relations to allow for a critical analysis of depictions of Britishness and Otherness in the series. The following two sections will examine the use and function of racial stereotypes in *Love Thy Neighbour*. And finally, in order to be able to appreciate the symptomatic nature of *Love Thy Neighbour* and its medial role with respect to representations of race, I will present a synopsis of depictions of the racial other in British TV comedies during the 1960s and 1970s. In comparison to black British film and postcolonial literature, this will enable a further understanding of the medial specificity of television and the sitcom in discourses of race.

2 Overview of *Love Thy Neighbour*

Produced by Thames Television, *Love Thy Neighbour* consisted of a total of 53 25-minute episodes plus two specials and was broadcast in seven series

from 1972 until 1976 by Independent Television (ITV). The comedy show was written by Vince Powell, who created 11 sitcoms for ITV, two examples being *Never Mind the Quality, Feel the Width* (1967–1971), set in the London rag trade and featuring an ethnically mismatched pair of tailors, the Jewish Manny Cohen and the Irish-Catholic Patrick Kelly, and *Mind Your Language* (1977–1979, 1986), another comedy notorious for its ethnic stereotyping. In the beginning of the 1970s, ITV was famous mainly for its long-running and overtly successful soap operas, particularly *Coronation Street* (1960–) and already featured some popular sitcoms, for instance, *On the Buses* (1969–1973).

The 1960s and 1970s were a time of experimentation with a number of comedy genres and are renowned for their introduction of formal innovation and more daring topics to TV comedy. Yet, despite the controversial subject matter of race, the domestic comedy *Love Thy Neighbour* is stylistically and formally rather traditional. Domestic comedies concentrate on the eccentricity of one particular family member as the source of humour. Moreover, the family often functions as a mirror for the nation, thus depicting the lifestyle and mentality of society, while the comic effects expose its pretensions as well as the datedness of its attitudes. In that respect, the sitcom *Beggar My Neighbour* (BBC 1966–1968), with its conflicts between family members living next door to each other, can be seen as a precursor to *Love Thy Neighbour*. As a sub-form of the domestic comedy, the neighbourly sitcom scrutinises the relations between the family unit and the outside world. As regards racially motivated antagonisms in Britain, *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC 1965–1975) can also be considered an antecedent of the sitcom, mainly because its hypocritically bigoted protagonist Alf Garnett is not unlike *Love Thy Neighbour's* central character Eddie Booth.

Eddie (Jack Smethurst) is a white working-class, old-school socialist and union leader, born in Manchester and supporter of Manchester United. The chain-smoking and beer-swilling Eddie therefore also stands in the tradition of comic characters that captures the aspiring lower-class man, such as Tony Hancock.² His neighbourly antagonist Bill Reynolds (Rudolph Walker) is a black immigrant from Trinidad, conservative and supporter of West Ham, whose role is to stand up to Eddie's racist abuses. Their wives struggle to create harmony: Joan Booth (Kate Williams) plays an overworked housewife and serves as the major foil to counter Eddie's rants, while Barbie Reynolds (Nina Baden-Semper) is depicted as a rather compliant, happily married, yet overtly sexy, black Twiggy. *Love Thy Neighbour's* comedy is thus predominantly driven by easily recognisable stock characters. Otherwise, the sitcom's humour largely relies on the use of swear words and racial slurs. In addition to the ideological conflicts, stereotypical depictions and foul language, other central ingredients of the show's comedy include expected slapstick, familiar puns, running gags and repetitive dialogues.

The narrative of each episode establishes the familiar status quo of the main character's bigotry. Eddie's stance further develops when, confronted

with Bill on neighbourly issues, he erupts into a cathartic verbal racist attack in public and an open conflict between the two ensues. The resolution of the matter is either achieved by mediation of the two women or by Bill getting his own back. Occasionally, the two characters drift towards friendship (when based on childish competition) or mateship (when based on a form of homosocial bonding against their wives). Nevertheless, at the end of each episode, or at the latest in the beginning of the following one, the situation is retransferred to the familiar status quo of Eddie's racist attitudes and the conflict of white versus black.

In the long run, the seriality of humour and circularity of the narrative becomes far from enjoyable. The fact that Eddie is unable to change his bigoted views or that the Booths and the Reynolds are hopelessly caught in a spiral of conflict is ultimately daunting. At one stage, Bill points out: 'It's not just tonight, it's tomorrow and the day after, it's not going to get any better. Look, you can't change people like Eddie Booth' (Series Two, Episode Two). According to the outset of the comedy series, it is hence impossible that the ideological conflict between white and black neighbours finds a resolution. This is partly a generic problem; Mick Eaton stresses in his analysis of the sitcom: 'It is clear that the narrative of each episode of the series must not allow for a resolution of the two sides or the problematic/hermeneutic of the show would be eliminated, another "situation" would have to be established, another series written' (Eaton 79). Nevertheless, the circularity of narrative and missing of closure in TV comedy also induces a repetition of frustration and a feeling of entrapment, which, according to James Baker, might actually change the dominant value system (Baker 40). Bill's remark on the fact that migrants from the former British colonies are here to stay (Series Two, Episode One) underlines this prospect of the series, eventually levelling constructed hierarchies between black and white, overcoming racial prejudice and leading to an integration of the other into the British in-group through laughter. However, Rudolph Walker admits that *Love Thy Neighbour* was 'never done to solve the racial problem' (quoted in Bourne 78), although he attributes the popularity of the comedy show to Alf Garnett, Powellism and racial politics of the 1970s.

3 Race and race relations in post-war Britain

Generally, the arrival of the SS *Empire Windrush* in 1948 is the symbolic marker for post-war immigration of black colonial people to Great Britain. The open door policy of the Nationality Act (1948) with its entitlement of UK citizenship invited labour migrants from Britain's colonies to cater to the labour shortage in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs, particularly in the iron industry, transport and the NHS. During this *laissez-faire* period of British immigration, which was conditioned by an economic boom, segmentation of menial labour and economic optimism, 250,000 Caribbeans, 79,000

Indians and 66,000 Pakistanis migrated to Great Britain (Hall, 'Racism' 27). Coming with high expectations, they soon found themselves in menial work, bad housing and confronted by racial abuse. The colour bar of institutional and public racism narrowed the immigrants' fair treatment by police as well as their access to employment or housing. Racism during the 1950s was overtly symbolised by the discriminatory signs on flats for rent: 'No Blacks / No Dogs / No Irish' (Ball 225). In 1958, the first major anti-black riots in London's Notting Hill indicated an ensuing ideology of racism as an expression of fears of cultural difference, miscegenation or sharing resources (Malik 13). With the advancing decolonisation abroad (for example, Nigeria (1960), Tanzania (1961), Trinidad (1962), Kenya (1963), Barbados (1966) and the Bahamas (1973)) and the looming economic crisis in Britain, this eventually brought into effect the first measures in migration control.

As race was predominantly considered a problem connected to the '*number of immigrants*' (Moore, quoted in Hall, 'Racism' 29), the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act set into place an employment voucher system, while the 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act controlled the entry of East African Asians and the 1971 Immigration Act reduced and regulated the immigration of dependents and family members. The 1960s, however, also saw early initiatives towards integration: the Race Relations Act of 1965 established the Race Relations Board and made public discrimination on grounds of race, colour and national origin illegal; with the subsequent Act in 1968, this ruling then specifically covered areas of employment, education and housing. That the issue of race had grown into a problem of 'racism "at home"' (Hall, 'Racism' 26) became particularly apparent with Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech of the same year, which catered to endemic fears of the threat from the black 'Enemy Within' who brings down British society (29–30). Following Stuart Hall's argument, with Britain's economic decline during the 1970s, racism was increasingly constructed on moral panic: hysteria of crime, fear of mugging, welfare scroungers, poverty, decay and youth unemployment all projected onto one particular group (31–33):

Blacks become the bearers, the signifiers, of the crisis of British society in the 70s: racism is its 'final solution' ... This is not a crisis *of* race. But race punctuates and periodizes the crisis. Race is the lens through which people come to perceive that a crisis is developing. It is the framework through which the crisis is experienced. It is the means by which the crisis is to be resolved – 'send it away'. (Hall, 'Racism' 31–32)

These developments combined with a growing emancipation and resistance by the black community towards the end of the 1960s and the politicisation of black consciousness in the 1970s, which inaugurated further social, cultural and political polarisation (Hall, 'Racism' 29). All in all, this led to a rise in anti-black sentiment visible in law enforcement and policing, but

especially in a language of racism within popular culture and media representations (31). The 1976 Race Relations Act's intent to promote equality of opportunity therefore made it unlawful to discriminate against anyone due to race, colour, national or ethnic origin. Being broadcast until that very same year, *Love Thy Neighbour* falls into this crucial period of British race relations, the transitional phase between primary labour migration and secondary family reunion, assimilation and integration, new political correctness and developing black consciousness, ongoing institutional and rising popular racism. This political context is evoked in *Love Thy Neighbour* by touching upon Powellism and the latest Race Relation Act, the heated atmosphere in industrial relations and continuous labour migration, discrimination on the grounds of race and questions of socio-cultural integration and, last but not least, the discussion and deconstruction of racial stereotypes.

4 Representing whiteness

One of the central thematic concerns with regard to representations of race in British TV comedy is the usage – the perpetuation or deconstruction – of well-established stereotypes. *Love Thy Neighbour's* very first episode, 'New Neighbours', sets the tone for the whole series: the audience is introduced to Eddie's working-class values, his political stance and bigoted attitude towards foreigners. He brings forward typical prejudices against non-whites: the inferiority of underclass menial workers, the swamping by their extended families, the olfactory pollution by the smell of foreign food and the disturbance of neighbourly quiet by their music and love of dancing. As a result of the shock that a black couple has moved next door, Eddie briefly intends to sell his house, but soon changes his mind when he spots the attractive new neighbour Barbie. Still, Eddie's intention to 'extend the hand of friendship' in order to 'tear down the walls of prejudice and unfurl the banners of tolerance' is based on the assumption that 'if we don't help our coloured friends, they'll never be civilised' (Series One, Episode Two). While the two women warm up to each other in the kitchen making tea, the two men become acquainted in a conversation following this fundamental prejudice with regard to whiteness and blackness: civilisation versus primitivism. When the central character insinuates that his new neighbour might be 'just like any other *normal* person' (Series One, Episode One), Bill jumps back into the scene, only with a towel wrapped around his waist, his body war-painted with shaving cream and a knife in his hands threatening the aghast Eddie: 'White man perish. If this is how you expect us to behave, then we don't want to disappoint you. Barbie, light the fire. One more white man for the pot' (Series One, Episode One). In playing up to his opponent's prejudices, framed by high-screaming laughter, Bill gets his own back. The black figure thus responds directly to racial prejudices, yet largely remains on the

defensive. The audience might laugh about Eddie Booth's bigotry, laziness and hypocrisy; however, his own in-group does not majorly challenge his opinions and racialism is depicted as one of underclass ignorance. Moreover, although the humour might expose the assumption of white superiority over other ethnicities on racial grounds as being ridiculous, the main perspective nevertheless remains with the white central character. Hence, the scene hints at the strong link between Englishness and whiteness.

Up to now, research has mainly assessed representations of blackness in British ethnic TV comedies. However, to come to a fuller understanding of conceptions of race in *Love Thy Neighbour*, it is imperative to also consider depictions of whiteness. By focusing on the representation of white people in various media, Whiteness Studies since the 1990s have shown that white is often seen as an invisible norm and not as a constructed racialised identity itself (Dyer xiii; Garner 2). During the nineteenth century, when ideas about the difference of races advanced to a classification system, the category race evolved as a scientific justification of dominance (Young 40). Races were ascribed specific psychological and intellectual characteristics, particularly according to the colour of their skin: black was perceived as an anomaly, inferior, evil, hypersexual and morally debased, while white signified goodness, purity, familiarity and normality (Young 39). In contrast to this essentialist notion, race is now regarded as an ideological construct which, on the grounds of perceived generic differences, legitimises white social domination (Malik 12; Young 39).

Synonymising 'white' with supremacy not only entails the power to name but also to classify – to enshrine whiteness as civilised, to exclude phenotypically non-whites from the dominant group and to mark them as deviant or even barbarian (Garner 63–65). In this light, Eddie's constant rants on white superiority versus black inferiority in *Love Thy Neighbour* seem to cater to an offensive populist point of view rather than to funnily expose his bigotry. Besides the notions of a genealogical dominance of the white race, for example, as regards intelligence and civilisation versus the black heritage of illiteracy or servitude, the protagonist also voices clear racist ideas of biological superiority. In one scene, Eddie, backed by his mates Arthur and Jacko, does not see Bill as a blood donor because of his 'coloured blood' (Series One, Episode Four). According to their essentialist ideas, blood is segregated into good and bad, hot and cold, civilised and primitive. Moreover, as white takes precedence over black, Bill's blood would pollute their 'rich' and 'mature' white blood. We find a similar comedy situation already in *Hancock's Half Hour* (BBC 1956–1960; 'The Blood Donor') and *Till Death Us Do Part* ('The Blood Donor'), as well as later in *Little Britain* (BBC3/BBC1 2003–2006; Series Three, Episode Two), with the only difference being that the non-white other is absent. By contrast, Bill is able to react directly to their prejudice with humorous reasoning and irony, but he cannot change the company's conviction that he will never be accepted as an equal because of

his blackness. Here, the comic intention to unmask the essentialisation of race as ridiculous backfires because the other remains marginalised in the group of three white men. Although basic notions of white supremacy are laid open, the scene is not directly resolved and hence does not function in a humorous way to subvert initial notions of racial difference, specifically because it terrorises the non-whites and is not directly countered by a self-affirming blackness. It is rather Eddie's 'whitely' (Frye, quoted in Garner 51) character that grants him the space to assert authority, preach, judge and tell right from wrong in educating the non-white other. As a 'beaten' Bill leaves the table, this scene dramatises whiteness as a prevailing power.

Whiteness exerts forms of power and terror on non-whites, for example, by stigmatising others as less appropriate for membership to their nationality or less suitable for access to their neighbourhood (Garner 18–19). On the one hand, Barbie's comment that it took them six months to find the house in Maple Terrace, Joan pointing out the poor state of the neighbourhood and Eddie's repeated attempts to force the Reynolds out all underline how black people face discrimination in housing and problems of residential segregation. On the other hand, Eddie's wish to sell the house and move back to the North is thwarted when the price is downgraded by the agency and a potential buyer, the racist Mr Britain, labels him 'white trash' because black people live next door (Series Eight, Episode Four).

Hence, although linked to white dominance, the Booth's living conditions and their immobility show that they 'are themselves in positions of relative powerlessness' (Garner 3). Whiteness entails contingent hierarchies that exclude 'deviant' people from power, for example, with regard to certain national, cultural and social backgrounds, most specifically on grounds of ethnicity and race, but also class and gender (65–66). Thereby working-class men, for example, equally become equally racialised as 'people who are outside/beyond/beneath the nation' (Haylett, quoted in Garner 73). Since the late nineteenth century, the urban poor have been paralleled with colonised peoples as unreasonable, irrational, easily excited, childlike, superstitious, criminal, excessively sexual and filthy (72–73). Consequently, the 'urban chav' is considered a backward anomaly that stands in opposition to the cosmopolitan middle classes (73). This has furthered the view – and one certainly perpetuated by *Love Thy Neighbour* – that racism is only the problem of 'white trash' (78). Thus, on the one hand, the Northerner and working-class bigot Eddie himself is on the margin of whiteness, an inferior who has dated views and whose behaviour is deemed inappropriate. On the other hand, and in context with rising racism of the time, lower-class citizens like Eddie have the chance to be absorbed into the dominant group of British whiteness again.

These hegemonies of whiteness privilege similarly apply to gender: while the concept might open up power structures within, it has also been shown that in situations of greater racialised polarisation, gender privileges were

waning (Garner 75). In *Love Thy Neighbour* the race-gender relations reveal that Eddie's male gaze is fixed on the non-white woman, while he frequently breaks off the discussions with his own wife: 'Oh, shut up, woman!' Coinciding with the second wave of feminism, this domestic comedy with a capital 'D' appears highly sexist. Although a stronger character than Alf Garnett's 'silly old moo', the London-born Joan is certainly far from being an 'unruly woman'. But the colour coding of the series posits her as a character in-between: whereas Eddie is presented mainly in pastel colours of blue and grey, underlining his moral conservatism and human coldness, Joan often wears orange clothes, setting her closer to the modern and upwardly mobile black couple. At one point, Joan and Barbie go on strike, on the grounds that their status as housewives is even worse than that of workers and black slaves (Series One, Episode Four). This implicitly questions patriarchy as a system that maintains gender, class and racial privileges.

However, while Eddie's behaviour specifically undermines his claims to white superiority, the overt concentration on class and gender might hide the fact that whiteness actually remains the central norm against which difference is measured (Garner 34–37). In this sense, white 'deviant' people own the privilege of not being subjected to stereotyping in relation to their race, whereas representations of blackness make extensive use of racial stereotypes.

5 Stereotyping blackness

Ensuring an immediate recognition of groups and individuals, comedy thrives on stereotypes and stereotypical oppositions. At the same time, stereotyping is a form of exhibiting prejudice and racism, as Kobena Mercer argues:

Stereotyping is a process of selective perception by which the complex character of experience is filtered and simplified into fixed categories ... Racism and ethnic prejudice have long been seen as classic illustrations of this process of simplification, as both entail rigidly fixed beliefs about racial difference. (Mercer 3)

The contradiction lies in the dependence of the media on stereotypes while also demanding a more 'accurate depiction' (Malik 28) of black people. It is thus important to consider the use of stereotypes as a device of circulating representations of race in media and to assess essentialist, negative, positive and alternative images constructed in order to force boundaries, level hierarchies or elevate integration.

The privilege of whiteness means that white people create the dominant racial imagery (Dyer 9); Stuart Hall showed that blacks in the media are prominently depicted as the slave, the native or the entertainer (quoted

in Mercer 2). With regard to these split representational strategies, Sheila Patterson describes the negative and positive images of black in her book *Dark Strangers* (1963):

[A] coloured skin, especially when combined with Negroid features, is associated with alienness, and with the lowest social status. Primitiveness, savagery, violence, sexuality, general lack of control, sloth, irresponsibility – all these are part of the image. On the more favourable side, Negroid peoples are often credited with athletic, artistic and musical gifts, and with an appealing and childlike simplicity which is in no way incompatible with the remainder of the image. (Patterson 212–213)

This 'stereotypical dualism' (Hulme, quoted in Hall, 'Black and White' 16) is extremely apparent in *Love Thy Neighbour* and not only stabilises these cultural clichés, but also confirms the dichotomy of self versus other.

According to Steve Garner, whiteness as terror and supremacy also includes the notion that otherness becomes the projection of anxieties (Garner 13). Thus, as described by Hall, immigration and race are rendered problematic in the light of the British economic decline. 'White Britain' objectifies non-whites as scroungers, job-stealers, criminals, terrorists – a general threat. Hence, Sarita Malik shows that in comedies about race during the 1970s, especially in *Love Thy Neighbour*, black signifies 'trouble; trouble with the neighbours, trouble with language, trouble with "fitting in"' so that the white character's prejudice becomes somehow understandable with respect to the 'difficulty of the situation' (Malik 97). Indeed, the premise of the series that a black couple moving next door indicates trouble is further underlined by the constant quarrelling, double entendres and cleverness shown in the series. For the white protagonist, Bill is always the 'troublemaker', although it is the 'mixer' Eddie himself who causes the mischief (Series One, Episode Three).

According to Rudolph Walker, however, the representation in *Love Thy Neighbour* at least countered the long-standing image of 'the black person being downtrodden, the black person carrying a spear ... now we had someone who was standing up for himself' (quoted in Bourne 78). He assumes that both white and black characters were on a par with each other, as Bill was able to hit back physically and verbally when abused (78). According to Mark Duguid, this 'seems to be missing the point. Worse, it leads by implication to the view that the racist and the victim of racism are somehow "as bad as each other"' (Duguid). Nina Baden-Semper is even quoted in the *TV Times* saying: 'Anyhow, whenever people insult me, and they do sometimes, I call them white pigs' (quoted in Coleman 20). The superficial premise of the sitcom appears to be that there is prejudice on both sides and that racism is mutual (Malik 97–98; Medhurst, 'Introduction' 18). Moreover, the attempt to balance racist attitudes by showing more racism not only banalises the problem, it also does not take into account the qualitative prospective of

the insult. Whereas 'honkey', 'paleface', 'great white chief', 'whitey' and 'white trash' are derived from an American context, words like 'nig-nog', 'golliwog' and 'sambo' carry direct weight for the history of British imperialism. Both Golliwog and Sambo were black characters of nineteenth-century children's books that are reminiscent of 'darkie' stereotyping. While the golliwog attained iconic status through the British jam manufacturer James Robertson & Sons and was considered a suitable toy for boys in the post-war period, *The Story of Little Black Sambo* was still very popular in the 1960s.

Hence, the belittlement of the racial problematic by means of childhood nostalgia might serve as an explanation as to why for Eddie, this word evidentially stands for a black person in general: 'Charlie's a Scouse. Paddy is a Mick. And you're a Sambo' (Series One, Episode Two). Bill is repeatedly deemed 'too touchy' and 'a bit sensitive' even by his own wife, although unambiguously offensive words like 'nig-nog' and 'golliwog' have been considered racist and unfit for usage in the media since the 1970s. Bill's constant reminder of their discriminating purport and Joan's intervention on the grounds of political correctness are too weak to break Eddie's persistent and habitual use of racial slurs – it becomes a running gag. The double edge of comedy here lies in the problem of distinguishing whether ritual laughter perpetuates, cements and thereby normalises abusive language, or whether the exposure of racism as a ritual actually unmasks the constructedness of racial identities.

With regard to the ambivalence of black stereotypes in medial representations, Rudolph Walker has argued that there was not 'a touch of the Uncle Tom' (quoted in Coleman 30) in *Love Thy Neighbour*. Still, the series capitalises on dated notions, signposting blackness through limbo dancing and voodoo (Malik 98). Thus, while negative images of primitivism are countered with more positive stereotypes of blackness, these seem to predominantly underline how Britain benefited from immigration through a literal process of 'spicing up' (Garner 163) – particularly in popular culture.

One of the major stereotypes of black people in the series concerns food culture: either as primitive cannibalism or added exotic variety to bland English cuisine. The running gag of black cannibalism is introduced in the very first episode and recurs again and again throughout the sitcom, circling around the image of 'Africans' eating 'tinned missionary'. In one of Eddie's worst nightmares, stranded on an island, Bill becomes the superior and orders 'the white pig' Eddie to be barbecued for Christmas dinner (Series Eight, Episode Three). The racial notions with regard to cannibalism become distorted, in particular as it is Bill's role to act on this stereotype in order to expose his antagonist. For Eddie, every foreigner eats muck or curry; he prefers mashed peas and gravy. When Joan prepares yams for tea and mangoes for pudding, he exclaims: 'I want King Edwards!' (Series One, Episode Two). Despite ridiculing Eddie's fear of new things – in this case foreign food – the Trinidadian Bill is presented 'like any other normal person' eating a

typically English roast dinner. Still, Joan mouths that Bill 'looks very good' on yams.

Stereotypes capitalise on the body: in opposition to Eddie and Joan, Bill and Barbie are presented as physically fit and sexy, strengthening the notion that 'Black is Beautiful'. Nina Baden-Semper argues: 'If they hadn't made the black people good-looking, black people wouldn't have done the parts' (quoted in Coleman 29). Hence, against cultural stereotypes of physical deviance, *Love Thy Neighbour* sets a positive image of female beauty and sexiness or male fitness and sportiness. The problem is that the black subject, particularly women, become the object of the dominating and objectifying white male gaze (Kaplan 6). Although Eddie is drafted as a lusting fool, the camera still eroticises and, thereby, others Barbie, who is unable to return the gaze (Julien and Mercer 8; Kaplan 7). Instead of deconstructing voyeurism or objectification, the sitcom capitalises on Barbie's sexiness and kinkiness throughout. This in turn emphasises the stereotype that black people are more passionate and hot-blooded: Joan and Eddie have sex twice a week, whereas Barbie openly talks about her personal needs (Series One, Episode Seven). If black women are seen as threats to white male virtue, black men are seen as threats to white womanhood (Garner 19). After being caught ogling the sunbathing Barbie, Eddie insists on his white – in other words 'pure' – thoughts (Series One, Episode Three), whereas the black man, because of the proverbial virility, is marked as a potential predator who steals 'our' women, or a dangerous 'sex maniac' who intends to rape them (Series One, Episodes One and Six). This idea of physicality and potential violence ties in with 1970s fears of racial outrages and black criminality. Bill is shown as the stereotypical black boxer who threatens Eddie with his 'black fist', although he is a conscientious objector and real violence never ensues.

With regard to physicality, the sitcom also takes up stereotypical images of black people dancing – around the pot, to calypso dancehall music and the limbo. This trope of dancing encapsulates the positive idea that all black people are 'born with the rhythm'. *Love Thy Neighbour* variously refers to famous contemporary black musicians, such as Sammy Davis Jr., Harry Belafonte, Ella Fitzgerald and Shirley Bassey, and thereby underlines the fact that black people have made it in popular culture and entertainment – especially comedy. Here, the sitcom harks back to a long-established stereotype and counter-image of the troublemaker: blacks as clowns. Bill is characterised by a shrieking laugh when he gets the better of Eddie and is presented as the stereotypical black jester who plays his tricks on the poor working-class fool. Eddie's nickname for Bill, Al Jolson, refers to the practice of blackfacing, such as in *The Black and White Minstrel Show* (BBC 1958–1978), which used comedic blatant caricatures of black people. Another comedian, who actually has a cameo appearance in *Love Thy Neighbour*, is black North-Yorkshire Charlie Williams (Series Six, Episode Six). Voicing working-class attitudes in *The Comedians* (ITV 1971–1992), he is often taken as a positive example of

the black presence in the entertainment industry. However, Malik criticises the forms of self-depreciation practised by Williams, making black viewers feel uncomfortable: 'Watch out, or I'll come and live next door to you' (Malik 97). With this quote on neighbourly relations, we are back to the 1970s British ethnic comedies' premise that blackness signifies trouble and at the centre of the sitcom's topic that the proximity of white and black is a problematic issue.

Love Thy Neighbour, although introducing the 'new' topic of race, is certainly not innovative, either in terms of form or with regard to more radical explorations of racial issues as it largely remains on the stage of set stereotypes. Nevertheless, this ethnic TV comedy can be considered an important step towards integrating black actors into mainstream media: due to the success of *Love Thy Neighbour*, both Rudolph Walker and Nina Baden-Samper have become household names in British television. Walker specifically acknowledges that the popularity of the sitcom helped his exposure as an actor (quoted in Bourne 78), being the first black actor in a series regularly seen on television by a larger audience. He later starred in other comedies, such as *The Thin Blue Line* (BBC1 1995–1996) alongside Rowan Atkinson, and has been a major black character in the BBC soap success *EastEnders* (1985–).

6 Black British media cultures

In one episode, *Love Thy Neighbour* self-reflexively criticises the relationship between race and TV comedy by intertextual references to other ITV and BBC shows of the day (Series Three, Episode One). While Barbie likes the jokes being told in *The Comedians*, Bill condemns the show as a racist programme. Similarly, while Joan points out the reality and popularity of *Till Death Us Do Part*, Eddie refers to its central character Alf Garnett as a 'loud-mouthed, ignorant bigot' (Series Three, Episode One). According to critics, however, the 'merely offensive' (Wickham) *Love Thy Neighbour* lacked the bitterness and contradictions of *Till Death Us Do Part* in explorations of race, sex, religion and politics. Still, it is questionable if the legendary status of Alf, a misogynist patriarch, monstrous bigot, deluded everyman, conservative monarchist and working-class anti-trade unionist, had an effect on reactionary attitudes or whether it celebrated and reinforced these prejudices (Eaton 62–63; Duguid; Lockyer 130; Medhurst, 'Introduction' 17). However, the absence of a black character in *Till Death Us Do Part* is remarkable: a modified 1980s reworking of the sitcom as *In Sickness and in Health* (BBC1 1985–1992) featured the black character Winston who could answer back (Mercer 2), when *Love Thy Neighbour* had already given a voice – albeit a defensive one – to a regular black character.

Another series of the late 1960s that attempted to raise important questions and challenge racist attitudes was *Curry and Chips* (ITV 1969), written by *Till Death Us Do Part*'s author Johnny Speight. Seen as a direct response

to Powell's speech (Malik 95), it featured the Irish-Pakistani Kevin O'Grady, played by a browned-up Spike Milligan, and heavily relied on 'crude racial abuse' (Duguid). It was pulled after one series just like *The Melting Pot* (BBC1 1975), a comedy about a Pakistani father and illegally immigrated son, a black Yorkshireman and a Chinese Cockney. The next successful ethnic comedy after *Love Thy Neighbour* was *Mind Your Language* (ITV 1977–1979), also produced by Stuart Allen and written by Vince Powell. It was set in a class of diverse foreign students and capitalised on the misunderstandings of the English language and customs while exploiting obvious non-British stereotypes. More daring perhaps was *Mixed Blessings* (ITV 1978–1980), which centred on the 'problematic' relationship between a white man and his black fiancée. While this series featured the first mixed couple, *The Fosters* (ITV 1976–1977) was Britain's first all-black sitcom. Once again directed by Allen, it starred Norman Beaton as the patriarch and a young Lenny Henry as one of his four children, and focused on the intergenerational conflicts within a black family. Due to the exclusive setting of the domestic sphere, the comedy was not particularly political, although the series subtly conveyed the conditions of black family life in one of London's tower blocks with its social confinement. Being based on the US sitcom *Good Times* (CBS 1974–1979), *The Fosters* was dropped after only two series because it was not quite tailored for British sensibilities.

All in all, British TV comedies of the 1960s and 1970s began to acknowledge the multiracial diversity of Britain, but were characterised by a constant stream of racial slurs and a full exploitation of racial stereotypes. Written exclusively by white writers, the black other ultimately remains the butt of the joke (Malik 96; Pines 13). With the emerging new racism by the late 1960s and its reappearing sense of anxiety regarding the non-white presence, this led to a 'creatively sterile period in British television' (Pines 12) concerning the perception of black experience. Thus, early ethnic sitcoms at that time did not directly respond to the broader socio-political discussion of race and race relations as it evolved in Britain during the period – black consciousness and power, anti-racism, multiculturalism – and must be considered rather conservative in comparison with other media.

Indeed, Young has shown how black filmmakers resisted in content the political and racial positions of the time (Young 34). Hence, while mainstream TV formats still revelled in stereotyping blackness, films like *Reggae* (1970), *Pressure* (1975), *Black Joy* (1978) and *Babylon* (1980) had already engaged with different modes of representing non-white people. Similarly, postcolonial literature from Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) to Buchi Emecheta's *In the Ditch* (1972) and Linton Kwesi Johnson's dub poetry (1978) imaginatively, innovatively and humorously grappled with black experiences of alienation, repression, violence and integration.

Nevertheless, as most critics have pointed out, the 1970s put the question of TV access by marginalised groups on the agenda and ethnic sitcoms have

helped to create new openings to black actors in mainstream television (Baker, Best and Lindeborg 11; Hall, 'Black and White' 14; Pines 13; Young 44). Although these 'light entertainment' achievers once more perpetuated the stereotypical image of the successful black people, they gained visibility on screen, if not in recognition of the complexity of black experience (Hall, 'Black and White' 24). Even though *Love Thy Neighbour's* 'absurdly exaggerated notions of racial prejudice' (Thames Television, quoted in Bennion 33) might seem precarious from today's point of view, by featuring black central characters and pointing to the prevalence of racial stereotyping, the sitcom paved the way for the development of alternative comedies and a more complex representation of black culture during the following decades.³ In the 1990s, Stuart Hall commented that 'black comedy in all its forms offers the widest and most diverse picture of black British life currently available in any genre on British TV; although (as comedy always is) deliberately two-dimensional and typecast' (Hall, 'Black and White in Television' 21). Ethnic comedy remains an ambiguous achievement and its interpretation shows that a critical assessment of contemporary representations of race is still of great relevance.

Notes

1. For more, see Bernd Lenz's discussion of *Dad's Army* in Chapter 3 of this volume.
2. For more on *Hancock's Half Hour*, see Jürgen Kamm and Birgit Neumann's introduction to this volume as well as Richard Kilborn's contribution in Chapter 2.
3. For more, see Deirdre Osborne's discussion of *Desmond's* and Jochen Petzold's discussion of *Goodness Gracious Me* in Chapters 11 and 12 of this volume.

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7

‘You Snobs! You Stupid... Stuck-Up... Toffee-Nosed... Half-Witted... Upper-Class Piles of... Pus!’ Basil Fawlty’s Touch of Class and Other Hotel Matters in *Fawlty Towers*

Paul Davies

1 Introduction: one of the best-loved British TV sitcoms ever

Despite being very short-lived and not airing too often, *Fawlty Towers* (BBC2 1975–1979) is recognised as one of the greatest British TV shows of all time and regularly makes it onto lists of the best and/or most-loved shows and/or sitcoms on British TV. It was voted number one in the British Film Institute’s 100 Greatest British Television Programmes in 2000, and then in 2004 it was ranked number five in the BBC British Comedy Guide’s list of Top 50 British Sitcoms. In April 1982, the two episodes of *Fawlty Towers* used as training films won a Queen’s Award for Export Achievement, while in May 2003 Basil Fawlty was recognised as the most ‘Monstrous Boss on British’ TV by the UK Satellite Channel UK Gold, just beating David Brent from *The Office* (BBC2/BBC1 2001–2003). The show has aired in over 60 countries, in places like Tonga, China, Pakistan, Latvia, Malta and Denmark (*‘Fawlty Towers’ TV Com*).

Fawlty Towers was produced by the BBC and was first broadcast on BBC2 in 1975. Despite rumours of a thirteenth episode, only 12 were ever produced (two series with six episodes each), yet the programme has had a lasting, powerful effect. The setting is a fictional hotel called Fawlty Towers in the seaside town of Torquay in Devon on the ‘English Riviera’. The show was written by John Cleese and Connie Booth, both of whom played main characters. The first series in 1975 was produced and directed by John Howard Davies, and the second in 1979 was produced by Douglas Argent and directed by Bob Spiers. The writers Cleese and Booth were married to each other at the time of the first series, and by the time of the second they had been divorced for almost a year after having been together for 10 years.

Fawlty Towers is a timeless classic by which all other Britcoms rightly continue to be judged and has stood the test of time because of its formal qualities. It is excellently timed, brilliantly performed, written, produced and directed with a

wit at least partly inherited from the Pythons. The actor playing Manuel has described it as 'a tragedy with laughs' ('Fawlty Towers Reopened') and as a symbol of manic hysteria and stress, Basil Fawlty perfectly fits our currently overstressed existences. In addition, *Fawlty Towers* mercilessly satirises the hotel industry and tourist service, both of which were perceived at the time as exemplifying the British disease of chronic inefficiency. The so-called 'British Disease' was a derogatory term for what was at least believed by many at the time to be a relative decline in Britain's economic power throughout the twentieth century, a belief which peaked in the 1970s. Further symptoms included low industrial productivity, heavily government-subsidised yet unprofitable companies, a pattern of strikes and industrial unrest accompanied by militant trade unionism, for example, the National Union of Mineworkers strike in 1973. Moreover, there was the Winter of Discontent from 1978 to 1979, during which more than one million public employees went on strike, litter piled up in the streets and sick patients were turned away from hospitals. Margaret Thatcher was elected in 1979 on a platform promising to make changes and to fix the problems that Britain had.

Even more relevant for *Fawlty Towers*, however, is that right up until the mid-1980s, the leading positions of British companies were occupied by Oxbridge graduates and not by the professionally trained economists and management experts Britain was so desperately in need of. The symptoms of the British Disease were therefore by no means limited to poor industrial relations, but self-indulgent, incompetent, inefficient management in some branches of industry were very much part of the problem as well. This is reflected in the basic premise of *Fawlty Towers*: it is not just that Fawlty is so incredibly rude to his guests and believes the hotel would be just fine without them, but above all he is the least-suited person in the world to run such an establishment, as ill-equipped for his task as were some captains of industry at the time the series was made.

2 Origins and genesis: the 'wonderfully rude' Donald Sinclair

In the words of sitcom expert and self-confessed obsessive Louis Barfe in *Britain's Greatest TV Comedy Moments*:

[A] location filming trip for *Monty Python's Flying Circus* provided the inspiration for one of the most enduring British situation comedies. The cast and crew had been booked into the Gleneagles Hotel in Torquay, run by a former naval officer called Donald Sinclair, but after experiencing his rudeness, the whole party moved to a different hotel. Apart from, that is, John Cleese, who found Sinclair fascinating and stayed on to observe him. (Barfe 155)

He was the rudest man Cleese had ever met, 'wonderful ... extraordinary', and he turned him into Basil Fawlty, in turn a 'wretched character, this

awful man' ('Fawlty Towers: John Cleese'). The following anecdote is symptomatic. The cast were all having dinner when Donald Sinclair noticed animator Terry Gilliam eating in an 'American' way, spearing his meat left-handed and commented: 'We don't eat like that in this country', even rearranging the cutlery on the plate ('Fawlty Towers – Keep Him in Check'), and they were astounded at this out-of-the-blue comment. Filming the next day, they asked for a morning wake-up call 'at a quarter to seven?!? You want me to phone you at a quarter to seven, you want breakfast as well?!?!' He obviously did not like guests or working in a hotel either ('Yes, yes, what is it now?'), sending people off to bed as soon as the bar closed. A similar story involved Eric Idle and the briefcase he had left by the door, but which Sinclair then had removed because 'we thought it might be a bomb – we've had a lot of staff problems recently', so he thought this might be an act of revenge by a fired member of staff who had come back to blow up his hotel ('Fawlty Towers: John Cleese'). Mr Sinclair also threw a bus timetable at another guest after he had dared to ask the time of the next bus to town. Graham Chapman described him as 'completely round the twist, off his chump, out of his tree' (Chapman 197). Michael Palin, who has kept a journal for many years, confirmed Cleese's account of that legendary hotel in Torquay with his notes. It seemed that Sinclair regarded them all as 'a colossal inconvenience. When we arrived back at 12:30 a.m. he just stood and looked at us with [a] look of self-righteous resentment and tacit accusation. Graham tentatively asked for a brandy; the idea was dismissed out of hand' (Palin 28).

John Cleese and Connie Booth then worked out the Donald Sinclair/Basil Fawlty logic: the people you are making money from are the ones who are causing you problems, and if they were not there, life would be so much easier. Thrilled with the inherent comic opportunities, John Cleese wrote the part just after he had walked out on five years of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* ('Fawlty Towers') and tried out his prototype character in an episode of *Doctor at Large* in 1971 entitled 'No Ill Feeling!' with Timothy Bateson as the bad-tempered hotelier and Barry Evans playing the doctor.

3 The poetics and politics of humour in *Fawlty Towers*

David Thomson in the third edition of his *Biographical Dictionary of Film* best encapsulates the spirit of the show when he calls *Fawlty Towers* 'an English defeat as dire as Hastings, a hotel of humiliation and mortification ... Basil Fawlty is the tragedy of fascism' in episodes 'sometimes as lacerating as the reportage of natural horrors and disasters' (Thomson 133–134). While critics have correctly drawn attention to how *Fawlty Towers* episodes 'centre on one principal theme and outline its ramifications' (Holm 188), they have ignored how many of them deal with a specific nightmare hotel situation. In Episode Two, 'The Builders', from Series One, building plans are

misread and everything is built back to front. Episode Four of Series One, 'The Hotel Inspectors', presents Fawlty never really knowing which of his many guests might be a hotel inspector. Episode Five, 'Gourmet Night', has a chef too drunk to cook, and the attempt to get some emergency replacement food fails miserably when the meals are mixed up. While Episode Six, 'The Germans', has the memorable catchphrase 'Don't mention the war!', the first half about a fire drill that sets off a burglar alarm is mostly forgotten in an episode which above all is about 'Basil's inability to control his own behaviour' (Holm 189). Guests are continually complaining in Episodes Seven, 'Communications Problems', and Nine, 'Waldorf Salad', from Series Two, while in Episode Ten, 'The Kipper and the Corpse', every hotel manager's nightmare comes true when a guest dies on the premises. In the very final twelfth episode, 'Basil the Rat', the local health inspector finds health hazards in the kitchen and Manuel's pet hamster, whom he has actually named 'Basil', eventually turns up on the inspector's plate at the end of the episode.

This by no means implies, however, that *Fawlty Towers* is limited to this one topic. Sex, for example, appears to be everywhere in the hotel and especially in Episodes Three, 'The Wedding Party', and Eight, 'The Psychiatrist'. Cleeve has said that he has always been struck by how 'people who aren't getting enough sex are fascinated by it', particularly by 'those people who get it' (quoted in Bright and Ross 147) and Episode Eight in particular 'is all about Basil's dislike of any kind of sexual behaviour' (Bright and Ross 170). According to Lars Holm, Basil Fawlty is in fact 'a virtual compendium of neuroses ... the embodiment of an entire nation's collective idiosyncrasies, hereditary eccentricities and fatal aberrations' (Holm 48). Holm then classifies these under class, sexual and racial phobias along with xenophobia and mythomania (Fawlty's almost pathological aversion to telling the truth), with a money obsession, a gambling compulsion and Sybilophobia (Fawlty's equally pathological fear of his wife Sybil) thrown in for good measure (48–50).

Finally, comedy always works best when it is firmly grounded in some sort of reality audiences/viewers know or can relate to, which then makes it that much easier to hold up to ridicule. Each *Fawlty Towers* episode is based around an everyday situation familiar to audiences/viewers since most people have stayed in a hotel of one sort or another. Even before this programme existed, English seaside boarding houses and their proprietors had something of a reputation for being firm to the point of unyielding, and this could be a throwback to the days when soldiers were billeted in small hotels during wartime or national service. In addition, there are several advantages to setting a series in a hotel according to Cleeve:

We could have almost anyone we wanted walk in, without trying to find an explanation. Plus, we had our basic regulars. It's a situation which almost everyone understands. Everyone knows what it's like to walk up

to a front desk, what it's like if someone's casual, rude, or inattentive. We didn't have to explain or set anything up. It's all very straightforward and conventional, so we could start right away with the jokes. (Quoted in Langton 225)

As if to counteract exactly the kind of inappropriate managerial behaviour personified by Basil Fawlty, Cleese co-founded Video Arts in 1972, a company specialising in personnel training videotapes. The 'Meetings, Bloody Meetings' (1976) video, for example, is a training resource meant to 'enable people to organise and chair meetings that are more effective and more motivating for those who attend'. Its target audience are those 'expected to organise and run meetings' and its overall aim is to 'show how anyone can organise an effective and productive meeting resulting in actionable steps for the future as well as motivating those who attend', its ultimate goal being more 'productive, efficient and effective' meetings ('Meetings, Bloody Meetings'). And the 'Dealing with Difficult People: Demanding Customers' video even features a hotel manager who has to face a customer complaining because there is no soap in his room. Ultimately, 'being perfect' is seen as the best way for managers to ensure their customers will come back to them and not run off to their competitors. Just as in *Fawlty Towers* itself, then, such videos can be interpreted within the context of brazenly insensitive, at times even macho management as one of the symptoms of the aforementioned British Disease of the 1970s.

4 The main cast

Despite or maybe even because of their dysfunctionality, the different characters in *Fawlty Towers* can rightly be considered to be a 'family': no matter how dire the mess they inevitably get themselves into, they always help each other in trying to get out of it with an astonishing number of ploys, deceptions and excuses. The first name and surname of Basil Fawlty (John Cleese) are both telling. 'Basil' is of Greek origin and means royal, kingly, while 'Fawlty' is a play on the word 'faulty', and this is both cruelly ironic and highly appropriate at the same time. Basil is by no means imaginable the king of his establishment and, on the contrary, fails to achieve anything, which proves that failure, not success, is funny. His failures are his own 'faults' and the result of his 'faulty' management: it is as if the changing sign on the title card at the start of every episode, such as 'Watery Fowls', 'Flowery Twats' and 'Farty Towels', is mocking him and warning viewers about another disaster to come. A bully and an authoritarian, he takes all emotional states to extremes, his manic behaviour and continually rising anger genuinely frightening, while simultaneously allowing us to fantasise about attacking people, but not having Fawlty's courage to do so. What he is most frightened of, though, is his wife getting into a tantrum and

unleashing the full force of her fury at him. At the same time, he is much more dependent on her than the other way round, which is why he is much more frightened of her than she is of him. In fact, he is terrified of her and all episodes are fuelled by the fact that he is trying to hide something from her. Fawlty is also eccentric in the sense that, as Edith Sitwell once wrote, 'eccentrics ... are entirely unafraid of and uninfluenced by the opinions and vagaries of the crowd' (Sitwell 29), and to this it can be added that eccentrics escape cultural norms and conventions, often being misfits. As far as his class category is concerned, and referring here to the English sociologist John Goldthorpe's class scheme (see Goldthorpe *passim*) which places individuals into specific social classes, Basil Fawlty is middle-middle class, Grade B, where the chief income-earner's occupation is listed as intermediate managerial, administrative or professional. He is not lower-middle class, which is typically made up of office workers or intermediate managerial, administrative or professional.

In a sense, Prunella Scales as Sybil Fawlty was the third creative power alongside Cleese and Booth, particularly regarding Scales' shrewd insights into the female character she was to perform. Basil Fawlty wants to belong to a professional class, but he is a hotel owner, and it is Sybil Fawlty who keeps pulling him back down to earth. She is a pretty complex and complicated character who can be both devious and annihilating. At 43, Prunella Scales was already a veteran of the stage and screen, and it was her idea that she was not quite as posh as he was. She ignores Basil's ranting, refusing to be hurt by his insults and at times can give as good as she gets.

Andrew Sachs (Manuel) and Cleese had already cooperated on some of the latter's training films. However, one of the most famous catchphrase of all time, 'He's from Barcelona', is not even true of Sachs, because he was actually born in Berlin and originally wanted Manuel to be German too, but Cleese talked him out of it ('Fawlty Towers: Andrew Sachs'). Manuel was based on one idea: back in 1970s London, you were incredibly lucky to get what you ordered in a restaurant because the owners had discovered that by employing people who spoke no known language, they could save a lot of money. According to Sachs himself, Manuel is 'a happy, successful man because he's found a family in Britain, a surrogate family'. Because he is used to his huge family back in Barcelona, he is 'very much a family man and acknowledges that however much violence is meted out to him, it means he's noticed ... He's a child with his parents around him, intensely loyal, generous to a fault' ('Fawlty Towers: Andrew Sachs').

The Fawlty's are Polly's (Connie Booth) surrogate parents and she is there to keep the peace as the voice of sanity and calm amidst the madness, simultaneously trying to save Basil from his predicaments. The two lead women are strong female characters, and the women's roles are very well written for the 1970s, with the women saving the day time and again.

5 Scripting *Fawlty Towers*: format and design

The whole team were working under the very demanding conditions of a sitcom with five days a week to rehearse one hour in the studio and two hours in front of an audience. In addition, for every minute on screen they spent one hour editing, an average of 25 hours per show ('Fawlty Towers' *TV Com*). And whereas the camera cuts in an average show were 200, here it was 400 ('Filming Guide' *OoCities*).

While most sitcom writers spend two weeks turning out an episode, John Cleese and Connie Booth spent six weeks writing each episode. Sixty-five pages was about the average for a sitcom script, yet here 120–130 or even 135–140 pages was the norm ('Fawlty Towers Reopened'; 'Fawlty Towers: John Cleese'). They were very well constructed: first, the plot was worked out in considerable detail and then the dialogue, which is why sometimes they would spend two and a half weeks on a plot, though by no means always the same one. Cleese has said they always knew where they were going, and every episode had a key idea accompanied by one or two subplots, other threads running in parallel for a time. Then they would become intertwined and, by the end, in the last five minutes, they would all come together ('Fawlty Towers: John Cleese').

As far as both the format and design are concerned, unlike American sitcoms, where 20 or more episodes in a season are the norm, British sitcoms are typically produced in one or more series of six episodes. The majority of British sitcoms are 30 minutes long and are recorded on studio sets in a multiple-camera set-up. *Fawlty Towers* was filmed on video in front of a live studio audience, so there was no canned laughter and the resultant very few outdoor sequences could be followed on a TV monitor. The team played it at a rapid pace for the people watching at home rather than in the studio ('Fawlty Towers: John Cleese').

By now there are a number of sitcom categories into which *Fawlty Towers* could comfortably fit. Richard F. Taflinger distinguishes between a 'domcom', a domestic comedy set around a family unit, an 'actcom', an action comedy emphasising action, not characterisation, and a 'dramedy', a more serious dramatic comedy. Hartley distinguishes between 'the family' or 'domestic' and 'workplace' comedy (78–81). Selby and Cowdary define the organic and the structured plot. With the organic plot, 'we are more interested in the response of characters to the various events that seem to grow and develop in a natural ("organic") way around them. The impression given is that these characters are there all the time and we just happen to drop in on an unedited and unstructured part of their lives' (Selby and Cowdary 95), *Fawlty Towers* on the other hand is definitely an example of the structured plot, where 'we are aware that we are in the presence of a "made" and edited account' (Selby and Cowdary 95).

Selby and Cowdary also draw our attention to a variety of sitcom comic strategies that apply to *Fawlty Towers*. First of all, there is what they term the ludicrous, 'a comic form that involves the central character(s) being caught up in circumstances beyond their control' (Selby and Cowdary 112), which is obviously true of Basil Fawlty. Then we have the ridiculous, with, for example, Basil thrashing his car with a tree branch in slapstick fashion in 'Gourmet Night'. Finally, they mention verbal wit: 'Basil's sharply sarcastic wit ... ties in with Basil's frustration with the world, and so he resorts to a highly imaginative and disruptive use of language to stave off this frustration' (113).

6 'A Touch of Class' and the politics of class-related humour

Fawlty Towers has an overriding concern with class, particularly the politics of class-related humour. One common factor in TV Britcoms is the exploration of social mores, and a key theme in many is social and class entrapment. Characters as diverse as Basil Fawlty and Edmund Blackadder¹ are constrained and contained by their situation despite their inner longing to escape. The characters in *The Office* are stuck in a pointless job, Rodney and Del Boy in *Only Fools and Horses* (BBC1 1981–2003) are continuously trying to strike it rich and, perhaps most blatantly, the characters in *Porridge* (BBC1 1974–1977) are prisoners, 'doing porridge' being British slang for serving a prison sentence, as porridge was the traditional breakfast in UK prisons. Much of the humour in *Fawlty Towers* stems from Basil Fawlty's constant struggle to escape his own class and move up the social ladder. Constantly dissatisfied by the social status of his guests, it is his sworn goal to attract the higher social classes, which explains why he is always trying to make the standards of the hotel higher. One of the ways in which he tries to achieve this goal is by introducing 'Gourmet Night' in Episode Five, where he invites some high-class people from the area to a specially arranged 'gourmet dinner'.

'A Touch of Class' was first broadcast on 19 September 1975 on BBC2 as the very first episode of the very first series. As the episode opens, we realise that Basil has placed an ad in a posh magazine to raise the tone of his hotel and upgrade the class of its clientele: 'I mean, have you seen the people in Room Six? They've never even sat on chairs before. They are the commonest, vulgarest, most horrible, nasty...' The seemingly aristocratic Lord Melbury then follows the leather-jacketed cocky cockney Danny Brown into reception – to Basil's immense relief. Basil fawns over Melbury at every opportunity, but there turns out to be more to this member of the aristocracy than meets the eye. Meanwhile, Sybil orders Basil to hang a picture while a Mr Wareing is continually trying to order a 'gin and orange, a lemon squash and a scotch and water'. We must not forget that all the while both Mr Brown and Lord Melbury are role-playing: the former is a CID undercover investigating the

latter, a confidence trickster. It should also be mentioned that the way in which the episode ends with Fawlty being conned by Melbury out of £200 'clearly indicates that Basil's veneration for members of the aristocracy in fact covers a deep and abiding resentment' (Holm 53) and it is Sir Richard and Lady Morris who get the full brunt of Fawlty's wrath: 'You snobs! You stupid... stuck-up... toffee-nosed... half-witted... upper-class piles of... pus!'

The different patterns of politeness, polite friendliness and polite formality contained in this episode allow for a closer look at the diversity of social relations in British society. The initial exchange between Mr Brown and Basil, and particularly the beginning of the conversation indicate the starting point of tensions, greetings and requests. Mr Brown asks for a room and seems to forget the boundaries set between Fawlty and himself, totally ignoring the social difference. He is speaking as if Fawlty were a friend – a 'mate' – instead of the hotel manager. He does not say 'Hello' or 'Good morning/afternoon/evening', just 'Allo!' Then, instead of apologising for disturbing, he just asks very directly: 'Got a room?' There's no 'excuse me' or 'please', and Fawlty answers by asking 'I beg your pardon?', which shows that he did not expect such language from Mr Brown. Mr Brown insists on repeating: 'Got a room for tonight, mate?' He obviously ignores Fawlty's remark and goes even further by calling him his 'mate', indicating a wish to be put on the same level as Fawlty. Fawlty keeps using the same kind of language, insisting on the social gap contrasting 'mate' by 'sir' and using modals ('shall have to'). Mr Brown answers that he would like a double room using the imperative form: 'Yeah. No, make it a double.'

Barely six minutes into the opening episode, Basil Fawlty's character is firmly established as someone totally convinced of his own self-importance, contemptuously looking down his nose at every single guest, for example, referring to Mr Brown in Manuel's presence as 'this gentleman'. On first laying eyes on Mr Brown, Fawlty's whole body language and facial expressions betray what he feels as he quite literally turns to stone. Fawlty's subsequent behaviour is a perfect embodiment of his attitudes to class. His disdain for Mr Brown is obvious after they have met and results from how he always judges people from first appearances. The fact that Mr Brown is a cockney and, even worse, wears a bomber leather jacket is all the evidence Fawlty needs that he is a member of the working class with a 'common' accent, which is why he flatly refuses to help or acknowledge him and treats him with utter disdain. He immediately assumes Mr Brown is a bit slow on the uptake, for example, questioning whether he has the intelligence to fill in the registration form and to know that Barcelona is in Spain. Yet it turns out that Mr Brown can speak fluent Spanish, which he does with Manuel to the complete devastation of Fawlty, whose whole body sags on learning this. The final insult is that Mr Brown's last word 'Key?' is not even a complete sentence and shows his lack of deference. Acts of deference are normally used to convey appreciation and respect, and when these rules are broken, problems

occur, such as a feeling of unease on the part of those who are socially interacting with the person breaking the rules (Goffman). This is exactly what unsettles Fawltly here, his body language once again demonstrating this, as he slams the key down on the desk, demonstratively turns his back on Mr Brown and retires to his office, letting out a snort of indignation before relaxing to the strains of Brahms' Third Symphony. The final insult: Basil Fawltly is not paid the respect he both expects and thinks he deserves.

A second conversation takes place later between Melbury and Fawltly which can equally be divided into two parts. First of all, there is Fawltly's behaviour before he learns that Melbury is a Lord and then his completely different attitude after he finds out the truth. In the first part Melbury starts by asking for a room for a few nights, yet the register is completely different from Mr Brown's: 'I was wondering if.' Then he plays down his request saying that it is just for 'a few nights' and, besides, he uses terms belonging to a high register such as 'accommodation' or 'I beg your pardon?' Fawltly's language is the exact opposite. He asks very direct questions: 'Have you booked?' There is no 'sir' or 'gentleman' at all. Furthermore, he is pretty aggressive, asserting 'we're not full, we're not full. Of course, we're not full' and repeating the adjective 'full'. Considering his position as hotel manager, not telling a guest immediately that there are some vacant rooms to be had is not only inappropriate behaviour, but also and above all downright rude.

However, as soon as Fawltly understands that Melbury is in fact 'Lord Melbury' and that he consequently fits perfectly his vision of a 'higher class of clientele', he reacts differently. He immediately changes his language and his behaviour, for instance, calling Melbury 'Your Lordship' or 'your honour'. He apologises for his previous rude behaviour: 'I'm sorry', 'I do apologise', 'please', 'forgive me', using the emphatic forms 'so' and 'do' to underline that. In fact, he overcompensates to please Melbury, and this exaggeration renders Fawltly's character even more hilarious. Next, he employs indirect expressions like 'I'm so sorry to have kept you', as he wants to know what he can do for Melbury. He starts out by asking if he can do 'something' then expands his frame of reference by using the more encompassing word 'anything'. Finally he says 'anything at all', which is even more generous. At this point, he is virtually begging to do 'anything at all' for Melbury. He even fetches his cases, by doing so taking on Manuel's job, as a way to satisfy Melbury's requests. On top of that, he flatters Melbury, exclaiming 'how very wise', but he immediately takes precautions, saying 'If I may say so', which is a way not to offend Melbury while simultaneously congratulating him to the hilt on his choice of a regular single room. By overdoing his compliments, Fawltly unwittingly makes the situation comical. Then he tries to be funny, saying 'naturellement' with a French accent as a sign of refinement or, more appropriately in this context, to add a touch of 'class' to his character.

When alone with Melbury, though, he does not know what to say. The only theme he finds is the weather in Torquay, something the English like

to talk about because it papers over awkward silences. Right at the end, Fawlty does not hesitate to exaggerate facts, making his discourse totally absurd and unlikely. He uses exclamations such as 'splendid', 'beautiful' and 'wonderfully'. He makes things up in trying to satisfy Melbury, who does not care about what he says. In his eagerness to make a good impression on Melbury, Fawlty becomes excessively polite, far more so than the actual situation requires, and one source of humour here lies in how Fawlty's double standards and hypocrisy represent a deviation from the norm of honesty required from hotel managers.

A little later on, Fawlty takes this class-conscious, class-driven exaggerated form of politeness to a new level when he wants to please Melbury after having by mistake removed a chair from where he was about to sit down. Fawlty offers Melbury dinner, and although he has other engagements, fortunately for the servile hotel manager, Melbury has a 'small' favour to ask, the cashing of a small cheque. Fawlty agrees on the spot and is 'delighted', 'so happy' to be able to comply with the request. In fact, it would be 'a privilege' to help, and whereas we would expect Melbury to be the one to thank him, Fawlty's 'Thank you so much' displays an excess of gratitude as if Fawlty himself were benefiting from this, even going so far as to talk about 'What breeding' and how 'it's delightful to have people like that staying here, sheer class'.

It was the people who were similarly 'aspirational' who put Margaret Thatcher into power at the end of the decade, demonstrating *Fawlty Towers'* great force in capturing contemporary culture and some of its social concerns. Basil Fawlty is the incarnation of the frustrated, would-be social climber from what is now termed Middle England, that 'burgeoning class of ambitious, self-improving home-owners who have become wedded to capitalism and consumerism' (O'Sullivan). Fawlty is tremendously class-conscious, always trying to become a little bit grand and adopting unjustified attitudes of superiority over others, who are only there for him to insult or to improve his position in the social hierarchy. In this case, it is the professional hierarchy: can he get a good recommendation for his hotel? Fawlty is desperate to belong to a higher social class and sees the successful running of the hotel as his means to this end, namely to turn it into an establishment of true class. Nevertheless, at the same time he is trapped in a job where he has to be pleasant to people he either despises or yearns to be above socially, people he would much rather snub. There are shades of Tony Hancock here, a little man with delusions of grandeur constantly thwarted in his ambitions. All of this is further evidence of how 'class pervades all aspects of English life', in what is still 'a highly class-conscious culture' (Fox 15). This explains why so many Britcoms have the class system and its tensions at the very heart of their humour, from the social climbing aspirations of Hyacinth Bucket, with her insistence on the French pronunciation of her surname, in *Keeping Up Appearances* (BBC1 1990–1995),² to the numerous exchanges between the working-class service and repair men and their employee counterparts, who

at least claim to belong to a higher class, in the fictional London department store of *Are You Being Served?* (BBC1 1972–1985).

'A Touch of Class' demonstrates how exaggerated forms of politeness can be used to create humour within the framework of specific situations of hierarchical power and social distance, in particular when connected to workplaces such as the Fawlty Towers hotel. Social distance is used with the meaning of how (dis)similar individuals are in terms of social status and class. Such social distance can be heightened or diminished by the use of language. For instance, in *Fawlty Towers*, Fawlty often uses the phrase 'Mr Fawlty to you' precisely in order to increase social distance. Seen from the historical perspective of Britain in the 1970s, the episode's concern with matters of class reflects the preoccupations of many British people concerning where they were on the social ladder and whether or not they could climb it.

7 Reception and influences

Twelve half-hour episodes were screened in the 1970s, the richness of the stories and characters always giving the impression there were many, many more. *Fawlty Towers* first aired in 1975, Series One concluded in the autumn of 1975, and the final episode, 'Basil the Rat', was broadcast on Thursday 25 October 1979, having taken a total of three and a half years to return, during which time *Life of Brian* (1979) was made, punk emerged, and Cleese and Booth got divorced. Amusingly in hindsight, certain executives at the BBC did not like Cleese's concept for the show and nor did they have particularly high hopes for it. Even now, there is a framed memo in the Light Entertainment Department declaiming: 'I'm afraid I thought this one as dire as its title. It's a kind of "Prince of Denmark" of the hotel world. A collection of clichés and stock characters which I cannot see being anything but a disaster' (among others, Young includes a photograph of the memo in 'How *Fawlty Towers* Almost Never Opened its Doors').

Some like Terry Jones considered *Fawlty Towers* a sell-out because it was a conventional and traditional straight sitcom in contrast to the experimental, avant-garde form and style of *Monty Python*, integrating animation, film and so on. Cleese was even seen as a traitor by Jones ('Fawlty Towers: John Cleese'). *Fawlty Towers* did not catch fire with its first broadcast on BBC2 in 1975, and only when it was repeated on BBC1 did audience-viewing figures pick up. The first episode was not an instant hit at a time when Britain only had three TV channels. It aired on BBC2 at 9pm after *The Money Programme*, a popular financial and business programme, and before *Leap in the Dark*, a supernatural television anthology series consisting of docudramas re-enacting real-life cases of paranormal occurrences. Only 3.7 per cent of the population tuned in. Yet by October 1975, it was fast becoming compulsory viewing for comedy fans. By the end of its first series, it had almost doubled its viewing figures, with close to seven million tuning in for the last episode.

Fawlty Towers was becoming a national obsession. Cleese and Booth were persuaded to write another six episodes for transmission in 1979. Thirteen million tuned in for Series Two and, when it was repeated, 15 million tuned in ('Fawlty Towers: John Cleese' *passim*).

Shown in over 60 countries, *Fawlty Towers* is one of British TV's most successful exports. Cleese has speculated as to whether the success of the series rests on its universality, because viewers all over the world recognise the archetypes that crop up in different cultures ('Fawlty Towers: John Cleese'), a somewhat surprising comment, perhaps, considering that its success outside of Britain is normally accredited to its Britishness. The influence of *Fawlty Towers* on popular culture and on subsequent TV comedies has been enormous. Descriptions of a certain type of Fawltyesque hotel have now become part of language use in England, as some traveller reviews on the website TripAdvisor indicate:

The owner was downright rude. We were looking for TV remote in Guest Lounge (no TVs in rooms) and were subjected to a half hour tirade, saying this was his private house and how dare we go through his things. His delightful eccentricity turned into Basil Fawlty-like venom. We left – much to his apparent bewilderment! Really upsetting. ('Lacock Pottery')

Jennifer Saunders and Dawn French, the two creators of *Absolutely Fabulous*, acknowledge the influence of John Cleese. The decision by Cleese and Booth to quit before a third series has often been lauded, as it ensured that the show's successful status would not be weakened by later, lower-quality work. Subsequently, it has inspired the makers of other shows to do likewise. Most notably, Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant refused to make a third series of either *The Office* or *Extras*, citing *Fawlty Towers*' short lifespan.

8 Conclusions

Fawlty Towers has done inestimable service to the cause of TV Britcoms and their continuing development over the years. Concerning formal innovations in the field of TV comedy, the show successfully entered new terrain with its fast-paced editing style and its combination of both verbal wit and physical comedy. *Fawlty Towers* has had an enormous influence on other TV comedies, simultaneously absorbing influences from the theatre, particularly music hall and stand-up comedy, with many of those involved from theatrical backgrounds themselves. Arguably, TV is inconceivable in its current form without its groundbreaking impact.

It is often speculated as to how far characters in comedy represent deviations from 'normality', how far they encapsulate transgression and subversion. In the case of *Fawlty Towers*, while on the one hand, Basil Fawlty is transgressive and subversive in the way in which he speaks his mind to his

guests, on the other hand, he upholds the class system through his desire to climb the social ladder. The whole production is an indicator of class in British society in the 1970s. Regarding the politics of class-related humour especially, the targets are the social hierarchies at the *Fawlty Towers* hotel itself, while Fawlty with his self-importance and social aspirations is the butt of a lot of the jokes. Then, as now, 'a great deal of everyday English humour is preoccupied with class issues ... We are always laughing at class-related habits and foibles, mocking the aspirations and embarrassing mistakes of social climbers', not to mention taking an obvious 'mischievous delight in pin-pricking the balloons of pomposity and self-importance' (Fox 72). In a broader sense, the values and power structures the jokes take aim at are those of British society in the 1970s, and Basil Fawlty's incompetence reflects that decade's British Disease of, among other things, mismanagement. In an ironic paradox, the historical accuracy of which is almost cruel, we are dealing with a man singularly lacking in the right abilities to climb the social or any other form of ladder. His attempts to nevertheless do so at every available opportunity provide both a mirror onto the similar aspirations of others in class-ridden 1970s Britain as well as generating a great amount of the humour of this inspired Britcom.

Notes

1. See Gerold Sedlmayr's contribution in Chapter 10 of this volume.
2. See Marion Gymnich's contribution in Chapter 16 of this volume.

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8

Ignorant Master, Capable Servants: The Politics of *Yes Minister* and *Yes Prime Minister*

Jürgen Kamm

1 Introduction: concept and design

Yes Minister is a British situation comedy which was produced and broadcast by the BBC from 1980 to 1982, with a Christmas Special airing in 1984, and written by Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn. Jay had attended a lecture by Barbara Castle to the Civil Service College in 1972 which made him aware of the intriguing distinction between ministry's policy and minister's policy. Earlier on, Jay had helped to launch *That Was the Week That Was* in 1962 and he felt that the civil service would be an excellent subject matter for a new sitcom. John Cleese had been at Cambridge with Lynn where they had set up the team of the Cambridge Footlights and it was Cleese who introduced the two men to each other when all three cooperated on the Video Arts project (Cornell, Day and Topping 115). The idea was that Jay would use his inside knowledge of Whitehall wrangling, while Lynn was to contribute his wonderful sense of humour and gift for comic rhetoric (Evans 586; Lewisohn 735). In 1977 the pilot script was submitted to the BBC and by the time several episodes were completed in script, it was 1978 and broadcasting was scheduled for 1979. However, since a General Election was to be held in May 1979, the BBC was worried that such an eminently political comedy might be perceived as influencing electoral behaviour. As a result, Series One started on 25 February 1980 when the new Government led by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was in office.

Looking back on their collaboration, Jay and Lynn in *The Yes Minister Miscellany* (2010) recount how their original idea for the show took shape:

Yes Minister started from two parallel perceptions. The first was that the television audience was seeing a lot of politics and politicians but only the bits they were meant to see. There was a whole world of activity going on behind the scenes that they were not supposed to know about – the world of Whitehall where things got done, rather than the world of Westminster where they were only talked about. The centre of this world was the

minister's private office, and the central figure – the Permanent Secretary – was someone most of the audience did not know existed. The tension between him and the minister was clearly a fruitful source of comedy, with each one needing the other and yet each having separate and often conflicting objectives and motivations. (Jay and Lynn, *Miscellany* 1)

The second perception concerned the power struggles between these two characters, with the Minister being backed by the political mandate and the Permanent Secretary disposing of many decades of service and inside knowledge. The contrast between a rather naïve superior and an infinitely craftier inferior figure had been successfully employed in previous television comedies. An early example is *Steptoe and Son* (BBC1 1962–1974), where the ideas of the young dynamic son (Harry H. Corbett) are invariably stonewalled by his conservative father (Wilfrid Brambell). An even more striking specimen is *Dad's Army* (BBC1 1968–1977), where the self-appointed head of the Defence Volunteers, Captain George Mainwaring (Arthur Lowe), is a pompous and incompetent bank manager, while his second in command, Sergeant Arthur Wilson (John Le Mesurier), is an extremely polite and public-school-educated gentleman who repeatedly saves his commanding officer from committing the worst of blunders.¹ Finally, the formula may be seen in operation in the relationship between Jeeves and Wooster. Based on the stories by P.G. Wodehouse, the BBC produced a first version under the title *The World of Wooster* (1965–1967) with Ian Carmichael as Bertie Wooster and Dennis Price as his butler Jeeves, but cult status was not reached until the roles were impersonated by Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie in *Jeeves and Wooster* (ITV 1990–1993).

The glue between subject matter and televised format was the scriptwriters' quest for authenticity, endowing the sitcom with a truth claim akin to that of a documentary. Although none of the scenes was filmed on actual locations in Whitehall, the premises of the (Prime) Minister and the administrative offices were convincingly reproduced. As far as the gathering of information was concerned, Jay and Lynn admit that most of their insight came from numerous politicians (Cornell, Day and Topping 115) with respectable informants like Lady Falkender, Harold Wilson's former secretary (Evans 586), while the civil servants, with the exception of Lord Rothschild (Jay and Lynn, *Miscellany* 4), remained discreet and reluctant to divulge information. As a result, most politicians, including Margaret Thatcher (Oakley 69),² felt that the episodes offered a realistic description of civil servants while drawing gross caricatures of politicians, whereas the staff in Whitehall harboured a diametrically opposed opinion. As a result, it is hardly surprising that the show corroborated 'most viewers' suspicion that what they were watching was unhealthily close to real life' (Crisell 201).

The desire to be as mimetically close as possible to political life obviously depended on the casting of the roles of Minister and Permanent Secretary.

Paul Eddington and Nigel Hawthorne were initially hesitant since they had merely seen the pilot script and, although they both liked it, were afraid that their acting careers might be damaged unless the following episodes were of a similar quality. Only after the script for Series One, Episode Four ('Big Brother') was completed did they feel confident enough to accept the parts of Jim Hacker and Sir Humphrey Appleby and, as one episode followed after another, they turned *Yes Minister* into a political and indeed national institution, 'a Rolls-Royce of a series that ran with the smoothness of that engine and the precision of a ministerial cover up' (Lewisohn 735). The show won the BAFTA for Best Comedy Series three years in succession (1980, 1981 and 1982) and each time the award went to Nigel Hawthorne. However, after Series Three and 21 episodes in total, Jay and Lynn felt that they had exhausted the potential of the configurative pattern and of possible subjects and situations until they realised that Jim Hacker might be promoted to Prime Minister. This opened up new possibilities, which resulted in a 60-minute Christmas Special ('Party Games') and 16 further episodes of *Yes Prime Minister* (1986–1988). As will be argued towards the end of this chapter, both programmes have stood the test of time. In a poll on 'Britain's Best Sitcom' conducted by the BBC in 2004, *Yes (Prime) Minister* occupied sixth place out of 100 listed productions ('The Final Top Ten Sitcoms').

The show is indubitably original with regard to political subject matter, but it is traditional in the sense that it presents self-contained episodes of 30 minutes with inserted laugh tracks, invariably ending on the phrase 'Yes (Prime) Minister'. Moreover, it is formally innovative since individual motives and the occasional plotline, especially in *Yes Prime Minister*, are spun over several episodes. In addition, Jim Hacker, in contrast to other sitcoms, is not a static character, but develops by changing his behaviour, by learning the ropes of his business and by gaining more control over his Department, and by Series Three of *Yes Minister*, he manages to score the odd victory over the scheming Sir Humphrey.³ The comedy relies, first of all, on surprising situations arising out of Hacker's well-meant attempts to introduce lean management by cutting waste and staff, an approach which is reminiscent of Thatcher's monetarism, but such manoeuvres are usually no match against the Machiavellian stratagems of Sir Humphrey, who feels that his political influence is directly measurable by the number of staff employed in his Department. In fact, the purely fictional Department of Administrative Affairs (DAA) is admirably chosen since the Department is responsible for administration and it is this meta-administrative approach which accounts for much of the comedy. In such a way, the whole range of political topics from environmentalism to health care, from higher education to nationalised industries, from public transport to art sponsoring and so forth is satirically explored.

Moreover, the scriptwriters were extremely responsive to topical incidents and subjects of debate, which were promptly included into the major

design of the storyboard. Thus, for example, in the Christmas Special 'Party Games', broadcast on 17 December 1984, the Cabinet Secretary Sir Arnold (John Nettleton) regrets having advised the Prime Minister in favour of employing the army during strikes. To contemporary viewers, this must have immediately been understood as a reference to the miners' strike which had started in March of that year and during which the Thatcher Government had despatched police squads from all over the country in order to stop pickets preventing strike-breakers from entering the mines. In a similar fashion, the religious and financial policies of the Church of England are satirically exposed in 'The Bishop's Gambit', broadcast on 20 February 1986, where Prime Minister Hacker has to recommend a suitable candidate to fill the vacant see of the fictitious bishopric of Bury St Edmunds, only to find out that it is all largely a matter of old-school ties. Quite fittingly, Parliament discussed and passed during that year the Bishops (Retirement) Measure 1986, in which such financial regulations received legal status. Finally, the project of building the Channel Tunnel went ahead after the Treaty of Canterbury had been signed in February 1986 and in the episode 'A Diplomatic Accident', broadcast on 17 December 1987, the various legal problems and issues of sovereignty between Britain and France, poised as the traditional arch-enemy, are amusingly unfolded. Indeed, a few episodes are marked out by an astounding degree of topicality: "'The Economy Drive'" briefly mentioned nuclear attack provisions, a subject covered by *Panorama* exactly an hour beforehand, and, once Hacker became PM, he fell out with his defence secretary on the same day that Michael Heseltine resigned' (Cornell, Day and Topping 116).

Like all television comedies, the success of *Yes (Prime) Minister* depended largely on the performances of the three principal actors. To increase the comic effects, the scriptwriters introduced a third character in the shape of Bernard Woolley (Derek Fowlds), an Oxford graduate with a First in Latin and Greek, and a young high-flyer in the civil service enmeshed in a conflict of divided loyalties as, on the one hand, Personal Private Secretary to the Minister and, on the other hand, dependent as far as his further career in the civil service is concerned on the benevolence of Sir Humphrey as his superior. Although the near-documentary style of the programme was underlined by frequent cameo appearances of well-known personalities from different walks of public life, the plots and the conflicts cohered around this triumvirate of admirably drawn characters, and Eddington, Hawthorne and Woolley managed to carve out their names as first-class actors and comedians.

Unfortunately, the scripts of the episodes were never published, but Jay and Lynn, inspired by the diaries of former Cabinet Minister Richard Crossman, took *The Crossman Diaries* (1979) as their model and transformed the dramatic dialogues into diarist narratives published in 1989 as *The Complete Yes Minister* and *The Complete Yes Prime Minister*.⁴ The approach to transfer the acting from screen to printed page met with applause by Michael Mulkey

because 'the authors have been led to describe explicitly much that was left implicit in the television presentation or that was conveyed indirectly through the mannerisms, phrasing and deportments of the actors' (Mulkey 187). However, one tends to side with Andy Medhurst, who rightly insists that comedy 'is never only textual – it is performed, enacted, an event, a transaction, lived out in a shared moment by its producers and consumers' (Medhurst 4). Indeed, the splendid performances of the three principal actors, including vocal modulation, body language and facial expression, cannot possibly be reproduced on the printed page, but since much of the comedy in this case is verbal – and, it may be added, verbal to a quite unusual degree – it may be feasible to do justice in writing to one of the finest Britcoms ever produced.

2 Dignified and efficient parts

In 1867, the year of the second great Reform Bill, Walter Bagehot published *The English Constitution*. In the absence of a written constitution, Bagehot's description of the unwritten rules and conventions of political life in Britain soon became a canonised text which even today almost enjoys constitutional authority. In his survey of the modes of political operation, he introduced a significant distinction between the dignified part, that is, the monarchy and the Royal Family, and the efficient parts of the constitution, including Her Majesty's Government and the political administration at Whitehall. This distinction may also be profitably employed for an understanding of *Yes Minister*:

The brief description of the characteristic merit of the English Constitution is that its dignified parts are very complicated and somewhat imposing, very old and rather venerable while its efficient part, at least when in great and critical action, is decidedly simple and rather modern. We have made, or rather, stumbled upon, a constitution which – though full of every species of incidental defect – though of the worst workmanship in all out-of-the-way matters of any constitution in the world, yet has two capital merits: – it contains a simple efficient part which, on occasion, and when wanted, *can* work more simply and easily, and better than any instrument that has yet been tried; and it contains likewise historical, complex, august, theatrical parts, which it has inherited from a long past – which take the multitude – which guide by an insensible but an omnipotent influence the associations of its subjects. Its essence is strong with the strength of modern simplicity; its exterior is august with the Gothic grandeur of a more imposing age. Its simple essence may, *mutatis mutandis*, be transplanted to many very various countries, but its august outside – what most men think it is – is narrowly confined to nations with an analogous history and similar political relics. (Bagehot 10–11)

Bagehot's reference here is to the Westminster Model and its global export as the 'Mother of all Parliaments'. However, using his term of *mutatis mutandis*, the distinction between dignified and efficient parts applies just as well to the aesthetics of *Yes Minister*, since it is the Minister who poses in all grandeur in public while his civil servants act most efficiently behind closed doors and, as Jay and Lynn observe, almost unbeknownst to the public. Indeed, the minister's ceremonial role, his function as a political actor rather than agent, is discussed in 'A Victory for Democracy'. Dick Wharton, Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office, warns his colleague Sir Humphrey that Prime Minister Jim Hacker must not fall into one of his Churchillian moods to defend democracy, but that he must stick to the ceremonial role allotted to him:

Dick Wharton: As far as Foreign Affairs are concerned his job is to confine himself to the hospitality and ceremonial role.

Sir Humphrey: You know what happens when politicians get into Number Ten: they want to take their place on the world stage.

Dick Wharton: But people on stages are called actors. All they are required to do is look plausible, stay sober and say the lines they are given in the right order.

Sir Humphrey: Yes, some of them try to make up their own lines.

Dick Wharton: Generally, they do not last long. (CYPM 165)

Ministers of cabinet rank were always vastly outnumbered by civil servants. In 1979, when the programme was in its planning stages, the British Government employed 732,000 civil servants and due to a new Civil Service Code which came into force in 1996, the number dropped to 499,900 (Central Office of Information 72) – a reduction of 232,000 jobs which is almost equal to the current population of Southampton ('City Statistics'). The number of employees remained fairly constant under the New Labour Governments; in 2011, 444,000 civil servants were employed, 53 per cent of them being female ('Civil Service Statistics').

The sitcom gains considerable mileage from the fact that civil servants are employed permanently while ministers come and go. Moreover, Sir Humphrey received a first in Greats at Ballie [*sic*] College, Oxford, and was knighted for his service to Queen and country (Jay and Lynn, *Miscellany* 111), while Jim Hacker graduated with a third from the London School of Economics and is merely Right Honourable. In the very first episode, entitled 'Open Government', the newly appointed Minister is introduced to the subtle hierarchies in his Department:

Sir Humphrey: Briefly, Sir. I am the Permanent Under-Secretary of State, known as the Permanent Secretary. Woolley here is your Principal Private Secretary. I, too, have a Principal Private Secretary, and he is the Principal Private Secretary to the Permanent Secretary. Directly responsible to

me are ten Deputy Secretaries, eighty-seven Under-Secretaries and two hundred and nineteen Assistant Secretaries. Directly responsible to the Principal Private Secretaries are plain Private Secretaries. The Prime Minister will be appointing two Parliamentary Under-Secretaries and you will be appointing your own Parliamentary Private Secretary.

Jim Hacker: Can they all type?

Sir Humphrey: None of us can type, Minister. Mrs McKay types – she is your secretary. (CYM 14–15)

In the episode entitled 'The Economy Drive', Hacker is challenged by a fierce article about the waste of taxpayers' money. He duly makes inquiries about the number of civil servants employed in his Department and ruminates on the possibility of cutting down the number of staff. However, his guess that there may be about 2,000 people working in the DAA is countered by Sir Humphrey's evasive but sobering reply that the figure is nearer to 23,000 employees. Hacker is aghast: 'Twenty-three thousand people? In the Department of Administrative Affairs? Twenty-three thousand administrators, all to administer other administrators?' (CYM 57) Consequently, Hacker is lectured by his Permanent Secretary about the fact that the civil service cannot be compared to a business company which measures success by its profits or losses; rather, the success of the civil service is directly measurable by the size of its staff and its budget, and it is the Minister's job to ensure that both staff and budget remain untouched or, even better, increase. In private conference the young Bernard Woolley and the television audience are cynically introduced by the magisterial Sir Humphrey into the more refined aspects of British political life and civil service culture:

Ministers come, and Ministers go. The average Minister lasts less than eleven months in any Department. It is our duty to assist the Minister to fight for the Department's money despite his own panic reactions. However, the Minister must be allowed to panic. Politicians like to panic. They need activity – it is their substitute for achievement. The argument that we must do everything a Minister demands because he has been 'democratically chosen' does not stand up to close inspection. MPs are not chosen by 'the people' – they are chosen by their local constituency party, i.e. thirty-five men in grubby raincoats or thirty-five women in silly hats. The further 'selection' process is equally a nonsense; there are 630 MPs and a party with just over 300 MPs forms the government – and of these 300, 100 are too old and too silly to be ministers, and 100 too young and too callow. Therefore there are about 100 MPs to fill 100 governmental posts. Effectively no choice at all. It follows that as Ministers have had no proper selection or training, it is our patriotic duty to arrange for them to make the right decision as often as possible. (CYM 59–60)

Even Hacker himself, as Prime Minister, is forced to conclude that most Members of Parliament are incompetent in political dealings. Asked by his wife Annie if MPs are not really underpaid, he bursts out:

Underpaid? Backbench MPs? Being an MP is a vast, subsidised ego trip. It's a job that needs no qualifications, that has no compulsory hours of work, no performance standards, and provides a warm room, a telephone and subsidised meals to a bunch of self-important windbags and busy-bodies who suddenly find people taking them seriously because they've got the letters MP after their names. How can they be underpaid when there's about two hundred applications for every vacancy? You could fill every seat twenty times over even if they had to pay to do the job. ('A Real Partnership', *CYPM* 141)

Hacker soon learns that he needs and, indeed, depends on the professional expertise of Sir Humphrey and Bernard, who not only ensure the Minister's political survival on more than one occasion but, knowing all the tricks in the book, can easily reduce his workload and, for example, minimise red tape:

Jim Hacker: What do I have to do with all this correspondence?

Bernard Woolley: You *do* realise, you don't actually have to.

Jim Hacker: Don't I?

Bernard Woolley: Not if you don't want to have to. We can draft an official reply.

Jim Hacker: What's an official reply?

Bernard Woolley: It just says the Minister is thanking you for your letter. Then *we* reply something like: 'The matter is under consideration.' Or even, if we feel so inclined, 'under active consideration'.

Jim Hacker: What's the difference between 'under consideration' and 'under active consideration'?

Bernard Woolley: 'Under consideration' means that we lost the file. Under 'active consideration' means we're trying to find it! ('The Official Visit', *CYM* 33)

In the episode 'Big Brother', Jim Hacker tries to muster more confidence and to resist the delaying tactics of his civil servants, but he is ultimately unsuccessful in realising his policies because he does not grasp the complex implications of the subject and also because he does not understand the administrative double Dutch in which he had been cautioned against taking such measures.

3 Civil-service speak

The main differences between the Minister and his servants are all based on knowledge: first, the amount of knowledge which is at the disposal of the

three characters; second, their strategies of procuring additional information and thus of increasing knowledge; and, third, the implementation of knowledge into policies and legislation. If any evidence for the relation between knowledge and power were ever needed, *Yes (Prime) Minister* provides ample material to prove the point.⁵ The imbalance of knowledge between the protagonists could hardly be more uneven: while Jim Hacker is, much to his own surprise, elevated to ministerial rank at the beginning of the programme and is, of necessity, ignorant in matters appertaining to administration, Sir Humphrey looks back on 30 years of civil service and joined the DAA when it was first set up in 1964 (Jay and Lynn, *Miscellany* 111). It has been his rule to supply every minister with just the amount of information necessary, but never to burden his superiors with too much knowledge lest they try to formulate independent policies. Knowledge to the likes of Sir Humphrey is a treasure trove collected over a long time and is best hidden away from envious eyes so that the ministers may perform their ceremonial role in public while being secretly guided in their decisions by the senior civil servants. However, it is important that ministers never realise that they are being operated via remote control. This is why language is of such importance in all the episodes because it is through language that knowledge is revealed as well as concealed. For Hacker, as a ministerial novice, it amounts to a rite of passage to learn the linguistic code of civil-service speak and particularly to decode the illocutions implied in certain propositions:

'I think we have to be very careful.' Translation: We are not going to do this.

'Have you thought through all the implications?' Translation: You are not going to do this.

'It is a slightly puzzling decision.' Translation: Idiotic!

'Not entirely straightforward.' Translation: Criminal.

'With the greatest possible respect, Minister...' Translation: Minister, that is the silliest idea I have ever heard. ('The Writing on the Wall', CYM 106)

A wonderful example of civil-service speak occurs in the episode 'Doing the Honours', which combines aspects of university funding with the Honours List, thus establishing a conceit by linking the apparently remote issues of economic decisions and individual distinctions. Hacker would like to sign the Honours List merely for civil servants who managed a budget cut of five per cent in their departments and therefore deserve to be included on the Honours List. Sir Humphrey is initially outraged because it would affect his friends in the service, but eventually he resorts to civil-service speak and phrases a friendly warning to encourage the Minister to drop the entire design:

Sir Humphrey: I recommend that we set up an interdepartmental committee with fairly broad terms of reference so that at the end of the day we would be in a position to think through all the implications and take

a decision based on long-term considerations rather than rush prematurely into precipitate and possibly ill-conceived actions which might well have unforeseen repercussions.

Jim Hacker: You mean no! (CYM 234)

In the end, Hacker's laudable schemes of cutting down on public spending are crossed once again as Ballie College offers him an honorary doctorate and the upright Minister is finally shown to be just as prone to corruption and just as keen on titles as all the other characters he had previously criticised harshly for their weaknesses.

However, civil-service speak is not just a means of steering ministers via an admirable command of language. It also shapes and creates the entire world of the Whitehall administration including its hierarchic stratification which is pertinaciously defended by its representatives, but remains largely unknown to their ministerial superiors. Bernard Woolley is only too pleased to instruct his Minister on the subtle hierarchy of honours in the Whitehall universe:

Bernard Woolley: You get your G after your K.

Jim Hacker: You speak in riddles, Bernard.

Bernard Woolley: Well, take the Foreign Office. First you get the CMG, KCMG, and GCMG, the Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George, Knight Commander of St Michael and St George, Knight Grand Cross of St Michael and St George. 'Cause in the Service CMG stand for 'Call Me God', the KCMG for 'Kindly Call Me God'.

Jim Hacker: What does GCMG stand for?

Bernard Woolley: 'God Calls Me God'.

Jim Hacker: But why should Sir Arnold worry? He has got his full array of honours, hasn't he?

Bernard Woolley: Certainly not, nowhere near! There is the peerage, the CH, the Order of the Garter, the Knight of the Thistle ...

Jim Hacker: Knight of the Thistle? Who gets that, Scotsmen and donkeys?

Bernard Woolley: There is a distinction, Minister.

Jim Hacker: You can't have met the Scottish nationalists. How do they award the Thistle?

Bernard Woolley: A committee sits on it. (CYM 238–239)

Since Sir Humphrey is a knight of the realm, his title indicates that his position in the hierarchy is well assured. As is stressed again in the following quote, he enjoys his elevated position due to his superior, almost divine knowledge:

Jim Hacker: Bernard, how did Sir Humphrey know I was with Dr. Cartwright?

Bernard Woolley: God moves in a mysterious way.

Jim Hacker: Let me make one thing perfectly clear: Humphrey is not God, okay.

Bernard Woolley: Will you tell him or shall I? ('The Skeleton in the Cupboard', CYM 501)

4 Sir Humphrey's rhetoric

As was pointed out, the possession of privileged knowledge is of little use unless it finds linguistic expression. In every episode there is at least one prominent scene in which Sir Humphrey displays his rhetorical powers. The actor Stephen Fry expressed his sincere admiration for the ways in which Nigel Hawthorne delivered such lines: 'We love the idea of the coherence and articulacy of Sir Humphrey ... it's one of the things you look forward to in an episode of *Yes Minister* ... when's the big speech going to happen? And can I see if he's reading it from an idiot board ... he's really learned it, and it's superb' (quoted in Jay and Lynn, *Miscellany* 14). Rhetoric strategies fulfil various functions such as equivocation, protection, delay, insistence, exhaustion and excuse. Being asked by the minister to provide a straightforward answer like 'yes' or 'no' to a simple question, Sir Humphrey demonstrates the power of equivocation in 'The Writing on the Wall':

Minister, if I am pressed for a straight answer I shall say that, as far as we can see, looking at it by and large, taking one thing with another, in terms of the average of departments, then in the last analysis it is probably true to say that, at the end of the day, you would find, in general terms that, not to put too fine a point on it, there probably was not very much in it one way or the other. (CYM 107)

In further episodes the rhetoric is directed towards allegedly protecting the Minister from informational overload, while in reality defending the privileged status of knowledge. The ploy is phrased in the most exquisite and sycophantic political soft-soap rhetoric imaginable:

Sir Humphrey: Minister, the traditional allocation of executive responsibilities has always been so determined as to liberate the ministerial incumbent from the administrative minutiae by devolving the managerial functions to those whose experience and qualifications have better formed them for the performance of such humble offices, thereby releasing their political overlords for the more onerous duties and profound deliberations which are the inevitable concomitant of their exalted position. ('The Right to Know', CYM 135)

In a similar fashion, Sir Humphrey manages to insist on the (frequently absurd) expenses necessary for properly administering public affairs ('The Compassionate Society') and he (just as frequently) gets the Minister to sign

important documents simply by rhetorically exhausting the latter's patience ('The Quality of Life'). It is only towards the end of *Yes Minister* that Jim Hacker begins to learn the ins and outs of ministry's policies. In the aptly entitled episode 'The Skeleton in the Cupboard', he finds out about a serious mistake committed by Sir Humphrey more than 30 years ago when he was new to the civil service. Questioned about the identity of the person responsible for the disaster, a squirming Sir Humphrey is finally forced to admit his failure:

The identity of the official whose alleged responsibility for this hypothetical oversight has been the subject of recent speculation is not shrouded in quite such impenetrable obscurity as certain previous disclosures may have led you to assume, but not to put too fine a point on it, the individual in question was, it may surprise you to learn, one whom your present interlocutor is in the habit of defining by means of the perpendicular pronoun. (CYM 512)

It takes Jim Hacker and presumably the television audience some time to understand that 'the perpendicular pronoun' is synonymous with the letter 'I'.

5 The self and the other: European and international politics

Britain's international relations are a fruitful subject matter which is explored in several episodes, with Africa and the Near East being synecdochically represented by the fictional states of Burunda and Qumran. It is difficult to overlook the fact that the scriptwriters fully enjoyed exploiting the manifold critical incidents involved in intercultural encounters. In fact, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) is not treated with much sympathy in the episodes. Bernard explains to his Minister that being Foreign Secretary is a punishment to any politician because the Department 'loves foreigners but the British people want you to be nasty to them' ('Party Games'; CYPM 36). In addition to the Commonwealth, the Near East and Asia as well as Britain's special relationship to the USA ('Jim Hacker: We have no real power, we are just a sort of American missile base, that's all' ('Party Games', CYPM 36)), it is the country's tense relationship to Europe and to the European Economic Community (EEC) which provides delightful scenes of television comedy. Britain had joined the EEC in 1973 under Edward Heath after two earlier applications for membership had been turned down by the French Government. When the first episodes were broadcast in 1980, Britain was still a rather new player within the EEC and its role was – and still is – far from being unanimously accepted, let alone popular. Jim Hacker's firm belief that 'Europe is a community of nations, dedicated towards one goal ... [t]o strengthen the brotherhood of Free Western nations' ('The Devil You Know', CYM 273) is countered by Sir Humphrey's profound Euroscepticism. The Permanent Secretary argues that Britain did not join the EEC because of highfalutin values, but solely to secure its own interests by throwing

spanners into the works of the Brussels administration and thus wrecking the EEC from inside:

Jim Hacker: The Foreign Office is pro-Europe, isn't it?

Sir Humphrey: Yes and no, if you'll forgive the expression. The Foreign Office is pro-Europe because it is really anti-Europe. In fact the Civil Service was united in its desire to make sure the Common Market didn't work. That's why we went into it ... Britain has had the same foreign policy objective for at least the last five hundred years – to create a disunited Europe. In that cause we have fought with the Dutch against the Spanish, with the Germans against the French, with the French and Italians against the Germans, and with the French against the Germans and Italians. In other words: divide and rule. And the Foreign Office can see no reason to change when it has worked so well until now. In fact, it is current policy. It was necessary for us to break up the EEC so we had to get inside. We had previously tried to break it up from the outside, but that didn't work. Now that we're inside, we are able to make a complete pig's breakfast out of it. We have now set the Germans against the French, the French against the Italians, the Italians against the Dutch ... and the Foreign Office is terribly pleased. It's just like old times. ('The Writing on the Wall', CYM 119)

Moreover, Sir Humphrey is quite confident that European regulations being passed in Brussels, such as the idea of a common European passport or shared word-processing standards, are invariably doomed to failure because of the mentalities prevalent in the Member States: 'The Germans will love it, the French will ignore it, and the Italians and Irish will be too chaotic to enforce it. Only the British must resent it' ('The Writing on the Wall', CYM 119). Although the sentiment is highly cynical, it seems not to be too far off the mark, since Britain's European policies underwent little change under later Prime Ministers, including John Major, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and certainly not under David Cameron.

In the final episode of *Yes Minister*, the position of Prime Minister becomes vacant and Hacker seizes the opportunity to campaign for the highest office. Much like Margaret Thatcher in the rebate debate, which she had opened in 1980 and which ended with a reduction of British payments to Brussels in 1984, Hacker rhetorically mimics her discourse and gains popular support by fiercely attacking the bureaucracy of Brussels, who want to abolish, in this case, the British sausage:

I'm a good European. I believe in Europe. I believe in the European ideal: Never again shall we repeat the bloodshed of the two World Wars. Europe is here to stay. But this does not mean that we have to bow the knee to every directive from every little bureaucratic Bonaparte in Brussels. We are a sovereign nation still, we are British and proud of it. (*Applause*) We have

made enough concessions to the European Commissar for Agriculture. And when I say Commissar, I use the word advisedly. We have swallowed the wine lake, we have swallowed the butter mountain, we have watched our French 'friends' beating up British lorry drivers carrying good British lamb to the French public.⁶ We have bowed and scraped, doffed our cap, tugged our forelocks and turned the other cheek. But I say enough is enough. (*Prolonged applause*) The Europeans have gone too far. They are now threatening the British sausage. They want to standardise it – by which they mean they'll force the British people to eat salami and bratwurst and other garlic-ridden greasy foods that are totally alien to the British way of life. (*Cries of 'hear, hear', 'right on' and 'you tell 'em, Jim'*) Do you want to eat salami for breakfast with your egg and bacon? I don't. And I won't! (*Massive applause*) They've turned our pints into litres and our yards into metres, we gave up the tanner and the threepenny bit, the two bob piece and the half crown. But they cannot and will not destroy the British sausage! (*Applause and cheers*) Not while I'm here! (*Tumultuous applause*) In the words of Martin Luther: 'Here I stand. I can do no other!' ('Party Games', *CYPM* 53–54)

In this speech, Hacker employs all the well-rehearsed commonplaces of anti-European and thus pro-British patriotic rhetoric, but the text is, of course, ironically undercut by the fact that his referee is, of all people, a German theologian who was outlawed for precisely this statement.

6 'Dear Lady': gender politics

The civil service of the 1980s and its televised copy clearly circumscribe a male environment. In the eyes of Sir Humphrey, women may find suitable employment in Whitehall as cleaners, typists and tea-ladies, but are not supposed to meddle with politics. However, in several episodes a number of rather outspoken female characters appear, like MP Betty Oldham (Judy Parfitt) in 'A Question of Loyalty', who adroitly chairs a select committee on public spending and gives Jim Hacker a frightful dressing down by accusing him of wasting taxpayers' money. It is only through Sir Humphrey's gift of equivocation that the committee is finally pacified and loyalty between servant and master is eventually restored. A further example of a militant female politician is Councillor Agnes Moorhouse (Miranda Forbes), who wants to reform local government by introducing grassroots democracy in 'Power to the People'. Jim Hacker wants Sir Humphrey to come to a gentleman's agreement with her, but his Permanent Secretary, frightened by the very thought of a confrontation, bursts out: 'But she's not a gentleman. She's not even a lady!' (*CYPM* 384). A more formidable opponent is Jim Hacker's political adviser Dorothy Wainwright (Deborah Norton), who enters the show in Series One of *Yes Prime Minister*. Competent, clever and shrewd,

she poses a real threat to Sir Humphrey's influence on policy making and as a consequence he tries to belittle her and patronisingly addresses her as 'my dear lady' at every encounter. Although he makes no impression on her, Sir Humphrey believes that he knows his way with women, at least in the corridors of Whitehall:

Sir Humphrey: It may be hard for a political adviser to understand but I am merely a civil servant and I just do as I am instructed by my master.

Jim Hacker: What happens if the Minister is a woman?

Sir Humphrey: Yes, that's most interesting. We sought an answer to the point when I was a Principal Private Secretary and Dr Edith Summerskill,⁷ as she was then called, was appointed Minister in 1947. I didn't quite like to refer to her as my Mistress.

Jim Hacker: What was the answer?

Sir Humphrey: We're still waiting for it. ('Big Brother', *CYM* 85–86)

Jim Hacker, for his part, is blessed with his down-to-earth wife Annie, who usually sees through the various machinations in which her husband becomes ensnared, but he is punished with his 18-year-old daughter Lucy (Gerry Cowper), a Trotskyite and environmentalist, who has little (if any) sympathies for her father.

The issue of equal opportunities was clearly on the agenda during the 1980s, especially since the two most powerful positions in the country were occupied by women. In her memoirs, Margaret Thatcher remembers her first audience as Prime Minister with the Queen in 1979: 'Of course, under the circumstances, stories of clashes between "two powerful women" were just too good not to make up. In general, more nonsense was written about the so-called "feminine factor" during my time in office than about almost anything else' (Thatcher 18). Although Thatcher's first cabinet only included one female minister, Janet Young, who was appointed Minister of State, Education and Science, the Prime Minister's insistence on a meritocratic society in which careers were to be made by merit and not by birth, title or connections did put its stamp on the decade. On 28 August 1982, Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, which critically responded to Thatcher's gender policies, was premiered to great international acclaim at the Royal Court Theatre. In the 'Equal Opportunities' episode broadcast on 11 November 1982, Jay and Lynn presented the eponymous topic to the television audience.

It was pointed out at the beginning of this chapter that currently 53 per cent of civil servants are female. The figure was considerably smaller in the 1980s, but given the political climate of the time, Jim Hacker feels that the number of women in the civil service ought to be raised substantially, ideally to a quota of 25 per cent within the next four years. Hacker wants to launch the programme straight away by appointing the young and attractive Sarah Harrison Deputy Secretary in his Department. In a confidential

conversation with her, he is forced to learn how few women are employed in the civil service:

Jim Hacker: How many women are there at the top of the Civil Service?

Sarah Harrison: None of the Permanent Secretaries. Four out of one hundred and fifty-odd Deputy Secretaries.

Jim Hacker: And what about your grade – Under Secretary?

Sarah Harrison: Oh, there's twenty-seven of us.

Jim Hacker: That doesn't sound too bad. Out of how many?

Sarah Harrison: Five-hundred and seventy-eight.

Jim Hacker: That's appalling! Aren't you appalled?

Sarah Harrison: Not really, I find it comic. But then I find most of the Civil Service comic. It's run by men, after all. (CYM 352)

On being informed about the Minister's scheme, Sir Humphrey is appalled at the very thought and believes that this is the end of civilisation as it is known to humanity. He argues that women have to work their way up the hierarchy just like everyone else and that Sarah is certainly gifted, but still too young and too inexperienced; hence, it is not yet her turn to climb the ladder and he believes that perhaps in 25 years, a quota of 25 per cent might be realised:

Sir Humphrey: Sarah Harrison is an excellent Civil Servant and a bright hope for the future. But she is our most junior Under-Secretary and I cannot and will not recommend her for promotion to Deputy Secretary.

Jim Hacker: I think you're a sexist!

Sir Humphrey: Minister, how can you say such a thing? I'm very pro-women. Wonderful people, women. And Sarah Harrison is a dear lady. I am one of her greatest admirers. But the fact is if the cause of women is to be advanced it must be done with care, tact and discretion. She is our only woman contender for a top job. We mustn't push her too fast. Women find top jobs very difficult, you know.

Jim Hacker: Can you hear yourself?

Sir Humphrey: Minister, if women were able to be good Permanent Secretaries, there would be more of them, wouldn't there? Stands to reason.

Jim Hacker: No, Humphrey!

Sir Humphrey: I'm no anti-feminist. I love women. Some of my best friends are women. My wife, indeed. Sarah Harrison is as yet very inexperienced, and her children are still of school age, they might get mumps.

Jim Hacker: You might get shingles, Humphrey, if it comes to that.

Sir Humphrey: I might indeed, Minister, if you continue in this vein. But what if her children caused her to miss work all the time?

Jim Hacker: Is it likely? Would she have reached the rank of Under-Secretary if her children kept having mumps? She is the best person for the job.

Sir Humphrey: Minister, if you go around promoting women just because they're the best persons for the job, you could create a lot of resentment throughout the whole Civil Service. (CYM 360)

After much debate among the male Principal Secretaries and their male Ministers, the scheme is applauded in principle, but quietly dropped in practice. When Hacker announces to Sarah the wonderful news of her impending promotion, she flatly tells him that she has resigned from the civil service and has accepted a position as director in a merchant bank. She wants to work in a profession where she can achieve her aims and she certainly does not wish to pursue a career due to a set quota:

Sarah Harrison: Well quite honestly, Minister, I want a job where I don't spend endless hours circulating information that isn't relevant, about subjects that don't matter to people who aren't interested. I want a job where there is achievement, rather than merely activity. I am tired of pushing paper. I want to be able to point to something and say: *I did that*. Sir Humphrey: I don't understand ...

Sarah Harrison: I know. That's why I'm leaving.

Jim Hacker: Surely you're not saying that the government of Britain is unimportant?

Sarah Harrison: No, it's very important. It's just that I haven't met anyone who is doing it ... I'm not pleased about being part of a twenty-five per cent quota. Women are not inferior beings, and I don't enjoy being patronised. I'm afraid you're just as paternalist and chauvinist as the rest of them. I'm going where I shall be accepted as an equal, on my own merits, as a person. (CYM 371)

In such a fashion, most of the issues surrounding gender equality as discussed in the 1980s (and arguably still pertinent today) are brilliantly condensed into 30 minutes of television comedy so that gender politics and the politics of laughter stride side by side.

7 Whitehall and the media

Yes (Prime) Minister was produced in the years before political spinning became professionalised. As such, the public relations policies of Bernard Ingham, who served for 11 years as Margaret Thatcher's press secretary, were a far cry from the later work of New Labour spin doctors like Alastair Campbell and Peter Mandelson. However, it is one of the eternal truths that politicians need the media to communicate policies while journalists need politicians to publish news. In fact, it is claimed in several episodes that the (fictitious) politicians receive most of their information through the media rather than through government channels. In order to strengthen the semi-documentary appeal

of the programme, the producers managed to arrange a number of cameo appearances by well-known BBC journalists like Sue Lawley, presenter of *Nationwide* and *The Six O'Clock News*, Robert McKenzie, one of the main presenters of the BBC's General Election programmes, and Ludovic Kennedy, the presenter of *Panorama* and renowned documentarist. By thus simulating the truth claim of the episodes, *Yes (Prime) Minister* as an artistic genre placed itself in a position of exerting political influence on viewing audiences. The point is touched upon in 'The Middle-Class Rip-Off', where the scriptwriters betray a meta-medial awareness. In this episode a reorganisation of competences is planned whereby the DAA will be made responsible for arts and television, which has one character exclaim: 'Arts and television together? What have they got to do with each other! They are complete opposites!' (CYM 488).

There are frequent scenes in which the characters study the papers, listen to the news on radio or on television, or in which they are interviewed. In most instances, however, it is Jim Hacker who is keen to employ the media in order to spread positive news, win votes and thus secure his re-election. Since he is a politician, he believes that he is an expert on the British media landscape, particularly as regards newspapers:

Jim Hacker: Don't tell me about the press. I know exactly who reads the papers: *The Daily Mirror* is read by people who think they run the country; *The Guardian* is read by people who think they ought to run the country; *The Times* is read by the people who actually do run the country; *The Daily Mail* is read by the wives of the people who run the country; *The Financial Times* is read by people who own the country; *The Morning Star* is read by people who think the country ought to be run by another country; and *The Daily Telegraph* is read by people who think it is.

Sir Humphrey: Prime Minister, what about the people who read *The Sun*?

Bernard Woolley: *Sun* readers don't care who runs the country, as long as she's got big tits. (CYPM 355)

More than once, however, it turns out that Hacker is fairly ignorant of public relations. While Sir Humphrey knows exactly how to leak information to which journalist at which paper at which point in time, the Minister is frightfully clumsy when it comes to supplying the press with sensitive information ('The Death List'). Also, he is invariably ill-prepared in front of microphones and cameras. In 'The Challenge', Ludovic Kennedy interviews the Minister on BBC radio about reducing public spending, but all Hacker manages to produce is a load of meaningless drivel:

Please, let me finish, because we must be absolutely clear about this, and I would be quite frank with you, the plain fact of the matter is that at the end of the day it is the right, no the duty, of the elected government in the House of Commons to ensure that government policies, the policies

on which we were elected and for which we have a mandate, the policies after all for which the people voted, are the policies which finally when the national cake has been divided up, and may I remind you we as a nation don't have unlimited wealth, so we can't pay ourselves more than we've earned, are the policies ... I'm sorry what was the question again? (CYM 376)

The Minister's performances on television are hardly more professional. Badly prepared and supplied with merely restricted knowledge, Hacker blurts out a well-kept party secret during an interview with Kennedy for BBC television, much to the dismay of the Prime Minister. Fearing for his political career, Hacker would like to suppress the screening of the interview, but is anxious to avoid being accused of censorship. Again he must rely on the service of Sir Humphrey, who, indeed, has a few trumps up his sleeve. Over a sumptuous dinner, he charges the BBC's Director of Public Policy with biased reports against the present government, informs him about plans to entrust the televising of Parliament to ITV,⁸ threatens him with a select committee to scrutinise BBC expenditure and gallantly hands over photographs of high-ranking BBC officials, 'all accompanied by their wives – or other ladies of equal distinction – and all bearing a remarkable similarity to governors, directors and executives of the corporation and their friends' (CYM 396). His spirit of resistance finally broken, the Director feels forced, however, to insist that the BBC cannot give in to government pressure. Sir Humphrey ensures him that nothing could be further from his mind, but he warns his victim that the programme contains factual errors, out-of-date information and severe security implications. Such flaws are of course anathema to the BBC standards of broadcasting and, under such conditions, the Director of Public Policy is only too happy to prevent the interview from being broadcast while he quite cheerfully continues chanting his mantra that the 'BBC cannot give in to government pressure' (CYM 397). This is a marvellous satire on the BBC and its alleged independence of the government and of party politics, all of this voiced in a television comedy produced and broadcast by the BBC itself. In fact, Jay and Lynn had the BBC in a tight corner because any suppression of 'The Challenge' would have been understood as a breach of the freedom of expression. As such, the episode was a testing ground, indeed a challenge, for the broadcaster's tolerance towards criticisms in comic form produced by and directed against itself.

8 Conclusion: the reception and legacy of the series

The programme was amazingly successful. When Paul Eddington visited Australia in the 1980s, he was greeted by Bob Hawke, the Australian leader at the time, as if he were a visiting Prime Minister ('Comedy Connections'). Moreover, the show created interest in the political reality of Westminster and Whitehall and, in turn, stimulated further television productions, such

as *The New Statesman* (ITV 1987, 1989–1992; BBC1 1988, 1994), written by Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran, satirising the Conservative Governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major. The trend for political satire was continued in the rather disrespectful puppet show *Spitting Image* (ITV 1984–1996), written by Tony Hendra, initiating a criticism of the ruling elite whose members have since been treated with ever less reverence (Mundy and White 126–127). A more thrilling approach to the machinations behind power was adopted in the television drama *House of Cards* (BBC 1990), based on the novel by Michael Dobbs, with Ian Richardson as Conservative Chief Whip Francis Urquhart, who cruelly as well as criminally manages to be elected Prime Minister. The role of party whips is also at the centre of Steve Thompson's play *Whipping It Up* premiered in 2006 (Clark), which one reviewer describes as 'sort of step-grandchild of *Yes Minister*' (Fisher). Given the astounding topicality of *Yes (Prime) Minister*, Jay and Lynn renewed their collaboration and revived the format as a stage play in 2010 with David Haig as Jim Hacker, Henry Goodman as Sir Humphrey and Jonathan Slinger as Bernard Woolley. To assert the show's survivability, the renewed *Yes Minister* even returned to the screen on the television channel Gold in 2013 after an absence of 27 years (Lawrence).

If there is any comedy that might be regarded as a true, if foul-mouthed, foster child of *Yes (Prime) Minister*, the choice candidate is certainly *The Thick of It* (BBC4/BBC2 2005–2012), created and written by Armando Iannucci.⁹ When the BBC launched the poll for best British television comedy in 2004, Iannucci volunteered as advocate for *Yes Minister* and recommended the programme for several reasons, but essentially he argued that '*Yes Minister* was more than a sitcom, it was a crash course in Contemporary Political Studies – it opened the lid on the way the Government really operated' ('Armando Iannucci'). One respondent on the BBC website contributed an interesting comment: 'There are many reasons why this is simply the best sitcom of all time, but one of them is that with each new era *Yes Minister/Prime Minister* seems more relevant than it ever was. It would also be interesting to find out if British people still base their perceptions of real-life politicians on these fictional templates' (quoted in 'Armando Iannucci'). No study on the subject has yet been carried out, but looking at it by and large, taking one thing with another, in the last analysis it is probably true to say that, at the end of the day, you would find, in general terms that, not to put too fine a point on it, the answer could well be positive.

Notes

1. See the contributions by Richard Kilborn on *Steptoe and Son* and Bernd Lenz on *Dad's Army* in Chapters 2 and 3 of this volume.
2. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher admired the show and wrote a little dialogue in which she performed the part of Prime Minister herself in conversation with Sir Humphrey and Jim Hacker; see 'Yes Real Prime Minister AKA The Thatcher Sketch

(1984)', www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwaX_DgHZkM (date accessed 27 July 2015). Antony Jay congratulated her on the sharpness of the repartee and jokingly invited her to join them as additional scriptwriter. 'Instead the Prime Minister recruited Jay to the informal team that advised her on television techniques and helped write her speeches and political broadcasts' (Cockerell 288).

3. Stephen Wagg (30) sees Hacker as the all-time loser, but the last episode of *Yes Prime Minister*, 'A Tangled Web', presents the Prime Minister's final triumph over the Permanent Secretary.
4. In the following quotations, individual scenes will be identified by references to *The Complete Yes Minister* and *The Complete Yes Prime Minister*, abbreviated as *CPM* and *CYPM* respectively. The televised dialogues are reproduced in the quotations.
5. The relationship between knowledge and power is intensely discussed in the writings of Michel Foucault, especially in *Surveiller et punir: la naissance de la prison* (1975), where the knowledge-power dichotomy is identified as the source of political authority and social control.
6. The reference is to the fierce debate over agricultural policy in the early 1980s, when 'the French had already been found in breach of Community law over lamb imports' (Thatcher 84–85) and British lorry drivers were attacked for fear of dumping the meat prices in France.
7. Edith Clara Summerskill (1901–1980), Baroness of Kenwood in the County of London, was a Labour politician and MP for Fulham West from 1938 to 1955. Throughout her political career, she fought for women's rights and women's welfare, 'often arousing great hostility' (McGovern 1459). She was created a life peeress in 1961.
8. The idea of televising Parliament was first introduced by the Labour Government in 1964, but was voted against in the House of Commons. At the time when the episode was broadcast (18 November 1982), the issue was again hotly debated. The Upper House voted in favour of it in 1983 and televising was introduced on 23 January 1985 when the Earl of Stockton, the former Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, used this first TV performance to criticise the economic policies of Thatcher's government. Televising the House of Commons started in November 1989 after fierce discussions ('Televising Parliament').
9. See the contribution by Anette Pankratz on *The Thick of It* in Chapter 19 of this volume.

Filmography

The Complete Yes Minister & Yes Prime Minister. Directed by Sidney Lotterby and Peter Whitmore, written by Jonathan Lynn and Antony Jay. London: BBC, 2003. DVD. 'Comedy Connections: Yes Minister 3'. *Comedy Connections*. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rktJtt3wKdI> (date accessed 27 July 2015).

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9

Zany 'Alternative Comedy': *The Young Ones* vs. Margaret Thatcher

Eckart Voigts

1. *The Young Ones*: an introduction

On 22 January 2013, comedian Alexei Sayle wrote an article in *The Guardian*, suggesting that 1980s 'alternative' comedy destroyed not only bigoted, racist, misogynistic and xenophobic humour, but also the elitist absurdity that had come to be the hallmark of Oxbridge comedy *à la* 'Footlights'. Sayle ended on the idea that he was still full of hate for elitism and privilege, and singled out an episode of *The Young Ones* (BBC2 1982–1984) as a moment of epiphany:

What I didn't understand, despite all my years of Marxist study groups, was that every revolution contains within it the seeds of its own destruction ... For me, the turning point ... was the making of the Bambi episode for the second series of *The Young Ones*, broadcast in 1984. I turned up for the recording to find several generations of Cambridge Footlights were in the show. 'I thought these people were the enemy!' I railed at the writers. 'The whole point of what we were doing was surely to challenge the smug hegemony of the Oxford, Cambridge, public-schoolboy comedy network, as well as destroying the old-school working men's club racists!' 'No, that was just you,' the writers replied. 'We never subscribed to your demented class-war ravings. We think all these people are lovely. Stephen Fry's made us lardy cake, Hugh Laurie's been playing boogie-woogie piano all morning, Mel Smith's going to take us for a ride in his gold Rolls-Royce, and Griff Rhys-Jones has been screaming abuse at minions to make us laugh.'

This story of *The Young Ones* as an anti-establishment, working-class comedy of disenfranchised intellectual masculinity still very much dominates both the public perception and the academic discussion of the show. In his article, Sayle remembers how the 1980s alternative comedians used to be courted by the literary establishment such as the *London Review of Books* ('a wanky, intellectual, middle-class publication that was all about books')

and describes alternative comedy as 'radical, confrontational and political' (Sayle).

The Young Ones was among the first televisual emanations of the alternative comedy boom of the 1980s, a sitcom produced by the BBC that ran for two series and a total of 12 episodes from 9 November 1982 to 19 June 1984. In style, *The Young Ones* owes a lot to the zany surrealism of the *Monty Python* sketches;¹ in structure, it was a family sitcom – its surrogate family consisting of four students living in a North London flat, attending the fictional 'Scumbag College'. The setting, as well as the character types, embodies various shades of marginalisation: Vyvyan (Adrian Edmondson) was a psychopathic punk; Rick (Rik Mayall) an anarchic, vegetarian sociology student bent on futile projects; Neil (Nigel Planer) represented a permanently depressed hippie with a special hatred of technology; and Mike (Christopher Ryan, a non-comedian) a smart-dressed, conventional Londoner who kept mostly aloof from the mayhem the others produced and thus represents a kind of father figure to the others, maintaining surface equilibrium. Meanwhile, the landlord Jerzy Balowski appeared in various family incarnations (invariably performed by Alexei Sayle). Most of the occasional actors were culled from the early 1980s alternative comedy scene (Gareth Hale and Norman Pace, Jennifer Saunders, Dawn French, Robbie Coltrane, Andy de la Tour, etc.). The show set a paradigm in mixing supposedly transgressive alternative rock of the 1980s (Motörhead, Madness, etc.) and comedy by incorporating a live performance of a band in every episode.² *The Young Ones* was written by Ben Elton, Lise Mayer and Rik Mayall.³ In the 1980s it was still fairly unusual for comedy performers to write their own material – another innovation that this new generation of comedians can be credited with. In order to keep the material fresh and to provide the stimulating experience of 'liveness', initial plans for a long rehearsal period were cut to about one week and plans for shooting without a studio audience were dropped.

The characters Rick and Neil were formed from personae assumed by Rik Mayall and Nigel Planer in their stand-up routines: Rick, a bad poet infatuated with Vanessa Redgrave, and Neil, an incompetent hippie guitarist. Both the writers and performers came out of the early 1980s alternative comedy scene that grew at the Soho venues 'The Comedy Strip' and (subsequently) 'The Comedy Store', where Edmondson and Mayall, Planer and Peter Richardson, and Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders appeared as double acts. Peter Rosengard, who intended to copy the comedy scene he experienced in New York and Los Angeles (notably at 'The Comedy Store', LA), opened the seminal London venue in a former strip club in one of the seediest areas of late 1970s London.⁴ Under pressure from the new special-interest private TV station Channel 4, the BBC looked for more adventurous formats that would appeal to young audiences. The result was *The Comic Strip Presents...*, a series of six half-hour self-contained narrative comedy shows on the opening night of Channel 4, and the rival project, *The Young Ones*. True, none of

this group of 'alternative' comedians had been to Eton, Harrow or Oxbridge, but, interestingly, they represented an 'alternative' Midlands intelligentsia: Mayall, Edmondson and Elton had attended Manchester University. Alexei Sayle, born in Liverpool and an activist for the Communist Party in his youth, attended Chelsea College of Art and Design, London, and Garnett College, Roehampton. Elton and Mayall, who collaborated on *Blackadder* later, and Sayle in many ways epitomise the writing that came to be characterised as alternative comedy. As Nigel Planer remembered in 2007, this new generation of comedians came predominantly from Midlands universities, art schools or fringe theatre, rather than from Oxbridge or the tradition of humour shaped by the defining comedy programme *It's That Man Again* (1939–1949).⁵ Nor were they the more traditional 'white working class comics from the North'.⁶ In 2007, Lise Mayer described the group as 'a sort of punk version of theatre' (de la Tour, quoted in 'The Making of *The Young Ones*'),⁷ that is, 'rough' theatre without paraphernalia, but just a microphone and the personality of a performer, often for rather short sets.

Why is this episode in British comedy still significant to this day? If there is one fact that centuries of humour theory has established, it is that humour is not trivial. *The Young Ones*, as I will show, is not a trivial subject, mainly for three reasons. The first one is very palpably present in Sayle's article above, which includes a rant against big stand-up comedy business in the sold-out O2 Arena. *The Young Ones* provides approximations to a 'structure of feeling' (Raymond Williams)⁸ that can provide access to an otherwise intangible experience: the way 'it was like' in the 1980s, when youth culture was provoked by Thatcherism to either rebel or resign. While the dominant view of the 1980s is one of rampant liberalism, uncaring capitalism and the glossy, artificial surfaces of postmodernism, *The Young Ones* provides access to an alternative and oppositional stance that counters the 'official consciousness'. The fluid, constantly evolving and changing nature of humour, I will argue, makes it a powerful tool in cultural anthropology. Therefore, both the humour that still works in 2015 and the humour that seems 'dated' today will help to provide access to the otherwise inaccessible collective psyche of the early 1980s.

Clearly, humour is an excellent indicator of a cultural climate, but it seems singularly restrictive to focus the analysis too narrowly on a set of national or ethnic characteristics. This brings us to the second reason why discussing *The Young Ones* is not trivial. The show embodies a type of zany, frantic or surreal humour that illustrates the incongruity of humour as well as the aesthetic potential of comedy in general. Thus, before discussing *The Young Ones* as a route to investigating male youth culture of the Thatcher years, I will describe the show as an example of successful surrealist humour of incongruity.

Third, *The Young Ones* is an example of how a group of cultural agents is able to dominate and transform an entire cultural field. As Friedman argues,

a network of 23 key alternative comedians managed to turn the field of stand-up and TV comedy from an essentially regressive and reactionary terrain to a sustainably productive field of cultural production whose impact persists to the present day:

Eager to improve the form and substance of British comedy, the 'alternative comedians' began to redefine the contours of the field. Adopting the ideology of autonomous art, their stand-up pushed beyond the 'low' styles of physical, obscene and 'trad' comedy. Their aim was to expand the art form and introduce more sophisticated genres deliberately skewed towards the restricted sub field of cultural production ... Furthermore, they also laid the structural foundations – in terms of institutionalising new genres and modes of performance – for subsequent comedians to continue the cultural legitimization of comedy. (Friedman 17–18)

Thus, *The Young Ones* not only harks back to the grotesqueries of *The Goon Show* (BBC Home Service 1951–1960) and *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (BBC1/BBC2 1969–1974), but also paved the way for even more radical contemporary descendants of 'black' and 'gross' body humour, such as *Little Britain* (BBC3/BBC1 2003–2006), *The League of Gentlemen* (BBC2 1999–2002) and *Nighty Night* (BBC3/BBC2 2004–2005).

2 *The Young Ones* and the legacy of *Monty Python*: zany incongruity

Let us begin with a list of the classic functions of humour, some of them problematic: psychic expenditure, cognitive rehearsal, spiritual equipoise, group cohesion, reduction of anxiety, control of deviance, warding off danger, rebellion against authority, relief from routine, defusing tension, overcoming taboos (anti-social safety valve) and reinforcing centrality. As we shall see below, however, *The Young Ones* provides humour that, on the contrary, in many ways favours marginalisation and counter hegemonies, centres, orthodoxies and normalcies. At the most basic level, as we shall see, *The Young Ones* was incongruous not just with Thatcherism, but was also countercultural in that it challenged the social consensus.

Let us briefly explain the incongruity theory of humour. As Morreall argues, the experience of incongruity tends to elicit negative emotions and uneasiness (an experience he styles 'funny strange'), unless – as in TV comedy – the situation provides a space where incongruity can be enjoyed: 'funny haha' (Morreall, 'Funny Ha-Ha', 195). In a situation of distancing, humans tend to find the incongruity or 'cognitive dissonance' of absurdity stimulating. Leaning towards the approach that sees humour as cognitive rehearsal, Morreall argues that humorous and critical attitudes go hand in hand in this kind of humour.

A case in point are the surreal special effects that frequently occur in *The Young Ones*, typically involving puppetry:

- A giant éclair is dropped on a 'University Challenge' quiz team...
- ... as the flatmates are discovered to be the size of amoebas, viewed by a scientist through a microscope.
- Longtime 'University Challenge' presenter Bamber Gascoigne is deliberately mixed up with Disney character Bambi.
- Red-faced 'dwarves' representing devils are shown in scenes from hell.
- Hiding in the wardrobe, Vyvyan experiences Narnia; he gets pregnant.
- Buried under manure, Neil multiplies; he morphs into the Incredible Hulk.
- A dishevelled, scruffy, farting Glaswegian hamster called SPG ('special patrol group'), who can talk, is Vyvyan's best friend; in the episode 'Sick', he is covered in snot; eventually his soul is pulled up to heaven, wearing wings.
- Vegetables, fish, a matchbox, dogs, a garden gnome, ants (etc.) and the dawn are seen speaking and singing in close-up.
- Two rats are punning on Euripides ('Euripides trousers, you menda these trousers!').
- A retching washing machine that says 'No way!'; two dogs that discuss chess.
- The flatmates are attacked by killer socks.
- A talking tree branch claims to have a degree in computer science.
- All of the characters swap roles.
- Irrelevant 'flash' frames occur in the second series, unrelated to the apparent narrative – a particular treat only for VHS-based rewind viewing and thus a forerunner of DVD viewing.
- The scene suddenly changes to a raft at sea or to Arctic Russia.
- A vampire/driving instructor from Johannesburg is sent in a parcel.
- The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse debate microchip technology, waiting for the apocalypse; Death refuses a game of Travel Scrabble.
- A giant sandwich falls from the sky, killing a Christian lady and subsequently serves as a sofa.
- The house passes through a time warp.
- Neil flies to the moon.
- A horse enters the flat; on cue, a lorry smashes through the bay window.
- Benito Mussolini works at the local police station and runs for the Eurovision Song Contest.
- Mexican bandits hold up a train to Manchester.
- The flatmates plan to cook and eat Neil to alleviate a food shortage.
- An atomic bomb falls through the roof, failing to explode but blocking the fridge.
- Beheaded poltergeists appear, attacking each other as 'codpiece-face'.
- Vyvyan appears with the three witches as 'Macvyvyan, Thane of Corridor' in *Macbeth*.

- A black postman appears, wearing a uniform, an iron cross and a Hitler moustache, speaking German.
- God appears in 1970s glam rock gear and claims that he is a woman.

For the incongruity to achieve its full impact, it is essential that the special effects are grossly exaggerated and appear grotesque and vehemently 'unreal'. One particular surreal effect used frequently in *The Young Ones* is the actualisation of metaphor – a literalisation of a bad (that is, obvious) pun. Riding a stolen London double-decker bus towards a Cliff Richard billboard, the flat-mates shout 'Cliff!' and the bus falls over a cliff ('Summer Holiday'); when Rick says 'Ask Roger Bannister!', the banister is seen to answer ('Interesting'); and the Elephant Man is discovered to be an elephant ('Bambi').

Conversely, conventional comedy became itself the butt of alternative meta-comedy, as Stott argues: 'Alternative comedy deliberately parodied and derided the idea of "jokes" as reactionary and dull, as in Peter Richardson and Nigel Planer's anti-joke "what's yellow and goes into the toilet? Piss"' (Stott 112). In this spirit, Vyvyan tears through the title sequence of anodyne sitcom *The Good Life* (BBC1 1975–1978), shouting:

No! No! No! No! We're not watching *The bloody Good Life!* Bloody! Bloody! Bloody! It's so bloody nice! Felicity Treacle Kendal and Richard Sugar-Flavoured Snot Briers! ... They're nothing but a bunch of reactionary stereotypes conforming the myth that everyone in Britain is a lovable middle-class eccentric and I hate them! ('Sick')

In terms of the 'relief theory' of humour, here is an outrageous world in which there is no congruity as it is ruled by anarchy, surprise and drastic vehemence; a 'liberated' world of the id in which anything might happen. The work of Freud and other humour theorists who take humour to be an outlet for energy needed to repress emotional, sexual, bodily drives can be easily applied to *The Young Ones*. Only within the limits of this safety-valve incongruity space might we find a severed head, a cut-off finger or a talking carrot funny. Among themselves, *The Young Ones* provide plenty of examples of the aggressive, disparaging laughter of superiority. According to the superiority theory of humour, which can be traced to Plato and Thomas Hobbes (Zillman 85–86), it is a device to elevate oneself at the expense of others – a strategy put best by the German *schadenfreude*. The violence and aggression within the student group is marked and, in spite of the fact that it is inconsequential cartoon violence, there is a lot of superiority humour to be detected in *The Young Ones*. For Palmer, the plausible aggression towards the Nigel Planer character destroyed the comic effect:

The TV comic series *The Young Ones* featured a hippy who was constantly victimised by all the other characters. My personal reaction was to feel

that this was simultaneously surprising and also very plausible: I could not see that it was absurd, and it seemed only cruel and therefore unfunny. (Palmer 137)

Palmer's matrix suggests a number of possible comic failures, in our case the fact that the aggression is both plausible and unsurprising.

Table 9.1 Matrix of possible comic failure (adapted from Palmer 137): *The Young Ones* as too serious

	Excess implausibility	Excess plausibility
High surprise level	Silly	Over the top
Low surprise level	Boring, conventional	Serious

Figures of authority (above all, the police, but also mainstream media celebrities and political representatives of Thatcherism) also frequently come under attack. In the episode 'Cash', when Vyvyan (miraculously) is about to have a baby, Rick points his finger in angry direct address to the audience and the Prime Minister: 'We haven't got any money! Vyvyan's baby will be a pauper. Oliver Dickens! Geoffrey Twist! Back to Victorian values! I hope you're satisfied, Thatcher!'⁹

In general, however, the countercultural force of the show is mitigated by the fact that not only Thatcher, Thatcherism and the privileged classes (Griff Rhys-Jones, Emma Thompson, Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie in 'Bambi') come under comic fire, but also its Marxist and anarchic counterforces (Alexei Sayle, Rik Mayall) and the hippie and punk countercultures (Nigel Planer, Adrian Edmondson).

For all their political differences, both 'waves' of comedy, *Monty Python* and the university humour of the Cambridge Footlights as well as the alternative comedy of *The Young Ones*, might be seen to address the same kind of sophisticated, relatively highbrow audience. *The Young Ones* emerged precisely at a moment in British TV history when established notions of quality TV (associated with the *Wednesday Play* and *Play for Today* slots for single TV drama) came under attack from market-driven notions of TV as (merely) an industry. Thus, the humour in *The Young Ones* can be seen as an attempt to merge low comedy with meta-television, commenting on the current TV conventions of the mid-1980s. The episode 'Nasty' invokes the 1980s moral panics around video nasties (as well as David Bowie, Harry Secombe, Oscar Wilde, Bela Lugosi, the Pythons and Marxist comedians who 'sell out' to advertising) and in 'Bambi' the popular quiz show *University Challenge* is referenced. As Friedman argues with reference to Alexei Sayle's wide-ranging rants that also mark *The Young Ones* episodes, this comedy

demands intellectual participation and deliberately risks the comic failure outlined by Palmer above:

Alexei Sayle epitomised this 'alternative' intellectual style, his ranting and relentless speed of attack demanding a constant intellectual participation ranging from Sartre references to Brechtian theatre ... Such intellectual comedy also demanded a more overtly 'disinterested' appreciation. Together, comedians like Sayle and Keith Allen dared to transgress the normal emotional response expected from comedy and intended not to please but to challenge. This meant material that directly invoked unpleasant emotions such as shock, disgust and sadness. (Friedman 18–19)

In spite of this more cerebral side, the childish zaniness and frantic violence in *The Young Ones* can be argued to celebrate the volcanic, eruptive, anti-social id. The relief theory according to Freud connected humour and creative activities to child's play (437), so that the surprise voiced by writer Lise Mayer at the fact that the show seemed to work best with younger adolescents and children is unfounded. *The Young Ones* sought, among other aims, to establish and reinforce the right to be stubbornly unproductive and futile in the face of the encroaching mandates of capitalist Britain. As Sianne Ngai has argued, zaniness as an aesthetic category (set off against the coolly 'interesting' and the diminutively emotional 'cute') is enmeshed in the cultural logic of late capitalism:

Intensely affective and highly physical, it's an aesthetic of nonstop action that bridges popular and avant-garde practice across a wide range of media: from the Dada cabaret of Hugo Ball to the sitcom of Lucille Ball. You could say that zaniness is essentially the experience of an agent confronted by – even endangered by – too many things coming at her quickly and at once ... The dynamics of this aesthetic of incessant doing are thus perhaps best studied in the arts of live and recorded performance – dance, happenings, walkabouts, reenactments, game shows, video games. I've got a more specific reading of post-Fordist or contemporary zaniness, which is that it is an aesthetic explicitly about the politically ambiguous convergence of cultural and occupational performance, or playing and laboring ... the zany more specifically evokes the performance of affective labor – the production of affects and relationships – as it comes to increasingly trouble the very distinction between work and play. This explains why this ludic aesthetic has a noticeably unfun or stressed-out layer to it. Contemporary zaniness is not just an aesthetic about play but about work, and also about precarity, which is why the threat of injury is always hovering about it. (Ngai and Jasper)

Derived from the *zanni*, the harlequin of *commedia dell'arte*, the zany character answers with over-the-top desperation to the overload of contemporary

capitalism. For Ngai, he is a character of weakness – and clearly Scumbag College harbours a zany weakness that is born of marginalisation, ineptitude and desperation, with ‘the threat of injury ... always hovering about’ the students. We can detect in the series’ squalid anarchy an attack on the corrosive piety of traditional Britain with its proclaimed return to heritage, core values and to the rigidity of a fundamentalist Englishness. This non-evaluative celebration of cosmopolitan laughter as absolute comedy does more than merely fight against repression – a repression which seems to be at the heart of a lot of English humour.

The violent, zany and grotesque humour of *The Young Ones* and its careful avoidance of sexism and xenophobia have saved it from merely replicating persistent comic stereotypes. One approach to *The Young Ones*, then, is to see it as part of a humorous surrealism that attacks the regime of normalisation (as proposed by Jürgen Link’s theory of ‘normalism’). Link argues that surrealism attempts to achieve a ‘transnormalist’ intensity that attacks the normalism that has prevailed in the Western world at least since the eighteenth century (Link 38). According to Link, rationalist and empiricist thought brought about a data-driven regime of statistics that generates normal ranges and *états normaux*. The obligation of surrealist comedy is therefore to transgress the governing normalcy with practices and images of zany absurdity.

The surrealism in *The Young Ones* was in part the result of the briefing of producer Paul Jackson, who ensured that the show was incongruous with the norms of TV by telling the writers to write directly from their imagination, unaware of budgetary or other constraints of broadcast TV: ‘What that resulted in was a script that didn’t know what it couldn’t do. And I think that’s one of the reasons why *The Young Ones* was the way it was ... So they wrote what you could argue actually was an unshootable script’ (quoted in ‘The Making of *The Young Ones*’). One may therefore see *The Young Ones* as part of a tradition of ‘highbrow’ humour. While this ‘vertical’ cultural assessment of comedy is inherently problematic, it is routinely evoked in humour research, for instance, in audience analyses of humour (Claessens and Dhoest). Both *Monty Python* and *The Young Ones*, one may conclude, offer absurd and surreal humour that transforms and transcends conventional sketch comedy or sitcom formulae, appealing not just to lowbrow audiences, but also generating cultural capital for highly educated, presumably young and liberal viewers with references to high culture and media culture. Only an audience well-versed in a broad variety of cultural fields would thus be competent enough to decode and appreciate all the divergent meanings implicit in this ‘richer’ kind of comedy. An archetypal example of the connoisseur of British alternative comedy might be the highly educated, 30-year-old female high school teacher investigated by Claessens and Dhoest:

When asked about her favourite television comedy, she names several British comedy series, such as *Little Britain* (BBC, 2003–present), *The*

Young Ones (BBC, 1982–1984) and *Blackadder* (BBC, 1983–1989). She excitedly describes the 'superdry', unpredictable, absurd humour and the presence of anti-climaxes in British comedy. She thinks the difficulty of this middle- to highbrow humour is due to the absurdity of the humour and the lack of an explicitly humorous frame. For her, this explains why people with different educational levels have distinct comedy preferences. (Claessens and Dhoest 65)

3 *The Young Ones* vs. Thatcher and Oxbridge humour

Let us briefly come back to the initial claim by Alexei Sayle about the political anti-establishment impetus compromised by the *Young Ones* episode 'Bambi'. In a significant moment of this episode, both the cerebral, intellectual, surreal and the politically conscious side of the show come to the fore:

Scene: Back in the train car

Rick: Come on, come on! Get the thing started! God, what excuse is it this time? I suppose they'll be telling us they've been held up by Mexican bandits.

Scene: Outside by the engine car. Mexican bandits are holding the Train Driver at gunpoint.

Train Driver: That's a Zapata moustache, ennit? He's Mexican, wasn't he, eh? Funny, really, you know, Zapata. He starts out as a peasant revolutionary, and ends up as a kind of moustache. Che Guevara, he's another one. South American revolutionary, ends up as a sort of boutique. Garibaldi, Italian revolutionary, ends up as a kind of biscuit. It's quite interesting, you know, the number of biscuits that are named after revolutionaries. You've got your Garibaldi, of course, you've got your Bourbons, then of course you've got your Peek Freens Trotsky Assortment.

Sings

'Revolutionary biscuits of Italy / Rise up out of your box! / You have nothing to lose but your wafers / Yum yum yum yum yum!'

Pause

I never really wanted to be a train driver, you know. I mean, they told me while at school, if I got two CSEs, when I left school I'd be head of British Steel. That's a lot of nonsense, ennit? I mean, you look at statistics, right. 83% of top British management have been to a public school and Oxbridge, right? 93% of the BBC have been to a public school and Oxbridge, right? 98% of the KGB have been to a public school and Oxbridge.

All you get from a public school, right – one, you get a top job, right, and two, you get an interest in perverse sexual practices. I mean, that's why British management's so inefficient. As soon as they get in the boardroom, they're all shutting each others' dicks in the door! 'Go on, give it

another slam, Sir Michael!' BAM! OW OW OW! 'Come on, Sir Geoffrey, let's play the Panzer commander and the milkmaid, EW EW EW EW! YOO HOO!'

Establishing shot of a Rolls-Royce driving out of Footlights College

SCENE: Back seat, four rich kids: Kendal Mintcake (Ben Elton), Miss Money-Sterling (Emma Thompson), Lord Snot (Stephen Fry) and Lord Monty (Hugh Laurie).

All: (*singing*) Rah, rah, rah, we're going to smash the oinks! Ha ha ha ha ha! Washing Machine: You know, it's a rotten shame. I went to see the Careers Officer in Big College yesterday, and he said all he'd got left is chairman of British Rail! Well, I wanted to be Director General of the BBC.

Lord Snot: Yes, it's rotten, they gave it to Skapper just because he directed our world tour of 'Hamlet' and wrote our hilarious revue, 'What Ho, Darkie.' Honestly, chairman of a nationalized industry – I'd rather be a Cabinet Minister!

Kendal Mintcake: Well, I'm alright, 'cause my Daddy's bought me the Socialist Workers' Party for my birthday!

Miss Money-Sterling: At least we're going to smash the oinks at Scumbag College in University Challenge. ('The Young Ones: Bambi')¹⁰

The surrealism of a talking washing machine claiming to be the Chairman of British Rail and of revolutionary biscuits rising from their box is just as evident as the satire/parody on the 'Footlights' tradition of class-conscious Oxbridge humour. It must be added, however, that Stephen Fry, Emma Thompson and Hugh Laurie, among others, were happy to participate themselves in this attack on upper-class humour and politics. In the Balowski rant performed by Alexi Sayle, the homophobia is class-inflected, targeting the public school as a rather conventional butt of Oxbridge elite bashing. Clearly, it takes a thorough knowledge of history and a secondary education to fully savour the surreal humour on revolutionary biscuits. If this continues to be funny, it may do so through the persistence of the perceived incongruities as well as through the class bias among British elites.

In humour theory, it is consensus that jokes are highly context-sensitive 'small anthropological essays' (Critchley 65), in which cultural power, status and habitus are being negotiated with an audience. The laughter and stereotypes shared with an audience are seismographic. Christie Davies argues: 'To become angry about jokes and to seek to censor them because they impinge on sensitive issues is about as sensible as smashing a thermometer because it reveals how hot it is' (9). Arguably, humour is at its best when it does not laugh from the power centre at the margins, but from the weak margins back at the power centre, as it self-deprecatingly manages to attack and interrogate its own moral ground: hopeless wit and ridicule in the face of despair. This is a line of argument on *The Young Ones* that sees it predominantly as marginalised youth culture's challenging of the dominant

paradigm of Thatcherism in the 1980s. After years of economic downturn, Thatcher offered a remedy that seemed neo-Victorian and anti-modern, based on free capitalism, thrift, self-help, entrepreneurship and the destruction of the trade unions. Crushing the welfare state and the supposedly inefficient old industrial core businesses, Thatcher offered an antidote to the paternalist conservatism and threw the gauntlet down to the 'progressive' left wing. The result was widespread industrial unrest and a society torn between embracing Thatcherism as a necessary remedy and resenting the social rift and fissures that emerged with it. The philistine ordinariness and anti-intellectualism that Thatcher exuded was particularly challenging to working-class culture both in terms of class (rampant unemployment, wage cuts, dismantling of the welfare state) and in terms of gender, as young males had to bear the brunt of her policies of disenfranchisement.

The alternative comedians of the early 1980s railed against the Thatcherite ethos. Following Peter Rosengard, Friedman argues they pursued:

a collective political project aimed at raising awareness of rising unemployment, economic recession and social division. For these comedians, the revolutionary idea was that comedy could be not just a banal perpetuator of 'false consciousness', but instead a radical mode of communication to galvanise political action and energy. (Friedman 18)

Echoing the assessment of their achievement by Peter Rosengard, John Wilmot, Oliver Double and others, Stott has pinpointed the liberating political dimension of alternative comedy as a catalyst for less streamlined comedy practice:

Alternative comedy was overtly political from the start, informed by a punk ethos that dominated British counter-culture in the mid to late 1970s, it defined itself against the expectations of mainstream performance, and encouraged people to write their own material, set up their own gigs, and perform without the need for agents. (Stott 112)

The flatsharing council estate students of *The Young Ones* seem like an embodiment of oppositional subject positions in the Thatcher years. *The Young Ones* can thus be seen as coinciding with the heyday of the campus novel, which discovered university education as a template for humour – a humour that was not entirely constructed (via punchlines), but that emanates from the direct experience of their writers (all of whom had just left university). For Janine Utell, this response to cultural hegemony (ironically on a BBC platform) is the key dimension of the comedy punks:

The Young Ones are marginalized by their youth and their inferior status in society ... *The Young Ones* ... exhibit the rage, melodrama and melancholy

of youth, and therefore may be dismissed; the young men invite mockery ... Rick is a spotty, idealistic pretentious teenage intellectual who writes bad poetry about Cliff Richard and decides to start a group called 'People Who Don't Pay Their TV Licenses Against the Nazis'. Like the fool speaking the truth, they are relegated to the margins of society; yet in this dismissal they are free to speak their subversion. One laughs, but one realizes at the same time that these young men are responding to profound ruptures and transformations in society. (Utell 153)

Such a reading, informed by popular cultural studies in the vein of John Fiske and Stuart Hall and the paradigm of Gramscian 'hegemony', locks *The Young Ones* firmly into the negotiation of capitalist and Thatcherite policies, reducing comedy to a cultural seismograph and disregarding both the aesthetic programme and anthropological function of humour. The incapacitated loitering of the four boys introduces a 'syntax of weakness' (Critchley 49) and in its best moments, *The Young Ones*' profound unhappiness is worthy of Beckett's characters.

The Young Ones is informed by an awareness of fundamental absurdity and futility of life. Its deliberate transgression of normalcy, then, expresses not only resentment against Thatcherism, but also a bitter, anarchic and Dionysian attitude towards life. Unkempt and messy, *The Young Ones* is clearly to be seen in the tradition of a comedy of abjection and disgust.

4 'An infantile and warped sense of humour': the comedy of disgust

The Young Ones should be addressed as the cusp of a wave of corporeal 'comedy of disgust' breaking on British screens as the alternative comedy of the 1980s and 1990s (*The Comic Strip Presents...*, *Bottom*, *Filthy Rich & Catflap*). It has been hugely successful, inspiring shows such as *Blackadder*, *Red Dwarf*, *Crapston Villas*, *The League of Gentlemen* and *Little Britain*. As this chapter has argued, the series helped push British comedy permanently out of a reactionary, prurient corner – although to what extent a show such as *Little Britain* might not perpetuate clichés and stereotypes that *The Young Ones* has helped overcome is still hotly debated.¹¹ Arguably, the signature grossness of the ejaculating giraffe in *The League of Gentlemen* is a direct descendant of *The Young Ones*. As Critchley put it, 'the body returns in laughter in the form of an eruptive, animal physicality' (46). It may therefore be juxtaposed as comic bodily abjection against images of bodily perfection. As the Irish comedian Dylan Moran, another performer clearly influenced by *The Young Ones*, put it with reference to his show *Black Books*:

It's a reaction against the perfectness of things like *Friends*, I have a very low tolerance for enthusiasm generally. Television should reflect how

we live. I get depressed by how good-looking everyone is on television. You never get the sense that they smell or are at all crusty. We wanted to avoid the airbrushed slickness of most things. I want viewers to feel that these characters find clumps of pubic hair in the most unexpected places around the house. (Rampton)

Juxtaposed against the cleanliness of civilised normalcy, we find the realm of art and culture proper. Again, we might see *The Young Ones* on two levels here: in the narrow sense, it counters the Thatcherite 'Victorian' values of cleanliness as godliness and, in a wider sense, it delighted in bodily abjection. Kristeva theorised 'abjection' as a primal process in a pre-symbolic, 'semiotic' state. Cultures and religions regularly delimit and prohibit deviant behaviour – practices that since the eighteenth century have been designated as 'abnormal' under the banner of normalcy in the sense provided by Link. We might venture that the regime of normality has replaced religion under conditions of a ruling secularised rational Enlightenment. The abject represents the other side of this coin – the unclean extremities, bodily loathing and desire. The abject fear of death becomes acceptable through the cultural promise of transcendence. Interestingly, even a cognitive approach to humour, such as that taken by Morreall, may find explanations as to why absurdist, grotesque and macabre fun might be had from the experience of fear and repulsion in fiction (Morreall, 'Enjoying').

To the extent that *The Young Ones* generates disgust, its humour relating to the body might be described as abject. The humour in *The Young Ones* is best described as puerile, aggressive and over-the-top. Writer Lise Mayer recalls:

We didn't consciously think 'Let's put in extreme violence.' I think it was just what made us laugh were people getting hurt, people hurting other people, people doing embarrassing things ... It was just a sort of infantile and warped sense of humour. (Quoted in 'The Making of *The Young Ones*')

After all, the series was called *The Young Ones* – suggesting not only Cliff Richard but also alluding to the zany infantilism of the humour. In the Freudian narrative, Vyvyan and Rick in particular give vent to the childhood id, prior to its disenfranchisement as a taboo by the forces of the super-ego. As cases in point, we might cite cartoon violence well known from *Monty Python* and a variety of bodily noises:

- Vyvyan is decapitated when he leans out of a train window; his rump subsequently kicks his foul-mouthed head around.
- At various moments, Vyvyan, Rick or Neil are hit with baseball bats, frying pans or bricks; Vyvyan bites through a brick.
- Neil cooks a dead pigeon he picks up in the litter bin. He empties the litter bin over Vyvyan's head, who bites a chunk off a dead rat he finds in it. The kitchen explodes.

- An exceedingly dirty loo is not only speaking but belching.
- There is farting, burping and bollock-hitting.
- The bathwater is never changed and looks like faeces; Neil finds his bike in it.
- Fingers are cut off with blood spurting violently from the wounds.
- A rat is chewing the limbs of his dead mate ('It's what he would have wanted!').

Disgust, aggression and violent transgression are essential to successful comedy because they may be offensive. In *The Meaning of Disgust*, McGinn maintains:

Disgust often gives rise to comedy and embarrassment. Scatological humour abounds, as do jokes about sex and death. We laugh about the things that disgust us ... Discomfort is the underlying factor. We joke about shit because we are embarrassed and discomforted by it ... Farting in public is embarrassing, discomforting and also funny – all too redolent of the disgusting body that is with us always. (63)

We may find the flatsharing students simply so offensive and disgusting that we lack sympathy. However, we may also see their uncouth and infantile behaviour as expressing a suppressed cultural taboo. Again, we might refer to Sigmund Freud and relief theories of humour. Freud argues that humour is one of the outlets of the imagination, compensating for the strictures of reality, expressing the pleasure principle once the reality principle has accommodated the child into the adult world (Freud 437–438). Laughing at what we find disgusting is a way of coming to terms with a strong emotion. The farting, burping and bollock-hitting of *The Young Ones* is an ambiguous abjection, luring us towards the pre-symbolic realm of abject fear and loathing in the context of a 'legitimate' transgression – only just allowed by the BBC and other institutions that lay down the law of what is culturally acceptable in the media or in a particular media text. Thus, we might usefully apply Freud, Nietzsche, Bataille or Bakhtin's concepts of subversion and transgression to *The Young Ones*. The series may be seen as going one further step in the decentring of comic values and the redefinition of what is acceptable in comedy. In the logics of transgression, as expounded by Jencks, 'excess is not an abhorration nor a luxury, it is rather a dynamic force in cultural reproduction – it prevents stagnation by breaking the rule and it ensures stability by reaffirming the rule' (Jencks 7).

Notes

1. Terry Jones of *Monty Python* has a guest appearance in the episode 'Nasty'. A classic *Monty Python* sketch is referenced when a man in a bowler hat appears, asking if he was in a cheese shop.

2. According to Lise Mayer, the reason was that performing bands meant larger budgets supplied by the BBC Variety department (quoted in 'The Making of *The Young Ones*').
3. Alexei Sayle is credited with contributing additional material. Lise Mayer recalls that every writer was paid the modest sum of £300 per script in the first series and £500 in the second series (quoted in 'The Making of *The Young Ones*').
4. For the history of alternative comedy, see the documentary 'Alternative Rebellion: The Beginning of Britain's Alternative Comedy Scene' (directed by Richard Adamson), which is part of *The Young Ones Complete Series* DVD.
5. *It's That Man Again* was a wartime BBC radio show whose key aim was to boost British war morale (written by Ted Kavanagh and performed by Tommy Handley; the title reference is to Adolf Hitler).
6. Andy de la Tour on the ITV programme *The Comedians*, referring to traditional, reactionary, 'superiority humour' at the expense of women ('mother-in-law jokes') or foreigners, which was standard fare at music halls and working men's clubs – jokes represented by Bernard Manning, Les Dawson or Charlie Williams ('The Making of *The Young Ones*').
7. Mayer ran the Old Red Lion theatre pub, where she gathered ideas with her then boyfriend Rik Mayall.
8. Raymond Williams developed his ideas in *The Long Revolution* (1961) and *Marxism and Literature* (1977), attempting to provide a notion that would do justice to the experience of a particular lived moment, expressing an otherwise irretrievably elusive set of shared norms, values and perceptions.
9. This passage, available in the BBC version published in 2007, is missing in some versions of the script. It may have been edited out of the first transmission.
10. A number of faulty transcriptions of *The Young Ones* scripts are currently circulating on various webpages.
11. Deborah Finding suggests that *Little Britain* reinforces anti-feminist and homophobic gender stereotypes (chav mums, gay men, mail order brides). Her history of 'alternative' comedy charts a downfall, a selling-out to mainstream tastes and a tendency to find ironic excuses in a return to 'laddism' and female self-deprecation. As in the quote by Christie Davies, however, it is more promising to see *Little Britain* as seismographic, that is, as indicating the current faultlines in TV humour. Stott colludes, arguing that 'alternative comedy is no longer the iconoclastic force it once was, and has managed to retain only the vaguest of liberal consciences since it became big business and was incorporated into radio and television' (Stott 112).

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10

The Uses of History in *Blackadder*

Gerold Sedlmayr

1 Introduction: *Blackadder* as alternate history

Blackadder ran for four series between 1983 and 1989, and engendered a number of specials and celebratory sketches. Each season has six episodes with a running time of 30 minutes. *Blackadder* recounts the fortunes of its eponymous hero, Edmund Blackadder, played by Rowan Atkinson, and his sidekick Baldrick, played by Tony Robinson. Other recurring cast members are Tim McInnerny, Miranda Richardson, Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie. The first season was scripted by Richard Curtis and Rowan Atkinson himself, while the remaining three were co-penned by Richard Curtis and Ben Elton. John Lloyd acted as producer. The following will provide an introduction to the notion of an alternate English and British history inherent especially in the first season of *Blackadder*. Subsequently, the series' general characteristics as a sitcom will be briefly sketched. The last and longest part will analyse and contextualise one specific episode from the third season, 'Dish and Dishonesty', with an emphasis on the relationship between the past and the present.

The show's most salient characteristic is that, unlike most other sitcoms, it is not set in the present, in this case the 1980s, but in different periods of the more or less distant past. The first series, *The Black Adder* (1983), is situated in the transition period between the Middle Ages and the early modern period, whereas the subsequent seasons are set in the Elizabethan Age (*Blackadder II*, 1986), the late reign of George III (*Blackadder the Third*, 1987) and the First World War (*Blackadder Goes Forth*, 1989). In other words, although played by the same actors, the Blackadders and Baldricks we see on screen are of course supposed to be different Blackadders and Baldricks in the respective seasons; they are different offshoots of the same family tree.¹

The plot of the first series, the first episode of which covers the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485, is based on the vision of an alternate history. According to historical tradition, King Richard III, who was defeated by the Lancastrians under Henry Tudor at Bosworth, had originally not been the

most obvious candidate for the succession. When his brother, Edward IV, died in 1483, Edward's sons, another Edward and his younger brother, another Richard, were the next in line. Since the elder son, who indeed became Edward V, was only 12 years old when he ascended to the throne, his uncle Richard of Gloucester acted as Lord Protector. Richard, however, was not the caring type of uncle, but quickly locked the young boys in the Tower of London, which they, unfortunately, did not leave alive. It is still unclear who actually murdered them, but murdered they were, and Richard, still the prime suspect in this case, became Richard III for a short term of two years. In common memory, kept alive not least by Shakespeare's play, he features as an evil, murderous king.

This is where the sitcom's alternative version of history sets in: in *The Black Adder*, Edward IV's younger son, Richard of Shrewsbury, the Duke of York, has survived the reign of Richard III, obviously because Uncle Richard was *not* the malevolent king that we suppose him to be. In fact, judging from the first episode's introductory sequence, he actually seems to be quite a nice fellow. What is more, Henry Tudor does not win, but actually loses the Battle of Bosworth Field, so that it is not Henry but the young Richard who becomes king after the death of Richard III. Why then have we never heard of this King Richard IV? Why do we think that he was killed by a reckless Richard III when still a child?

According to the series' allohistorical narrative, we have to blame Henry Tudor for our being ignorant of this historical period: the very Henry Tudor, who indeed became Henry VII, yet not in 1485, as we commonly suppose, but only 13 years later, in 1498. What we learn from a fast-forward account of the events is that, after eventually ascending to the throne, Henry managed to erase all historical records of the reign of Richard IV, thereby creating his own brand of an alternate history for the years between 1485 and 1498: an alternate history ('intratextual' level) within an alternate history ('extratextual' level). To put it more concisely, the series contends that the particular version of history we commonly claim to be accurate is actually false because it was consciously falsified, while the one offered by the series is presented as being true. As the narrator avers: 'History has known many great liars. ... But there have been none quite so vile as the Tudor king, Henry VII. It was he who rewrote history to portray his predecessor Richard III as a deformed maniac, who killed his nephews in the Tower' ('The Foretelling', BA² 1) However, since we, the audience, are of course aware that this is not a documentary, but a television sitcom, we know from the beginning that its truth claims are obviously not meant to be taken seriously. We know that *Blackadder* plays with history and we are supposed to realise that it does. We know that its historical construction is a construction. Therefore, if there is any 'serious' issue underlying the project, then it is its prompting us to reflect on the status that history itself has when it comes to the here and now. As Gavriel Rosenfeld writes: 'Alternate history is inherently

presentist. It explores the past less for its own sake than to utilize it instrumentally to comment upon the present' (93), regarding *Blackadder*, that is, the Thatcherite years.

Historically, of course, the Battle of Bosworth Field marks not only the end of the so-called Wars of the Roses, but, with respect to England, is conventionally also considered to indicate the end of the Middle Ages and hence the beginning of the (early) modern period. In retrospect, the defeat of the followers of the House of York under the Plantagenet King Richard III, who died on the battlefield, has become symbolic of large-scale shifts in England's social and political structures. Whereas '[i]n the century before 1485, England had been underpopulated, underdeveloped and inwardlooking compared with other European states', in the sixteenth century, amongst other things, 'the expansion both of the area of land under cultivation and of consumer demand stimulated the commercialization of agriculture and the rise of entrepreneurs ... bolstering new ambitions among the merchant classes' (Guy 257), not least with regard to the New World and the East Indies. Considering these aspects, to draw certain parallels to the Thatcherite 1980s may not seem all too absurd, since this era has also come to mark a watershed period. Not only did Thatcher, despite her Euroscepticism, controversially manage to put the UK 'on the map' again internationally as a result of the Falklands War, in domestic terms the neo-liberalist ideology of her governments also placed a heightened emphasis on entrepreneurship and the boosting of Britain's economic performance at the expense of the welfare state.

Nonetheless, it is important to remember that the series' vision of an alternate history is framed within the parameters of a television comedy. Its titular hero, Prince Edmund Plantagenet, later referred to by himself as 'The Black Adder', is King Richard IV's – utterly fictive – second son, with the (equally fictive) Prince Henry being the first and hence the legitimate heir apparent. Regarding the diegetic level, much of the humour of the first series derives from *Blackadder's* failed attempts to gain his father's favour and put his brother Henry away in order to become heir apparent himself. On a meta-level, though, Edmund's sly but ultimately doomed attempts to subvert the ruling authority become indicative of one significant aspect of the politics of this sitcom: due to its own establishing narrative of origin, that is, its proposal of an alternate history within an alternate history, it draws attention to the very status of some of the ruling *grand récits* that have structured English and British national memory. The question is whether its humour acts in such a way as to subvert or, on the contrary, even strengthen their authority.

2 General characteristics: *Blackadder* as a sitcom

Much of the first series was shot on location, especially at Alnwick Castle in Northumberland, not least because the creators attempted to give the series

a flair reminiscent of older heroic adventure films, particularly of the type of the 1938 classic *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, starring Errol Flynn (Roberts 81–82). As Katherine J. Lewis writes:

In keeping with the desired ‘Hollywood’ feel, the series was filmed in large cinematic sets and on location, rather than in front of a studio audience, as was usual for sitcoms at the time. The BBC spent a million pounds on the series, visible in the lavish costumes and set-dressings, which also served to set it apart from any other sitcom it had ever made ... However, the ambitious nature of the series was nearly its downfall, for although a million pounds was spent on it Atkinson has noted that it only looked like a million dollars. (Lewis 119)

The series was not the success it was expected to be, either in economic or in critical terms, so those responsible at the BBC decided to axe the show. It was only because the show’s producer and writers very quickly suggested returning to the traditional sitcom format that the show could eventually be saved. This meant that, among other things, instead of on-location filming, Series Two to Four were shot in a studio with a live audience. As a consequence, the scriptwriters, Richard Curtis and his new co-writer Ben Elton, instead of providing an action-driven plot and a glittering filmic atmosphere, had to put the emphasis on wordplay and slapstick, which actually suited the actors. Since most of them were comedians accustomed to playing in front of live audiences, the new format allowed them to much better ‘adjust their pace and mood according to the reactions they got’ (Lewis 119). On the other hand, the sitcom format, due to its rather strict and well-established conventions, might also be considered as limiting the show’s potential. Eckart Voigts-Virchow has concisely summarised these conventions with a view to *Blackadder*:

Sitcom is the archetypal TV narrative and it is regularly named as the most prominent instance of a TV-specific genre development. The 24 regular *Blackadder* episodes and occasional specials share the time-worn structural and narrative hallmarks of the genre: the half-hour duration, the predominantly verbal humour, the episode-specific predicament, the stereotyped characterization, the perennially static and circular plot constellations, the importance of the series context (for example for running gags such as Baldrick’s ‘cunning plan’ and recipes), the consistent scheduling, and the season division which cuts across the boundaries of series and serial, moving towards new generic hybridity. (Voigts-Virchow 214)

3 Edmund Blackadder as a Thatcherite character

In the following, the foregoing remarks will be specified and illustrated by contextualising the first episode of the third series, *Blackadder the Third*. As

mentioned before, the third series is set in the time before and during the Regency period (1811–1820). The then king was George III, who ruled over Britain from 1760 to 1820. From 1788 and at irregular intervals, he suffered from bouts of a nervous disease that doctors had a hard time diagnosing. In the beginning, these spells of mental illness, though extremely disconcerting and politically momentous, were still short enough. The King repeatedly was able to return to his normal working routine. In 1811, however, the disease had become so tenacious that his son, Prince George, took over the King's official functions as Prince Regent until the King's death in 1820. Unfortunately, though, from very early on, Prince George did not exactly have the best reputation. He was accused of 'gambling, intemperance and womanising', a 'dissipated lifestyle' (Derry 21–22) which in fact plunged him into serious debts quite early in his career, so much so that Parliament ultimately had to pay for them (31).

In the second scene of 'Dish and Dishonesty', we witness Prime Minister Pitt accuse the Prince of profligacy – 'this year alone he has spent £15,000 on banqueting ... Twenty thousand pounds on perfume ... And, most astonishing of all, an astonishing £59,000 pounds on socks' (BA 237) – and accordingly demands that he be struck off the Civil List, that is, barred from the annual grant given to the Royal Family and the Royal Household. Naïve George, however, when informed about this by Edmund Blackadder, who features as his butler, is at first unable to comprehend the consequences of the Prime Minister's plans and is rather concerned about the continuing disappearance of 'many millions of pairs of socks' (BA 238). When he muses that 'you'd think someone was coming in here stealing the damn things and selling them off' (BA 238), he unwittingly hits the mark, as Blackadder's brief but telling silence clearly indicates. While in the first series, Blackadder is still depicted as rather naïve himself, the remaining instalments turn him into a highly cunning and malicious character, whose only motivation is to maximise his personal gain. As always, he is depicted as taking some sort of middle ground in terms of his hierarchical position in society³ or, as he phrases it: 'So basically it's a nice old mess. Toffs at the top, plebs at the bottom and me in the middle making a fat pile of cash out of both of them' (BA 237). As this quotation betrays, Blackadder's position in the middle is not one of mediation and moderation, although this is what he repeatedly makes Prince George believe; rather, whenever Blackadder purports to moderate, it is with a view to his personal advantage. The way in which he treats his inferiors, especially Baldrick, makes clear that he is not at all interested in communal harmony or general welfare, but merely in his own material advancement. Verbally at least, Blackadder aggressively mistreats those below him and at the same time cleverly and falsely fawns over his superiors. While it may be true to a certain extent, as J.F. Roberts claims, that the series, because of its historical setting, 'thrives by being untied to its decade of origin' (222), certain striking parallels between the fictive historical world

of *Blackadder* and the 1980s in Britain are again undeniable. The character of Edmund Blackadder, in all of his incarnations, seems to be a negative epitome of the 'ideal' Thatcherite individual.

As has been remarked above, all four regular series of *Blackadder* were shot and aired during Margaret Thatcher's 'reign' as British Prime Minister. In many ways, the Thatcherite era marked a drastic break in the history of post-war Britain – just like the Tudor era, the turn from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, and the First World War marked periods of transition in their own right. In particular, Thatcher's successive governments launched quite effective attacks against the welfare state that had been installed after the Second World War by the Labour Government under Clement Attlee and had since considerably defined the self-conception of British society. In view of the UK's rather modest economic performance when compared to other European or Western states and the high costs of the welfare system, Thatcher propagated a severe reduction of state intervention in people's lives.

Accordingly, the Thatcher governments, guided by a neo-liberal ideology, radically cut state benefits, effectively reduced the influence of the trade unions and declared that each individual was responsible for their own welfare and success. Certainly, Thatcher did believe in a communal ethic: according to her ideas, everyone had to take responsibility not only for himself or herself, but also for the others. However, it was not the state's duty to impose values on its subjects; rather, these values – and in Thatcher's mind, these were traditional 'Victorian' values – had to spring from the individual members of the community themselves. In the words of Jürgen Kamm and Bernd Lenz:

Three [of Thatcher's] principles deserve particular consideration, because they recur again and again in her speeches and actions: personal responsibility, the crusade for traditional values, and strong leadership. Personal responsibility results from a sense of obligation to society, which needs go-getters and not spectators. Thatcher's favoured central concept is *meritocracy* – a neologism from *merit* and *aristocracy* – and is meant to lead to an achievement-oriented instead of a class society. For Thatcher, personal responsibility entails a politics of privatisation rather than state control. (Kamm and Lenz 348, author's translation)

This was Thatcher's ideal vision. The reality was different, though. Many contemporaries experienced the Thatcherite revolution as cold and unjust, as creating social gaps instead of levelling them. When it came down to it, people, it seemed, always chose their own advantage over the welfare of others. Exaggerated in a very negative way, then, Edmund Blackadder functions as a stereotypical embodiment of the perfect Thatcherite 'middle-class' neo-liberal, someone whose whole world turns around himself and who, at the cost of others, is interested in his personal advancement only: 'me in the

middle making a fat pile of cash' (BA 237).⁴ Although, as Richard F. Taflinger remarks, '[m]ost of the characters in a situation comedy are sympathetic' (Taflinger, 'General Comments' section), we are clearly not meant to overly sympathise with Blackadder. Ironically, though, as with other sitcoms, given the ruling ideology during the Thatcher era, the audience might still be able to 'identify with [him] and [his] problems and care whether or not [he] can solve the problems' ('General Comments' section).

4 Competing notions of history: stasis versus progress

The most important hallmark of the series, its negotiation of the past, is therefore closely interlinked with 'the perennially static and circular plot constellations' (Voigts-Virchow 214) typical of sitcoms. This typical sitcom convention may indeed be interpreted as serving a political purpose here: we know that all of Blackadder's schemes, as cunning as they may be, will ultimately come to nothing. The self-centredness on which his character is based is doomed to fail. Precisely by creating a series that emphasises the past, the creators of *Blackadder* arguably made the point that Thatcherite neo-liberalism – and the kind of egoism that it potentially stimulated – would ultimately not be able to open up viable paths towards a better future. Unfortunately, and this is the flipside of the sitcom format, none of the other characters is able to provide a viable alternative to Blackadder's stance: Baldrick is as stupid as the Thatcherite neo-liberals allegedly implied many members of the working and lower classes to be; and Prince George, as representative of the old ruling classes, certainly does not fare better. Like Baldrick, he is as dumb as a doornail. What's worse, none of the characters ever changes. Consequently, there are no alternative plot developments.

Such character and plot stasis is of course characteristic of many sitcoms.⁵ Nonetheless, it attains a specifically fatalistic edge in a TV show whose subject matter is the past: hence, paradoxically, while history, on the one hand, seems to progress – we move from the Middle Ages in the first series on to the Elizabethan age to the Regency period to the First World War – it seems to fundamentally remain stationary on the other: in terms of characters and plot constellations, nothing really appears to change. Both at the end of every episode and at the end of every season, we return to the original status quo. As Barbara Korte writes with a view to character development:

Although the individual series are set in different periods, their Blackadders and Baldricks undergo little change except for historical costume, which creates the overall impression that one watches these two characters time-travelling, masquerading in different styles but with little consequence for their basic attitudes, behaviour and outlook on the respective environments in which they have to cope. (Korte 375)

Very consciously, then, *Blackadder* negotiates two different conceptions of history: history as progressive and teleological on the one hand, and history as circular and recurrent on the other. The sitcom format itself supports a conception of history as circular, whereas the decision to set the different seasons in different historical epochs, with *different* members of the same families, allows for the notion of time's progress, if ever so slightly. Regarding the latter, *Blackadder*, to some extent at least, suggests a 'serial style' in James Monaco's sense: 'stories develop; an end is in sight' (546).

Significantly, this ambivalence in the employment of history correlates with an ambiguity inherent in the genre and its institutionalisation as such. As Darrell Y. Hamamoto remarks with respect to US television, especially during the Reagan era, sitcoms potentially support emancipation – and therefore change – by providing space for the expression of 'multivalent social ideologies and mores that function within the larger framework of liberal democratic ideology' (Hamamoto 1). Yet, at the same time, 'the commercial system that produces and distributes the product for private profit alone' tends toward 'repression' (1) precisely because its primary motivation is the conservation of one ideology only (that is, capitalism), focusing on the individual as (passive) consumer. After all, when the four series of *Blackadder* were shot, the Cold War was not over yet. Where to draw ideological frontiers was still rather clear.

5 *Blackadder*, the British comedy tradition and historical (in)accuracy

It must be repeated at this point that the historical epochs were of course not chosen randomly; in fact, all of them feature prominently in the British historical imagination. The producers and writers obviously believed that their audience knew the basic historical constellations. Certainly, such knowledge is not absolutely necessary: the events themselves, combined with a good amount of wordplay, create their own situational humour. Nonetheless, access to the historical context may alter the *quality* (and therefore the *effect*) of the humour considerably. It is such a knowledge that, in a certain way, turns shows like *Blackadder* into specifically 'British' comedies in the first place. In this context, it is worth mentioning that many of the writers and actors of *Blackadder* have an academic background. Both Rowan Atkinson and series writer Richard Curtis, for instance, studied at Oxford, and it was during their time there that they first developed their approaches to comedy (Roberts 16–22). In other words, the people who created and shaped this show had a very particular educational background, a background they partly took for granted. Not for nothing did the credits of the first season regularly name Shakespeare as 'co-writer' of the script.

Nonetheless, when it came to expectations concerning cultural knowledge, *Blackadder* was indeed representative of British comedy culture rather than

unique. For instance, the radio show *I'm Sorry, I'll Read That Again* (ISIRTA), which ran successfully from 1963 to 1972, or, in fact, the whole *Monty Python* venture ruthlessly exploited Britain's cultural heritage in order to create the desired comic effects. In an article on ISIRTA, Gerd Stratmann writes:

there is one respect in which the early British pioneers [of comedy] were (and remained) unique [when compared to their American or German colleagues]: they systematically included in their materials the classics of literary and cultural history, allotting to them even a privileged position ... In [the ISIRTA] shows, the classics were systematically fragmented, distorted and trivialised, before they were fed into the *mélange* to contribute to the [sketches'] grotesque incongruities. One suspects that this is indeed a very British mixture – all-inclusive, combining 'high' and 'low' genres/discourses, all of them comically distorted with equal insolence – a tradition leading back at least as far as Gilbert & Sullivan. (Stratmann 120, 124)

It could be argued, then, that *Blackadder* merely carried this strategy of ransacking literary and cultural history to extremes, in that its makers chose to fully set the sitcom in the past. Of course, even this approach was not wholly new, with *Dad's Army* providing perhaps the most notable model (Roberts 82–89; see also Chapter 3 of this volume). However, while *Dad's Army* focused on very recent British history, *Blackadder* went all the way back (or, rather, forward) to the beginning of the early modern age in order to then work itself back to the twentieth century.

Of course, like other comparable shows, *Blackadder* treats actual historical processes rather freely, which is notable throughout. For instance, at the very beginning of 'Dish and Dishonesty', *Blackadder* tells Mrs Miggins that he will have no problems upholding his comfortable parasitical position in between the '[t]offs at the top' and 'the plebs at the bottom' (BA 237) as long as Prime Minister William Pitt the Elder remains in power. In the very next scene, we learn that the Elder Pitt has been replaced by Pitt the Younger. Although both Pitts, who were father and son, truly served as Prime Ministers, they did not serve in successive terms. While Pitt the Elder left office in 1768, Pitt the Younger became Prime Minister in 1783.⁶ Another example is that Parliament did debate paying for the Prince's debts, but four years after Pitt the Younger had become Prime Minister, in 1787, and it was during the King's first severe bout of mental illness in 1788 that certain oppositional factions tried to turn Prince George into a regent for the first time. These attempts, which in turn were severely opposed by Pitt the Younger, who indeed did not like the Prince, were not fruitful. Prince George became Prince Regent as late as 1811. The introductory credits of *Blackadder*, though, refer to this character as Prince Regent. To cut a long story short, despite the show's superficial reverence of British history, it is

blatantly inaccurate when it comes to the details. When taking a closer look, time in *Blackadder* therefore appears to be neither progressive nor circular, but chaotic and anachronistic. To put it differently, it is all of this at once: in *Blackadder*, history goes topsy-turvy. Or, as the military historian Stephen Badsey puts it dryly, 'historical authenticity is not very high on the series' order of priorities' (120).⁷

Nonetheless, it is precisely the astonishing anachronisms of *Blackadder* that help to put its view of the relationship between past and present into perspective. After all, as Rosenfeld purports, 'while they are subjective, alternate histories are far from being unrepresentative' (94). This can be explained by referring to another historical detail. In their conversation, Blackadder and Mrs Miggins talk about the upcoming General Elections and thereby allude to the inconsistencies of the British electoral system at the turn from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century:

Blackadder: You're not eligible to vote.

Mrs Miggins: Why not?

Blackadder: Because virtually no one is – women, peasants, chimpanzees, lunatics, lords.

Baldrick: No, that's not true. Lord Nelson's got a vote.

Blackadder: He's got a *boat*, Baldrick. Marvellous thing democracy. Look at Manchester – population 60,000, electoral roll, three. (BA 235)

Blackadder's diagnosis of the deficiencies of the electoral system at the time is actually quite correct (if you ignore the Lord Nelson joke). This system could not do justice to the realities of a world quickly changing, not least due to the impact of the Industrial Revolution. However, both the problem of a very limited franchise and that of unfairly structured constituencies – the Manchester problem he addresses – only gained real prominence in the first decades of the nineteenth century, and were at least partly redressed by the Reform Act of 1832. Hence, an understanding of the plot of this episode again very much depends on one's knowledge of these processes.

Since there is a tie in Parliament concerning the question of whether to strike the Prince off the Civil List or not, all depends on the results of a by-election. Accordingly, Blackadder and George need to make sure that a candidate who is on their side is chosen. Significantly, this by-election takes place in a so-called rotten borough, meaning a constituency whose voting population is relatively small and can therefore be manipulated quite easily. As it turns out, the population of this very rotten borough, Dunny-on-the-Wold, is extremely small indeed, as Blackadder explains to the ignorant Prince:

A rotten borough, sir, is a constituency where the owner of the land corruptly controls both the voters and the MP ... Dunny-on-the-Wold

is a tuppenny-ha'penny place. Half an acre of sodden marshland in the Suffolk fens, with an empty town hall in it. Population – three rather mangy cows, a dachshund named Colin, and a small hen in its late forties ... We must buy Dunny-on-the-Wold at once, and thus control the voter. (BA 241)

As a candidate for the Prince's party, Blackadder proposes Baldrick, while other interested parties, above all that of William Pitt's Whig faction, field other candidates. Since neither a cow nor a hen nor Colin the Dog has the franchise, there is still need for a voter. This voter, as it turns out, is Blackadder himself, who, somewhat unsurprisingly, also acts as returning officer. When asked how long he has been a resident of Dunny-on-the-Wold, he replies: 'Since Wednesday morning. I took over from the [previously unmentioned] original electorate after he very sadly accidentally brutally cut his head off while combing his hair' (BA 246). The fact that Blackadder, as a single voter, has been able to cast 16,472 votes is met by an equally laconic comment. Following the humoristic logic of the show, the correctness of the election result is not questioned by anyone. Pitt's candidate, Pitt the Even Younger, is merely 'horrified', because 'I smeared my opponent, bribed the press to be on my side, and threatened to torture the electorate if we lost. I fail to see what more a decent politician could have done' (BA 245).

6 Conclusion: *Blackadder*, heritage culture and the depthlessness of history

Apart from such 'absurdities', one aspect of this scene strikes even those not learned in the historical lore of the British electoral system as conspicuous. By way of an unashamed and unconcealed anachronism, Mr Hanna, the 'Town Crier' (BA 244), is featured as if he were a latter-day television correspondent. Situated in a time in which the existence of TV sets was not even dreamed of, the scene gives the impression that Mr Hanna, by directing his gaze at us, really addressed himself to a TV audience. Yet indeed, and weirdly enough, he does, simply because *Blackadder* is a TV series.⁸ It is in moments like these that the notion of historical authenticity is undermined radically. *Blackadder*, by conjuring up some of those eras which feature so prominently in the British historical imagination, severely criticises some of the then fashionable, but ultimately distorting and backward-looking forms of historical nostalgia. Certainly, it is no coincidence that *Blackadder* was created in a decade in which the heritage industry in its contemporary form experienced unprecedented popularity. In Johann N. Schmidt's words:

As compensation for the fragmentation and destabilisation in Thatcher's competitive society, images [were] sought in which stability and harmony [were] inscribed.

It is undeniable that the heritage industry reached its climax in the 1980s and early 1990s and also that it was politically exploited. It is equally clear that it was supposed to be instrumental in creating a very memorable form of British identity, with the past serving as a point of reference for a rather less idyllic present. (Schmidt 310, author's translation; cf. also Korte 378)

In this sense, *Blackadder* may very well have a discomfiting effect: it wakes us up from our snug and glossy dreams of a golden past in which 'everything was better' and humorously returns us to our own affairs. It is interesting to note, therefore, that this very episode, 'Dish and Dishonesty', was not so much motivated by the past as it grew out of the present. As J.F. Roberts notes, it was 'recorded just one week after another Thatcher victory in the 1987 elections' (245) and hence drew attention, in an exaggerated way, to the perceived stagedness and corruption of contemporary British politics.

Then again, *Blackadder* might surely also be read as relying on its very own form of nostalgia. Since it takes its audience's proficiency in English history for granted, its humorous distortions of historical events are not primarily disruptive but playful. *Blackadder*, if seen from this perspective, attempts to strengthen the sense of a (cultural/national) community in the know, a community that is so proud of its 'own' history that making fun of it is elevating, not degrading. Nonetheless, since its representation of history is 'shallow' instead of 'deep' – precisely because it also has to meet the expectations of *any* consumer – the conservative strains of *Blackadder* are maybe less momentous.

In conclusion, *Blackadder* – in a very self-confident and self-aware, but at the same time ambiguous way – subscribes to a historicising operation. 'Historicity', according to Fredric Jameson:

is, in fact, neither a representation of the past nor a representation of the future (although its various forms *use* such representations): it can first and foremost be defined as a perception of the present as history; that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective. (Jameson 284)

As a postmodern TV sitcom, with its circularity of plot and stasis of character, it contributes to a sense of historical depthlessness, which Jameson defines as one of the most characteristic marks of the postmodern condition (6). As a TV comedy, it allows us to laugh at our own complicated and hardly graspable situatedness as historical subjects.

In an opinion poll conducted in 2012 by the film subscription service LoveFilm, *Blackadder* was voted the best British television series ever,

with *Fawlty Towers* and *Father Ted* relegated to second and third positions ('Blackadder the First'). This and other similar surveys may lend credence to the *British Comedy Guide's* assessment that: 'It's difficult to overestimate the influence of *Blackadder*' ('Blackadder'). Nonetheless, *Blackadder* surprisingly could not start a trend – a fact maybe due to its towering status: almost no historical sitcoms have been produced in the meantime. The few there are, *Maid Marian and Her Merry Men* (BBC1 1989–1994) or *Dark Ages* (Granada TV 1999), have neither been as inventive nor as successful. In its intricate interweaving not only of different epochs but also of different conceptions of history, *Blackadder* remains quite unique.

Notes

1. In the frontmatter of his recently published *The True History of the Black Adder*, J.F. Roberts even supplies a fictional genealogical table, visualising the intricacies of the *Blackadder* lineage.
2. *BA* refers to the script as offered in *Blackadder: The Whole Damn Dynasty*.
3. Admittedly, in the first series *Blackadder* is the King's son and therefore assumes a high place in the chain of being. Nonetheless, the King at times does not even recognise him and, when he does, treats him as an inferior, who unfortunately happens to be part of the family.
4. At one point, Pitt calls *Blackadder* a 'lower-middle-class yobbo' (*BA* 243).
5. According to David Marc, the 'narrative architecture' of a sitcom is very simple: at the beginning of each episode, the audience is exposed to the familiar status quo. Then, one of the characters ritually makes a mistake; he or she has to learn a lesson from this mistake; and in the end, the status quo is re-established (Marc 190–191; Feuer 69).
6. It is true, though, that Pitt the Younger was very young when he became Prime Minister for the first time, namely 24 years of age, which indeed exposed him to a certain amount of ridicule, which *Blackadder* takes up.
7. With respect to the depiction of Queen Elizabeth I in *Blackadder II*, Bethany Latham has remarked: 'This Elizabeth is more a parody of all members of the Tudor dynasty rolled into one than a farcical representation solely depicting Elizabeth. With regard to the high-ranking nobility who surround her, she has Henry VIII's tendency to execute first and ask questions later, and she also displays Mary's penchant for the mass murder of those who differ from the royal religion. She's a self-described "naughty scatterbrain", which is probably the greatest divergence from any aspect of the historical woman's character – Elizabeth possessed a formidable intellect, but Queenie is a ditz' (Latham 220).
8. The town crier Hanna did not have a historical, but a contemporary model, namely the late political commentator Vincent Hanna (Roberts 245).

Filmography

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11

Black British Comedy: *Desmond's* and the Changing Face of Television

Deirdre Osborne,

with some additional information from Stephen Bourne

1 Sightlines

For most viewers in most countries and in most periods, watching television has involved looking at the faces of other people – people they have not usually met in person, (Frosh 90)

When *Desmond's* was launched by Channel 4 on 5 January 1989, it was the first situation comedy series in Britain to be created and scripted by a black writer of African Caribbean descent. It was a landmark series in a number of ways, notwithstanding the fact that it remains Channel 4's longest-running situation comedy series, but also for the acting credentials of its cast. The celebrated actor Norman Beaton starred as Desmond Ambrose, a grumpy barbershop owner from Guyana, while Desmond's long-suffering wife Shirley was played by another stalwart figure of British post-war theatre, Carmen Munroe (who, together with Mona Hammond, Yvonne Brewster and Inigo Espejel, had founded Talawa Theatre, Britain's premier black-led company, only four years previously). Set in the south-east London area of Peckham in Desmond's barbershop, the premises are used as a gathering place for his family of three children Michael (Geff Francis), Gloria (Kim Walker), Sean (Justin Pickett), his friend Porkpie (Ram John Holder) and Porkpie's adversary, the African perpetual student Matthew (Gyearbuour Asante), and a variety of locals. The show captured many of the true-to-life eccentricities of a small family business as well as the lives of an assortment of hangers on and, crucially, as Sarita Malik argues, was designed to work against the negative images of comedic blackness which had hitherto been seen on television (Malik, *Representing* 101). Its wry humour came from the attitudinal differences between Desmond, the Guyanese settler, and his British-born children, one of whom has a white girlfriend. The ever-patient Shirley provides support for her irascible husband, and their children are socially aspirational in education and employment. The elder son Matthew is an

assistant bank manager. The setting of a barbershop rather than a domestic space enables a thoroughfare of characters and situations, which creates variation and complexity for the comic plot's twists and turns, as well as circumventing any easy generalisations about black people from already-known, white-culturally-shaped narratives. As Malik identifies, *Desmond's* 'built its characters around different (regionally, politically and generationally) types of Black characters ... The series was unique as a Black comedy which was set in a workplace, and as one in which Blackness was mediated through a relatively stable and unified home family life' (Malik, *Representing* 101).

Malik's summary above reveals the series' importance in representing an ordinariness of black people's lives within a representational legacy that had overwhelmingly been negative and had denied black artists the agency and access to the modes and means for redressing this. Furthermore, the series also aired the nuances of intra-racial tensions between black citizens based upon African and Caribbean cultural affiliations and identities. Up to the 1980s, such acknowledged heterogeneity was non-existent in the dominant cultural conceptions and political realities of black Britons. A myriad of nationalities and socio-cultural origins had been gathered under the unitary, hold-all determiner 'black' in public discourse. The identity politics of this term had served as a source of political unity against racial oppression for the many minority groups experiencing unrelenting racism from white-dominant society and yet it became a discriminatory label suppressing the acknowledged variegation and heterogeneity of those perceived and grouped in this way.¹

It cannot be underestimated what negative effects the absence of black people on television presented to black viewers who were unable to share the pleasure of positive cultural representations of people who looked like them. While white viewers who in frequently inhabiting a racially varied reality, either harmoniously or acrimoniously, were presented with a televisual world in which this was erased. Paul Frosh identifies the primacy of physiognomy as being intrinsic to the televisual medium in transmitting certain images; it creates 'an integrated communicative structure that [importantly] made television a key mechanism for the social construction of humanity in the second half of the twentieth century' (Frosh 87). The human face is the pre-eminent presence on the television screen. The distancing objectification created by the flat surface of its geometric shape, framing and audio effects is transcended by the lifelike three-dimensionality and the compelling intimacy of a programme's content, which draws in a viewer. The presence of ethnicities whose dark skin further distinguished them from the majority population's fair skin reveals how the visual medium of television was a particularly acute barometer of how society viewed black people: literally (as there were few black faces ever evident on programmes) and metaphorically (the absence or stereotypes indicated how hegemonic culture reacted to black citizens in Britain). As black people

in Britain are susceptible to the skin-deep readings in white society and its cultural apparatuses, the effects of engendering communality in ways that overcome such psychosocial impediments mean that television plays a powerful part in reforming or reinforcing prevailing ideas of race.

Desmond's evolved from outside the BBC's commissioning mechanism as a product of the newest terrestrial channel in the UK (Channel 4, from 1982). As Darrell M. Newton observes: 'The BBC until 1956, a mid-point of the highly nationalistic post-war 1950s, did not produce programmes and documentaries that addressed the West Indian as a potential citizen (or threat)' (Newton 239). British television programming had initially responded cautiously and optimistically to the presence of post-war migration and the striking visual impact of black people in society and on 1950s' television screens. The television 'persona' (Newton 239) of the black citizen was structured in response to the white majority population's reactions to the increasing numbers of these immigrants.

Desmond's followed a period of uprisings by black citizens in a number of areas in Britain throughout the early 1980s (Brixton, Tottenham and Southall in Greater London and further afield in Toxteth, Liverpool), fuelled by the inequalities faced through racism and exclusion from British institutions. Tolerance regarding this ongoing situation had reached boiling point. It was contoured by demonisation in the criminal justice system (stop and search laws and the 'driving while black' approach in policing, which perpetually keeps young black men in particular in a state of being viewed perpetually as suspicious) and by negative press stereotyping of black youth.² For second-generation settlers, the education system from schools to universities failed to include and value the heritage of the multiple cultures that constituted Britain's demographic reality, as did the cultural bodies, which governed access to artistic representation and, crucially, the funding of creative developments and enterprises. A lockout existed in relation to opportunities for black artists across the spectrum of the arts and humanities, as it did in other social institutions. The arena of television was no exception.

The overriding achievement of *Desmond's* as a series spanning the late 1980s to the mid-1990s was that it was not only entertaining for a wide cross-section of viewers in the UK and internationally, but that this popularity signalled a plausible and viable inclusion of black people's experiences into a well-loved television genre, the domestic situation comedy, for which Britain has an established and noteworthy tradition. Malik notes that *Desmond's* was one of the few homemade black television programmes to successfully reach a mainstream audience in Britain (Malik, *Representing* 101). It was also popular in the Caribbean and America, where it was broadcast on the Black Entertainment Television (BET) network. As co-producer Charlie Hanson noted: 'The places where there were no black people, they still watched it in droves' (quoted in Jackson). This debunked any claims

of the minimal appeal that black British cultural production could have internationally, where the reverse situation operated in the assumed popularity of imported American situation comedies such as *The Cosby Show*, which was accepted as having crossover appeal nationally, ethnically and culturally.³

2 Production heritage

Desmond's can be placed along an extremely modest television trajectory of situation comedy series that feature black people in Britain. Two earlier short-lived examples set a precedent for this: *The Fosters* (ITV 1976–1977), which was not critically well-received by black viewers (who found its inauthenticity problematic), and *No Problem!* (Channel 4 1983–1985). *Desmond's* achieved greater longevity than its predecessors with six series and a total of 71 episodes, and came to an end when its star, Norman Beaton, died in Guyana, the country of his birth, on 13 December 1994 (Evans 170–171).

Part of the problem with sitcoms of the 1970s featuring black actors, such as *The Fosters* and *Mixed Blessings* (ITV 1978–1980), was that they were the products of white writers. Black writers did not contribute to the scripts. In fact, until the 1980s and the launch of Channel 4, a black perspective was missing from most of British television's output across all genres, so there were no alternatives to these sitcoms.⁴ Although a handful of African and Caribbean-origin dramatists had written or adapted plays for British television from the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the outstanding original dramas written for television by highly respected writers (all resident in the UK) were exceptional and not serial.⁵

To establish the radical degree to which *Desmond's* reshaped the sitcom in Britain, it should be remembered how television intersected and often reflected public views about Britain's changed urban demography.⁶ This is vividly illustrated in a character written for the BBC's popular sitcom *Till Death Us Do Part*, a series that preceded *Desmond's* and followed it as an enduring and notorious presence on British television. Alf Garnett was Enoch Powell's fictional 'disciple'.⁷ While his creator (and the series' script-writer), Johnny Speight, claimed his series was a satire, he was never able to defend himself adequately over the charge of bringing Alf's racist language as entertainment into the homes of viewers. Moreover, Speight's treatment of a handful of black and Asian characters during the series' initial run (BBC1 1965–1975) included an Irish-Indian character named 'Paki-Paddy', played by the white comedian Spike Milligan in blackface in episodes spanning the period 1970–1974. On another occasion, Kenny Lynch, the popular cockney performer, who was mixed-race, made an appearance in 'Till Closing Time Us Do Part' (a Bank Holiday Special). This episode reveals the degree to which black and mixed-race actors were vehicles for delivering the racist scripts. In one pub scene, Kenny's character explains to Alf and

his friends that he has just started selling ties on a stall in the local market. 'I'm going to become a tie coon [tycoon]!' he jokes to them (BBC1, 27 March 1967). Of Alf Garnett's racial attitudes, Andy Medhurst observes:

The sheer virulence of Garnett's prejudices (racial and otherwise) is startling, and far stronger than anything heard on television today ... Johnny Speight has always claimed that he wrote Garnett as a monster so as to expose his bigotry to ridicule ... Whatever Speight's intentions, Garnett became a figurehead, and *Till Death Us Do Part* was the most popular television programme, in terms of ratings, in the mid-60s. (Medhurst 17–18)

It took until 1972 before a British sitcom featured black actors in leading roles. Unfortunately, ITV's *Love Thy Neighbour* (1972–1976) relied upon objectionable name-calling (once again) as a basis for portraying relations between black and white people.⁸ Worrell confirms that '*Love Thy Neighbour* reflected racist reality and the paucity of any black people' (quoted in Jackson) on television. In spite of this, viewing figures were high. Perhaps audiences were drawn initially to the programme because of its novelty value in having black actors playing lead roles, for its black stars Rudolph Walker and Nina Baden-Semper became household names and celebrities. On the strength of her appearances in *Love Thy Neighbour*, Baden-Semper was a subject of *This is Your Life* (ITV 1975). Whatever the viewing motivation, this friction between black families and white families who were neighbours appears to have garnered attention in an era when second-generation children of migrants who were black were becoming an increasing fact in the British-born population. For this generation, there was no going back to where you came from, for they came from the same place as their white neighbours.

Love Thy Neighbour was contentious and imperfect in its vision and execution. Some black commentators acknowledged that they were glad to see black actors appearing in starring roles on British television, but, according to Trinidadian Pearl Connor (who made Britain her home in 1948, opening an agency for black performers in the 1950s):

at the same time, we felt cheated because we knew these programmes projected a one-sided view of us. The whole matter of 'nig nog' and 'honky' and all that rubbish in *Love Thy Neighbour*, for example, steamed us up ... It went too far. What's more, it wasn't balanced by serious drama showing us as we really are and as we have been ... It's true that television sitcoms gave us opportunities for work, which we wanted. Everybody was glad to get in and to be working regularly. But *Love Thy Neighbour* ... really hurt us. It hurt us because we had nothing comparative in real drama to show who we really are. (Connor 42)

However, Rudolph Walker defended the series in terms of its entertainment value rather than as an ameliorative political vehicle, noting:

What you have to remember is that *Love Thy Neighbour* was never done to solve the racial problem. It was done for pure entertainment and to make money. It so happens that it also came at the right time and in the right atmosphere. We had Enoch Powell blowing his top off, we had Alf Garnett (in *Till Death Us Do Part*) and all that, and *Love Thy Neighbour* just fitted into that period, and with what was going on. So, for four years, it was extremely popular. (Walker 78)

In a move oppositional to this racist legacy of black–white social relations and white writers’ representational monopoly, Channel 4’s *No Problem!* was created by the Indian-born writer Farrukh Dhondy and the Trinidadian dramatist Mustapha Matura, who wrote the majority of the 27 episodes. Its cast were members of the Black Theatre Co-operative, a foundational black theatre company in Britain. The writers were aware of the shortcomings of previous sitcoms, which did not appear to consider the expectations of black viewers and also assumed the absence of black culture. However, when the series was launched in 1983, just two years after the 1981 Brixton and Toxteth uprisings, its use of a sitcom for black talent did not appeal to black activists, who disliked the series and criticised it for its lack of radicalism and political stance. Dhondy later defended the programme:

I can take the criticism that *No Problem!* did not make some people laugh, but I know that it actually made a lot of people laugh, that they watched it for that reason, and that as a result it became a fairly popular programme over three series ... *No Problem!* got on the wrong side of what I call ‘the nascent bureaucratic black middle-class which lives off a grievance industry’. When you give these people something that is quite innocuous, that should make people laugh, they find it unfunny and switch it off, which is fair enough. But, unfortunately they don’t stop at switching off, they believe it’s something to campaign about as well. (Dhondy 166–167)

3 Significance and effects

Desmond’s took the black sitcom to another level. In the year in which it was first screened, ‘only 6 per cent of the BBC’s 28,000 labour force were not of European descent and these were employed overwhelmingly in catering, cleaning and clerical work’ (Williams 152). *Desmond’s* functioned as a significant employer artistically in tackling the specific absence of black people at the creative heart of television programming as well as in front of and behind the camera.⁹ Intrinsic to the series’ existence and success was its

creator, the producer Trix Worrell, who is also credited as the writer of 39 episodes. Worrell was born on the Caribbean island of St Lucia and came to Britain at the age of five. He represents a first-generation migrant sensibility who, as Griffin notes (in relation to black playwrights), comprised 'the adult subject who migrated and the child who, so to speak *was migrated*, and their different accommodations to that situation' (Griffin 25). With inherent connections to a non-British national and cultural origin, like a number of his peers, Worrell too was trained in an elite British cultural institution (another example is Alby James, TEMBA theatre company's final Artistic Director before Arts Council disinvestment, whose professional trajectory along a white establishment route included the Royal Court Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the BBC and Glyndeboune). In his twenties, Worrell had graduated from the prestigious National Film and Television School and with *Like a Mohican*, he won the Channel 4 Debut New Writers Award, which was produced for television in 1985. With this expertise and insider credentials, Worrell was well-placed to negotiate the development of projects demonstrating more authentic representations of black people's lives than had hitherto characterised British television programming.

The genesis of the show demonstrates this unique cultural agency. Worrell claims that the idea for *Desmond's* came to him when he was on his way to meet Humphrey Barclay, a Channel 4 producer, when he saw a West Indian barbershop which reminded him of a barbershop in Bellenden Road, Peckham, the inner-city area where he had been raised (quoted in Bourne, *Speak of Me* 73–74). As Stuart Hall identifies the Front Room as a key domestic sanctuary for socialisation for migrant families (who invariably faced racism in Britain's public spaces), the barbershop provides another such meeting place for Caribbean migrant communities, albeit a male-dominated one (Hall 128–129). In one episode, an exchange between Shirley and Porkpie testifies to the humour of the space:

Porkpie: Wi'out us dis place wouldna be de same.

Shirley: Wi'out yu, dis place would be a barbershop (*audience laughter*) instead of a bookie an' a social club.

Worrell formulated and successfully pitched the idea to Barclay, who recalls how his hopes plummeted when Worrell described a barbershop, recalling hairdressing comedies with camp characters. However, re-educated to understand the barbershop as a drop-in place, he ended up co-producing it with Charlie Hanson, the producer of *No Problem!*, thereby creating a degree of artistic and experiential continuity which had not been the case to date for black people working in British television.

In *Desmond's*, Worrell and later a group of young black writers (who were responsible for most of the other 32 episodes) explored some of the complex issues which are important features of black migrant experiences in Britain.

Malik notes that: 'To some extent, it became a training ground for young, multicultural, creative talent. Many aspiring writers, producers, directors and production staff gained experience on the programme by learning how to create a long-running fresh situation comedy' ('Desmond's' 480). In doing so, Worrell and his successors provided a sitcom that appealed to both black and white viewers and showed the British viewing public that black families experienced the same joys and problems as white families. Worrell recalls: 'We wanted to say something positive about black families and, more importantly, about migrant families within this country and what it is to be black in England' (184). This was not without its challenges.

The sound of English in all its linguistic varieties spoken by migrants from the Caribbean islands had a long history of colonial oppression, which in the post-war period then intersected with the new racism encountered in settling in Britain. As Susanne Mühleisen identifies: 'English-lexicon Creoles were often seen as inferior varieties of English [which] contributed to the impression held by wider British society that the grammar of the speech of West Indians was wrong instead of different, and that their "accent" was unintelligible' (Mühleisen 231). For many white Britons, all black people were assumed to have West Indian accents and these were from Jamaica. Worrell wanted to highlight the different islands in the Caribbean, which would help to dispel this myth and, in turn, expose non-attuned ears to the subtleties and cadences of spoken English, where an increased familiarity would broaden conceptions of black citizens beyond narrow stereotypes. Mühleisen's tabulation of the accents its actors employed and the varieties of English spoken in *Desmond's* offers the most comprehensive analysis to date of the linguistic properties of the series in relation to humour, typical sitcom characters, cross-generational frisson and the dynamics produced by the confluence of these factors (234–238).

Worrell also wanted to draw attention to the conflicts and cultural differences between Africans and West Indians (he had first-hand experience of this), which he describes as 'really a question of misunderstanding between the two communities' (186). The success of the outreach is evident. As Paul Jackson reports, for the series' first live show, the racially heterogeneous audience did not know in advance that *Desmond's* was about a black family and yet, as Worrell recalls, their reaction to the humour after the first take was totally unexpected, 'we had to do it again because the sound guy wasn't ready for it ... the size of the laugh' (quoted in Jackson) This brings to mind the transferable aspect of humour and pleasure in its sharing, as Ann Ubersfeld writes:

One can see how this basic pleasure stems, on the one hand, from the pleasure of the story, and, on the other, from the joy of the performance. It is, for example, the joy of seeing the trickster-actor light-heartedly dupe and mock the powers that be, of seeing him display his eloquence and

physical agility. We witness the triumph of the pleasure principle over the reality principle. (Ubersfeld 135)

Notwithstanding actual society, the reality principle can be considered in terms of television's physical viewing medium, in the privacy of one's home, as an audience of one or with family and friends. Frosh testifies to the significance of the 'expressivity of the televisual face' in that '[i]t exposes individuals, from a very early age, to a larger and more varied physiognomic repertoire of feelings (including extreme emotions), thoughts, and moods than they are likely to come across with any frequency in their everyday personal encounters' (Frosh 92). Importantly, the face viewed on television becomes 'an index, a singular manifestation of a nameable, unique person' (92–93). In the context of black Britons, this can be seen to work against the narrowness of generalising or stereotyping. As an unreciprocated face-to-face experience, this has the effect of 'allowing the faces of strangers to appear in the sphere of intimacy without creating alarm or triggering a defensively hostile response ... reducing the strangeness of strangers by making them constantly quasi-available' (93–94). If applied to *Desmond's*, the strangeness assumes a white-public majority who are in effect allowed into a black family and community circle – especially in terms of the stock camera angle – where a direct face or headshot assumes the viewer takes on the point of view of the person addressed in the scene. This creates a subtle inhabiting for the white viewer of a black character's perspective. Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein argue that there are 'cues in the texts that enable access to their comic potential. Laughter and humour are therefore 'test cases' not for cultural belonging, but for transcultural competence' (Reichl and Stein 14). Notions of laughing at black characters can become laughing with a black audience in harmony with, and attuned to, the specific cultural nuances that are conveyed in *Desmond's* humour through enjoying the form and the comic moment without necessarily fully appreciating its entire reach.

Laughter can threaten the borders and rupture the illusion of control and rule. For who gets left out of the joke, is in on the joke or is the butt of the joke? The competing constituencies of membership and exclusion keep the experience of humour and laughter in a state of indeterminacy. Can those left out develop or decode what it is that makes something funny and therefore gain admission to the field of enjoyment? Worrell described the immensity of the laughter of the black and white audience members in the first live recorded show of *Desmond's*: 'They laughed out loud. It broke the Richter scale' (Jackson). Combined with the popularity of the series, which peaked at 5.6 million viewers, it suggests that this was not merely a cerebral appreciation, but a visceral response produced by the responsive release into the humour.

Television can thus provide possibilities for creating common ground between socially estranged groups and can present an illusion of intimacy. Yet, what did it offer a black viewer? Carmen Munroe (Shirley), who had

also been in the casts of both *The Fosters* and *Mixed Blessings*, testifies to the importance of the series' authenticity to black people:

Desmond's is successful because we are serious about it. We are now able to do what other series are trying to do, and that is to be about real people. We don't have to be constantly begging for acceptance, begging to be understood – that's gone, that's past ... With *Desmond's* we have successfully created a space for ourselves, where we can just be a real, honest, loving family, with problems like lots of people, and we can present that with some degree of truth and still not lose the comedy. (Munroe 64)

Munroe's observation evokes how 'the televisual mechanism appears as a single integrated unit' (Frosh 97), which can slide into the integrational moment, where the viewer inhabits and finds affinity with the characters portrayed. This enables 'simultaneous relations of *transcendence* and *immanence* between the individual and the social totality ... the miniaturization of the totality and its ubiquitous embedding within the intimate sphere of the individual' (97). Having the opportunity to engage in laughing with one's own socio-cultural group about this group and its foibles through creating humour towards this group's experiences – rather than being laughed at by those outside it – is an important form of agency that is affirming of socio-cultural identities which experience frequent disparagement. Where an overlay of adversity is attached to certain citizens so that it becomes the predominant lens via which this social group is represented, as Joseph Boskin writes, '[i]n the absence of cosmological affirmation, humour fills a void' (38), and it can also build bridges between cultural distances. The dual dynamic of presenting and reflecting back underpins the televising of infrequently programmed subject matter and by virtue of *Desmond's*' serialisation, representing until it becomes an expected if not familiar norm. Frosh's (87–102) transcendence and immanence is achieved in the humour deployed, as humour is group work, augmented and intensified by a *communitas* of feeling. In terms of Henri Bergson's definition of humour as social signification, laughter can function as a conduit to engaging with the inherent unpleasantness of stereotyping legacies. *Desmond's* shows humour deployed to generate recognition of this backdrop, the opportunity for individual viewer awareness of how far they can be implicated in this as recipients or instigators. From Freud's definition of laughter as the release of psychic energy enabling the expression of taboos, the issue of racism and ideological oppression that the series implicitly tackles (by virtue of its remit, existence and effects) means that humour is confirmed as a disruptive strategy, reliant upon repetition, foreknowledge and the act of reformation and revision for its participants. It can reconfigure cultural values through bringing disparate traditions (such as non-Western and Western, national and international) into proximity, capitalising upon the incongruity they promise.

However, the opposite effect of consolidating distance can also be a result, where the viewer (by virtue of the illusion of intimacy) is then restored back to reality, in full confidence that it was merely a programme. Worrell further refers to the cost of any black person's perceived transgression as bringing double retribution which implicated all black people, 'all deemed as villains' (quoted in Jackson). *Desmond's* tackled this unabashedly in a storyline that sees the family taken hostage by some young black ruffians. Shirley lambasts the youths for undoing all the hard work her honest family have achieved, and how the irresponsibility of the quick gains crime offers threatens their status now, due to the racist framework of social reception. The series in many ways managed this fine line between actual life and the hold-up humour of the sitcom.

The overarching premise which *Desmond's* both parodies and dismantles is that there is something incongruous between being black and being British. Within the framework of black identities and national nuances bestriding Caribbean and African regions, it adds a sense of being both in alignment and at odds with the hold-all determiner of black. This was played out most particularly in the constant droll *contretemps* between Porkpie and Matthew:

Matthew: I come from a long line of intellectuals.

Porkpie: Oooh, at the back of it? (Quoted in Jackson)

If, as Trevor Griffith argues of plays, those 'which get the deepest' are those 'which are aware of their own conventions, or other conventions, and which somehow or other manage to spring the unexpected within those conventions' (quoted in Tylee 101), then the chord struck by *Desmond's* fulfils this in a number of ways. As a situation comedy, it participates in the canonical staple of British television heritage, taking its place in televisual repertoire and conventions, and, at the same time, it innovated and renovated generic and socio-cultural expectations embedded in white-dominant producing and viewing contexts. This is not to say that *Desmond's* wholly undermines the formulaic expectations of the situation comedy. However, by centralising a black family in Britain, there was a clear strategy of re-writing and parodying predominant norms of white male hegemony that resonate with the spirit of John Agard's memorable poem 'Listen Mr Oxford Don' (1985). The series challenges ideological constructions of the black family in Britain and cuts across projected race-differentiated standpoints with the ease and familiarity of shared and known domestic situations.

To screen *Desmond's* was to plant black British experience in a realm of universality in contrast to press and political definitions, where black subjectivities continue to be represented primarily as socially troubled and troubling or celebrated within the narrow cultural arena of sport and music, the characteristic spaces of prominence in Britain's post-war socio-cultural contexts (Steve McQueen's recent international acclaim as a visual artist and

film director remains one of a number of notable exceptions in the visual media). As is the case with any besieged social group whose survival often rests upon solidarity and unconditional support as a tool against diminishment and erasure, black-led culture has had an uneasy relationship with reception and critique frameworks (from white- and black-centred sources) and the influences that these contexts exert upon cultural legitimization, longevity and artistic growth.

Laughing at speakers of English as a second language or accents from patois, vernacular or dialect has a long tradition in British comedy vehicles. In *Desmond's*, Michael memorably asserts that '[j]ust because I'm black doesn't mean I can't speak the Queen's English', gesturing to the value and pride (as well as satire) that migrants from the Caribbean islands frequently directed towards this.¹⁰ He also confirms that as a British-born citizen, he is going to speak in this way rather than in the accent of his Caribbean-origin parents. The heritage of this accentual playfulness developed a further black-centred intricacy in the late Felix Dexter's peerless comic monologues from the 1990s onwards, in which his use of accents – Received Pronunciation, Nigerian-accent-inflected English, Estuary English and Caribbean-evocative-patois – immediately positions his characters in a recognisable trope for his audiences' delight. It enables a range of sociolects and situations that are black-centred and, importantly, delivered by a black comedian and enjoyed by racially diverse audiences. As Mühleisen identifies, 'the non-native speaker accent is usually a feature of non-belonging or of exclusion' (226). Yet in the legacy of *Desmond's* through to Dexter, the reverse dynamic can occur where its very use flaunts the majority's non-belonging to the minority, especially when cultural credentials position this minority source as hip or cutting-edge. The distance from closeness to authentic agency of the accent projected, and the socio-cultural type being performed, produces the humour. The disparity between expectations of a character's accent and deduced class or behavioural traits produces a deconstruction strategy of the very parts that comprise the stereotype. This is reliant upon pre-knowledge of these characteristics in order to appreciate the humour. As Freud points out, 'the source of comic pleasure would not be the comic of situation but of expectation' (209) and the degree to which the fulfilment of these expectations is offset by them *not* being fulfilled – as a new direction is taken, which veers away from what audience members might have initially predicted. Thus, the route for humour is re-scripted and, importantly, *Desmond's* normalised black-centred comedy and demolished the residue of minstrelsy which had still contoured the earlier situation comedies penned by white writers.

4 After-show anti-climax

If television functions as a barometer of surrounding society, and that society is demographically white-British dominant, the absent figure of

the black citizen in programming across all genres confirms the parameters of BBC Director-General Greg Dyke's new-millennial denunciation that the BBC is 'hideously white' (Dyke) and one with institutionally ratified exclusion processes.¹¹ After *Desmond's* ended, Mühleisen notes that 'more "Black soaps" followed: *Brothers and Sisters* (1996), for instance was a ten-part drama series with a comic touch, but it failed to convince the audience' (234). Newton surveys the diversity issues surrounding post-*Desmond's* television programming where little programming was targeted towards black people specifically, despite the Diversity Centre (where staff were not the people who made the programmes), resulting in a series like *The Crouches* (BBC1 2003–2005), with a white writer and director, which was heavily criticised for its inaccurate portrayal of black life and was universally panned. *Desmond's* appears to have a nostalgic place in an era of possibilities which have not continued. As Cyril Husbands, a senior diversity manager during Dyke's tenure, notes, the ramifications of this lack of representation skews one's sense of belonging: 'The concern is these young Black people who've grown up here will ask, "When I was younger I saw programmes that featured people like me. Now I'm 25, why can't I see myself? Why should I pay a licence fee when you keep doing this?"' (quoted in Newton 237). This fact was noted again in 2012 by cultural commentator Bonnie Greer, who, like Husbands, saw this absence as most profoundly affecting young people: 'You'd think that the powers-that-be would run to that segment of the population reared to watch the box, as well as the fastest growing, and youngest, demographic in the land – ethnic minorities. But you'd be wrong.' Black British comedian and actor Lenny Henry most recently foregrounded this absence when he argued for the ring-fencing of jobs for British and minority ethnic people in television across all areas to counter the imbalance, a proposal he is putting forward to Tony Hall, the current Director-General of the BBC (Conlan 5).

It remains the case that to produce and sustain a self-defining presence on television within a prejudicial context (overtly racist until the end of the twentieth century) is an unfinished project for the institution of British television. It is one to which, as this chapter demonstrates, *Desmond's* contributed positively, albeit with limited redress.¹² The achievements of programming *Desmond's* did not accomplish any lasting impact in reconfiguring the broader field of television. Even as the series' availability as a complete DVD set to purchase or via Channel 4's on-demand library and re-runs on the Africa Channel means it is accessible for perpetuity, there still remains a disproportionate under-representation of black people in a wide range of roles on British television to this day.¹³

Notes

1. Tariq Modood strongly contested this 'false essentialism' in extricating Asian people from the label when he argued against 'the manufacture of a "black"

- communality that a set of features are plucked from Afro-Caribbean history or contemporary experience and said to be paradigmatically “black” (Modood 866).
2. ‘Driving While Black’ was first coined in an ironic retort to the racial profiling underpinning American policing systems (Sugrue) and in Britain it has been most recently discussed on Operation Black Vote (Woolley).
 3. *Desmond’s* producer Humphrey Barclay notes the words of a Canadian reviewer, who claimed that ‘*Desmond’s* makes *The Cosby Show* look like a slice of white bread’ (quoted in Jackson).
 4. This appears not to have altered even with the popularity of *Desmond’s*; as Jack Williams writes, in the mid-1990s, a study of more than 350 ethnic minority television viewers carried out for the BBC found that they did not feel that they were ‘valued as a specific viewing public’ or that ‘their viewing needs were being met’ (151).
 5. From 1958 to 1989 (the year *Desmond’s* was launched), about 30 plays were written by or adapted for British television by dramatists of African Caribbean descent. These include Evan Jones (Jamaica), Errol John (Trinidad), Jan Carew (Guyana), Barry Reckord (Jamaica), Obi Egbuna (Nigeria), Alfred Fagon (Jamaica), Michael Abbensetts (Guyana), Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria), Samuel Selvon (Trinidad), Caryl Phillips (St Kitts), Mustapha Matura (Trinidad) and Tunde Ikoli (Britain/Nigeria) (Bourne, *Black in the British Frame* 260–262).
 6. The heritage of the black body as object of humour and ridicule for white audiences was a televisual reality surrounding *Desmond’s*, where the BBC had only just stopped commissioning and airing *The Black and White Minstrels Show*, which occurred 11 years after a petition requesting it be taken off the air had been lodged by the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination. Malik observes that ‘its removal from the air coincided with the demise of the popularity of the variety genre on British television, rather than in response to the offence its racism caused’ (*Representing Black Britain* 101).
 7. Powell as Conservative MP for Wolverhampton attained notoriety in 1968 through a racist speech, which has been dubbed ‘The Rivers of Blood’ speech due to his rhetorical twisting of classical references into an anti-immigration and settlement denunciation. It remains a watershed of extremist scaremongering in the history of British politics and race relations.
 8. See Nora Plesske’s contribution in Chapter 6 of this volume.
 9. In two notable examples, director and writer Paulette Randall joined the series as the script editor from Series Four onwards and Lincoln Abraham’s career as a cameraman was launched by working on *Desmond’s*.
 10. In contrast to this is Mustapha Matura’s play *As Time Goes By* (1971), which stages the cross-generational tension between the migrant parents’ assertion of the Queen’s English as an important indicator of respectability and deference in the face of British-born children’s linguistic defiance and refusal to speak it.
 11. ‘In 2004 only 4.4 per cent of management were from minority backgrounds’ and by 2008 ‘this has actually dropped to 4.3 per cent’ (BBC More “Hideously White”).
 12. In re-runs of the series in 2013, the Africa Channel website operated a blog, and an indicative posting below shows how the access to past television achievements centring on black people and culture is a rarity. *Grace* says: ‘I think it’s good to show this show, a whole generation can now access a piece of TV culture they were maybe too young to experience. (you can’t know where your going if you don’t know where you came from) And if you ask me *Desmond’s* is as Timeless as *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, forever funny! (I’m a 22 year old by the way)’ (*Desmond’s*).

13. In his retrospective of the impact of *Desmond's*, Paul Jackson notes: 'The end result is that it is still very difficult for a black writer or a black performer to get a comedy on television.' His guest, Farrukh Dhondy, adds: 'I would say it is virtually impossible'. (quoted in Jackson).

Filmography

Desmond's. Directed by Trix Worrell, written by Trix Worell *et al.* Channel 4. DVD.

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Part III

The 1990s: (Un)doing Gender and Race

12

Laughing at Racism or Laughing with the Racists? The 'Indian Comedy' of *Goodness Gracious Me*

Jochen Petzold

1 Introduction

As Salita Malik reminds us, black people¹ have been part of the British 'entertainment industry' since early modern times (Malik 91) and they 'appeared on British television on the first day of transmission when the African-American performer, Josephine Baker, participated in one of John Logie Baird's experimental television broadcasts from his London studio in October 1933' (4). However, throughout its subsequent TV history, the 'blacks as entertainers' tradition raises the question of 'whether images of Blackness in television comedy "play on" or "play off" the long-established Black clown stereotype, and whether we are being invited to laugh *with* or *at* the Black comic entertainer' (92). Despite – or because of? – its great success, this is also a central question frequently asked in connection with the first all-Asian sketch show on British television, *Goodness Gracious Me* (BBC2 1998–2001), which will be at the centre of this chapter (Emig; Gillespie; Mendes; Weedon). But before turning to the show and attempting to answer the question, let me briefly introduce the cultural context of black and Asian British television comedy.

One of the most infamous instances of a black 'presence' in British TV comedy stems from the late 1960s to mid-1970s: in *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC1 1965–1975), the character Alf Garnett (played by Warren Mitchell) regularly ranted about 'the unspeakable ("coons", "kikes" and "wogs")' (Malik 92), and while the show was meant to criticise his racism, the satire was not recognised as such by many viewers. In the analysis of Malik, the show is clearly open to a range of alternative readings, but given the 'context of news and documentary images of the Black problematic at this time', many viewers 'who took Alf's diatribes at face-value adopted this dominant reading of the text, although this was not the preferred reading intended' by the show's writer Johnny Speight (Malik 93). Significantly, the show had no regular black characters who could reply to Alf's racism.

Although black and Asian characters did appear in subsequent comedy shows like *Curry and Chips* (ITV 1969), *Love Thy Neighbour* (ITV 1972–1976)²

or *Mind Your Language* (ITV 1977–1979), ‘many of the comedies “about race”’ that were produced in the 1970s ‘were actually comedies about blacks signifying *trouble*; *trouble* with the neighbours, *trouble* with language, *trouble* with “fitting in”, so that if the White characters did display prejudice, this was deemed funny or understandable given the “difficulty of the situation”’ (Malik 97). Only in the 1980s did black and Asian actors, writers and producers assume a central role in the production of TV comedy, and although these programmes were not beyond criticism, from a black perspective, ‘for the first time in television history, these were programmes that really were “ours” to criticize’ (Malik 99).

Thus, when Anil Gupta, then working at the BBC as script editor in comedy development, started thinking about the possibility of a British-Asian comedy format in the mid-1990s, the terrain of ethnic minority comedy had already been well established. However, according to Sanjeev Bhaskar, ‘there was no one out there who represented being British and Asian’ at the time, and he suggests that it ‘was time for something to happen – the scene wasn’t huge, but it was in the air’ (*‘New Kind of Laughter’* 23). In the spring of 1995, Gupta approached the BBC’s head of comedy entertainment with ideas for the show, but although Jon Plowman liked what he saw when a ‘one-off live performance’ was put on, ‘arranged principally for [his] benefit’ (*‘Mirth of a Nation’*), the production could not be financed that year and Gupta ‘decided to do a radio pilot to keep up the idea’s momentum and to have something to play the controller of BBC2 when the commissioning rounds came up again’ (*‘New Kind of Laughter’* 23). *Goodness Gracious Me* was first aired on BBC Radio 4 in July 1996 and was subsequently turned into a radio series; in 1998, broadcasting of the show as TV comedy was finally started by BBC2, as the first ‘television program created and performed by Indians to obtain a regular position in the BBC schedule’ (Balirano and Corduas 229). All of the main actors of the show, Sanjeev Bhaskar, Meera Syal, Kulvinder Ghir and Nina Wadia (listed in this order in the introduction sequence), are of Indian background, although white British actors make regular appearances on the show (for example, Dave Lamb and Amanda Holden) – the producers do not reverse the tradition of white actors in blackface by ‘whitening up’ Indian actors to play ‘white’ roles.

The TV show was an immediate success that reached an audience well beyond the British-Asian sector. In the first series, aired at the post-peak slot of 11.15 pm, the show reached an audience of 2.83 million and according to Gupta some 80 per cent of the viewers were white (*‘Mirth of a Nation’*). However, according to *The Guardian*, the percentage as such is not surprising: ‘Programmes directed towards non-white people generally draw a high percentage of white viewers’, and the Asian population in Britain only numbered about 1.26 million in the late 1990s. In fact, *The Guardian* found it more remarkable that the show was so popular within the Asian community, ‘a group of people the BBC had previously failed to reach in any great

number'; when the second series was aired at prime-time (9.30 pm), audiences grew to 3.84 million and 'more than half of [the Asian population] watched'. In the analysis of actor Kulvinder Ghir, the 'Asian community feel they have something that belongs to them. Something they can identify with and call their own' ('Mirth of a Nation').

2 The make-up of *Goodness Gracious Me*

Goodness Gracious Me is a sketch comedy show, each episode lasting approximately 30 minutes and consisting of some 15 sketches, varying in length between a few seconds and a few minutes. Most sketches are filmed in a studio in a semi-realistic set-up, but some are produced in outside locations. Some sketches are one-off productions, but many run through a number of variations, either within one episode (for example, four variations of very short sketches in a restaurant setting in the first episode) or over the course of various episodes (for example, Smita Smitten, the Bhangra Muffins and the Minx Twins become regular features – see below). Hence, some characters can develop a certain identity, and catchphrases like the Bhangra Muffins' 'Kiss my chuddies!' (that is, kiss my underwear) can become established trademarks.

As Rainer Emig points out, the format of the show itself is not particularly 'Asian'; in fact, he suggests that it is 'not even typical of British television, but ultimately a US-American format ... now common all over the world, globalised that is' (Emig 184). Furthermore, Chris Weedon points to the fact that *Goodness Gracious Me* 'is marked by a rich intertextuality and works on many different levels, depending on the ethnic background and knowledge of the audience' (Weedon 263). Hence, it frequently parodies popular films like *The Six Million Dollar Man* or *Men in Black*, characters like the detective Philip Marlowe, the 'Bollywood' film industry, or pop-songs like 'I Know Him So Well' or 'Barbie Girl'. Arguably, it is precisely the multifaceted nature of the programme that allows it to work – although not in the same way – for different audiences (differing not only in terms of ethnic background, but also in terms of age and gender), although it has to be stated that most references stay within the framework of Western popular culture. In my analysis of the show, I want to attempt a rough overview of the different kinds of sketches it contains and to indicate how these might work for different audiences.

The intertextuality highlighted by Weedon – the broader term 'intermediality' may be more appropriate in this case – already becomes apparent in the title, *Goodness Gracious Me*, and the theme tune to the TV show, both of which refer to a comic song recorded by Peter Sellers and Sophia Loren in 1960 in connection with a film version of George Bernard Shaw's play *The Millionairess* (1960), directed by Anthony Asquith and starring Loren as the heiress Epiphania and Sellers as the Indian physician Dr Ahmed el Kabir. Although the song did not appear in the soundtrack of the film, it proved very popular, making it into the Top Ten and earning Sellers 'five thousand

pounds in the first few weeks of its release on disc' (Lewis 641). The theme tune to the TV comedy echoes the catchy heartbeat-rhythm of the original song, and the title picks up on the catchphrase repeatedly voiced by Sellers – in the over-emphasised form of a fake Indian accent – throughout both film and song. Significantly, the live 'pilot show' performed in front of Plowman in 1995 was called 'Peter Sellers is Dead' – an indication that the times when you could darken up a white comic actor and pass him off as Indian (and get away with it) were over ('Mirth of a Nation'). Hence, from its beginning, the show insisted on intertextual references to 'canonical' texts of the white mainstream, re-appropriating the terrain and hence 'writing back' (or 'tickling back', as Rainer Emig suggests) at this mainstream centre from a marginalised point of view.

3 Laughing at the English

In keeping with this idea of 'writing back', of reversing the representational 'point of view', many of the sketches in *Goodness Gracious Me* play with role-reversals. Thus, the first sketch of the very first episode puts an Englishman in a situation usually experienced by non-white people in Britain. The setting is a company meeting (presumably taking place in India), in which a new team-member – visibly of white European background – is introduced to the all-Asian team. The team leader introduces him as an Englishman and asks his colleagues to 'be gentle with him', suggesting that his ethnic difference might cause problems for the new recruit. The joke then works on the inability of the Asians – who initially are very eager to accommodate their new colleague – to pronounce the new team-member's name, which is Jonathan. Various alternatives are suggested, and Jonathan becomes more and more exasperated at his colleagues' failure to pronounce his name. This is all too familiar to Asian viewers in the British contexts, and many white viewers may well feel reminded of not having been able to pronounce a 'foreign' name. The situation grows more aggressive when Jonathan insists on being called Jonathan: he is told that he is 'not in jolly England any more, sipping tea and doing the Morrison dancing' (Series One, Episode One), and hence is confronted with stereotypes of his ethnic background. As the foreigner still refuses to assimilate, as it were, the mood becomes even more threatening when his boss accuses him of making things difficult for everybody by giving himself 'a silly, hard to pronounce foreign name', finally indicating that he does not see the new employee 'progressing very far in this firm with a name like that' because people will think that he is a 'troublemaker'. The final punchline is reached when Jonathan himself offers a highly complex parody of a multi-syllabic 'Indian' name that includes 'Shiva', 'Rāma', and 'Guru' as recognisably 'Indian' constituents.

This kind of reversal joke is what Gupta calls 'Anglo-Saxon-friendly jokes', because 'white people would understand them' ('Mirth of a Nation'). Indeed,

while we may be laughing *at* the Asian characters for their inability to pronounce the 'simple' English name Jonathan, the sketch suggests that the perceived 'difficulty' of any name is a question of one's socialisation into a language community and hence it invites its audience to transfer both the joke and its target to the British context. However, while the solution offered by Jonathan in the sketch, that is, to let himself be called by an 'Indian' name, serves to highlight the relativity of linguistic complexity (when a name of three syllables is replaced by one consisting of 12), it also releases the tension of uneasiness that was created by the sketch's political implications, arguably deflecting attention from the more serious (sub-)text: the warning that Jonathan's career would be jeopardised by insisting on his 'foreign' name points to very real discriminatory practices experienced by many black and Asian people in Britain. Furthermore, the ending could also be read as criticising the 'foreigner' for his willingness to compromise his ethnic origins for economic success – a reading that is clearly reinforced in a later variation of the sketch that was part of the Episode Two of Series Two. Here the actor who played Jonathan is now called John and is cast as the man responsible for minority programming at the Indian Broadcasting Corporation (IBC). When he demands a representation of the English community in India that goes beyond stereotyping, his superior announces that his budget will be halved, his staff cut by three-quarters and his office relocated to a distant town. However, when he also promises to extend John's contract to life, the latter quickly agrees, suggesting that those meant to represent their communities can be easily corrupted. Thus, both sketches do cut both ways: they make fun of the dominant group for its unwillingness (or inability) to accept and accommodate the linguistic difference of a 'foreign' name, but they also criticise the representative of the minority group for his willingness to 'sell out'.

It is a general feature of most reversal jokes in *Goodness Gracious Me* that they function allegorically. By creating situations in which Indian characters are in the majority, in which they constitute the 'normal' mainstream of the fictional society, these sketches highlight the normative power of European colonial discourse, which casts and essentialises 'white' as the unmarked norm and 'black' as its deviant other. And by depicting Indian characters behaving in a rude or openly racist/discriminatory way towards white characters, these sketches implicitly criticise behavioural patterns and prejudices common among the British mainstream. This becomes particularly clear in one of the best-known sketches, 'Going for an English', which also appeared in the show's first episode of the first series. In this sketch, a group of young Indians, somewhat the worse for drink, end their night in town by going to 'Mountbatten's English Restaurant' in Bombay (Mumbai), behaving very rudely towards the waiter (for example, mispronouncing his name and making sexual innuendos) and displaying utter disregard for the food, for example, asking for the 'blandest thing on the menu' as particularly

daring, or ordering gammon steak 'with the crap [that is, peas] on the side'. Again, we are laughing at the Indian characters, but the criticism is aimed at the behaviour of young white British people going for 'an Indian'. In the analysis of Rainer Emig, this sketch goes well beyond the 'Jonathan' sketch, since the binaries at the core of the clichés that are reversed are less firmly entrenched in the restaurant sketch than in the 'Jonathan' sketch. For example, the concept of 'going for an English' is simply not established, and nor are there 'particular associations of pale skin and eroticism in contemporary British culture' as the sketch implies (178); hence, Emig sees this as an example of *Goodness Gracious Me* producing a 'double articulation' in the empowering sense of Homi Bhabha (177), who describes mimicry as 'the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which "appropriates" the Other as it visualizes power', insisting that the 'effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing' (86).

However, there are also some reversal jokes that do not primarily use allegory in order to satirise white British behaviour, but work more directly. Thus, a fairly long sketch at the end of Series One, Episode Two shows a group of Indian students from Delhi on a holiday trip to England. The sketch is presented as 'India's favourite travelling show, "Backpacks"', that is, like a reality TV show that consists of a series of short episodes. The presenter points out that the first 'major differences in culture' are experienced quickly after arrival. The camera then shows the 'departures' board at a train station where two trains are marked 'cancelled', and one of the travellers comments that the 'English train system is a bit primitive'. Later, the travellers complain of the number of beggars, and one of the girls says that they had been warned that 'begging in England is pretty bad'.

The sketches derive some of their humour from reversing common European stereotypes of travel in India; at the same time, they point at real problems facing Britain at the time. In this respect, the sketches pick up on a satirical tradition that goes back to Charles-Louis de Secondat Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* (1721), using fictional foreign travellers and their experiences to satirise European society. In a similar manner, the technique of the 'foreign gaze' is used in *Goodness Gracious Me* to hold up a mirror to Britain, criticising both existing shortcomings of Britain and the arrogance of common stereotypes of India. At the same time, the sketches can also be read as an allegory on young European travellers going to India for 'spiritual enlightenment' and to escape the pressure to integrate into the job market of a capitalist economy. Thus, one of the Indian travellers is depicted as a typical 'hippie dropout', dressed in torn jeans and carrying a small drum. This level of the satire is emphasised at the end of the sketch when the group is going back to the airport and one of them declares that he is staying, because he feels that 'this is [his] spiritual home' (Series One, Episode Two). He wants to join 'a group of travellers who came in the 60s ... and ...

just stayed and formed their own subsistence community', and he is sure to be happy, since there are 'no pressures of home, no universities, no looking for a good job', and, he insists, 'it's like paradise'. At first sight, this is making fun of Western 'dropouts' staying in India; however, the final punchline again reveals a second level of the satire. When the man leaves the bus, the camera pans to reveal that he is getting off at Hounslow, a suburban town in Greater London that has an extremely high percentage of citizens with an Asian background. Hence, the 'dropouts' of the 1960s are in fact the first generation of Asian immigrants coming to Britain, and the reference to 'their own subsistence community' points to the fact that ethnic minorities often live in specific areas within larger towns.

There is a final group of sketches that primarily poke fun at white British people, and these centre on a naïve enthusiasm for 'Indian' culture. An example of this is provided by a sketch from Series One, Episode Three, in which an Englishwoman visits the rather run-down dwelling of an Indian couple. At the beginning of the sketch, we hear 'traditional Indian music' and see the couple playing with electronic gaming consoles, which they hide when the woman enters. She starts the conversation by saying 'I do hope I'm not intruding in your simple rural rituals', evoking the prototypical colonial encounter of the civilised and urban white 'colonizer' and the backward urban 'natives'. She continues by explaining that she is visiting from England and that she wants 'to see something – you know – authentic'. When she reveals that she is 'an artefacts buyer for a chain of stores', she immediately denigrates her profession as 'decadent Western practices' and suggests that her Indian interlocutors are 'more connected with the flow of the seasons, the pull of the earth and the ripening of the crops'. This places her in the Western tradition of idealising (rather than demonising) the supposedly unspoiled simplicity of the 'native' in the concept of the 'noble savage', a term first used in John Dryden's play *The Conquest of Granada* (1672). The tradition goes back to antiquity (for example, in Greek pastoral poetry), but it becomes entwined with European colonial expansion in the early modern period after Montaigne popularised the idea in his essay 'Des cannibales' (1580). The Indian couple quickly catch on to her utter naïvety and they manage to convince her that the jumble of fairly modern commodities (an old bucket, a deckchair, a table with a missing leg, a can-opener and a bed-spread depicting the Power Rangers) are all in fact traditional heirlooms and finally sell them to her for £2,000.

Thus, in the sketches that are ultimately poking fun at 'the English' (albeit in many cases allegorically), *Goodness Gracious Me* picks up on colonial discourse in its two basic forms of projecting either positive or negative characteristics onto the colonial 'other'. While sketches like 'Jonathan' or 'Going for an English' highlight fairly common discriminatory practices facing Britain's non-white community, sketches like the 'Artefact buyer' let us laugh at a naïve idealisation of the 'other'. All of them are 'entry-level

sketches' in the sense that, from a non-Asian point of view, they do not require special knowledge; a general awareness of common stereotypes and prejudices held by white British people about Asians is all the background knowledge necessary. At the same time, they remain within the bounds of what may be seen as 'appropriate' for jokes; the issue of racist physical violence is hardly touched upon or is relegated to the time of the Raj (Mendes 124–127). Thus, the programme could be said to sidestep a growing problem at the time of its production: based on statistics from the Home Office, *The Guardian* points out that 'the number of racial incidents [had] more than trebled between 1988 and 1996 – a growing number of those [had been] directed towards Asians' ('Mirth of a Nation'). While *Goodness Gracious Me* does comment on racism, it does not invite a reading that would connect the show to specific incidents and it does not allocate blame in a way that would make it uncomfortable for white Britons to watch.

4 Laughing at the Indians

While white Britons are being made fun of in some sketches of *Goodness Gracious Me*, most of them actually invite us to laugh at Asian people, and although there are many different sketches that function in very different ways, certain patterns do emerge: sketches make fun of Asians in Britain for retaining certain 'customs' (in a broad sense), for losing their 'cultural roots' or for over-enthusiastically embracing new customs. Furthermore, certain Asian characters are made fun of for their overconfidence and/or loss of 'grounding' in reality. Arguably, many of these sketches go beyond the 'entry level' described by Gupta. Discussing the role of stereotypes in *Goodness Gracious Me*, Sharat Sardana points out that they 'included stereotypes within the Asian community that others outside wouldn't know ... like the Asian couple who think they are British' ('New Kind of Laughter' 24). While an audience that does not know about the stereotype is still likely to 'get the joke' (see below), it will respond differently from an audience that knows what is being parodied. Hence, Yasmin Alibhai Brown insists that if 'you are Asian, you take a completely different set of messages' from the show, and she cautions that a white British audience might not 'get the second or third level of the jokes' since they 'know nothing about Asian culture' ('Mirth of a Nation'). However, as Speight had to realise with regard to *Till Death Us Do Part*, any text is open to various readings and it is difficult to predict – or control – which will become the dominant one, and we are back to the question of whether an audience laughs *with* or *at* the Asian characters in the show.

A large number of sketches are set in Indian families, playing with stereotypical patterns of behaviour, most of them centring on 'traditional' family values. For example, there is a small series of sketches involving two mothers boasting about their sons. The motif of the proud mother is, presumably,

transculturally pervasive and hence a broad audience can easily identify with the situation. The sketches take on a particularly Indian slant because of the topics singled out for boasting. Hence, the first of these sketches combines the motif of 'economic success' – which would arguably connect white British and Asian mothers – and 'family-mindedness', a topic that is stereotypically Asian (Series One, Episode Four). The boasting becomes increasingly outrageous (alleged visits to Downing Street and the White House) and ridiculous: a second sketch in the same episode has the mothers boasting of the criminal success of their sons, and a later sketch has the mothers boasting about the dependency of their sons. The punchline to all these sketches turns the semi-realistic setting, mothers boasting about their sons, upside down: when one of the mothers cannot think of a way to outdo her antagonist with a more outrageous claim, she asks 'but how big is his danda?', wagging her little finger. Danda is a Hindi word for stick, but in the context it obviously refers to the son's penis – a calculated breach of decorum that highlights the infantile nature of the boasting match and simultaneously undercuts the mother's position as moral centre of the home.

While the show has many sketches that play on 'typical' Asian family life, there are some that address the topic of cultural roots in a diasporic context. Thus, there is a small series of 'What does it mean to be a...' sketches that raise the issue of rootedness. In the first of these sketches, a young man – wearing a beard and a turban – asks his mother what it means to be a Sikh, wondering how he fits 'into hundreds of years of culture' (Series One, Episode One). She tells him that it is very simple: 'You are a man, hm? You've got a turban, so you're a Sikh man.' When the son is not satisfied, asking 'What about metaphysics and ethics and philosophy?', his father is called and he repeats the explanation: 'Put pagg on man, you've got Sikh.' The humorous situation is underscored by linguistic markers. Both parents – presumably first-generation immigrants – speak with strong Indian accents. The son, presumably born in Britain, shows no trace of an Indian accent; rather, he speaks in an English Midlands accent. Phonologically, he is 'English' while remaining visibly 'different'. Thus, it is psychologically convincing that it should be the second generation of immigrants who feel the need to explore their 'ethnic' identity, only to find this thwarted when the parent generation turns out to be less than interested in spiritual 'roots'. Similar sketches involving other religious groups make it clear that the show does not intend to single out Sikhs; rather, first-generation disinterestedness and second-generation root-finding are presented as a general issue affecting the Asian community.

Taking this loss of rootedness one step further, *Goodness Gracious Me* includes a number of sketches that ridicule the over-assimilation of some immigrants. The first sketch of this type is also included in the first episode of the show, and it shows an Indian couple visiting Indian friends in their very 'English' home. All four speak with in an over-pronounced attempt at

an English accent, but cannot hide their Indian background, and they outdo each other in terms of assimilation: all characters have Anglicised their names and insist on English customs, denigrating everything 'Indian' to a point that becomes ridiculous. Hence, when the host has to admit that it is 'Indian tonic water', the guests, mistaking the usual name of the beverage for its origin, opt for 'two whiskies and a soda' instead of the gin and tonic (Series One, Episode One), and when the Kapoors ('pronounced Cooper') reveal that their son has gone to India 'to find his roots', this meets with utter surprise. The sketch ends on a rather threatening note, when a brick with the message 'Pakis go home!' is hurled through the front-door window. Any possible tension is quickly laughed away, however, when both families enthusiastically agree with this sentiment (which becomes the catchphrase to this line of sketches), inviting two connected readings: in keeping with the general gist of the sketch, they feel 'English' and hence adopt the white xenophobic sentiment, while at the same time, the rejection of 'Pakis' can be read as a very 'Indian' reaction to the unloved rival state, and hence as a more specific prejudice that may well go deeper than the veneer of adopted 'Englishness'.

Finally, there is a whole range of sketches involving Asian characters who are laughed at not primarily because of ethnic stereotypes, but because they behave in ways that display their lack of 'grounding' in reality. While these sketches tend to include ethnic references, the humour is more universal, being directed at people who live in their dream worlds. For example, the 'Bhangra Muffins', two teenage boys who try to be cool by adopting a ragga-muffin style that stems from the Caribbean, frequently refer to their Asian background, but this is largely coincidental to the comical situations that arise from their often highly sophisticated misinterpretations of a given situation. For example, in one sketch they talk about the 'problem' of young British-Asian academic over-achievers, who are under double pressure from family and community to do well at school, resolving to address this problem by deliberately under-achieving. At the end of the sketch, it is revealed that they have just been sitting an exam and that their status of academic over-achievers is out of the question. In another sketch they talk about the importance of TV talk shows, thinking they will be in the audience of an Oprah Winfrey show, when it turns out they have tickets for an opera performance. Hence, they are ridiculous not because they are Asian, and not even primarily because they are British-Asian-pretending-to-be-Caribbean (although that is undeniably funny in itself), but because they make fools of themselves by being utterly out of touch with their immediate reality.

5 The legacy of *Goodness Gracious Me*

If the idea of an all-Asian TV comedy show was a novelty in the mid-1990s, this was clearly altered by the success of *Goodness Gracious Me*. The show won the Royal Television Society's Team Award in 1998 and the Broadcasting

Press Guild award for Best Entertainment in 1999, and Phil Daoust declared in *The Guardian* in 1999: 'Asian comedy is hip.' Furthermore, Meera Syal pointed out in 2000 that '[t]here is a lot of Asian comedy about now', suggesting that '[i]t was always going to happen with a second generation finding its feet' ('New Kind of Laughter' 24). *The Guardian* suggested, again in 1999, that the show's 'legacy may be that it has transformed the notion that non-white Britons have no popular appeal beyond music and sport' ('Mirth of a Nation'), and according to the *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang*, the phrase 'kiss my chuddies' was 'in use in school playgrounds among other ethnic groups' by 2004, because it had been popularised by *Goodness Gracious Me* (Thorne 96). With the comedy chat show *The Kumars at No. 42*, it inspired 'an indirect spin-off' that brought Sanjeev Bhaskar and Meera Syal from *Goodness Gracious Me* back to the screen and ran successfully between 2001 and 2006 ('The Kumars'). The programme has recently been revived as *The Kumars at No. 42B* for Sky1 (Aaron).

Finally and perhaps most importantly, the show is still seen as a kind of 'touchstone' to measure the quality of 'ethnic comedy', as is witnessed in many comments on *The Guardian's* 'TV&Radio Blog' made in connection with the controversial sitcom *Citizen Khan* (BBC1 2012–). For example, a commenter calling himself/herself 'pangar', on 30 August 2012, claims that 'a programme like "Goodness Gracious Me" made [many Britons] think afresh about what it meant to be British Asian'. The user 'synchronised' commented a day later that the quality of *Goodness Gracious Me* lay in the fact that the show 'was inclusive, was positive and empowering', insisting that the show 'provided a change of perceptions of the Asian community in the UK. The difference is that [in] GGM one laughed with ... *Citizen Khan* one laughs at ...' ('*Citizen Khan*'). So we are back where we started at the question of whether we laugh with or at ethnic minorities in *Goodness Gracious Me* – and the majority of commentators, both at the time of the show's production and some 15 years later, seem to agree that in this case, the answer is more likely to be *with* rather than *at*. Nonetheless, by emphasising an Asian point of view, the show simultaneously raises awareness for essentialising categories, while it also re-inscribes the very categories it arguably seeks to subvert.

Notes

1. I use the term 'black' in the political sense in which it became used by anti-racism activists in the 1980s, that is, as referring to people of African, Caribbean and Asian descent.
2. See Nora Plesske's contribution in Chapter 6 of this volume.

Filmography

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13

Exploding Family Values, Lampooning Feminism, Exposing Consumerism: *Absolutely Fabulous*

Rainer Emig

1 Background and structure

Absolutely Fabulous is a long-running British sitcom that has achieved cult status worldwide. It originally emerged from a sketch entitled 'Modern Mother and Daughter' that was featured in the *French & Saunders Show* in 1990. In it, Jennifer Saunders plays a mother called Adrianna and Dawn French her daughter Saffron. The point of the sketch was that the middle-aged single mother behaved like a teenager. By contrast, her teenage daughter acted like a middle-aged woman (Vahimagi 310, 336).

The sketch was then developed into a sitcom, first broadcast in 1992, by Jennifer Saunders alone. She still plays the mother in it, now called Edina Monsoon – after Saunders' husband's nickname (his actual surname is 'Edmondson'). Further characters are the daughter, still called Saffron (Julia Sawalha), Edina's mother (June Whitfield) and most importantly Edina's best friend Patsy Stone (Joanna Lumley), a fashion editor. Another regular character is Edina's secretary 'Bubble' (Jane Horrocks). The sitcom has produced five series so far – with several twentieth anniversary episodes, including one Olympics Special, added to them in 2011 and 2012.

Absolutely Fabulous is a mixture of a family and a workplace sitcom, though both concepts need to be taken with a large pinch of salt in this case. Edina's 'family' consists of her daughter and her mother. She is twice divorced, with her ex-husbands (one gay and one married to a very overbearing American) making occasional appearances. Her much-loved son Serge is abroad and absent for all but one of the shows, and only gets a guest appearance in a 2002 special entitled 'Gay' in Britain and 'Ab Fab: New York' in the US that takes Edina and Patsy to the Big Apple. Most scenes of the show are set in Edina's basement kitchen, a clear reference to domestic sitcoms of previous decades, but also – in its strong theatricality, even with entrances via a central staircase – to the kitchen-sink realism of the 1950s and 1960s. While one could argue that *Absolutely Fabulous* thus represents the contemporary state

of the family, 'unclear' rather than nuclear, it can equally well be considered a family parody (Emig 154).

The same is true for the workplace aspect. While both Edina and Patsy are technically working full-time, Edina as the agent of various no longer very successful celebrities and Patsy as the editor of a fashion magazine, part of the humour of the show is that they avoid work whenever they can. Shopping and lunches are more to their taste, and they have a way of declaring these to be the core of their jobs. Indeed, they also employ staff (Bubble in the case of Edina, and a fringe of sub-editors and interns in the case of Patsy), but these are usually shown as equally workshy and incompetent. We shall see below how far this can be considered a comment on Britain's increasing transformation to a country with a dominant services sector.

The show is moreover a city sitcom, which hints at its roots in the 1980s and 1990s, when the big metropolises and their business life became the subject of global fascination. It is set in the Shepherd's Bush area of London, although Edina is always keen on stressing that her house is actually in the posher Holland Park district.

Absolutely Fabulous not only takes up crucial social and cultural themes, such as the rise of London as a national business and style hub during the 1980s and 1990s, the transformations of the family, or the presence of women in the service and entertainment industry, but also actively forms part of the cultural iconicity of the times. This can be seen not only in the success of the sitcom, but also in the status of its writer and actors. In contrast to Germany, where being a comedian can be financially rewarding but rarely carries much cultural clout, the British situation is strikingly different. Jennifer Saunders, a graduate of the Central School of Speech and Drama in London, is not only a comedian, but also a scriptwriter and actress, and has garnered an impressive array of awards for her work: three BAFTAs, including the BAFTA Fellowship, an International Emmy Award, a British Comedy Award, a Rose d'Or Light Entertainment Festival Award, two Writers' Guild of Great Britain Awards and a People's Choice Award (Hiams). Britain, one can tell, takes its entertainment industry seriously.

Joanna Lumley, OBE, the actress who plays Patsy Stone, already became famous with the cult series *The New Avengers* (ITV 1976–1977). She also has one of the most recognisable 'posh' voices in Britain, which is often used for voiceovers – and for AOL's 'You have e-mail' announcements (Lumley). June Whitfield, CBE, who plays Edina's mother, has been a well-known radio voice and afterwards a TV actress since the 1940s, and has a long association with sitcoms (Whitfield). Jane Horrocks, who plays Edina's secretary Bubble, is a well-known theatre, film and TV actress whose trademarks are her strong Lancashire accent and her singing skills. She starred in the award-winning film *Little Voice* (1998) (Barnett). Julia Sawalha has also established herself as a TV actress in both series and films (Smith).

The show also relies on many celebrity guest appearances, including regular ones by the singers Lulu and Emma Bunton (Baby Spice) and

occasional ones by Elton John, fashion designers Christian Lacroix and Stella McCartney, and supermodel Kate Moss.

Already the sitcom's nickname *AbFab* hints at its cult status. Many lines from its episodes have become idioms, especially Edina's favourite expression 'Sweetie darling', as well as 'Bolly' and 'Stolly' for Bollinger champagne and Stolichnaya vodka, Edina's and Patsy's favourite drinks; 'Lights, models, guest list', Edina's roll call when preparing a PR launch; 'I am thin and gorgeous', Edina's mantra in front of the mirror; or 'Don't know. Get paid', Bubble's response to the question what exactly her job entails. The show has clearly hit a number of cultural nerves. What are they exactly?

2 Conflicting ideologies

The early 1990s, the time when *Absolutely Fabulous* emerged on the scene, are generally taken to be a period of rampant individualism and materialism – in line with the neo-liberal ideology that was then becoming the dominant ideology in the Western world. This is true despite the fact that the ruling Conservative Government, though no longer headed by the iconic figure of Margaret Thatcher, ostensibly held on to conservative values, such as those of the nuclear family. Thatcher's rejection of state involvement and proclaimed return to Victorian values is famously summarised in an interview with the woman's magazine *Woman's Own* in 1987. In it she states:

And who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first; it is our duty to look after ourselves and then also to look after our neighbour and life is a reciprocal business and people have got the entitlements too much in mind without the obligations, because there is no such thing as an entitlement unless someone has first met an obligation. (Keay 9)

In a typically conservative move, 'society' is rejected as abstract and a left-wing invention. In its place, however, it is not community that is emphasised, but the individual and the (nuclear) family. The traditional reference points are Victorian, such as Samuel Smiles' influential tract *Self-Help* (1859), but also biblical, as in the reference to our neighbours. In fact, the argument of the statement is something of a mess, as becomes clear when business and legal metaphors enter it, such as 'reciprocal business' and 'entitlements'. Are we individuals or families? Do we love our neighbours or do business with them? Is family a question of obligations or indeed a business? Religion, the traditional 'glue' that was supposed to cement social relations, is tellingly absent. We shall see below what it has been replaced by in *Absolutely Fabulous*.

Rather than offering a clear ideological guideline, Thatcher's interview is more of an admission of confusion and represents the conflicting ideologies of individual, community, family, gender and business that were striving

for dominance at the time. Out of these, and their clashes, the comedy of *Absolutely Fabulous* was generated.

3 Questioning the family

Absolutely Fabulous portrays a non-traditional family revolving around a single mother. Not unimportantly, its main protagonists are also all female. It radically challenges traditional notions of the family as care-giving, protective, emotional and loving. These concepts form the cornerstones of the ideal family model as developed in the bourgeois nineteenth century. The most radical disruption of this ideology in *Absolutely Fabulous* is the multiple violation of the generation contract. Edina detests her own mother – mainly for being old-fashioned and for reminding her of her own increasing age and girth, and eventual mortality. That there is a ‘Mister Monsoon’, Edina’s father and Saffron’s grandfather, we only learn when news of his demise makes Saffron mournful, but only irritates Edina (in the aptly named episode ‘Death’). Edina also does not really care for her daughter. Instead, she regularly wants her daughter to ‘mother’ her. More than that: Saffron is frequently reminded in very cruel ways by Edina and Patsy that she was an accident and unwanted:

Patsy: You should have ended up in the dustbin – the incinerator was too good for you. You know, when I heard that Ed was pregnant, I told her to abort. Abort! Abort! Abort! I said, chuck it down the pan, bring me...
Saffron: A knitting needle?

Patsy: A knitting needle! (‘Death’; Saunders, *Absolutely Fabulous* 2 134)

Patsy has never come close to a lasting relationship, much less a family. Her past saw her as the groupie of pop stars (and as an actress in porn movies), while her present consists of spontaneous sexual adventures, of which the following description by Patsy has become iconic (and much repeated, for example in the Pet Shop Boys’ song ‘Absolutely Fabulous’ that sampled soundbites from the show for *Comic Relief* in 1994): ‘Oh, he was just a windscreen washer I picked up at some traffic lights. Bum’s so tight he was bouncing off the walls’ (the quotation is from the very first episode, ‘Fashion’, in the first series in 1992; Saunders, *Absolutely Fabulous* 19).

It is clear that the personal relationships represented in *Absolutely Fabulous* cannot be reconciled with the conservative notions of the nuclear family. The only relics of such families are represented by Edina’s re-married ex-husbands. The first of these, Marshall (Christopher Ryan), is now the henpecked husband of the American Bo (Mo Gaffney). Significantly, their marriage is childless. Edina’s second ex-husband, Justin (Christopher Malcolm), who is Saffron’s father, is gay. This is often the cause of Edina’s attacks on him. But he at least seems to be in a loving relationship with another man, Oliver (played by Gary Beadle), who also happens to be black, something that makes Edina even more furious.

'Inverted racism' can be detected in Episodes One and Two of Series Five, 'Cleanin' and 'Book-Clubbin', in which Saffron confides in Edina that she is pregnant by an African whom she has met on one of her philanthropic trips abroad. Edina is initially shocked, but then decides that a mixed-race baby (that she insists on calling 'Lola' after pop singer Madonna's first child, although Saffron christens her Jane) is the latest fashion accessory, the 'Chanel of babies'. In the first of three 2011/2012 anniversary specials entitled 'Identity', Edina is informed by her taxi driver that they are in Brixton, London's Afro-Caribbean quarter. She instantly asks him to play dub reggae music very loudly with the car windows turned down and starts spouting some pseudo Caribbean-inflected phrases – but only until a group of black youngsters approach the car. Then she panics.

Showing a mixed-race gay couple as the only successful representative of cultural norms or a middle-aged white woman unsuccessfully trying to fraternise with London's black community are two examples of how *Absolutely Fabulous* employs subversion as a tool of critique. This subversiveness applies to hegemonic norms, such as heteronormativity, the conservative family model or the still prevalent racism in contemporary Britain (the racially motivated murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 looms large here). Yet it also – and this makes the sitcom so interesting – targets many of the academic and cultural debates trying to overcome such ideologies, and this includes the famous Cultural Studies triad of gender, class and race.

Absolutely Fabulous oscillates between taking up politically correct agendas and ridiculing them, a fact that has led to attacks by concerned reviewers and academics alike. As John Ellis writes with reference to the sitcom's stance on feminism in *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*:

Absolutely Fabulous can be vaguely disconcerting for a man to watch: it provides both empathy and distance. It may well offend those who practise the difficult art of 'political correctness', if any such people exist outside the fevered imaginings of newspaper columnists and other such commentators. It certainly seems to offend anyone with an over-developed sense of how things ought to be. In 1993, Melanie Phillips, then a columnist with the *Observer* newspaper, known as the scourge of the 'political correctness' movement, condemned the series as anti-feminist. Her argument to the Royal Television Society Convention was that the humour was directed at the values of feminism, rather than at the ways that the characters deal with their problems. *Absolutely Fabulous* disturbs as it entertains. This is its importance in pointing to a new way of thinking about the role of public service broadcasting. The series lets us into the emotional complexes of its characters; it allows us to experience, within a situation comedy format, what women feel like in a public role, women aggressively uncertain about the nature of their identities. (Ellis 88)

While Ellis' statements sound slightly dated and condescending today, especially when he seems to think that a public role for women is a new challenge or wishes to force *Absolutely Fabulous*' female protagonists to engage in a quest for true identities, he is right in stressing the show's innovatory double-bind of highlighting cultural issues – along the lines of political correctness debates – while at the same time at least partly debunking them. Misogyny is only one of these debates, and the following section will look at the show's ambivalent attitude towards femininity. But the show has many other provocations up its sleeve. Homophobia has already been mentioned. The final sections of this chapter will then analyse forms of snobbery that link the show once again with its roots in the neo-liberal 1980s and 1990s and their rampant individualism and materialism.

4 Gender and (anti-?)feminism

In gender terms, *Absolutely Fabulous* could be considered a radical sitcom because of its almost exclusively female cast. Its central protagonists earn their own incomes (although Edina also relies on alimony payments) and manage to live in affluent circumstances. Men only appear as ex-husbands, sex objects and sometimes as adored fashion designers (for example, Christian Lacroix). Yet Edina especially is also a very evident victim of gender norms. She is a fashion victim who refuses to accept her age and size. An early episode is entitled 'Fat', thereby taking up a theme explicitly set by Susie Orbach's manifestos *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978) and *Fat is a Feminist Issue II* (1982). In most episodes of the show, there is at least one scene in which Edina tries to squeeze into clothes that are evidently too tight for her. Dieting is a constant theme, as are other ways of losing weight. In 'Fat', the following iconic exchange between Edina and her mother occurs:

Edina: What you don't realise is that inside, inside of me there is a thin person just screaming to get out.

Mother: Just the one, dear? ('Fat'; Saunders, *Absolutely Fabulous* 43)

Patsy, in contrast, is always shown as remarkably thin and fashionable looking. But there might be a reason for this, as becomes evident in the episode 'Morocco':

[Patsy groans, holding stomach]

Edina: Oh, are you alright, darling? Have you eaten something?

Patsy: No. Not since 1973. (Saunders, *Absolutely Fabulous* 2 66)

Thus, the two supposedly emancipated protagonists of the show are both shown as victims of patriarchal norms that demand slimness and agelessness from women. Their self-esteem depends on the recognition as attractive

and desirable by the male gaze, and this is true even for Patsy, who has an uncharacteristic tantrum when the tabloid press report on her affair with a politician. She likes the attention, and in fact the episode 'Hospital' starts with her only pretending to fend off a crowd of photographers and reporters in front of Edina's house. But her bubble bursts when she then reads the actual news report:

Patsy: Picks up another newspaper. Oh, well, heigh-ho, Eddy. Pours more champagne. I mean, you know, let them write what they want ... Starts to read another feature. Continued on page 5. I mean, I shall just rise above it. I shan't let this thing affect me in ... Notices something in particular. Bastard! No! No! No!

Eddie: Who, who? Where, where? What, quick, what? What, what? Show, show, show! ... Patsy hands her the newspaper. Edina reads aloud. 'Source is...'

Patsy: No, no, no – further...

Eddie: 'Patsy is...' Uh?

Patsy: Yes?

Eddie: Aged forty-seven!

Patsy: Aagh! I'll sue!

Saffron: To Edina. Well, how old is she?

Edina shrugs.

Patsy: I'm thirty-nine.

Saffron: And I'm an ovum.

Patsy tears up paper and throws it into the bin.

Patsy: Oh ... it's just not fair.

Mother enters, reading newspaper headlines.

Mother: Another pig-ugly MP making a fool of himself with some scrawny old hooker, I see.

Patsy: Grabs the paper from Mother, looks at the photo and shreds the newspaper in the food blender. Old? Old! Old, old, old! (Saunders, Absolutely Fabulous 2 5–6)

In terms of sexual liberation, the show presents a similarly ambivalent scenario. Edina would like to join Patsy's man-hunts, but is ultimately too shy and too concerned about her looks and age. She also feels humiliated by the fact that one of her exes is gay. (It eventually turns out that her adored absent son Serge is gay as well.)

5 Class snobbery

While both Edina and Patsy stem from middle-class backgrounds, they now live lives that are anything but average. In the case of Patsy, it was her non-conformist hippy mother who already set her on a trail to different spheres

when naming her Eurydice Colette Clytemnestra Dido Bathsheba Rabelais Patricia Cocteau Stone (the scene is featured in the already mentioned episode 'Birth'; Saunders, *Absolutely Fabulous* 2 133–134). Edina, on the other hand, feels hampered in her ambitions by the continual presence of her daughter and her mother, whose choice of names for Edina, Edina Margaret Rose, revealed in the episode 'Poor' (Saunders, *Absolutely Fabulous* 2 115), smacks of a rather stodgy version of the British middle class. While Edina's mother is a reminder not only of Edina's past, but also of the resilience of traditional attitudes and values, Saffron is moreover a spokeswoman for every political correctness debate. She is a feminist, anti-materialist, anti-racist – in short, a modern-age Goody Two-Shoes. Worse than that (in the eyes of Edina), she also refuses to develop any dress sense or interest in her looks.

Nonetheless, living a life that revolves around celebrities and fashion has catapulted Edina and Patsy towards the upper middle class, if not into the supposed new upper class of wealth and stardom. That this is a relatively new phenomenon was given evidence by reports that HRH the Duke of Edinburgh supposedly complained about the 'chorus line of soap stars and homosexuals' in the guest list of Princess Diana's funeral in 1997 (the statement was included in Stephen Frear's film *The Queen* of 2006).

That Edina in particular displays class snobbery has already been demonstrated by her repeated attempts to suggest that her abode is in the genteel Holland Park area of London. What she cannot abide are reminders that there is poverty at the fringes of her glamorous life. When Saffron threatens to donate some of Edina's old outfits to charity, Edina strongly objects:

Saffron: Well, I could take these down to the charity shop.

Edina: Huh! You cannot give these sort of clothes to the poor! Well, I'm sure they've got enough to contend with, without the added humiliation of wearing last-season, sweetie. ('Birth'; Saunders, *Absolutely Fabulous* 2 120)

What this grotesque episode encapsulates is not only the greedy materialism of the 1990s, but also the reminder that the success stories of this period happen on exactly the kind of thin ice of the exploding services sector that forms the basis of Edina and Patsy's careers. Saffron at one point asks questions about this:

Saffron: So what does a fashion director do?

Edina: Darling, she drinks free champagne, gets free merchandizing and free clothes. She commands her own booth in most good restaurants and has a fifty per cent discount at Harvey Nic's. I mean if it wasn't for Patsy I'd hardly be able to afford to eat and dress in quite the style I manage now.

Patsy: It's not only that, I mean there is work involved, Skill.

Edina: Of course, there is.

Patsy: I decide what goes in the magazine. One snap of my fingers and I can rise [*sic*] hem-lines so high that the world is your gynaecologist! I ... direct.

Edina: The fashion. ('Magazine'; Saunders, *Absolutely Fabulous* 124)

This is very much a summary of what much of the services sector of the 1980s and 1990s was about: selling things and services to consumers who had hitherto not realised that they needed such goods and services at all. A good illustration would be the TV chef Delia Smith advertising then little-known ingredients in each of her shows, such as cranberries in 1995, which would then also be miraculously available at Sainsbury's ('Delia's Cooks'). The cycle of creating unrealised demand and then exploiting it seems to work (most of the time) for Patsy's fashion magazine, but not so well for Edina's flagging PR agency (Miller and Dinan). When things look bleak for Edina at one point, she has a hard time understanding that instead of her usual home deliveries, she now has to resort to trips to the supermarket ('Poor'). She even gets this wrong – by first choosing as her source the extremely expensive Harvey Nichols and then being reduced to stealing a crate of champagne from an ordinary supermarket.

In many ways, *Absolutely Fabulous* thus exposes in an exaggerated form the cultural effects of Britain's transformation from a manufacturing to a service economy. On the subject of this transformation, a parliamentary report from 2010 states bluntly: 'The UK manufacturing sector has suffered long-term decline. It accounts for around 12 per cent of national output, half its share 30 years ago' (Mellows-Facer 32). The sitcom also eerily predicts some of the dire consequences that an eventual crash of this new economy would produce, a crash that famously happened in the wake of the so-called 'Credit Crunch' of 2008.

6 Conclusion: subverting consumerism

Gender and age issues, those of individualistic self-centredness, the new neo-liberal services ideology affecting Britain as well as race issues all culminate in the already mentioned episode 'Hospital'. This will therefore provide the material for the concluding analysis of *Absolutely Fabulous* in this chapter in line with the above claim that the sitcom's multiple subversions and blatant political incorrectness offer it scope for a wide-reaching social and cultural critique.

In this episode, Patsy quickly decides that she needs to do something about her appearance after the media correctly identify her as 47 years old. Only a radical facial peel with the most corrosive of chemicals will do. Edina, as usual reluctant to be left behind, also insists on hospital treatment, in her case for a splinter in her foot. The scene below shows both characters in

hospital and their self-created environments, and their attitudes towards the hospital staff clearly signal what is at stake. The following dialogue ensues when the black nurse spots Edina wearing (as usual) an outrageous outfit:

Nurse: *Over her shoulder.* Mary! Mary! Come in here a minute and look at this!

Another nurse enters.

Mary: Mother of God, what is it?

Nurse: *Indicating Edina's outfit.* You know, my daughter could get away with wearing something like this.

Edina: Yes, well, maybe she could get away with it ... but I doubt very much if she'd be able to afford it.

Nurse: Well, she's only three years old.

Edina: Oh, God – look, just furnish us with the appropriate drugs and then leave the room, please.

Mary: With the laugh you've given us, it's the least we can do for you. Now, how about some distalgescic?

Edina: Distal ... Distal ... Is that all right, Pats?

Patsy: Wash them down with brandy.

Edina: Yeah, and I want a drip and a little heart-bleep machine. All right? I've seen *Casualty*. I know what goes on. ('Hospital'; Saunders, *Absolutely Fabulous* 2 13–14)

Nurses with a Caribbean background became a common sight in Britain from the late 1940s onwards. Sister Mary, by contrast, is marked as Irish by her accent, name and religious expostulation. Both nurses here represent common sense. Edina counters them with an insistence on her wealth – and on her knowledge of the TV series *Casualty*. That her status and her education do not match becomes embarrassingly evident when encountering her doctor:

Edina: Now, look, I demand to see a doctor.

Nurse: Mr Simpson will be round in a minute.

Edina: Mr. Simpson! Mr. Simpson! I want a proper doctor in a white coat who's gonna take me seriously and give me some more painkillers. Now, all right?

Mr Simpson enters.

Mr Simpson: Right, Mrs, um, er...

Nurse: Monsoon.

Mr Simpson: I'll be operating on your ... um, er...

Nurse: Foot.

Mr Simpson: Tomorrow morning.

Edina: *To Saffron.* Hold my hand, darling. He could be the caretaker for all I know.

Mr Simpson: We could do this under local. It's not a very serious operation. It would be very quick.

Edina: L ... L ... Local? Local anaesthetic? Are you mad? God, what is this, Eastern Europe?

Nurse and Doctor exchange glares.

Mr Simpson: You wouldn't feel any pain.

Edina: I may not feel it, but I'd still be able to see it. I'm not totally lacking in imagination, you know. I want total sensory deprivation and back-up drugs. All right?

Saffron: *To Mr Simpson.* Believe me, she's much happier unconscious!

...

Mr Simpson: Nurse, I know I should see that lumpy-breast woman now, but great friends of mine are having a drinks party...

Nurse: *Pointing to Patsy.* Doctor – the facelift.

Mr Simpson: Oh, it'll be a doddle – just grab her by the scalp, shake her up and down a bit and chop off the slack. Tomorrow. (Saunders, *Absolutely Fabulous* 2 16–17)

Edina is not educated enough to realise that a medical doctor in Britain can very well be a 'Mr' and have a full university education and practical experience. Her insistence on a title and her suspicion that he might be little more than a caretaker give her away as ignorant. Yet the surgeon is also shown as the typical product of a medical industry that views patients as consumers. He neither knows his patient's name nor the reason why she is in hospital. His attitude towards the unnamed cancer patient and to Patsy's face-lift shows him treating women like pieces of meat. But then Patsy's own attitude to her body is also one of reckless objectification and commodification. For Edina, on the other hand, the stay in hospital is mainly a means of trying out new ways of losing consciousness – and she uses inappropriate language and once again incorrect terms for it (a paraplegic is someone whose lower body parts are paralysed):

Edina: Oi, you! Bitch nurse. *Nurse pauses.* Don't you just keep me on the threshold of pain. I want some more painkillers. Look, I had two tiny paraplegics or something in this cup over an hour ago ... and don't look at me like I'm mad. I know you've got Valium out there. (Saunders, *Absolutely Fabulous* 2 17)

Edina insists on having Saffron with her, who spends her time watching TV rather than talking to her mother. Edina is even more upset by the fact that Patsy has more visitors than she: her staff and even the director of her magazine, Magda (Kathy Burke with her characteristic Cockney accent):

Patsy: Oh, Magda!

Magda: Hello, Pats. How are you? Unlucky business with the MP. Still, the *Hello!* thing should sort all that out. [*Edina and Patsy engineered a Hello! magazine home story presenting Patsy as the owner of Edina's flat to deflect*

press attention from her sex scandal.] Right, I'd better make this quick. I've got a lingerie opening and a feminine wash launch to get to by six o'clock, and all this with my extended working champagne lunch with Anouska-bloody-Hempel floating about here. *She doesn't pause for breath.* Right, this month, I want articles about how lovely spending money is, expensive things are better, cosmetics are great. I want money, money, money, spend, spend, spend. I don't want to see any more photos of gormless skeletons with no brains, no make-up and no bloody tits.

Patsy: Bored teenagers won't sell a Chanel suit.

Magda: Too thin.

Patsy: Too young!

Magda: If the models get any younger, Pats, they'll be chucking foetuses down the catwalk. (Saunders, *Absolutely Fabulous* 2 17–18)

Magda is the typical product of the services sector selling commodified notions of beauty and success, even when her notions of work ('working champagne lunch') are as nebulous as Edina's and Patsy's, and she has to deal with products that are as appealing as a feminine wash (the 'lingerie opening' is one of many lewd puns that the sitcom enjoys). Yet she does formulate the mantra of 1980s and 1990s consumerism neatly: 'how lovely spending money is, expensive things ... money, money, money, spend, spend, spend'. At the same time, Magda implicitly acknowledges that she victimises women, both the models and the women who take these models as (quite literally, it seems) yardsticks for their self-assessments. The overarching irony of the scene is, of course, that Patsy is in hospital exactly because she herself has swallowed the belief that 'ever younger' is the only trend fashion can follow.

While youth, beauty, success and sex are Patsy's tenets of faith, Edina unsuccessfully dabbles in all kinds of religious substitutes, mainly of the esoteric, Buddhist, vegetarian and other health-food kinds (the latter permitting her to combine pseudo-spirituality with her interminable diets). All of these pseudo-religions, Patsy as well as Edina's, are ultimately commodities, and one remains as meaningless and exchangeable as the other. This becomes clear in the vacuous small talk in which Patsy's staff engage:

Catriona: Yes, and she believes chairs are as important to civilization as a masterpiece or something. I wrote it down somewhere, so we could print that up and do some lovely ... photos ...

Fleur: *Picking up face cream.* Have you tried this? It's a triple acting alpha hydroxy acid natural complex to reactivate your skin, making you scientifically more beautiful.

Catriona: Sounds good.

Fleur: Dermatologist- and ophthalmologist-tested, non-acne genic ... I don't know what it means, but it's forcing me to believe it. (Saunders, *Absolutely Fabulous* 2 15, 17)

This dialogue contains the essence of PR, replacing knowledge with a manipulative message, and of commodification, making chairs as important as masterpieces – and in turn reducing masterpieces to the level of mass-produced commodities. It also shows that ‘belief’ is now attached to products and services. This becomes tragic when the self, so celebrated in the individualistic universe of the 1980s and 1990s and in *Absolutely Fabulous*, becomes the target of such a commodification. Almost in the same breath as advocating a story about chairs, Fleur and Catriona hatch the following idea:

Fleur: Couldn’t we make a feature? ‘Our Editor.’

Catriona: Yes, and then we could use all these lovely ... um ... photos. (Saunders, *Absolutely Fabulous* 2 18)

Patsy, who is just about to have her face treated with acid, is on the one hand turned into that to which she aspires, a celebrity. On the other hand, this makes her as exchangeable a commodity as chairs. Editor and chairs merit equally glossy photos and equally transient media coverage in a magazine that will be replaced and forgotten when the next issue arrives.

Absolutely Fabulous is a sitcom that has its roots nostalgically in the 1960s with its hippy culture of anti-materialism and free love. A reminder of this is its title song, ‘This Wheel’s on Fire’, written by Bob Dylan and Rick Danko and performed by Julie Driscoll and Saunders’ husband Adrian Edmondson. Yet the 1960s ideology of celebrating individuality has mutated into sheer egotism and greed by the time we reach the 1990s. Spirituality is now available as drugs, rituals or yoga classes. Of the radical politics of the 1960s, nothing remains but the confused jumble into which they have merged with conservative and neo-liberal ideas, such as those proposed by Margaret Thatcher in the above-quoted interview. In other words, subcultures, and these include those cherished by many British people of Afro-Caribbean descent, such as reggae and Rastafarianism, but also the late 1970s subversive gestures of the punk movement, have quickly been turned into lifestyles – and sold by the likes of Edina and Patsy, but also to them. In fact, many old subcultures now form part of the new mainstream. One only has to think of health food or self-improvement through meditation. A telling indication of this is an opinion posted on an American TV review website in the wake of the recent twentieth anniversary episodes of *Absolutely Fabulous*:

After watching ‘Identity,’ I revisited a few old episodes of *Absolutely Fabulous*, a show that I enjoyed back in my high school days despite not getting all the jokes. If anything the series seems less farcical – though no less funny – than it did in the mid-’90s. If anything, it is astonishingly prescient: in the premiere episode, Eddie tries to adopt an orphan from Romania and makes thrice-weekly ‘colonic irrigation’ appointments. In 1992, Patsy and Eddie

were hilariously monstrous caricatures. Twenty years later, in the era of \$425 Gwyneth Paltrow-approved colon cleanses and Kardashian-branded magazines, they're nowhere near as far-fetched. (Blake)

In the same way as the excesses of *Absolutely Fabulous* are now themselves almost mainstream, the sitcom has joined the process that it cynically depicts. The series is big business, with TV re-runs and DVD box sets making money worldwide. Its writers and main actresses have made a neat career out of their association with the programme, a link that several of them celebrate in the titles of their autobiographies. Nonetheless, the show retains a challenge to the viewer after over 20 years of media presence, a challenge that is common to all good sitcoms: how much do we laugh about ourselves when we laugh at the antics of characters like Edina, Patsy and Saffron? And if we realise that we also laugh about ourselves, are we content to merely enjoy the mirth or does it trigger more critical thought processes?

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The Queen. Directed by Stephen Frears, written by Colin Swash *et al.* Paris: Pathé Pictures International, 2006. DVD.

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14

Comic Strategies of Inclusion and ‘Normalisation’ in *The Vicar of Dibley*

Lucia Krämer

Geraldine: You were expecting a bloke: beard, Bible, bad breath...

David: Yes, that sort of thing.

Geraldine: And instead you’ve got a babe with a bob cut and a magnificent bosom.

David: So I see.

Geraldine: Well, don’t worry. It’ll be alright. (‘The Arrival’)

1 Background, production context and structural features

The comic adventures of the Revd. Geraldine Granger (the eponymous vicar of Dibley) and her country parishioners have become something of an institution in British TV comedy. The show may have notched up only 26 instalments between the winter of 1994, when the first episodes were aired, and the latest Comic Relief Special, which was broadcast on 13 March 2015. Yet the very fact that the show was repeatedly extended and picked up for holiday and Comic Relief Specials well after the series had officially ended in 2000 demonstrates its longevity and considerable popularity. It can be argued, in fact, that the intermittent production of the show – with three short series and two Comic Relief Specials between 1994 and 2000 and a further eight holiday and Comic Relief Specials between 2004 and 2015 – as well as its scheduling around Christmas and Easter and for Red Nose Day have turned each new episode into something of an event, simultaneously drawing on and reinforcing the show’s persistent popularity and ‘significant audience ratings’ (Mills, *The Sitcom* 12).

Conceived in the early 1990s, the show’s premise of a female vicar having to find acceptance in a new parish ultimately relies on a 1992 vote by the General Synod that authorised the ordination of woman priests in the Church of England. However, this decision and the actual ordination of women priests that followed from 1994 onwards were by no means uncontested, especially among the laity. At the beginning of *The Vicar of Dibley*, Geraldine Granger, a young female priest, has to face precisely such hostility. Newly appointed to

the parish of St Barnabus in the fictional small Oxfordshire village of Dibley, Geraldine arrives in the first episode and encounters surprise, disbelief and even outright hostility from the Chairman of the Parish Council, David Horton.¹ However, this premise soon fades into the background and, the conflict quickly evaporating, everything turns out alright, as the quotation at the top of this chapter illustrates. Geraldine is almost immediately accepted by the community of highly eccentric villagers (only David Horton remains a ready critic for a considerable time) and energetically puts her stamp on the place. Already in its first series, *The Vicar of Dibley* is therefore not really so much about the struggles of a female vicar for acceptance as, in the words of lead actress Dawn French, 'a sitcom about a vicar who landed in a village of mutants, which was by far the funnier and more traditional premise' (French 321).

The Vicar of Dibley was created by Richard Curtis (of *Blackadder* and *Mr Bean* fame), who also co-wrote the show together with Paul Mayhew-Archer (with contributions from Kit Hesketh-Harvey). The title role was conceived for Dawn French, one of Britain's leading female comedians. French had made a name for herself in alternative comedy and had become known to a larger public in the sitcom *Girls on Top* (ITV 1985–1986) and, more importantly, in the successful sketch show *French and Saunders* (BBC2 1987–), which she co-scripted and performed with Jennifer Saunders (who would go on to create her very own sitcom masterpiece with *Absolutely Fabulous* (BBC1 1992–1996, 2001–2004, 2011–2012). In *The Vicar of Dibley*, French is surrounded by a group of experienced theatre actors playing 'mad villagers' (Hamad, 'Vicar'), mostly flat characters with a small number of comic character attributes who serve as classic 'oddballs'. The most memorable among them may be the verger, Alice Tinker (played by Emma Chambers), who is so extremely dim-witted that her future father-in-law once describes her as: 'Less a human being than a genetically modified stick insect with the brain removed' ('The Engagement'). However, in terms of absurdity, Alice has stiff competition from several members of the Parish Council, namely: the extremely boring and pedantic Frank Pickle (John Bluthal); Jim Trott (Trevor Peacock), who tends to preface all his statements by a series of 'No's' before coming to the point and, in addition, has a penchant for sex and exotic women; Owen Newitt (Roger Lloyd-Pack), a coarse farmer with body hygiene issues, an obsession with bowel movements and a propensity to mutilate animals (when he does not interfere with them sexually); and old Letitia Croypley (Liz Smith), a former nymphomaniac and adventurous cook, whose outlandish recipes yield utterly unpalatable results, such as Marmite cake. All these characters are variations of age-old comic types: the stupid person, the sexual deviant, the country bumpkin and the undignified old man or lady. David Horton (Gary Waldhorn), Chairman of the Parish Council and District Councillor for Dibley, is the most powerful and richest man in the village, and, besides Geraldine, the only non-moronic character in the regular cast. He is old-fashioned, prejudiced and initially appears ruthlessly

unfeeling, but becomes a more sympathetic person during the course of the show, in contrast to the other villagers, who, according to writer Mayhew-Archer, instead became more outrageous over the years (Berman 114). Horton's son Hugo (James Fleet), in contrast, is another very stupid man, but with a pure heart. He has tremendous emotional intelligence and lovability. He and Alice become a couple and get married in the second series and eventually have ten children.

This group of core of characters is occasionally augmented by further actors for individual storylines (such as Geraldine's romantic involvements) and by appearances of guest stars in selected episodes, especially several of the Comic Relief Specials (for example, Kylie Minogue, Darcey Bussell, Johnny Depp, the Duchess of York, Sting and his wife Trudie Styler and Sean Bean). Essentially, however, *The Vicar of Dibley* is an ensemble piece in which French has the central part as the good-hearted and sometimes ridiculous Geraldine, but where, despite her comedy star status (Mills, *The Sitcom* 38), the loudest laughs are usually reserved for Geraldine's much more bizarre parishioners. The show showcases French's verbal and physical comic skills the most, yet also revels in the pleasure provided by the other performances (Mills, 'Comedy Verite' 66). The result is a rather strong rapport with the characters (Mills, *The Sitcom* 17), whom audiences obviously liked to re-encounter again and again, even after breaks of several years.

From a post-noughties point of view that has witnessed the development of British sitcoms which eschew the genre's tradition in music hall in favour of formats that instead play with and emphasise the genre's home in TV (for example, *The Office*, *Extras*, *Marion and Geoff* and *The Trip*), *The Vicar of Dibley* strikes one as quite traditional. It is certainly not the sort of 'age-defining' series experimenting with new comedy forms that critics and academics tend to focus on. Mills therefore rightly includes it in his lists of sitcoms that have achieved remarkable audience figures, but have not become a focus of academic interest (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 49; Mills, *The Sitcom* 12), as the latter tends to be reserved for sitcoms 'which it is assumed do something other than that which is "normal" for sitcom, even if that "normal" is never explicitly defined' (Mills, *The Sitcom* 11). *The Vicar of Dibley*, in contrast, sticks firmly to older forms of production and revels in their theatricality. As with most sitcoms, the individual episodes of *The Vicar of Dibley* were performed and recorded with three to four cameras in front of a live audience, whose reactions are included in the final edit as a laugh track. Occasional open-air shots, mostly recorded in the village of Turville in Buckinghamshire, which doubled for Dibley, are used either as establishing shots, to present characters in the rare scenes when they go for a walk or whenever the show uses the geography of the village for picturesque or comic effects. They also establish a reality outside the usual settings of vicarage, church, council hall or the characters' homes. They do not, however, alleviate the impression of stasis created by the settings, camera work and

editing style, which have not changed in the course of the years, and by the recurring situations the characters find themselves in (Parish Council meeting, Geraldine and Alice at the vicarage, Geraldine and Alice in the vestry, social events at David Horton's home, etc.).

Concerning structure, too, the show is traditional, with its single setting (Dibley), recurring characters with conflicting personalities and a single narrative problem in each episode (Mills, 'Comedy Verite' 69), which is developed in a linear and closed form and is usually resolved without any major surprises, so as to leave the spectator with the feeling that everything is alright. In Series One and Two, there are additional larger narrative arcs spanning the entire season that end with Geraldine's acceptance by David Horton (Series One) and the marriage of Alice and Hugo (Series Two). In fact, the show deploys the most traditional of comedy endings – a wedding – twice, when Alice and Geraldine get married at the end of Series Two and the 2006–2007 Christmas Specials respectively.

Yet the show does have its structural idiosyncrasies, as each instalment opens with a visual gag right after the opening credits and closes after the end credits with Geraldine telling Alice a joke, which Alice usually does not understand. This pattern is sometimes broken, usually for emotional rather than comic effect. In 'Love and Marriage', for example, Geraldine tells David the joke, as Alice is away on her honeymoon. In contrast to Alice, he gets the joke at once and uses this common understanding for a heartfelt appeal to Geraldine to reconsider her plans to leave Dibley. However, the most obvious deviation from the pattern occurs in 'Happy New Year', where the joke is placed at the beginning, while the episode ends with the reaction shots of the Dibley villagers to a video of suffering children supporting the Make Poverty History Campaign.

The online resource *British Comedy Guide* singles this episode out for particularly harsh criticism by calling it a 'rape' of an initially charming and light-hearted series ('Vicar'). Others have been more critical of the series as a whole and have attacked it for its alleged 'violent mediocrity' (Ferguson) and blandness (Hamad, 'Vicar'). Yet, in the 2004 TV show *Britain's Best Sitcom* (BBC2), *The Vicar of Dibley* was unexpectedly voted into third place, beating critical favourites such as *Fawlty Towers*, which underlined the show's great popularity. In contrast to the experiments and 'edgy' material that most reviewers and critics seem to favour in sitcoms, *The Vicar of Dibley* is an unashamedly mainstream show and was never conceived as anything other than what Clarke-Jervoise has called 'audience sitcom' (quoted in Mills, *The Sitcom* 63), that is, sitcom made for as broad an audience as possible. This is already visible from the fact that it was broadcast on BBC1, the BBC's site for mainstream programming, rather than BBC2, which would have been the site for less accessible material. Undemanding of its spectators in terms of form and unthreatening in its choice of comic subjects (even occasional allusions to bestiality and sexual promiscuousness appear merely quaint when associated with Geraldine's eccentric but essentially good-natured

parishioners), the show never courted controversy, but presented itself much like its central character: big-hearted Geraldine always manages to create a cosy atmosphere, although she is keenly aware of her own and her neighbours' oddities. Because of this sense of good-heartedness and cosiness, *The Vicar of Dibley* has been characterised as 'gentle' and 'family-friendly' ('The Vicar of Dibley' *British Comedy Guide*; O'Donovan), while others, as I have already pointed out, have found this 'blandness' quite unpalatable.

This impression of, depending on one's point of view, 'gentleness' or 'blandness' is partly due to the show's mostly harmless plot conflicts. More importantly, it also derives from *The Vicar of Dibley*'s rather tenuous relation to reality. Unlike other sitcoms – the examples of *The Royle Family* and *The Office* spring to mind – *The Vicar of Dibley* never feels like a slice of real life. Not only are most of the characters too exaggerated and flat to be recognisable human beings, the social cosmos of the village, too, feels removed. This might appear strange at first glance. After all, the series is based on a concrete, by interpretation even revolutionary event in the history of the Church of England, and, in this sense at least, was topical when it first aired.² As the premise of the woman vicar fighting for acceptance recedes into the background, however, the show slips into a 'timeless now' (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 57). Most villagers seem to be caught in a pre-modern past without television, where handwritten council minutes serve as the record of village life. In the episode 'The Window and the Weather', which was first broadcast in 1994, and even in 'Happy New Year', which aired on New Year's Day 2005, for example, some of the villagers still think that Margaret Thatcher is the Prime Minister. Yet there are numerous references and allusions to contemporary pop culture (for example, *Dr Who*, *Teletubbies*, pop music and TV chefs), to British persons of public interest (for example, Anthea Turner, Jane Asher, Ronnie Barker, Billy Connolly, Michael Barrymore and Kriss Akabusi), and to politicians and members of the Royal Family. Such references regularly evoke the present and a world outside Dibley. Nonetheless, the show's production mode creates an impression of theatricality and therefore, in the context of post-1990s television, an air of stasis and the unreal. Moreover, the village seems remote and insular because practically all story events are concentrated there. As the *British Comedy Guide* points out, this insularity 'adds to the incestuous feel of the place' ('About "The Vicar"') and thus to the flair of outlandishness conveyed by the oddball characters. Moreover, it really robs the show of any potential for a status as social satire. Instead of the acerbic quality associated with satire, the show delivers 'a big, squashish hug, even for people who don't like to cuddle' (Munson).

2 Comic devices and strategies

The politics of humour in *The Vicar of Dibley* are indeed strikingly inclusive. On the level of the fictional world, all the characters in the show, with the

possible exception of Geraldine's love interests, become the butts of laughter – so none of the regular characters is privileged in this respect and it is rare that one character is played off against another. There is a difference, however, between Geraldine, the sane centre of the world of the sitcom, and the villagers as objects of comedy. In contrast to the central characters of other sitcoms like *Fawlty Towers* or *The Office*, Geraldine seems to be at ease in her environment and is presented as fully functional while being surrounded by mostly dysfunctional characters whose lack of self-awareness heightens their comic appeal (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 41–42). Although we are encouraged to laugh both at and with Geraldine, we only ever laugh *at* the oddball characters. This mechanism of exclusion, which is based on comedy of superiority, works as an inclusive measure on the level of the audience. Moreover, since most of the oddball characters are so extremely strange that probably all spectators will be unable or refuse to relate to them, the resulting in-group includes just about all members of the audience.

At the same time, the characters' eccentricities remain ultimately harmless. Frank Pickle's boringness may have driven his parents to suicide, Letitia Cropley's food may taste like poison and Owen Newitt's penchant for mutilating animals is decidedly unhealthy, yet the spectators only ever hear about but never really witness the dire effects of these eccentricities. They remain unreal, so that the villagers still come across as innocents despite them. Hamad therefore rightly characterises the madness of Dibley's villagers as 'innocuous and reassuring' ('Vicar') rather than sinister. Nor do they give offence. With the possible exception of David Horton, they are simply too exaggerated to trigger the sort of recognition which would be the prerequisite for people taking offence, and David and Geraldine are ultimately too good-natured to provoke hostility. Moreover, the guidance of sympathy towards all characters is essentially benevolent. David's initial rejection of the notion of a female vicar as 'some sort of insane joke' ('The Arrival'), for example, is not only never endorsed by the programme; David, despite his egotism, is himself benignly characterised less as misogynist and reactionary than as traditional and conservative. In *The Vicar of Dibley*, the anarchic social function ascribed to comedy by theories of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin) is therefore muted to a degree where it becomes almost unrecognisable. The series as a whole strives towards inclusion and, on the story level, too, the potentially anarchic quality of some of the oddball characters is completely naturalised, since they, rather than sane Geraldine, are the norm within the village.

As it is a comedy series, *The Vicar of Dibley* naturally works with transgressions, but again in a rather mild form. It uses powerful and well-known people for the purpose of comedy – which might be considered an irreverent and potentially subversive practice in itself. However, the comic effect is usually not achieved by attacking or exposing these VIPs, let alone the social institutions they represent, but by the villagers' attitude towards them (for

example, David's secret wish to have sex with Princess Anne or Hugo fancy-ing Norma Major). It is the villagers who are ultimately the butt of the joke. Similar reticence marks the show's use of sexual humour.³ The sexual jokes in *The Vicar of Dibley* are 'rude' (Geraldine's own characterisation of the final joke in the episode 'Spring'), but not to a degree where they would be offensive or make the audience squirm with secondhand embarrassment at the characters' behaviour. They can either laugh with Geraldine about these jokes or be comically surprised at, for example, Letitia Cropley's weakness for bondage. If they do the latter, the source of the comedy is, once again, the oddballs' deviation from an implicit 'norm', here the behaviour expected from female septuagenarians. Yet the comic effect relies on surprise and incongruity rather than a feeling of transgression.

All these strategies ultimately combine into a type of comedy that can best be described as comedy of inclusion, which is founded on and in turn generates various forms of 'normalisation'. On the level of form, the 'normality' of the sitcom is underlined by its production style and its uncontroversial storylines and comical topics. Because of its comedy of superiority towards the oddball characters, it creates inclusion on the level of the audience, and the normalisation of the eccentric on the story level finally translates as a call for tolerance and inclusion in the real world, advocating the acceptance of the unconventional or unfamiliar, such as women priests.

The scene after Letitia Cropley's death, in which the other characters enumerate the fond nicknames bestowed on her by her many former sex partners ('Luscious Letitia', 'Cropley the Cracker', 'Titillating Tish' and, most hilariously, 'Always-lets-you-dock-your-boat-in-her-jetty Letty'; 'The Easter Bunny') is one of relatively few instances of the show that foreground the writers' ingenuity in playing with language. There is a lot of verbal comedy, but it is usually more subdued, as in the quotation at the top of this chapter, where the language is subtly refined by alliteration. The show of course also resorts to other staples of verbal comedy, such as puns and innuendos, and some characters have comic linguistic idiosyncrasies (Jim's constant 'No no no no no's' and Owen's swearing). Generally, however, it is rare for linguistic virtuosity to be exhibited as above; the verbal comedy instead usually unfolds through the way it is linked to characters and situations (see, for example, the discussion of the council in 'Love and Marriage' about the naming of a new road as 'New Road', which would necessitate the renaming of the existing 'New Road' into 'Quite Old Road', of the existing 'Quite Old Road' into 'Really Quite Old Road' and of the existing 'Old Road' into 'Very Old Road'; 'Love and Marriage').

Occasionally the comedy of the show is refined by self-reflexive elements. The episode 'Songs of Praise', for example, refers to the potential effect of alienation created by artificial or manipulated laugh tracks. The more obvious examples, however, are the discussions between Alice and Geraldine, which sometimes ensue from Alice's misunderstanding of Geraldine's jokes.

Taken together, these scenes constitute a little anatomy of comedy and the ingredients of jokes – highlighting first and foremost the shared frame of reference of addresser and addressee that is the key prerequisite for successful comic communication. The show's audience ratings are ample proof that this communication was very successful in the case of *The Vicar of Dibley* and it is fair to assume that its comedy of inclusion contributed to this. The strategies of 'normalisation' on which it is based have moreover also left traces in the treatment of the show's major themes.

3 Central themes: femininity, community and the ambivalence of change

Since *The Vicar of Dibley* is based on the not uncontested notion of female priests, any reading of the show from a cultural studies perspective has to address how it engages with the question of femininity. For this, we have to take into account Geraldine's position and role within the story. Another important factor is the way in which the star status of Dawn French and her performance of Geraldine as a funny character contribute to or interact with the character's position on the story level. The key aspect in this respect is the showcasing or display of French's mastery as a comic actor (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 72, 80; Mills, 'Contemporary Comedy' 143), most notably through physical and emotional excess.

The very fact that the show is centred around a female star playing a female priest and has another woman (Alice) as the most spectacular minor character is extraordinary in itself. Sitcoms revolving around female protagonists are still far less frequent than sitcoms centred around men. Similarly, the show's agenda of 'posit[ing] the idea of female priests as a natural and sensible state of affairs' (French 321) and of thus popularising this idea can also be interpreted as a liberal plea for and acknowledgement of female equality.

In keeping with such an approach, French's Geraldine stands in the tradition of the comic type of the 'unruly woman', who refuses to conform to the social and physical expectations of femininity and questions heteronormative notions of gender politics (Mills, *The Sitcom* 22). Geraldine is an extraordinarily outgoing character, rarely demure or restrained, but witty and fun-loving instead, with a keen sense of humour. She is also full of *joie de vivre*. This extends into her relationships with men. Although not conventionally attractive because of her ample body shape and despite her position as an unmarried vicar, Geraldine is sassy and sexually active, and an aggressive flirt when she encounters handsome men. When she falls into 'cute and girly' (Curtis and Mayhew-Archer 31) behaviour, makes immature pig noises out of embarrassment or pursues overly romantic ideas, she herself is most keenly aware of the absurdities of her own behaviour.

In scenes of great emotional excitement, French plays up Geraldine's emotional excess by physical comedy, such as grimaces and exaggerated physical

inertia or agility. French's large body is the key site of physical comedy in *The Vicar of Dibley* and she deftly uses it 'in a way quite different to the "funny fat lady" traditions established by more patriarchal forms of comedy' (Hamad, 'French'). Occasionally, Geraldine's fatness does appear undignified, for example, when she is first stuck in a chair and later has one collapse under her in 'The Christmas Lunch Incident'. These are exceptions, however, as Geraldine usually comes across as energetic and mobile, most obviously when she dances as Darcey Bussell's comic ballet mirror image in 'Celebrity Vicar'. In difficult situations, for example, after she has been jilted by her lover Simon or when she is overcome by worry about the wisdom of her decision to have a service for animals, her already considerable consumption of chocolate and other sweets becomes even more obsessive, positing her as a figure of excess who refuses to subscribe to expected norms and restraints.

Despite the show's celebratory attitude towards Geraldine's unconventional and unruly sides, however, the character cannot quite escape accusations of female stereotyping. Since the show sought to legitimise and normalise the notion of female priests, it needed to present the central character in a particularly sympathetic light. Yet, as this character was female, her gentleness and care were quickly interpreted as motherly, that is, as 'natural' for women. In her foreword to the autobiography of Joy Carroll, a female priest who inspired the portrayal of Geraldine in *The Vicar of Dibley*, French writes about her reaction to a funeral service held by Carroll: 'I knew that it was so right that women should be ordained. Women are good at this job, it comes naturally to us, providing spiritual guidance and succour' (Carroll xiii). Much like French in this statement, *The Vicar of Dibley* is in danger of basing its emancipatory premise for the acceptance of female priests on – and thus re-inscribing – an essentialist notion of women as mothers and nurturers, although 'French's characterisation of Geraldine as sexy, outspoken and modern was a genuine innovation from earlier comic depictions of the clergy' (Hamad, 'Vicar').⁴

Such ambivalence ultimately also marks the treatment of another key theme in *The Vicar of Dibley*: change. The show's approach to this topic is epitomised by the following scene from the first episode:

Scene: Outside Mrs Cropley's House

Jim, Owen and Mrs Cropley are looking over at the Vicarage. They see Geraldine and Alice leave the house together, making their way over to the church.

OWEN: Well, it can't be right can it, really?

JIM: What's that?

OWEN: Having a woman vicar. I mean, Jesus didn't have any women disciples, did he?

MRS CROPLEY: No, but things have to change, don't they?

JIM: That's right. I mean, look at traffic lights. Well, if they didn't change there'd be terrible congestion, wouldn't there?

OWEN: On the other hand, there's gravity.

JIM: What about it?

OWEN: If gravity changed we'd all go floating up into space.

Mrs Cropley cackles with laughter at this thought.

And no one wants that.

JIM: So, there's good change and bad change?

MRS CROPLEY: That's right. I mean, there's the Changing of the Guard, isn't there?

JIM: Oh, wonderful.

OWEN: And then there's prawn-flavoured crisps.

JIM: Disaster. (Curtis and Mayhew-Archer 13; 'The Arrival')

I have already drawn attention to the impression of stasis created by the production conditions of *The Vicar of Dibley*, which might lead one to suspect that change is not something one would associate with either Dibley or *The Vicar of Dibley*. This would not be quite correct, however, since life in the village obviously does undergo change. The fact that the villagers learn to look beyond Geraldine's sex and embrace her as the best vicar they have ever had is the most obvious example of their ability to overcome established prejudices and ways of thinking. Nevertheless, they are only ready to do so when the change is perceived as good. Change for change's sake or change that feels unnatural ('prawn-flavoured crisps') is 'bad change'. Change that ultimately enhances stability and leads to continuity ('Changing of the Guard') is 'good change'. As the pictures of handsome men on Geraldine's wall symbolically indicate – they show Jesus plus, in succession over the years, Mel Gibson, Sean Bean and Robbie Williams – it is a combination of the traditionally stable and of innovation that, in the logic of *The Vicar of Dibley*, serves as the most successful model for personal and communal life.

Moreover, change in *The Vicar of Dibley* is only good when it strengthens, upholds or at least does not threaten the community. Most of the things that Geraldine introduces in the village (a video club, a reading group, Dibley radio, a crèche) have such a stabilising effect. However, when she goes off on a media ego-trip in 'Celebrity Vicar', she damages not only her own dignity but also that of her neighbours and therefore the community. One of the most striking aspects about the social cosmos in *The Vicar of Dibley* is that this community seems to function well despite the villagers' inability to conform to cultural norms and conventions. Most of them deviate from the implicit norm in terms of social skills and intelligence. There is also only one family – that of Alice and Hugo – that follows the model of a heterosexual couple with children (though ten children are of course again excessive). Nonetheless, life in the village is mostly harmonious. In fact, the characters basically form one big ersatz family with Geraldine as the mother figure. Once again, we encounter the 'normalisation' of the unconventional, which, because of its 'normalised' status, can provide stability – another example of the show validating alternative lifestyles.

The village community as a whole is unpretentious and down-to-earth, and content in and of itself without the need for recognition by others. Owen's refusal to participate in the 'Best Kept Village' competition is symptomatic in this respect: 'Months of efforts and what will we win? Some pointless poncy piece of paper saying "Dibley: Best Kept Village"' ('Dibley Live'). Most importantly, it sticks together when it is under attack. This becomes most obvious in the episode 'Summer', when Dibley is to be flooded for a new water reservoir. Despite being offered money and more comfortable housing elsewhere, the villagers quickly realise that they do not want their community to be broken up. Dibley may be, as Geraldine suggests, 'the inbreeding capital of the world', but it is also 'a real country village' where people, although they 'range from the mildly bizarre to the dangerously odd', are 'happy together' ('Summer'). David, the most pompous of the characters, even recurs to Shakespeare to express his praise: 'This other Eden, demi paradise, this happy breed of men, this little world, this precious stone set in the silver sea. This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this Dibley' ('Summer'). Replacing 'England' by 'Dibley' as the last word of John of Gaunt's famous speech from *Richard II*, David's lines implicitly establish Dibley as representative of England as a whole.

Most of the villagers embody the stereotype of the 'Little Englander' in the sense that they are ignorant and coarse, even though they do not represent the more negative connotations of the term, such as xenophobia or jingoism. Nonetheless, they share a celebratory and slightly solipsistic attitude towards the village (and thus implicitly the national) soil that relies on a quite selective version of Englishness embodied by Dibley. This version of England is, first and foremost, 'rural and green and ... pretty' (French 323) and quaint, and it is exclusively white. It also disregards social conflict by presenting the village community as unproblematically egalitarian, for although society in Dibley is stratified, with David, the millionaire and lord of the manor, at the top of the class hierarchy, the only one who seems to pay any heed to this is David himself. The other characters, in contrast, are much too irreverent to respect him on this ground, and David's son Hugo is too dim to even be aware of class differences. In *The Vicar of Dibley* class is therefore not developed as a topic. It serves instead predominantly as a gesture that helps to portray the fictional world of Dibley as pre-modern by evoking the system of landlords and tenant farmers. The show seems pervaded by a strong nostalgic yearning for 'an asbo-free world where really bad things never happen and kind people co-exist in harmony' (O'Donovan) – an impression reinforced by *The Vicar of Dibley's* double temporality of pre-modernity on the one hand, references to contemporary life on the other hand and 'good change' to mediate between them. However, this air of nostalgia does not manifest itself so much in the sense that the show wants to turn back time, as in the sense that it emphasises the importance of continuity, and in the logic of the show, this continuity is based on

community, altruism and solidarity. In contrast to the much more satirical *Father Ted* and the more realistic *Rev., The Vicar of Dibley* therefore conveys a form of mild social utopianism alongside its ostensible nostalgia. It cleverly combines a conservative thrust (in its form, the emphasis on the importance of community and its scepticism against 'bad change') with a liberal agenda celebrating the acceptance of unconventional ways of life – at least as long as they do not damage the community. Since it presents the combination of nostalgia and utopianism and of stability and change as harmonious and inclusive, *The Vicar of Dibley* is ultimately an exercise in optimism, which has clearly been one reason for its continued broad audience appeal.

Notes

1. The two latest Comic Relief Specials of the show returned to this premise and thus to the (relative) topicality (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 56–57) of the first episode. The special episode in 2013 presented a fictional comic version of the General Synod's rejection to approve the ordination of women bishops in November 2012 ('Women Bishops'). The Comic Relief Special in 2015, in contrast, reacted to the General Synod's approval of ordaining women bishops in 2014 with a sketch in which Geraldine is one of six contestants for the first five posts of female bishops in the Church of England.
2. This must be understood as a relative topicality. See Mills, who draws attention to the fact that, in contrast to most US sitcoms, the production conditions of traditional British sitcoms, whose instalments are usually recorded weeks or even months before they are broadcast, robs them of the chance to react immediately to topical events (*Television Sitcom* 56–57).
3. Again, this is relative. In a US context, the effect of these jokes would be much more risqué than in a British or Western European context, which is the reference frame of the present reading of the show.
4. *The Vicar of Dibley* is part of a long line of British clergy sitcoms ranging from *Bless Me Father* (ITV 1978–1981), *All Gas and Gaiters* (BBC1 1966–1971), *Oh Brother!* (BBC1 1968–1970) and *All in Good Faith* (ITV 1985–1988) to the more recent *Father Ted* (Channel 4 1995–1998) and *Rev.* (BBC2 2010–2014). *The Vicar of Dibley* is remarkable among these for its mild and benevolent depiction of the clergy, especially in comparison with its more surreal contemporary *Father Ted* (see also the contribution by John Hill in Chapter 15 of this volume).

Filmography

The Vicar of Dibley: The Ultimate Collection. Directed by Dewi Humphreys and Gareth Carrivick, written by Richard Curtis and Paul Meyhew-Archer. California: Universal Pictures, 2007. DVD.

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15

Subverting the Sitcom from Within: Form, Ideology and *Father Ted*

John Hill

1 Introduction

The first episode of *Father Ted*, a sitcom dealing with three Catholic priests and their housekeeper living on a fictitious island somewhere off the west coast of Ireland, was initially transmitted by Channel 4 at 9 pm on 21 April 1995. Although the first newspaper reviews were mainly favourable and appreciative of the programme's originality, there was little sense of the acclaim that was to follow. By the time of the launch of the third (and last) series in March 1998, however, the show's reputation, and its place in sitcom history, had already become assured. The *New Statesman* (27 March 1998) acclaimed it as a 'magnificent contribution to the revival of British comedy', while the *Daily Telegraph* (16 March 1998) declared that it had earned 'a place next to *Fawlty Towers* in the topography of comedy'. Ten years later, the veneration for the programme had, if anything, increased and, in 2012, Channel 4 ran a trio of programmes canonising it as the channel's 'greatest comedy show' ever (with one contributor – the actor and writer Jessica Hynes – praising it as 'the perfect, perfect comedy show'). In this respect, *Father Ted* has not only achieved growing popularity since its initial transmission but has also undergone changes in the way in which it has been perceived. By looking at the circumstances of the programme's making, the aesthetic devices and representational strategies that the programme employs, and the various critical reactions that it has generated (in both Britain and Ireland), this chapter will explore the place of the series in relation to the history of British sitcom as well as its emergence as a comedy 'cult'.

According to the show's writers, Graham Linehan and Arthur Mathews, the programme was not, in fact, originally conceived as a sitcom at all. When he was a member of a spoof U2 band, The Joshua Trio, in Dublin, Mathews had played the character of Father Ted as part of a stand-up routine at gigs. Subsequently, he and Linehan incorporated the character into a script for a spoof documentary in which Ted travels around Ireland in search of priests with whom he had attended seminary (Falvey 33). This

was offered to Geoffrey Perkins at Hat Trick, the independent production company responsible for *Drop the Dead Donkey* (Channel 4 1990–1998) and *Have I Got News For You* (BBC2/BBC1 1990–), who encouraged the writers to turn the idea into a sitcom which was then commissioned for Channel 4 by Seamus Cassidy, the channel's Commissioning Editor for Entertainment. Channel 4 was, of course, the UK's fourth television channel, established in 1982, with a remit to appeal to tastes and interests not generally catered for by existing television services and to 'encourage innovation and experiment in the form and content of programmes' (Broadcasting Act 1981 14). Although the channel had sought to extend the boundaries of television comedy through its links with 'alternative comedy' in programmes such as *The Comic Strip Presents...* (1982–2011) and *Saturday Live* (1985–1987), it was less sure-footed in the area of domestic sitcom, where its main success was the production of a run of comedies – *No Problem!* (1983–1985), *Tandoori Nights* (1985–1987) and *Desmond's* (1989–1994) – involving predominantly black and Asian characters. The first Chief Executive of Channel 4, Jeremy Isaacs, took the view that sitcom constituted 'the most conventional form in British television' and, as such, he believed that it was difficult for the channel 'to bring in new work' (quoted in Neale and Krutnik 236). However, during the 1990s, the channel did begin to commission new series – such as the absurdist *Nightingales* (1990–1993) and the playfully postmodern *Sean's Show* (1992–1993) – which began to chip away at the traditional conventions of the genre and, to some extent, prepare the way for the formal playfulness that characterised *Father Ted*.

2 *Father Ted* as 'classic' sitcom

However, while it is common to discuss *Father Ted* in terms of its abandonment of realism, absurdism and cultivation of a general aura of silliness, it is also a show with firm roots in traditional sitcom form. As has often been argued, the conventionality (and presumed 'conservatism') of 'classic' situation comedy derives from its adoption of an episodic structure that maintains the integrity of the 'situation' at the expense of narrative progression. The consequence of this is that narrative complications do not carry over from one episode to another and are typically resolved by the end of each programme. By the same token, sitcom characters typically do not appear to remember events in which they have previously been involved and thus lack the capacity to learn from them (a characteristic that informs the concluding joke of 'The Old Grey Whistle Theft', in which Dougal testifies to having learnt nothing from his experiences). These features – a repetitiveness of narrative structure and lack of character development – also underpin a recurring 'problematic', or structuring disposition, of situation comedy whereby sitcom characters are repeatedly foiled in their efforts to escape from, or triumph over, the 'situations' in which they find themselves

(Bowes 129). This too may be observed in *Father Ted*. Apart from two episodes in Series Three that involve a degree of plot continuity, all the episodes are narratively self-contained and return characters to the position from which they began. In doing so, the programme also mobilises the idea of 'imprisonment' insofar as all of the main characters remain trapped within the – geographical and domestic – circumstances in which they are located.

This is particularly true of the main character, Father Ted. Like the dim-witted Father Dougal and the alcoholic Father Jack, he has been exiled to Craggy Island by Bishop Brennan as a punishment for earlier misdemeanours. In Ted's case this has to do with a trip he made to Las Vegas using money that was intended to pay for a 'poor child' to go to Lourdes ('The Passion of Saint Tibulus'). It is, of course, a recurring joke within the series that Ted evidently lacks the spiritual calling expected of a priest and repeatedly yearns for worldly pleasures. Thus, when Father Jack is mistakenly assumed to have died and Ted and Dougal believe they have been left his money ('Grant Unto Him Eternal Rest'), the two men discuss what they will do with this unexpected windfall. Ted mouths pieties about his plans to donate his share of the money to various charities ('Concern, St Vincent de Paul, Food for Africa, Help the Aged') before a cut to a series of short fantasy shots show him dressed in a white jacket and dark glasses, dancing with a group of attractive young women and celebrating his winnings at roulette. Throughout the series, Ted yearns for the fame, fortune or sensual pleasures missing from his domestic and work situations by striving to appear on television ('Good Luck, Father Ted'), competing in the Eurovision Song Contest ('A Song for Europe') or even contemplating an affair with the author of racy novels ('And God Created Woman'). In what might possibly be a fantasy sequence in the first episode of Series Three, 'Are You Right There, Father Ted?', he even appears to have managed to escape to a Dublin parish, where he enjoys a civilised life of drinking port, eating pheasant and attending the races. However, this proves to be only a temporary interlude once an investigation into his claims for 'expenses' precipitates a return to Craggy Island.

In accordance with the traditional conventions of situation comedy, therefore, Ted is destined to remain the prisoner of his particular 'situation'. This is finally made quite explicit in the programme's concluding episode, 'Going to America', when it seems as though Ted might, at last, succeed in getting away. Having successfully dragged a depressed priest off a window ledge at the 'It's Great Being a Priest' convention, Ted is offered what appears to be a dream job in Los Angeles by the go-getting American priest, Father Buzz Cagney. Ted, however, is unable to tell the others in the house that he plans to go alone and eventually resorts to subterfuge in order to get away from them at the airport. However, on learning from Buzz that, rather than the life of ease beside the swimming pool that he had anticipated, he will, in fact, be dealing with murderous LA gangs, he opts to get off the plane and rejoin Dougal, Jack and Mrs Doyle, who, it transpires, had no particular

enthusiasm for going in the first place. As they prepare to return home, Dougal compounds Ted's misery by cheerfully announcing that 'you're here to stay – with me and Mrs Doyle and Father Jack forever and ever and ever and ever ...'.

As this suggests, *Father Ted* is also relatively traditional in the way in which it is organised around the activities of a quasi-familial group. As has often been noted, the sitcom has tended to revolve around a family situation and, even when the setting is the workplace, the group has commonly assumed familial features. The three priests in *Father Ted* are, strictly speaking, co-workers, but the primary setting is the home (the interiors of the Parochial House on Craggy Island) and the series largely avoids showing the priests at work. In this respect, it is tempting to read the domestic situation of *Father Ted* in familial terms in which Ted occupies the place of the put-upon father, Mrs Doyle the downtrodden wife, Dougal the naïve (if not downright idiotic) child, and Jack the difficult and curmudgeonly grandparent. Indeed, although he denied a direct influence, Linehan suggested how the relationships of the priests parallel those of the Trotter family – Grandad, Del and Rodney – featured in the hugely successful mainstream situation comedy *Only Fools and Horses* (BBC1 1981–2003) (*Time Out*, 28 February–6 March 1996). In this respect, Ted's continuing failure to escape the island is not simply related to his futile quest for a more materially comfortable lifestyle, but to the strength of the bonds that tie him to his surrogate family. Thus, just as Harold Steptoe, in the great 1960s sitcom *Steptoe and Son* (BBC1 1962–1974), remains unable to leave his father despite his desires to better himself so, in *Father Ted*, Ted is eternally stuck with his surrogate family of misfits, Dougal, Jack and Mrs Doyle.¹

The other respect in which *Father Ted* might be said to be relatively traditional is its commitment to multi-camera studio recording. Although the programme contained a significant proportion of material shot on location around County Clare in the west of Ireland, the bulk of the interiors were shot in a London studio in front of a live audience (which provided the laughter track used in the edited version). For Linehan, the conditions of studio shooting not only reinforced a sense of the communal character of comedy but also helped to make the material funnier.² This means that *Father Ted* belongs primarily to a tradition of 'comedian comedy' rather than 'character comedy', in which performance and physicality take precedence over well-drawn characterisation. As various writers have indicated, situation comedy has often provided a vehicle for comedians rather than conventional actors. *Father Ted* became famous not only for its casting of comedians in the main roles but also its recruitment of a whole host of Irish comedians (from Graham Norton to Tommy Tiernan) for the smaller parts (particularly the wide range of eccentric priests who continually crop up in the series). Dermot Morgan, who plays Father Ted, was a well-known comedian in Ireland whose comic creation, Father Trendy, originally performed

on RTÉ's *The Live Mike* (RTÉ 1979–1982), had suggested to Linehan and Mathews that he might be suitable for the role. Ardal O'Hanlon, who plays Father Dougal, was an up-and-coming stand-up, while Frank Kelly, who plays Father Jack, was a well-established comic actor whose performances in the long-running comedy sketch show *Hall's Pictorial Weekly* (RTÉ 1971–1980) partly led to his recruitment.

As these comedians were not well-known in Britain at the time, *Father Ted* does not so much rely upon their pre-existing 'personae' (and associations with 'funniness') as take advantage of their skills as comic performers capable of engaging in various kinds of – verbal and physical – comic business that grow out of (but inevitably go beyond) the strict necessities of the plot. Indeed, with the possible exception of Father Ted himself, the programme is almost entirely oblivious to the exploration of character psychology. This means that much of the humour of the programme derives from the absurdity of the verbal exchanges in which the characters engage (particularly those involving the childlike Dougal, whose grasp on reality seems especially tenuous) or moments of physical 'slapstick' (such as the repeated jumping through windows or falling over). Father Jack, in particular, constitutes a singularly one-dimensional creation whose grotesque physical appearance, limited vocabulary ('feck', 'drink', 'girls', 'arse') and proclivity for mindless acts of violence mean that his contribution to the proceedings consists almost entirely of acts of 'low' physical comedy.³

3 *Father Ted* as 'alternative' sitcom

However, as the very 'excessiveness' (and lack of surface verisimilitude) of Frank Kelly's performance indicates, *Father Ted* may be grounded in the traditions of British situation comedy, but it also explodes these conventions from within. So, while the series may draw upon the conventions of the 'great tradition' of 'classic' British sitcoms, such as *Steptoe and Son*, *Porridge* (BBC1 1974–1977) and *Only Fools and Horses*, it is also indebted to an 'alternative' counter-tradition of modernist and postmodernist comedy characterised by dramatic improbability and excess, surrealist incongruity, intertextual referencing and pastiche. While this is a line of comedy that may be traced back to the 'surrealist' humour of the radio programme *The Goon Show* (BBC Home Service 1951–1960), the series appears to owe a particular debt to the 'absurdism', and general silliness, to be found in the work of Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer, such as their spoof 'variety show' *Vic Reeves Big Night Out* (Channel 4 1990–1991). It also seems to be influenced by the anarchic (and often violent) alternative comedy of *The Young Ones* (BBC2 1982–1984). Although *Father Ted* is, of course, much more genial and less openly confrontational than *The Young Ones*, it nonetheless shares the earlier programme's enthusiasm for pushing back the boundaries of the traditional sitcom through the creation of a fictional world in which normal

laws of temporality and probability are suspended, plots follow their own crazed logic, and extensive allusions are made to other forms of fiction and popular culture (including, *inter alia*, references to *The Young Ones* itself).

How these elements are welded together may be seen in the fourth episode of the second series, 'The Old Grey Whistle Theft'. The title is, of course, an allusion to the BBC music programme *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, which, despite the liking of the series overall for popular music references, is not directly referred to within the episode itself. It does, however, debunk the pretentiousness of the title of the original programme by using it to signal the plot's interest in an actual theft of a whistle. Much of the humour of the episode then derives from the exaggerated reaction of the villagers to this apparently insignificant event: Hodgins, the local policeman, obtains a helicopter to scour the island for the culprit, the local newspaper runs the story of the theft on its front page (as well as providing a special pull-out on whistles), the local shopkeeper arms himself against potential intruders, while an elderly female resident warns Ted that the island will soon resemble *Boyz N the Hood* ('drive-by shootings ... the hoors selling their wares on the street and the pimps ... using crack to keep the hoors under control'). What really distinguishes the episode, however, is the way in which the theft itself is set up. The episode begins with Ted preparing for a picnic and engaging in an exaggerated exchange with Mrs Doyle regarding his dislike of egg sandwiches (which is, inevitably, *all* that she has prepared). When it transpires that Dougal will not be going after all (having formed a friendship with a visiting priest), Ted calls up Father Larry Duff, whom he is also expecting to come along. By this time, the phone call to Larry Duff has become one of the programme's running jokes and invariably ends in mishap (if not Larry's apparent death). In this case, Larry is revealed to have been stopped at an army roadblock as a result of the discovery of machine guns at the home of one his fellow priests (who is then shot by a soldier when he attempts to make a run for it).

When Ted and Father Jack eventually get to the 'picnic area' (in actuality the Burren region of County Clare), this turns out to be wind-swept, rocky and entirely inhospitable. Nevertheless, when Ted settles down to read the spoof book *The Life of Mel Gibson*, he is confronted by an abusive middle-aged couple, dressed in garish multi-coloured anoraks, woolly hats and white trainers, who claim that he is in their spot (even though the area is otherwise deserted). This leads to the intervention of another character, Benson, who emerges from a small yellow 'beach hut' further along the barren landscape blowing the whistle that is later stolen. He then shouts at Ted through a megaphone and, in a bizarre simulation of how an American cop might set about disarming a violent suspect, makes his way slowly towards Ted, first requiring him to drop a plastic fork and then pulling out a cigarette (rather than a gun) from his jacket as a means of defusing the situation. As with other episodes, these particular characters and this particular setting

do not reappear later in the series. There is also no explanation of the circumstances in which such a desolate landscape, policed by an apparently full-time 'guard', might have assumed the status of a picnic area; rather, the viewer is simply invited to accept that this strange landscape and these unorthodox characters constitute a 'normal' part of the programme's fictional world. However, it is also a fictional world overlaid with references and allusions to other fictions – from the existential bleakness of Samuel Beckett to the contemporary US cop show – that remind the viewer of the series' own status as fiction in which the normal rules of physical and psychological verisimilitude do not prevail.

However, it is also worth noting that, although each episode is characterised by the introduction of unexpected characters and improbable narrative twists, the programme also maintains a concern for careful plotting. Linehan and Mathews have regularly expressed their admiration for the well-crafted plots of *Fawlty Towers* (BBC2 1975–1979) and have often sought to emulate the sense of escalating misunderstanding and crisis to be found in that series (as in 'The Plague', when Ted is driven to increasingly desperate measures to prevent Bishop Brennan from discovering that the house has, inexplicably, been overrun by rabbits). In 'The Old Grey Whistle Theft', the solution to the crime resides in the episode's secondary plotline – Dougal's new friend, the disrespectful young priest Damo, is revealed to be the culprit – but the final scenes, when Benson and Hodgins arrive at the house in search of the whistle, also 'cash in' apparently incidental gags, such as Ted's indiscreet remarks to Dougal at the start of the episode about what he had been told at confession which, it now transpires, refer to Hodgins. Indeed, this desire to tie up apparently disparate narrative elements becomes the subject of a full-blown and self-reflexive joke in a later episode, 'Escape from Victory', in which Father Niall shows an incredulous Ted the apparently useless items that he has bought from a catalogue. 'What kind of a situation could possibly require either a radio-controlled wheelchair or a pair of fake arms?', Father Ted asks in disbelief. 'Only, I would imagine, a completely ludicrous one.' It is, of course, the accomplishment of this episode – dealing with the 'All-Priests Five-A-Side Over Seventy-Fives Indoor Football Challenge Match against Rugged Island' – that it provides the narrative pretext not only for these items to be brought into use but also to become pivotal to the way in which the plot unravels! As Feuer indicates, 'the situation' in situation comedy typically provides 'a simple and repeatable frame on which to hang all manner of gags, one-liners, warm moments, physical comedy and ideological conflicts' (Feuer 83). In this respect, all situation comedy involves a degree of oscillation between narrative order and the potentially 'destabilising' acts of comic performance and narrative excess. In the case of *Father Ted*, these intrusions and interruptions may acquire an increasingly 'surreal', and improbable, dimension, but they nonetheless remain firmly anchored to the dramatic architecture provided by the sitcom form.

4 *Father Ted* and 'Irishness'

However, given the show's playfulness and postmodern knowingness, it is also difficult to be entirely sure of how to read the show's handling of 'ideological conflicts'. This is particularly so of the programme's treatment of Catholicism and of 'Irishness' more generally. In this respect, it is worth reflecting upon the issue of the programme's own 'national identity'. As previously noted, the programme was made by a British production company and commissioned by a British television station, Channel 4, which also provided the series with its first airing. However, the writers of the series – Graham Linehan and Arthur Mathews – are both Irish, as is the director of the first two series, Declan Lowney. The programme is set almost completely in Ireland, while the majority of the characters, and the actors who play them, are Irish as well. The programme's theme tune (and musical interludes such as the famous Eurovision entry 'My Lovely Horse') were also written by the Irishman Neil Hannon (aka The Divine Comedy). Thus, while the current discussion of *Father Ted* appears in a book entitled *British TV Comedy*, it has also been common to refer to the programme as an example of 'Irish television comedy' (for example, Dixon and Falvey; Pettitt). In many respects, this simply reflects the transnational character of film and television production whereby Irish projects have often come to depend upon financing from a variety of international sources. However, it has also been a recurring concern of cultural criticism to ask how the (national) source of production financing may influence the kinds of representations of 'Irishness' that result. Linehan and Mathews themselves have argued that the programme was neither 'specifically Irish' nor aimed solely at 'a British audience'. As Mathews explains, their background was 'British TV, American movies, rock music' and the programme was therefore aimed at a (youngish) audience (in Britain, Ireland and elsewhere) with tastes similar to themselves (Falvey 33). From this perspective, it may be seen how the writers were keen to avoid identifying contemporary Ireland as 'a place apart', but rather as a country immersed in the transactional dynamics of international (popular) cultural exchange. This then accounts for much of the series' intertextual referencing – the allusions to other (mainly British) sitcoms, the spoofs of Hollywood movies (as in 'Speed 3') and the predilection for musical quotation (which, for example, becomes central to the plot of 'Going to America', in which the spirits of a depressed priest are temporarily lifted by Isaac Hayes' 'Theme from Shaft' before he once again becomes suicidal on hearing Radiohead's 'Exit Music').

However, if the programme is concerned to look outwards in this way, it also does so from a position that is rooted in some of the most traditional of representations of Ireland. As has often been noted, the representation of Ireland in terms of both rural simplicity (exemplified in particular by the western seaboard) and religious piety (in the form of Catholicism) has been

fundamental to both colonial stereotypes of Ireland (whereby Ireland came to be discursively constructed as 'primitive', 'backward' and 'other') as well as for Irish cultural nationalism (for which rural life and Catholicism underpin an ideology of national self-sufficiency and asceticism) (Hill; McLoone, *Irish Film*). Thus, despite the avowed internationalism of its references, the programme may be seen to rely upon a reservoir of traditional imagery of Ireland (as rural and Catholic) that position its representational manoeuvres somewhat ambiguously between the reproduction and subversion of ethnic and national stereotypes.

This is reflected in the opposing critical responses that the programme initially generated. For, while the first newspaper reviews were largely positive, other reactions to the programme in Britain were hostile due to what was perceived to be a derogatory attitude towards both Catholics and the Irish. Since the onset of 'the troubles' in Northern Ireland in 1969, there had been continuing expressions of concern amongst the Irish in Britain about how media portrayals of the Irish might encourage anti-Irish prejudice (Curtis). Thus, just over a year prior to the transmission of the first series of *Father Ted*, Channel's 4 *Right to Reply* (12 February 1994) had run a short piece on 'the stereotyping of Irish people' that was critical of the 'negative and unflattering' portraits of Irish characters to be found in a number of soap operas (*Coronation Street*, *Eastenders*, *Brookside* and *Casualty*). It was therefore not entirely surprising that a female viewer subsequently appeared on the same programme (29 April 1995) to complain that the first episode of *Father Ted* had succeeded in portraying the Irish as 'ridiculous, stupid and idiotic'.⁴ The British-based newspaper the *Irish Post* followed suit in publishing a number of criticisms of the programme that objected to its 'post-imperial ... paddy-whackery', 'disgusting and degrading' representations of Irish people and its 'offensively disrespectful' attitude towards the 'clergy and Roman Catholics in general' (quoted in Free 222; Pettitt 196).

Within Ireland itself, the responses to the programme were somewhat muted given that the programme was not being shown by the Irish national broadcaster RTÉ and therefore could only be viewed by those with cable TV (mainly in urban areas). Although many TV reviewers were well-disposed towards it, there was nonetheless a feeling that, given the programme's content, RTÉ was 'unlikely' to 'screen it' (*Irish Times*, 27 May 1995) if it had not, in fact, already turned the programme down. While this was later revealed not to have been the case, RTÉ was nonetheless slow to purchase the programme and only began to broadcast it in late 1996 (by which time the first two series had already been aired on Channel 4). Although the eventual showing of the programme across the whole of Ireland proved in the end to be relatively uncontroversial, there was nevertheless some evidence of hostility to its transmission. There was criticism from the Catholic Church that priests were being made to 'look like idiots' (*Daily Mirror*, Irish edition, 24 September 1997), while letters to the *Irish Times* objected to the

programme's 'Paddy-whackery' which, in one case, was alleged to bear comparison to the ape-like cartoons produced by the English magazine *Punch* in the nineteenth century (*Irish Times*, 20 November 1996). However, satisfaction was also expressed by at least one correspondent that, following the transmission of the first episode, 'life as we know it' had not 'deteriorated' and there was, as yet, no evidence of 'divine retribution' (*Irish Times*, 9 October 1996)!

As these mixed responses might suggest, there was clearly a recognition that the programme's representation of priests was problematic for a country in which a sense of national identity had historically been so entwined with Catholicism (and in which the Catholic Church had successfully sought to censor cultural matter that was contrary to Catholic belief). However, there was also a strong sense that *Father Ted* reflected a 'new Ireland' in which the old shibboleths no longer held sway and in which it was possible to treat religion with a newfound irreverence. Indeed, it is precisely the waning power of the Catholic Church to impose its views that is made fun of in 'The Passion of Saint Tibulus', in which Fathers Ted and Dougal make unconvincing, and ultimately self-defeating, efforts to ban the screening of an apparently objectionable film (that appears to bear more than a passing resemblance to Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane* (1976)). It is hardly unexpected, therefore, that the programme should depart from the territory previously occupied by earlier clerical comedies such as ITV's *Bless Me Father* (1978–1981) and RTÉ's *Leave It to Mrs O'Brien* (1984–1986), both of which deal with the relations between two Catholic priests and a housekeeper, or the BBC's *Oh Brother!* (BBC1 1968–1970), set in a Catholic monastery. Given the way in which *Oh Brother!* generates much of its humour from revelations of the monks' more worldly enthusiasms (such as smoking cigars and gambling), *Father Ted* might, in fact, be said to draw upon a broadly similar strain of comic material. In *Father Ted*, however, not only has the spread of activities in which the priests are engaged become that much more extraordinary (competing in the 'All Priests Stars in Their Eyes Lookalike Competition', betting on the 'King of the Sheep' competition), but the priests themselves are now almost completely devoid of spiritual leanings and religious impulses. Indeed, some of the funniest moments in the series derive from Dougal's wide-eyed expressions of disbelief regarding the teachings of the Church ('Heaven and Hell and everlasting life and that type of stuff. You're not meant to take it seriously'), which lead him, inadvertently, to convince a visiting bishop to abandon his faith (in 'Tentacles of Doom').

To this extent, the programme may be seen to conform to an emerging pattern of secularisation within Ireland and growing disenchantment with the Catholic Church in the wake of various sexual scandals. This includes poking fun (in 'The Passion of Saint Tibulus') at the case of Bishop Eamonn Casey, who was revealed in 1992 to have fathered a child by an American divorcee, as well as alluding (in 'Rock a Hula Ted') to the mounting evidence

of paedophilia within the Catholic Church that followed the conviction of Father Brendan Smyth, in a Belfast court in 1994, on 43 charges of sexually assaulting children. In the face of evidence such as this, it might be argued that *Father Ted*, far from being offensive, was, in fact, much less critical than it was entitled to be.⁵ However, for the Belfast comedian and writer Tim McGarry, it was precisely the programme's geniality that made it so effective (as well as so popular). As he explained:

Club comedians had been lambasting the hierarchy for years, and anti-clericalism was old hat even before Bishop Casey made everyone into an amateur comedian. But *Father Ted* was all the more devastating for its gentleness, its lack of rancour or bitterness. It was, instead, an affectionate lampooning of a clergy which, it was assumed, the audience had lost all respect for. (McGarry 10)

Indeed, it might be suggested that not only was *Father Ted* the product of the emerging 'new Ireland' of the 1990s, but that the character of Father Ted himself, in part, emblematised its social dynamics. In his account of Ireland's increasing globalisation, for example, Tom Inglis notes how the country's entry into 'the global flow of culture' encouraged a shift from 'a Catholic culture based on practices of chastity, humility, piety and self-denial to a liberal-individualist consumer culture of self-indulgence' (Inglis 3). This description might, of course, apply to Ted himself, for while he may be a Catholic priest, he has lost all commitment to the Church's ethos of 'self-denial' and is clearly keen to enjoy whatever opportunities for 'self-indulgence' may come his way (for all that his pursuit of them may end up frustrated).

In this respect, the criticisms directed at *Father Ted* may be understood to reflect the concerns of those in Britain anxious about anti-Irish prejudice or those in both Britain and Ireland worried about accelerating secularisation (and the loss of the certainties that were a feature of 'old Ireland'). However, while such criticisms could come across as very literal-minded and oblivious to the intertextual 'knowingness' of the programme itself, it is also worth noting how the 'subversiveness' of the programme extended only so far. While 'post-Catholic' in impulse, it nonetheless remained within the Catholic 'habitus' that it otherwise sought to unpick. While 'post-national' in its imaginings, it also remained constrained by the narrow range of stereotypes of 'Irishness' that it was otherwise mocking (through the devices of exaggeration and excess). This particularly seems to be so in relation to gender. Although some episodes, such as 'Rock a Hula Ted' in which a character loosely based on Sinéad O'Connor comes to Craggy Island, seek to highlight the sexism of the priests and their shameless exploitation of Mrs Doyle, the series as a whole struggles to overcome the overall 'masculinism' of the fictional universe (and version of 'Irishness') which the show

constructs (and depends upon for its humour).⁶ And while it clearly does not constitute ‘paddy-whackery’ of a traditional kind, there is also a sense in which the postmodern playfulness of the programme contributes to an updated, globalised and increasingly commodified version of ‘Irishness’ that depends upon associations of the Irish with notions of fun, conviviality and ‘the craic’.

5 *Father Ted* as ‘cult’ TV

This may partly be seen in the way in which *Father Ted* has emerged as a cult TV programme *par excellence*. Although *Father Ted* was popular in both Britain and Ireland, it was, as has been indicated, transmitted by the minority channel Channel 4. Although the programme was the channel’s most successful entertainment series in 1998 (when the third series was broadcast), the viewing figures were still less than those for many of the situation comedies transmitted by the mainstream channels. They were, for example, much lower than those for the BBC1 sitcom *My Hero* (2000–2006) in which Ardal O’Hanlon (the former *Father Dougal*) starred as a dim-witted superhero called Thermoman. However, while *My Hero* may have attracted more viewers at the time it was broadcast than *Father Ted*, it is now only vaguely remembered (if at all) and has enjoyed little by way of an afterlife. In contrast, *Father Ted* has continued to benefit from an active following long after its initial transmission. Its emergence as ‘cult’ viewing was partly assisted by the untimely death (from a heart attack) of its lead actor, Dermot Morgan, just after the completion of the shooting of the third series. Although the writers had been contemplating finishing the show at this point anyway, Morgan’s death nonetheless ensured that the programme came to an end before it entered a period of decline (and insulated it against demands for a further series). The bizarre quality of the show itself also meant that there were more than enough quotable lines, unusual characters and improbable situations to which fans could lay claim and make the basis of an enduring fascination.

This was, of course, facilitated by the continuing accessibility of the series. Following its television transmission, the programme enjoyed considerable success on both video and DVD. It then became something of a staple on the new digital channels (with episodes of the programme still showing every week on More 4 in early 2013) as well as becoming available to view on other platforms courtesy of Channel 4’s video on demand service, 4oD, and YouTube. There also continue to be *Father Ted* fansites (such as *Everything Father Ted*) catering to the large number of devoted ‘Tedheads’, while the annual *Tedfest*, hosted by Inis Mór (the smallest of the Aran Islands), has been running successfully since 2007. The latter event is not, however, a traditional fan convention, but involves fans dressing up as characters from the series and re-enacting favourite scenes (such as the five-a-side football

match or the 'lovely girls' competition). As one regular explains: 'It's like taking part in a live episode of *Father Ted* ... The minute you get off the boat and put your foot on the ground, you turn into a lunatic' (*Irish Times*, 2 March 2013).

6 Conclusion

However, the fact that *Father Ted* continues to maintain a strong presence within the cultural landscape also means that its continued success and appeal to new generations of fans and viewers have, to some extent, become its main legacy. Although one of the show's writers, Graham Linehan, has been responsible for successful sitcoms such as *Black Books* (Channel 4 2000–2004), for which he co-wrote the first series, and *The IT Crowd* (Channel 4 2006–2010), which he both wrote and directed, neither of these has achieved anything like the same cultural resonance as *Father Ted*. However, what has also been significant about these shows is how they have sought to sustain the tradition of studio-based comedy that Linehan has historically championed. This has been in the face of what might be regarded as the dominant trend within 'quality' British situation comedy – evident, for example, in series such as *The Office* (BBC2/BBC1 2001–2003) and *Extras* (BBC2/BBC1 2005–2007) (which explicitly pokes fun at the studio sitcom) – towards the substitution of studio style, 'repeatable narratives' and overt performativity with location shooting, serial narration and more 'mimetic' forms of acting (see, for example, Mills 63–78). While this tendency has been commonly understood in terms of a narrative of 'progress', what, of course, *Father Ted* and some of its successors indicate is how the traditional conventions of sitcom are not yet necessarily 'exhausted', but still retain the capacity to be renewed through an innovative mixture of the 'old' and the 'new'.

Notes

1. Marcus Free argues that both Harold Steptoe and Father Ted are 'child-men' who have 'never completed the Oedipal process' (221), a feature which, he suggests, assumes a particular significance in relation to the post-colonial Irish context (and thus the formation of Irish masculine identity). Although the narrative structure of sitcom reinforces this failed 'Oedipal' process, it is, perhaps, significant that the series' only two-parter ('Escape from Victory' and 'Kicking Bishop Brennan Up the Arse') does involve the temporary triumph of Ted over the would-be 'father-figure', Bishop Brennan.
2. See his comments on studio recording in the documentary *Small, Far Away: The World of Father Ted* (Channel 4, 1 January 2011). The title of the documentary comes from a famous joke that occurs in the first episode of the second series ('Hell') when Ted tries to explain to Dougal the difference between toy cows ('small') and real ones in a field ('far away').
3. Margaret Llewellyn-Jones (132) links the representation of Father Jack and Mrs Doyle to a specifically Irish tradition of grotesque humour identified by Vivian

Mercier. This is not, however, the predominating impulse of the show, which also displays elements of Mercier's other categories of Irish comedy: 'fantasy', 'wit and word play' and 'satire'. This suggests that the programme is probably best understood in terms of a hybridisation of different comic traditions rather than an allegiance to only one.

4. An extract from the programme, also featuring Graham Linehan, may be seen in the TV documentary *Small, Far Away*.
5. For a discussion of the mounting criticism of Catholicism in Irish film and television, see McLoone, *Film* 111–26; Rockett 125–142.
6. In fact, 'Rock a Hula Ted' actually ends up by undermining the feminist pretensions of the visiting singer by showing her failing to forge bonds with other women and rebuking Mrs Doyle for eating meat. In *Small, Far Away*, Linehan responds to a criticism that there's 'not much' in the programme 'for women' by claiming that he and Mathews created 'one of the best female characters in comedy' without apparently recognising how, for all the programme's playfulness, the representation of Mrs Doyle remains confined to a grotesque exaggeration of traditional femininity (Llewellyn-Jones).

Filmography

Father Ted: The Complete 1st Series. Series 2 Part 1–Series 2 Part 2. The Complete 3rd Series. Directed by Declan Lowney, Graham Linehan and Andy De Emmony, written by Graham Linehan and Arthur Mathews. VCI, Hat Trick, Channel 4, 2002. DVD.

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16

‘The Lady of the House Speaking’: The Conservative Portrayal of English Class Stereotypes in *Keeping Up Appearances*

Marion Gymnich

1 Introduction

The situation comedy *Keeping Up Appearances*, which was originally broadcast from 1990 to 1995 on BBC1, was written by Roy Clarke and directed by Harold Snoad. It consists of 44 episodes, including four Christmas Specials.¹ For a British sitcom this is a comparatively large number of episodes, which already suggests that the series was quite successful. In terms of its themes as well as with respect to the way in which comic effects are achieved, *Keeping Up Appearances* is certainly a far cry from British alternative comedy, which emerged in the late 1970s and had a significant impact on the British comedy in the 1980s. Instead of the ‘blatantly aggressive attack on the *decorum* of the traditional sit-com’ that is characteristic of British alternative comedy and the latter’s ‘tendency towards anal jokes and sexual prurience’ (Neale and Krutnik 245), *Keeping Up Appearances* features a type of entertainment that could definitely be called ‘family friendly’. There are hardly any rude jokes or graphic allusions to the characters’ sex lives. In this sitcom comic effects are primarily produced by exaggerating and making fun of class stereotypes. *Keeping Up Appearances* revolves around the everyday life of its matronly protagonist Hyacinth Bucket, who is responsible for most of the show’s catchphrases, running gags and physical comedy, and whose central goal in life – maintaining or even improving her social status – is already alluded to in the title of the sitcom.

2 Structural features

In terms of its narrative structure and visual style, *Keeping Up Appearances* is primarily indebted to traditional patterns of the sitcom. In contrast to some recent sitcoms, it makes use of the device of the so-called laugh-track and thus can be regarded as quite conventional in terms of its soundtrack as well. The individual episodes are roughly 30 minutes long, with the exception of

the Christmas Specials, which vary in length, but were often significantly longer. Unlike some other British sitcoms produced since the 1990s, including *The Office* (BBC2/BBC1 2001–2003) and *Extras* (BBC2/BBC1 2005–2007), *Keeping Up Appearances* neither offers ‘an unconventional shooting style and narrative structure’, nor is it ‘highly intertextual’ (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 21). Moreover, *Keeping Up Appearances* is episodic, avoiding ongoing storylines that connect two or more episodes. Occasionally there are references to something that happened in an earlier episode. A holiday cruise on the *Queen Elizabeth II*, which is the topic of the Christmas Special ‘Sea Fever’ (1993), is mentioned several times, for instance. Yet viewers who are not familiar with this particular Christmas Special will face no difficulties whatsoever understanding the episodes featuring references to the cruise. While seriality is not drawn upon for presenting ongoing storylines, it is crucial for creating comic effects. In accordance with the general tendency of the sitcom to be character-driven rather than plot-driven,² *Keeping Up Appearances* relies very much on the repetition of and – more or less subtle – variation on situations that derive from the characters’ attitudes, habits and eccentricities. After a while, the viewers know very well what to expect in certain situations, and comedy to a certain extent ‘stems from the anticipation of how the characters will react in a given situation, based on their, and the audience’s, previous experience’ (Walker 96).

With respect to its setting, *Keeping Up Appearances* turns out to be considerably more flexible than many other sitcoms. The TV format of the sitcom typically features ‘standardised and recognisable settings, most frequently inside the same house’ (Emig 17). Although *Keeping Up Appearances* presents a number of recurring (indoor) locations that are familiar from other (domestic) sitcoms – especially bedrooms, living rooms and a kitchen – there is also a range of different actual outdoor settings, which is rather unusual for sitcoms given the fact that they used to be recorded in a TV studio in the presence of a live audience. Besides adding variety, at least some of the outdoor settings that have been chosen for *Keeping Up Appearances* reinforce the ‘Englishness’ of the series – for instance, the country house visited by Hyacinth in the episode ‘Stately Home’ (Series One), rural environments where picnics take place and the local church.

3 *Keeping Up Appearances* and the genre of the domestic sitcom

On the basis of its content, *Keeping Up Appearances* can be categorised as an example of the domestic sitcom or family sitcom. This genre is among the oldest TV formats and can be traced back to the roots of the TV series in the radio serial; John Hartley even considers the domestic sitcom to be ‘the bedrock of broadcast television’ (66). The domestic sitcom typically focuses on the private life of a relatively small set of recurring characters.

Traditionally many sitcoms have featured either nuclear or patchwork/substitute families, that is, social units consisting primarily of parents or other caregivers and children, and have developed individual episodes around some (minor) disruption of domestic harmony and its re-establishment.³ *Keeping Up Appearances* departs from the prototypical family sitcom insofar as the central characters are already well past their prime. At the centre of *Keeping Up Appearances* are two couples in their late fifties/early sixties whose children presumably left their parents' home a while ago: bossy Hyacinth and her long-suffering husband Richard, who is fighting off retirement, and their in-laws, Daisy and Onslow. Sheridan, the grown-up son of Hyacinth and Richard, turns out to be an important off-screen character. He is frequently referred to by Hyacinth, who never tires of bragging about her son's various talents and achievements. Moreover, he regularly calls his parents to ask them for money. Hyacinth either does not realise that her son just gets in touch with her to ask for money or she does not want to admit that this is his only reason for calling his parents – all in order to 'keep up appearances'. Neither married life nor the relationship between parents and children is presented in a very positive way in *Keeping Up Appearances*. Thus, just as in *Absolutely Fabulous* (BBC1 1992–1996, 2001–2004, 2011–2012), for example, the depiction of family life in *Keeping Up Appearances* certainly serves to discredit idealised notions of the family.⁴

In many domestic sitcoms, 'the next-door neighbours form a crucial part of the situation as an "outer circle" of the "inside"' (Neale and Krutnik 238). This is also the case in *Keeping Up Appearances*, where Elizabeth, who lives next door with her divorced brother Emmet, appears in all episodes but one. Hyacinth apparently asks her neighbour to come over for coffee virtually every day, which leads to recurring comic situations. In the presence of Hyacinth, poor Elizabeth invariably falls to pieces and shows herself to be perfectly incapable of drinking coffee without trembling violently, let alone of contradicting Hyacinth in even the most trivial matters. Whenever Hyacinth tells her neighbour to drive her anywhere or to accompany her, Elizabeth is horrified (as her facial expression tells the viewer), but obeys immediately. Hyacinth in turn treats her neighbour, who is approximately the same age as herself, like a clumsy child, who is bound to spill coffee, to sit in the wrong chair and, worst of all, to break the valuable china owned by her hostess. *Keeping Up Appearances* is generally informed by a very strong interest in the characters' relation to and interaction with other members of the community. Thus, in addition to next-door neighbours, certain local 'figures of authority', in particular the vicar and his wife, appear as recurring minor characters.

The minor characters are hardly individualised, and even the protagonists remain rather one-dimensional and static – something that is not uncommon in the genre of the sitcom since this may generate or at least enhance comic effects. In fact, a tendency to reduce the complexity of the characters

is even required by the genre-specific need to evoke laughter from the very first moments onwards. *Keeping Up Appearances* is no exception in this respect. Given the fact that sitcoms are typically broadcast in instalments of roughly 30 minutes, there is not much time to provide an introduction to a new situation or to develop characters; consequently, the sitcom tends to rely on characters and situations that can easily be grasped and categorised by the viewers and that do not require much background information.⁵ This implies that sitcoms often draw upon social stereotypes and binary oppositions, which turn out to be crucial for *Keeping Up Appearances*.

4 The portrayal of class differences as a source of comic effects

One of the hallmark features of *Keeping Up Appearances* is its tendency to derive much of its comedic potential from the stereotypical portrayal of class differences in Britain. The sitcom juxtaposes a middle-class couple and a working-class household, emphasising the different ways in which the two households operate. In Britain, class differences continue to play a much more important role than in many other European countries. As a consequence, British TV audiences can be expected to recognise a range of class markers, including people's accents and choice of words as well as the way they dress and decorate their homes, what they buy and where they spend their holidays. Emig even argues that '[a]ll British sitcoms feature class aspects' (22) due to the pervasive influence of class differences and class markers in British society. Yet there are certain British sitcoms which refer to class markers 'knowingly by indeed making class their theme' (Emig 22). *Keeping Up Appearances* clearly is a case in point: here many of the widespread stereotypes associated with the middle class and the working class are picked up and exaggerated.

Hyacinth and Richard Bucket are representatives of the middle class and the bourgeois lifestyle associated with this class. Richard is shown to be employed by the City Council until he retires. In addition to Richard's white-collar job, the Buckets' house, its interior decoration and the car they own are characteristic of the middle class. Hyacinth is extremely proud of her respectability, and her habit of ceaselessly referring to the amenities which she considers to be indicative of her refined lifestyle (her china, her new telephone, her burglar alarm, etc.) is one of the main sources of running gags and catchphrases in the series. One of the running gags related to social status results from Hyacinth's habit of correcting everyone who 'mispronounces' her last name by choosing the plain English 'Bucket' instead of the supposedly more elegant pronunciation 'Bouquet', which Hyacinth insists on. Throughout the sitcom she is shown to 'strive ... for a perfect façade of respectability – to the degree of hopelessly exaggerating what she believes to be the rules and rituals of middle-class life' (Emig 22). In this way the features that may be regarded as defining a typical middle-class

lifestyle are more often than not exposed to ridicule. This may be seen as a tongue-in-cheek allusion to the widening gap between the middle class and the working class which was characteristic of the Thatcher era, which came to an end in 1990, the year when the first episodes of *Keeping Up Appearances* were broadcast.

However, Hyacinth is not really satisfied with maintaining a middle-class lifestyle. Instead, she hopes to improve her social status eventually and thus eagerly seeks to imitate upper-class manners, which is already apparent in her habit of answering the telephone with a formula that has become one of the catchphrases of *Keeping Up Appearances*: 'The Bouquet residence, the lady of the house speaking.' The way Hyacinth dresses likewise suggests that she belongs to the middle class but is striving for something better. White gloves and the type of hat that was typically worn by the Queen Mother are certainly uncalled for in most situations in which Hyacinth finds herself, which does not deter her from overdressing. Hyacinth's clothes as well as her actions tend to be motivated by her desire to mingle with members of the upper class. Her interest in visiting country houses owned by upper-class or aristocratic families, for instance, is primarily fuelled by her hope of actually meeting members of the respective families. Due to her exaggerated belief in her own importance, Hyacinth does not have the slightest doubt that the upper-class families will be more than happy to welcome her and her husband into their social circle. Time and again, her hilarious attempts to ingratiate herself with members of the upper class fail spectacularly. More often than not, she ruins her chances of making a favourable impression by errors such as mistaking the owner of a stately home for a gardener or involuntarily insulting the very people she seeks to impress. Yet no matter how many mishaps occur and how often her plans backfire, Hyacinth shows a remarkable resilience; she is never seriously downcast as a result of her failure. The reason for this extraordinary resilience seems to be an amazing capacity for ignoring everything that might challenge her image of herself as being entitled to belonging to the highest social circles.

Despite her would-be upper-class demeanour, Hyacinth does not even have a middle-class background. Two of Hyacinth's three sisters (Daisy and her unmarried sister Rose) still belong to the working class and apparently do not see any need to hide this fact, exhibiting their lifestyle in a manner which in its own way is just as confident as their sister's. Daisy is married to Onslow, who, unlike Richard, does not have a white-collar job; in fact, he does not seem to have a job at all. The viewers are led to assume that he somehow makes a living by betting. The way in which the life of Onslow and Daisy is portrayed in many respects corresponds to stereotypical notions of British working-class life. Onslow in particular is often shown sitting in front of the television in a vest, drinking beer and munching crisps, while Daisy is an avid reader of trashy Mills-and-Boon-style romances. The clothes typically worn by Daisy and Onslow are indicative of a lack of money as well as of bad

taste. In later seasons, however, Onslow is regularly shown lying in bed and reading academic texts, such as *Principles of Condensed Matter Physics* and what appears to be an anthropological study called *Life among the Primitives*. In other words, there are occasionally moments which undermine the presentation of class stereotypes. Given Hyacinth's ceaseless struggle to improve her social status, her obviously lower-class relatives inevitably constitute a major source of embarrassment for her. Emig aptly describes Hyacinth as 'a social climber whose working-class background continues to haunt her in the shape of her family of working-class no hopers' (22). Whenever Daisy, Onslow and Rose turn up in Hyacinth's neighbourhood in their run-down car, Hyacinth panics and tries to get rid of them as quickly as possible. Her attempts to hide her relatives from her neighbours and acquaintances typically lead to all sorts of complications and comical situations. However, it is worthwhile noticing that encounters between Hyacinth and her working-class relatives never entail any serious conflicts or quarrels, which endows the sitcom with a remarkable light-heartedness as far as its approach to class differences is concerned.

Despite the fact that British television in general has the reputation of addressing class conflicts in a more serious manner, class differences appear to be exploited solely for creating comic effects in *Keeping Up Appearances*. That there is no criticism of the class system in and of itself is indicated, for instance, by the fact that the lower-class characters do not show any signs of resenting their social position. Onslow, Daisy and Rose appear to be quite comfortable and satisfied with their life, and they certainly do not envy Hyacinth and Richard in any way. Although Onslow clearly dislikes his stuck-up sister-in-law, he is never shown to harm her. Daisy is presented as good-natured and naïve, and Onslow is also shown to be a laid-back character who obviously pities his hen-pecked brother-in-law and who regards even his annoying sister-in-law as part of the family. The series thus offers a vision of a peaceful, at times even friendly, coexistence of the different social classes and may certainly be accused of avoiding social problems and reiterating class stereotypes for the sake of a joke. Unemployment, poverty, insufficient health care and similar class-related topics are simply never addressed throughout the series. In terms of its approach to class differences, *Keeping Up Appearances* thus on the whole adopts a fairly conservative stance.

Language is one of the factors contributing to the reiteration of class stereotypes in *Keeping Up Appearances*. Sitcoms quite often make use of regional and/or social varieties of the language in order to produce comic effects (Emig 19). In accordance with its exaggerated portrayal of class differences, *Keeping Up Appearances* features a stereotypical depiction of working-class and middle-class speech for the sake of generating comedy. Hyacinth's distinct upper-class accent is indicative of her snobbery. Working-class speech is in particular evoked by the frequent use of a few stereotypical linguistic features. Perhaps the most striking among these is the fact that

Onslow, Daisy and Rose consistently refer to family members by using the first-person plural possessive pronoun ('our Rose', 'our Hyacinth', etc.), which is regarded as being typical of the working class. The excessive use of this linguistic feature in the course of the series deprives it of its potentially realist overtones and turns it into a parody of lower-class speech patterns instead. While *Keeping Up Appearances* on the whole evokes a very reductive and clichéd type of class-specific speech, the portrayal of working-class English in a series like *The Royle Family* (BBC2/BBC1 1998–2000, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2012) is significantly more detailed, featuring 'broad Manchester accents – and ... a language full of colloquialisms and swearwords' (Emig 23). In contrast, the English used by the representatives of the lower class in *Keeping Up Appearances* is much more 'family friendly', being largely devoid of swearwords.

5 The character of Hyacinth Bucket/'Bouquet' and her contribution to the comedic potential of *Keeping Up Appearances*

In *Keeping Up Appearances* the action is often initiated by the plans and ambitions of the female protagonist Hyacinth. Moreover, this character is responsible for much of the comedic potential. The events that are depicted in the show tend to be trivial – at least if they are judged by average standards. After all, having a burglar alarm installed or inviting the new vicar for 'tea and light refreshments' presumably for most people are not major events in one's life. Yet Hyacinth considers events such as those just mentioned as being of the utmost importance. What is more, she expects everyone else to share her exaggerated interest in all issues pertinent to her life. Her self-centredness and her talkativeness, paired with the refusal to listen to what anyone else says, are among the factors that turn her into the nightmare of her entire neighbourhood. The postman and the milkman as well as all of her neighbours do their very best to avoid her and try to get past her house as fast as possible. Hyacinth, however, remains blissfully unaware of others' low opinion of her. For instance, she simply fails to realise that her neighbour Emmet is terrified of encountering her and dislikes her intensely. Far from interpreting Emmet's behaviour correctly, Hyacinth is convinced that he is shy and has a crush on her. The fact that much of the comic action is constructed around a character like Hyacinth, who is self-centred, obtuse and anything but likeable, is far from uncommon in British sitcoms. As Mills (*Television Sitcom* 41) points out: 'British sitcom repeatedly focuses on characters who are incapable of communicating.'

The character of Hyacinth Bucket/'Bouquet' was portrayed by British actress Patricia Routledge, who was born in 1929 and thus was already in her sixties at the time that *Keeping Up Appearances* was recorded. As veteran actress, well-versed in acting on stage as well as in films and on TV, Routledge proved

to be an ideal choice for a role that demanded expertise in both verbal and physical comedy. Verbal comedy tends to play a particularly prominent role in the format of the sitcom, and *Keeping Up Appearances* is no exception in this respect. Gillian Mansfield argues that 'due to the time restrictions of the approximately half-hour programme, the sitcom will be packed tightly with a variety of extended word plays heavily supported by visual humour, rather than scattered with isolated "interventions" as might normally occur in everyday spoken discourse' (Mansfield 28). Like many other sitcoms, *Keeping Up Appearances* features a considerable number of verbal running gags and catchphrases, which viewers expect to recur on a regular basis.⁶ In *Keeping Up Appearances* many of the catchphrases are directly linked to Hyacinth's attempts at emphasising each and every facet of what she considers to be her refined lifestyle, ranging from the way she answers the telephone to references to her 'candlelight suppers'.

A further characteristic of *Keeping Up Appearances* is its extensive use of physical comedy. In general, comedy performance often 'foregrounds the physicality of comic acting, making the body a key site of comedy', as Mills ('Contemporary Comedy Performance' 131) points out: 'Much comedy draws on the physical, whether it be a joke about sexual behaviour, the pain of slapstick or laughter at fat people, even if "civilised" societies condemn such humour' ('Contemporary Comedy Performance' 133). Although other members of the cast are also involved in the physical comedy at times, Routledge is the heart and soul of this type of comedy in *Keeping Up Appearances*. That she was over 60 at the time the sitcom was recorded contributes very much to the comedic potential of physical comedy in this series, since it means that the physical comedy performed by Routledge violates norms regarding gender as well as age. Her comedy routines range from grotesque facial expressions to the occasional wild chase over garden walls, thus encompassing the comparatively subtle as well as the downright absurd. One of the comic routines repeatedly displayed by Routledge involves a nervous twitching of her facial muscles. This typically occurs when she is on the phone with her sister Violet. On the whole, Violet is someone Hyacinth is proud of, because her sister is married to a wealthy husband. Yet Violet's rich husband Bruce has unfortunately turned out to be a transvestite; as a consequence, Violet regularly calls Hyacinth in order to complain about her husband's behaviour, including his interest in cross-dressing. In scenes where Violet calls Hyacinth, the viewers never hear what she says, but Hyacinth's verbal and non-verbal reactions make abundantly clear what is being said at the other end of the line. What Hyacinth is told obviously threatens her idealised image of her sister's upper-class lifestyle. The twitching of her facial muscles, which is highlighted by means of close-ups, seems to indicate that she registers what she is hearing and is enormously embarrassed by it. She always seeks to end the conversation as soon as possible and apparently banishes the unpleasant images conjured up by Violet's report from her mind as

soon as she has put down the phone. Throughout the series, ignoring what she simply does not want to notice is Hyacinth's strategy to make sure that she is not forced to adjust her view of the world to reality.

Routledge's physical comedy goes far beyond hilarious facial expressions, however. The viewers regularly see her climbing over garden walls, falling overboard or being part of similar typical slapstick situations. The regular use of slapstick in *Keeping Up Appearances* ensures that perfectly ordinary, everyday situations may turn into surreal moments. It is in scenes involving physical comedy that the 'comic excess' (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 137) characteristic of the situation comedy is most obvious.⁷ As was pointed out above, the physical comedy routines involving Hyacinth are all the more remarkable and entertaining because Routledge was already over 60 when the first episodes of the sitcom were produced. The fact that a very matronly woman who is always eager to appear dignified provides physical comedy substantially enhances the comic effect produced by this kind of comedy.

It is Hyacinth's apparent inability to even begin to realise what people around her really think about her as well as her immunity to being wounded by reactions to her utterances and actions that make it very easy to laugh at this character. Her self-confidence, coupled with her indestructible conviction that she is right, seems to be the basis of her astonishing invulnerability in the face of rejection and (implicit) criticism. Thus, an experience that is simply bound to be mortifying or humiliating for others will typically leave Hyacinth's sense of her own importance and respectability perfectly unblemished. In his analysis of *Keeping Up Appearances*, Emig refers to Hyacinth as 'a tragic figure of fun' (22), but Hyacinth's obtuseness with respect to any kind of explicit or implicit criticism concerning her behaviour ultimately keeps her from turning into a 'tragic figure of fun'. In other words, viewers in all likelihood feel free to laugh at Hyacinth without feeling in the least guilty or sorry for her – a reaction that may well be caused by laughing at someone whose self-respect has been seriously injured. Despite finding herself regularly in all sorts of extremely awkward situations, Hyacinth's (unfounded) sense of her own consequence remains intact right to the end of the series. The utter lack of self-awareness that is displayed by Hyacinth is a feature that is generally more common with characters in British sitcoms than with their American counterparts. As Mills puts it: 'American sitcom characters commonly have a degree of self-awareness about their own predicaments and are able to comically reflect on their own drawbacks' (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 42). Characters in British sitcoms, in contrast, typically lack such self-awareness, which means that their:

comic force ... lies in the gap between how they wish to be seen by others, and how they actually appear. It is their lack of self-awareness that's funny. This means that while American sitcom often invites us to

laugh *with* its characters, Britcom instead offers pleasure in us laughing *at* them. (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 42)

One may certainly argue that Routledge's interpretation of the character of Hyacinth Bucket/'Bouquet' is reminiscent of the tradition of the so-called comedian comedy. The main characteristic of the comedian comedy is that the audience is not encouraged to 'forget the presence of the actor within the guise of the character' (Butler 69); in other words, the viewers are very much aware of the fact that what they see is just a performance.⁸ According to Mills' (*Television Sitcom* 117) assessment of physical comedy performed specifically by female comedy actresses such as Lucille Ball in the classic American sitcom *I Love Lucy* (CBS 1951–1957), one may even assume that Routledge's physical comedy routines express a certain 'feminist stance'. Mills argues that women's physical comedy is interesting in terms of gender politics because this type of comedy 'refuses to conform to the convention of the female body as needing to take up as little space as possible, and only to be looked at for male sexual pleasure' (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 117). Hyacinth is a female character who commands the viewers' attention by means of physical comedy as well as by her extremely self-confident demeanour.

Moreover, it is in particular the reiteration of physical comedy routines by Routledge that makes it possible to categorise *Keeping Up Appearances* as a type of family sitcom that has been referred to as 'The Unruly Woman Sitcom' by Jane Feuer (68–69) and others.⁹ What the sitcoms subsumed under this label have in common is first and foremost that excess (of various kinds) is associated with at least one of the central female characters. In *Absolutely Fabulous*, for instance, heavy drinking and smoking are just two of the many ways in which excess is visible. Edina and Patsy in *Absolutely Fabulous* celebrate being excessive by departing from the rules and regulations of bourgeois society. Given the fact that excess in the 'Unruly Woman Sitcom' is usually associated with breaking rules and departing from social conventions, the excess one can observe in the case of Hyacinth Bucket comes along with an ironic twist; after all, in her case it is precisely her pre-occupation with painstakingly adhering to rules of social etiquette which ultimately leads to all sorts of 'excessive' behaviour, reaching its climax in physical comedy.

6 Sexuality in *Keeping Up Appearances*

In contrast to many other British sitcoms, *Keeping Up Appearances* seems to be extremely reluctant to make use of sexual innuendo. Nevertheless, it turns out to be interesting to examine the ways in which the series addresses sexuality. For Hyacinth and Richard, sexuality is clearly a thing of the past,

as a number of episodes suggest at least in passing. They still share a bed, but physical intimacy for them has been reduced to a perfunctory peck on the cheek, which Hyacinth expects before her husband leaves for work in the morning. Given her general interest in 'keeping up appearances', it is hardly surprising that she wants her husband to kiss her on the cheek in front of their entrance door, in this way making sure that her neighbours can witness her husband displaying affection for his wife. Onslow and Daisy do not seem to have a sex life either. In contrast to Hyacinth, Daisy often tries to initiate erotic moments with her husband, but is invariably rejected by Onslow, who frequently claims to 'have a headache'. The viewers are led to conclude that Daisy's (frustrated) romantic interest in Onslow is fuelled to a certain extent by her reading Mills-and-Boon-style romances. The scenes in which Daisy fails to seduce her husband create comic effects which are based in particular on the clumsy ways in which Daisy tries to attract her husband's attention as well as on the fact that Onslow – contrary to what Daisy obviously thinks – is hardly the kind of man who is generally thought of as attractive. The way in which the love life of the two couples is presented might lead to the conclusion that sexuality is at least implicitly associated with youth in *Keeping Up Appearances*. Yet the portrayal of Rose, Hyacinth's unmarried sister, who lives with Onslow and Daisy, contradicts this assumption. Rose is shown to be a woman who is sexually extremely active, despite the fact that she seems to be well into her fifties. She appears to have a new love interest in almost every episode. The men she has affairs with usually are married and are obviously not willing to leave their wives for her. This repeatedly leads to comic-melodramatic scenes in which she threatens to commit suicide – an idea that is always quickly pushed aside by her as soon as she has found a new love interest, however. Thus, like Patsy in *Absolutely Fabulous*, Rose is sexually very active despite no longer being in her prime.

Homosexuality is also part of the world created in *Keeping Up Appearances*; after all, the viewers are repeatedly given clues which lead to the assumption that Hyacinth's son Sheridan is homosexual. Yet in spite of the fact that *Keeping Up Appearances* features homosexual characters, homosexuality is stubbornly ignored by Hyacinth. She either actually fails to figure out the (fairly obvious) clues she is given or she simply refuses to accept the truth. The depiction of homosexuality reinforces the impression that *Keeping Up Appearances* emphasises the gap between reality and the way Hyacinth chooses to see the world. The fact that the homosexual characters in *Keeping Up Appearances* are largely off-screen characters comes along with a tendency to draw upon a few worn-out clichés about homosexuals' supposedly camp behaviour instead of presenting a more complex portrayal of a homosexual character. Thus, the overall depiction of homosexuality in this sitcom is certainly not politically correct, which reinforces the impression that *Keeping Up Appearances* is quite conservative in terms of its political stance.

7 The 'Englishness' of *Keeping Up Appearances*

In many ways, *Keeping Up Appearances* is certainly a very English series. The preoccupation with the more or less subtle distinctions between social classes (including speech varieties) is a very English topic to begin with. Moreover, the sitcom is set in what appears to be a generic English small town or suburb. In contrast to many other TV shows, *Keeping Up Appearances* never tells the viewers exactly where the sitcom is supposed to be set, which reinforces the viewer's impression of being confronted with a generically English setting. The England that is portrayed in *Keeping Up Appearances* does not appear to be a society that is in a state of change concerning gender politics or that is multicultural. Homosexuals still appear to be largely 'in the closet' and the only recurring reference to an ethnic minority group forms the basis of one of the running gags: Hyacinth's hope of receiving a telephone call from 'somebody important' is repeatedly ruined by calls which are intended for a Chinese takeaway, which happens to have a telephone number that is very similar to that of the Buckets. The overall 'Englishness' of the series is also reflected in occasional references to the characters' national pride; in particular, Hyacinth is proud of being English and highly suspicious of any 'continental' influence on England.

The portrayal of English society as largely white and heterosexual and essentially devoid of social tension clearly seems to be out of touch with developments in the first half of the 1990s. Thus, in terms of its depiction of 'Englishness', *Keeping Up Appearances* is a far cry from comedies such as *Goodness Gracious Me* (BBC2 1998–2001), *Little Britain* (BBC3/BBC1 2003–2006)¹⁰ or even *Absolutely Fabulous*, which present a more diversified picture of English society. What at first sight appears to be a fairly obvious signal of the conservative politics informing *Keeping Up Appearances* may however also invite a more subversive reading. As Joanne Morreale points out, 'it is not a simple task to ... determine whether a particular sitcom serves an ideologically conservative or subversive function' (xix). This certainly applies to *Keeping Up Appearances* as well. The exaggerated portrayal of English conservatism may in fact be read as a parody of the Thatcher era, which had come to an end in 1990. Seen in this light, Hyacinth's blindness concerning social developments and her obstinate refusal to modify outdated notions of respectability seem to mock the conservative turn of the 1980s.

Notes

1. Christmas Specials constitute a format that is typical of British television: 'In Britain it is very common for channels to broadcast Christmas Specials of popular sitcoms [and other series], with these one-off episodes often at the core of the prime-time schedules, and routinely garnering the biggest audiences of the Christmas periods' (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 6). Although they are initially broadcast on Christmas, these episodes – contrary to what one might expect – are not

necessarily set at Christmas. Thus, Christmas Specials may essentially be just additional instalments of a series, which are, however, often longer than the standard episodes.

2. See Wolfe on the tendency of the sitcom to be character-driven: 'Situation comedy is really character comedy. The comedy should come from the way your characters react to a situation and the way they react to each other' (Wolfe 55).
3. Neale and Krutnik define the structure that is typical of individual episodes as follows: 'Individual episodes have a "classical" narrative structuring in that the narrative process is inaugurated by some disruption of or threat to a stable situation, necessitating the movement towards the reassertion of stability' (Neale and Krutnik 234) *Keeping Up Appearances* departs from this pattern insofar as there is frequently no 'reassertion of stability' at the end of an episode. Quite often the episodes end abruptly instead of providing closure. Right at the end of the episode 'The Rolls Royce' (Series Five), for instance, two of the main characters are arrested by the police because they are suspected of having stolen a car, and the viewers never find out how the characters manage to get out of this scrape. At the beginning of the following episode, everything is simply back to normal, without any explanation. This tendency to avoid explanations which is characteristic of *Keeping Up Appearances* makes it possible to focus on comic and absurd situations without the need to provide resolutions which might slow down the pace of the comic action.
4. For a detailed discussion of *Absolutely Fabulous*, see Emig's contribution in Chapter 13 of this volume.
5. See Mills (*Television Sitcom* 101): 'While sitcoms may develop more fully "complex" characters over a number of series, the characters within it must be easily recognisable in the first instance in order for audiences to find them funny at all.'
6. See Mills ('Contemporary Comedy Performance' 143) on the function of catchphrases in the sitcom: 'Many long-running comedy series develop catchphrases, and the times when these are used make clear the contract between audience and text at the heart of comedy ... The pleasure an audience may gain from a catchphrase is not one of surprise, nor one of acting skill, but instead one of encountering that which is expected.'
7. Mills (*Television Sitcom* 33) argues that: 'The notion of excess is vital to comedy, and is a central principle of sitcom.'
8. See Mills ('Contemporary Comedy Performance' 143) on the characteristics of the comedian comedy: 'comedian comedy is performance rather than acting, for an audience is not invited to enjoy comedian comedy as a "truthful" re-creation of real-world activity, but is instead offered the pleasure of the mastery and skill of the performer'.
9. This concept and its implications for gender politics are discussed extensively by Kathleen Rowe in her study *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (1995).
10. For detailed discussions of these two shows, see the contributions by Petzold and Lindner in Chapters 12 and 10 of this volume.

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17

Family Life in Front of the Telly: *The Royle Family*

Angela Krewani

1 Introduction

The sitcom *Royle Family*, originally broadcast between 1998 and 2000, has been described as the 'most successful BBC2 comedy since *Absolutely Fabulous*' (Collins 6) and the 'most radical new sitcom since *Till Death Do Us Part*, all over 35 years ago' (Gilbert). Definitely jesting with the proximity to *Royal Family*,¹ it centres on a Manchester working-class family, documenting their everyday life. In contrast to the well-known social-realist working-class drama, *The Royle Family* stages family life in front of a TV set, where the family of mother, daughter, brother, son-in-law and grandmother slob around, being bossed by the vociferous father, who is obsessed with his bodily functions. Being filmed in real time (Thompson 279), the sitcom dispenses with the genre's usual canned laughter, which gives it the smack of a documentary series. This impression is supported by the complete lack of plot: 'things happen in sitcoms, real life is just people sitting around and sometimes say funny things' (Thompson 273), as its co-author states.

Although the series was started in a fringe context on BBC2, it was shifted to BBC1 because of its success (Collins 6). Despite its frugal stage set and the spatial restriction to television's front space within the living room, the series engages a wide set of intertextual and intermedial references, providing it with additional meanings, and caters for most of the comical aspects. It was produced by the Northern ITV station Granada in cooperation with BBC2 as part of a wider cooperation between these television stations (Moyes). Granada Television, one of the oldest ITV stations, has been responsible for a wide range of televisual innovations within Britain. Besides the production of the famous serial period piece, an adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1981), Granada Television had contributed to the proliferation of theatre in television and has become famous in the staging of provocative theatre plays in its 'Armchair Theatre', being headed by Sidney Newman (Krewani 107).

With this production connection, the series is deeply implicated in the history of the audio-visual representation of the British working class, which is given a large space within British media and has its own history. Besides the Granada theatre productions, the British working classes have been represented in John Grierson's documentary films and in the late 1950s with Free Cinema, offering either documentaries of everyday life such as *We Are the Lambeth Boys* (1958) and *Everyday Except Christmas* (1958) or the black and white images of northern life in the feature films *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and *A Taste of Honey* (1961). With the institutionalisation of the British documentary film through John Grierson, a special perspective on the lives of the working classes was established. This special perspective may be due to Grierson's rather left-wing political positions. All in all, Grierson added a critical flavour to the documentary film, which has since focused on the life of the working classes. This special interest was picked up by the Free Cinema group, producing documentaries and films at the same time, and later on it was reformulated in the productions of the 'New British cinema'. Here working-class life was a contrast to the period pieces of the heritage culture and its images provided a working-class life full of spontaneity, a negligence of social manners and a general mistrust of middle-class rules.

Following the generic rules of a sitcom, *The Royle Family* completely differs from the documentary or semi-documentary approaches of the artificial naturalism of the earlier documentary or semi-documentary films, an aesthetic that finds itself continued in contemporary working-class flicks such as those by Ken Loach and Stephen Frears. The televisual style of *The Royle Family* finds its forerunners in the British social-realist soap tradition of *Eastenders* and *Brookside*. But *The Royle Family* exceeds the social realism of the soap opera towards theatrical improvisation, media awareness and a parodistic approach to gender and class. These factors are responsible for the outstanding quality of the series and make up for its extreme reductions in narrative topics, places and characters.

2 Theatre

Although *The Royle Family* clearly functions as a comedy, its style is resonant of theatrical or filmic improvisations. This feature is typical of the improvisational theatre films of Mike Leigh, who has repeatedly carried his improvisational theatrical style into film. He lets his characters improvise in front of the camera, giving them space and time by evading complex montages; the camera represents more or less the highly documentary camera of the 'fly on the wall'. Thematically, Leigh features family situations with all their misunderstandings, fragmentary situations and broken dialogues. Although *The Royle Family* is based on a written script, its style is deeply improvisatory, labelled 'anti-sitcom' with a 'ditched plot' by Gerard Gilbert. In addition,

'there are no gags, in the traditional sense, and no storylines'; the reviewers rightly connect it to a show presenting the rhythms of daily life and thus to a reality show, 'very Big Brother, but at least Jim doesn't strip down to his underpants' (Gilbert).

The effect of this reality style is achieved not only by the camera but also by the actors' performances, and aspects of casting underline this impression. Ricky Tomlinson as Jim Royle, the repulsive father of the series, is not only well known through his performance in *Brookside* but also through his work with director Ken Loach. Sporting a filmic documentary style similar to that of Mike Leigh, Ken Loach usually lets his characters improvise in front of the camera. Tomlinson, Loach's main actor, usually converses about the political situation and the foremost importance of the unions as in *Riff Raff* (1991) and *Raining Stones* (1993). He also starred in Alan Bleasdale's *Boys from the Blackstuff* (1982), a mini-series that centres on the problems of some of the unemployed in Liverpool (Krewani). Generally, Tomlinson has impersonated working-class characters in film and television shows, sporting a high-impact realism. These forms of realism, with a documentary camera used in direct cinema- or cinéma vérité-style, can be regarded as forerunners of televisual reality shows.

The closest association of Ricky Tomlinson and his partner Sue Johnston as Barbara Royle comes from a televisual inspiration, the long-running social realist soap *Brookside* (Channel 4 1982–2003). Here Tomlinson and Johnston figure as the anchor couple Sheila and Bobby Grant, who have moved into the lower-middle-class neighbourhood of Brookside, moving socially upwards from council housing (Nicholls). Comparable to Ken Loach's film characters, Bobby Grant is outspoken about his left-wing positions. His extreme political positions conflate with the soap's focus on socially controversial topics – *Brookside* was one of the first soaps to feature an openly gay character (Nicholls). *Brookside's* broadcast started with the launch of Channel 4 in 1982 as production with a social, political and cultural mission. Thus, *Brookside* is a political message in form of social realist soap.

3 Mediality

Through the corresponding casting of the central characters Sheila and Bobby in *Brookside* and Barbara and Jim in *The Royle Family*, both series enter an intertextual relationship: the better-established and probably longer-known *Brookside* has fashioned the working-class family story in the form of the social soap evolving around Sheila and Bob. This narrative background has established Barbara and Jim as a couple with a surrounding family and neighbours. Unlike *Brookside*, which has narratively engaged in a variety of current topics, *The Royle Family* swaps the narrative structure of a soap with complicated, intertwining plots and a wide range of characters with concentration on the nuclear family, a few neighbours and the sitting room.

Apart from reducing the soap narrative, *The Royle Family* issues a shift within structure and narrative. The usually complex and varied narrative of the soap is substituted by references to the medium television. Consequently, the family gathers in front of the television set and the audience is put into a second order watching position; it watches a family watching television. Thus, the audience is mirrored in its familiar viewing situation (Luhmann). Even the title of a review underlines the complex viewing situation brought about by the doubling-up of the viewing situations: 'Something about the Fat Bloke Reminds Me of My Dad...' (Blincoe 2). Astonished by the rough behaviour of his own middle-class family, the reviewer subsequently remarks:

While my family is as middle class as it is possible to be and still come from Rochdale, *The Royle Family* proved there are more similarities than differences across the northern class divide. If my father wore a wig, he would be a ringer for Ricky Tomlinson; bearded and overweight, with a belly laugh that runs an internal laughter-track and ensures that no one else ever knows what he finds funny. My mother, too, bears a striking resemblance to Sue Johnston, though rather more like the real-life version with her salon highlights than the brutally cosmetic-free Barbara Royle. (Blincoe 2)

Through reduction of the narrative and pointing to the televisual viewing situation, the series transgresses the social realist narrative towards a self-reflective consideration of the structure and effect of television. This idea is at least hinted at in Stephanie McBride's short remarks on *The Royle Family*'s effect: through watching the family watching television, we can observe the machinations and effects of the medium. According to McBride, the series confirms contemporary positions of television research concerning the shaping of everyday life and the concept of television as flow.

Consequently, each episode's opening credits begin with the switching on of the television set. This is done by the patriarch, Jim Royle. To confirm the parallel between the viewers and those being viewed, the camera position falls together with the television screen: initially, the viewers are put into the position of the television set looking out through the camera; more or less from the 'back of the screen' or from within the television set, they start watching the Royles.

The structuring power of television's viewing situation and its influence on the family life (Feuer, 'Melodrama'; Feuer, 'Genre Study') will henceforth be called 'disposition'. Deriving from film theory (Baudry), this term denotes the structuring aspects of film in the cinematic situation. Traditional cinematic film perception is organised through the viewing situation, which positions the audience in front of the screen, while the projection and the light come from the back. Apart from the light not originating from behind,

the audience is not paralysed in a dark room – the television is part of the living room and it has even shaped its design. All these factors complicate the exact definition of television's viewing disposition, but it can be asserted that television is shaping family life and organising everyday life (Spigel).

In this regard, *The Royle Family* offers a demonstration of the structuring function of the televisual situation (Spigel). The first images from inside the television onto the family underline the structuring function of television: the furniture is arranged in a viewing position in front of the set and the television is a lively companion throughout the episodes, being the family's para-social companion. There seems to be hardly any episode without the switched-on television in the background and the family's comments on actors and shows.

On the auditory level, the televisual dialogue is a constant attendant to the family's conversation – it chimes into it, and utterances from television are picked up and commented upon. Here, television turns into a para-social companion, dominating and structuring the family life. This becomes obvious in one of the earlier episodes, where Denise tries on her wedding dress in the living room while the men are chatting in the kitchen. Interrupting the women in the living room, Jim comes in and mentions *Antiques Roadshow*, which the family plans to watch. Later on, the women (Nana, Denise and Barbara) expectantly gather in front of the TV where the jingle announces the beginning of the show. At this moment, the men – Jim, Dave and Antony – enter the room, chiming into the show's theme. This moment conflates the televisual and the family's space into one dimension: the television has acquired the status of a family member or vice versa; family life is organised by television. Consequently, the camera zooms in onto the television screen, showing parts of the show and the displayed objects.

The joint viewing of *Antiques Roadshow* is a family ritual where the family bets on the value of the displayed objects, thereby displaying a variety of attitudes towards television. At the same time, they are documenting their personal attitudes towards highbrow culture and displaying their individual attitudes towards property. Nana, for instance, cannot understand the increased value of a vase she had paid much less for: 'twenty-five quid'.

Jim: It's worth more than that, she wouldn't have bothered her arse taking them.

Nana: That's how much I paid for them ... just after the war it was.

Although Jim Royle announces his interest in a Queen Anne table – 'quiet now, we're talking Queen Anne furniture' – in the end he is not convinced of the antique's worth: 'for a manky old table?' (Aherne *et al.* 79–80) Denise reveals her stupidity and general greed when, at the sight of an antique candelabra, she comments: 'Look upon these candelabras for our wedding list ... not one of them old ones, a newy' (80).

While the evening with *Antiques Roadshow* can be considered a successful family evening, a later evening turns into a peculiar experience. Spending a holiday in a camping van, the family tries to put up the antenna of the little TV set in order to receive the signal. Jim, Barbara and Denise are lying on the sofas, Dave is holding the antenna and he is trying to receive the signal. Here we are offered a parodistic version of Marshall McLuhan's concept of media as bodily extensions. Finally the antenna is covering Dave's head and he has to climb out of the van's roof light in order to receive a signal.

Having thus introduced the distorted body of Dave, the narrative explores this topic in the sense that the urge to watch television brings about grotesque behaviour. Following on from Dave's climbing out of the van's upper window and his failure to achieve a visible transmission, Jim Royle decides to 'have a shite' and visits the toilet. Since they are all staying in the small camping van, Jim cannot close the toilet door and is, visible to all, sitting on it – the camera zooms in on his spotty underpants. At the same time, Dave, Denise and Barbara spot the neighbour's television, recognising the programme. They kneel on the van's benches, their backs to the camera and look out through the window to the neighbour's television set: 'Oh, it's *The One Show*.' Dave, Barbara and Denise start singing out the song, Jim chimes in from the toilet. The camera moves back into a total view, showing Jim on the toilet and the rest of the family looking out of the window with their outstretched backs, jointly singing the show's theme song.

The scene strongly associates the taboo of public defaecation, the behinds of the family, with the urge to watch television. In addition, the whole family, ignorant of the situation's absurdity, innocently sings the show's introductory melody. Thus, in a grotesque way, the usual televisual viewing arrangement is turned over and parodied. Instead of positioning the viewer in front of the television screen, the scene marginalises the television out of the *mise-en-scène* and shows the viewers from the back or, as in the case of Jim Royle, sitting on the toilet. This aims to turn the viewing situation into the grotesque.

4 Seriality

Numerous hints at other serial productions bring about questions of the sitcom's seriality. Due to the introduction of the DVD, the reception (Klinger) of episodic narrative has undergone severe changes, with consequences for narrative structures and aspects of seriality (Spigel and Olsson). The reception of serial narrative through DVD has brought about a higher narrative complexity and better production standards, called 'televisuality' by John Caldwell. Complex narrative series such as *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad* and *Six Feet Under* – to name just a few – tend to be viewed on DVD since the new narrative complexity requires more concentrated viewing compared to television. In addition, the classical division between serial and series has become obsolete, as contemporary serial production combines both forms

into a hybrid (Brandt). Since the reception of television and televisual narrative is not chained to the television set and can instead happen on DVD, the Internet, on the computer or via stream, concepts of seriality have been seriously challenged and they have been uncoupled from the classical medium of television. These new distributional forms have so challenged the concept of traditional television that it is called 'post-broadcast television' or even 'post-television' (Köhler 23).

Against this background of conceptual and pragmatic change within the medium, *The Royle Family* seems to ignore narrative complexity. The sitcom's seriality offers neither the heterogeneous narrative of a soap opera nor the episodic structure of a serial with a closed narrative. Thus, the serial structure does not want us to forget certain actions, nor does it demand special knowledge on a wide set of characters and their individual histories (Engell). Contrary to the narrative structure of the typical soap, the narrative of *The Royle Family* is reduced to a few elements which evolve around Denise's marriage and the birth of the baby. Despite this under-complex narrative, we do not encounter the usual episodic structure of a classical sitcom; there is a slowly unfolding narrative.

Narrative complexity is encountered in the reference to television. As has already been argued, the television set plays a central role in the production and it generates an intertextual basis for the episodes. Nearly all episodes are accompanied by television, televisual dialogue and direct interference between character and television. Very often, the family members comment on well-known television shows. Thus, seriality in *The Royle Family* is brought about by the intertextual relation between real and fictional characters who reach out into family life. The sitcom's 'real' life is highly dominated by televisual seriality. This relationship between real and televisual life, the hybrid forms which come into being suggest that *The Royle Family* romantically quotes and plays with a televisual form and a form of watching TV that no longer exists. *The Royle Family* thus represents a television era long gone.

In light of the high media reflexivity, this series also plays with the representation of the working classes and an inscription of symbolic positions of class throughout everyday life (Skeggs 110). The symbols of working-class life are indicative of the grotesque body, a negligence of political correctness as well as a general stupidity and slackness. Perhaps due to her admiration of Ken Loach's work (Thompson 276), Caroline Aherne does not let herself be seduced into ridiculing the working classes: like Loach's films, her script partly sympathises with the working classes and their ways. Analysing the construction of class and self in audio-visual products, Beverly Skeggs concludes that *The Royle Family* offers a double-bind viewing position, which allows for working-class or middle-class perspectives:

The Royle Family offers simultaneously a temporary respite from the pervasiveness of middle-class judgments, but also a reproduction of fixity,

waste, excess authenticity and being unmodern. How it is read and misunderstood clearly depends upon the social positioning of the audience, their discursive access, their knowledge and investments. (Skeggs 116)

For Skeggs, the following dialogue on Richard Branson ('Virgin Air'), icon of middle-class success, is an example of the proceedings of dialogue and its ambivalence towards the middle class:

Jim: I know, you don't read about crashes because they keep it all covered up, but you can't tell me the likes of Richard Branson, whose got his own bloody airline, goes everywhere by balloon, he is not bloody soft is he?

Antony: Hey, he's loaded, he is. He is worth over a billion.

Dave: D'you know how he started off his business that Branson? From a little record shop.

Barbara: Ooh, can't imagine him behind a record shop can you? With his beard.

Jim: What's his beard got to do with it?

Barbara: Ey, imagine what it must be like him. All that money.

Jim: Can't get that rich without being as tight as a camel's arse in a sandstorm, can ya? He wouldn't get you the steam of his piss that fella. (Aherne *et al.* 115)

Thus, the construction of class remains ambivalent and open to viewing positions. Aherne puts the viewer into a double-bind position: the comedy on the one hand relieves the viewer from the constraints of middle-class behaviour, while on the other it despises such middle-class values as the control of the body. Large parts of the Jim Royle's behaviour contest the idea of a disciplined middle-class body in favour of the display of a grotesque body with inadequate control. His frequent preoccupation with bodily functions and his standard exclamation 'my arse' confirm the impression of the grotesque, undisciplined working-class person.

A lack of discipline is also displayed as to what health measurements are concerned. There seems to be no awareness of the harm of smoking for adults and adolescents. Frequently being sent out to buy cigarettes, 'hey our Antony, nip down to the offie and get us some ciggies' (Aherne *et al.* 23), the 15-year-old Antony is constantly exposed to the smoking family and nobody seems to care about his own smoking. He is allowed to smoke as a gratification for his extended service to the family:

Antony: Giz one, Mam.

Jim: You shouldn't be smoking. It's bad for you.

Antony: I only want one.

Barbara: Are you getting them pots washed?

Antony: Ah it's Denise's turn ... oh all right.

Barbara: Go on, take one.

At this point, Jim chimes in, complaining about the bribe completely beside the point:

Jim: You shouldn't bribe him, he lives here rent free.

Barbara: They're dead strict about no smoking in the baker's. No ways you can light up. It's health and safety. We have to keep taking it in turns to nip to the toilet.

Jim: You can't do owt these days. Them health and safety won't let you wipe your arse.

Barbara: Some places are only taking on non-smokers.

Denise: Well, you just don't smoke in the interview do you.

Jim: What places?

Barbara: Well flat-nosed Alan went for a job at the petrol station on the roundabout. (Aherne *et al.* 32)

Among many others, this dialogue is an example of the family's communicative 'surround technology'. Surging up against the audience's knowledge of the dangers of smoking, the family discusses the topic without even hinting at it. Instead, marginal arguments are brought up and the dialogue turns into the absurd topped with Barbara's last mentioning of flat-nosed Alan being forbidden to smoke at a petrol station. A similar attitude is exhibited towards drinking. There seems to be a complete ignorance of threats to individual health – it is just 'them health and safety'.

In addition to class, gender is another issue in *The Royle Family* where the patriarchal structure still seems to be undisputed and even wished for by Denise. As head of the family, Jim operates the remote control, a sign of his dominant position within the family – even over his son-in-law Dave, who is too dumb to compete with him. The women – Barbara and Denise – seem to fall in with the role of subservient housewives. However, similar to the construction of class, Aherne deconstructs her characters, parodies them and pushes them towards the grotesque. Thus, the women both comply with the patriarchal order and undermine it at the same time. According to Kathleen Rowe, the unruly woman in comedy is the woman not to be governed by patriarchal norms, which she strategically undermines through carnivalesque behaviour (Rowe 23–49). Both Barbara and Denise partially display grotesque features. Both are characterised through excess in eating, smoking and drinking, as well as by outfits, which are sloppy (Barbara) and exaggerated (Denise). Right from the start, the young and pretty-faced Denise offers a version of femininity which covers a type known traditionally in film: 'the dumb blonde' (Rowe 169–190). Whereas in classical Hollywood the dumb blonde is at least socially adequate and adapts to her surroundings, Denise remains resistant towards personal change. From the beginning onwards, she is stupid, lazy and excessive in smoking and drinking. She does not change with pregnancy and the baby; in fact, she keeps

up her bad habits and does not adapt to the role of the young mother. This discrepancy between character and social position brings about the laughter in the series, while at the same time also parodying the image of femininity through mimicry.

Summarising and interrelating the specific mediality of *The Royle Family* with its narrative structure and the construction of class and gender, we encounter a similar underlying operationality. In each case, the sitcom constructs instability and allows the viewers to take up contradictory viewing positions. The sitcom can either be read as identificatory confirmation of class and gender or rejection of these issues. This hybridisation of viewing positions is brought about by narrative structure which turns the narration on itself and by the intermedial references to television, which open up into an intertwined reception of media structure and narrative content. This intertwined reception is generally responsible for the structural openness of the sitcom. In this respect, *The Royle Family* is not only a funny sitcom, it is also and more importantly a demonstration of the strategies of how media and societies construct meaning.

Being an experiment, *The Royle Family* was such a success that it was shifted from BBC2 to the more mainstream BBC1. Its appeal lies in the ambivalent position to the working classes, ridiculing and affirming them at the same time, and thus bringing to light a generalised 'human' behaviour. The fictional real-life characters seem to stem from a reality format and not particularly from the sitcom: thus, its influence on other sitcoms was that of connecting real-life documentary formats with the highly artificial sitcom.

Notes

1. Compare the BBC clip that stages the Royle Family as the Royal Family ('Prince Charles & Camilla Royle').

Filmography

'Prince Charles & Camilla Royle Family Spoof – BBC Comedy'. *YouTube*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6FU0cgg9ko> (date accessed 31 July 2015).
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18

Old Jokes: *One Foot in the Grave*, Comedy and the Elderly

Brett Mills

1 Introduction

One Foot in the Grave ran from 1990 to 2000 on BBC1 and so can be seen as indicative of British television comedy in the 1990s. A total of 42 30-minute episodes were made, and the programme became a massive hit, its ratings increasing over its first two series so that by 1993, it was regularly being watched by 16 million viewers in the UK (Lewisohn 595). The programme concerns the trials and tribulations of Victor Meldrew, who, in the first episode, is forcibly retired from his job as a security guard when he is replaced by an electronic box. The series explores the ways in which people attempt to fill their lives, and find something useful to do, when forced out of work. Because Victor is an older person, the programme is often referred to as being about retirement, but the motivation behind the majority of its narratives arises because Victor does not wish to be retired and desires to be a productive member of society. The series can therefore be understood as an examination of changing labour patterns and treatment of older people, and the relationships that exist in contemporary labour markets in which 'people aged 50–65 face widespread age discrimination from employers' (Walker and Naegele 5).

As will be explored below, in formal terms the programme can be seen to be a 'traditional' sitcom (Mills, *The Sitcom* 28). Alongside Victor, there are regular characters: his wife Margaret, their friend Mrs Warboys, their neighbours Patrick and Pippa and Mr Swainey. The programme has a number of regular settings, and the majority of the action is centred on the Meldrews' home, primarily the living room and the kitchen. Yet the series is also lauded for its 'surreal' and 'dark' (Lewisohn 595) content, with morbidity and death a recurring trope, alongside episodes about child abduction ('Descent into the Maelstrom', 7 February 1993), abuse of the residents of a retirement home ('Hearts of Darkness', 14 February 1993) and depression and suicide ('The Man Who Blew Away', 25 December 1994 and 'Tales of Terror', 23 October 2000). Indeed, the programme suggests that despite all their tribulations,

Victor and Margaret stay together as a couple as they are united in grief over the death of their own child at a young age ('Timeless Time', 8 November 1990). In the final episode, 'Things Aren't Simple Any More' (20 November 2000), Victor is killed by a hit-and-run driver, who subsequently becomes Margaret's new friend, supporting her through her grief. Earlier in the episode, Margaret has vowed to kill whoever murdered her husband, and at the end of the narrative it is strongly implied that she has indeed carried out this act of vengeance which – perhaps surprisingly – is presented as moral and understandable, celebrated by the series' comic ending. The programme, then, places a wide range of social issues at its core and repeatedly examines how 'moral personhood' (Thomas 138) might be enacted, especially in terms of the individual's relationship to the society within which they function.

In a number of ways the programme's characters and comedy can be seen as emblematic of the particularities of British sitcom, and Victor arises out of a lineage of British sitcom characters. The specifics of the 'Britcom' (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 40–42) mark the norms for British comedy from its American precedents. That is, the sitcom can be understood as an American invention, and early British television imported such series wholesale for domestic audiences. These series primarily depicted middle-class families and were aspirational in nature. British culture in the 1950s, meanwhile, moved towards exploring working-class culture and did so in order to examine the UK's class structures and to try and develop newer forms of representation that would empower society's poorest demographic. Perhaps the most obvious legacy of this movement on British television is the continued popularity of soap operas such as *Coronation Street* (ITV 1960–) and *EastEnders* (BBC1 1985–); unlike soap operas in many countries, these are avowedly working-class. Goddard (86–87) argues that this trend resulted in what can be called the first proper British sitcom: *Hancock's Half Hour* (BBC1 1956–1960). Hancock's character in the series is self-important, deluded, rude and desperate to improve his life; perhaps most importantly, he does not know he is funny, and it can therefore be argued that we are invited to laugh at him and his failure to understand how he is perceived in the world. The tradition of such characters recurs across British sitcom, including Harold Steptoe in *Steptoe and Son* (BBC1 1962–1974), Basil Fawlty in *Fawlty Towers* (BBC2 1975–1979), Del Boy in *Only Fools and Horses* (BBC1 1981–2003) and David Brent in *The Office* (BBC2/BBC1 2001–2003). Victor Meldrew may have more self-awareness than some of these other characters, but his powerlessness is evidently coupled with an inability to control his destiny and make himself understood to others. British sitcom can be seen as a recurring playing out of these ideas, and it is therefore a genre which offers the hopelessness of others up for humour and consistently depicts society as complicated, uncaring and incomprehensible. *One Foot in the Grave* highlights these ideas explicitly and foregrounds the existential angst of being perhaps more obviously than most other sitcoms.

This interplay of the comic and the existential is perhaps most evident in Victor's catchphrase. At times of extreme frustration he splutters: 'I don't believe it!' That the catchphrase came to symbolise the programme and the character is evidenced by the laugh track of many episodes, where the audience reaction suggests they are waiting for it to be expressed and laugh uproariously when it occurs. The catchphrase is an interesting trope of television, which works from the serial nature of broadcasting, relying on audiences' awareness of a phrase that is repeatedly uttered and offering pleasure in its reappearance. While it is perfectly possible for other genres to have catchphrases, they are more evident in comedy than other genres, suggesting the communal nature of humour and the interplay between performer and audience that is vital for such entertainment. Yet catchphrases are rarely explored in terms of their meaning or why they might become so pervasive at particular points in social history. Victor's 'I don't believe it!' is a logical response to the absurd and incomprehensible situations he often finds himself in, but it can also be seen as representative of British sitcom characters as a whole, whose recurring demeanour is one of incomprehension. The phrase also neatly symbolises Victor's powerlessness; at points of incomprehension, all he can do is express his response, but it does not in any way empower him to act in a productive manner. It is a statement of being and not a call to action. Indeed, the phrase often occurs precisely at the point that Victor gives up and gives in, expressing dissatisfaction with society as a whole. That such a catchphrase was taken up by wider society suggests that audiences drew a parallel between Victor's powerless exasperation and their own experiences as individuals at a time when citizenship in the UK was reformulated towards a 'citizen-consumer model'. Such a model has been seen to erode the 'practices of the public domain' and subsequently 'individualises relationships' (Clarke *et al.* 16). 'Victor's 'I don't believe it!' is emblematic of the strained relationship between the individual and society, showing how citizens' disbelief at the atomised society within which they must function is something beyond comprehension.

2 Innovations

On the surface, *One Foot in the Grave* can be seen to be a traditional sitcom. In other words, the programme is written so that the vast majority of it can be performed in narrative order in front of a live studio audience, whose laughter is recorded and included as part of the programme's transmission. For the majority of its history, television sitcom has employed this format, which can be seen to be an echo of the theatrical origins from which such comedy arose. That is, early television (and radio) comedy transplanted performers who had worked in music hall and vaudeville for decades into the new media, and therefore brought their working practices with them. Such performers employed a performance style directed at a live audience in the

room, and their comedy relied on their interplay with that audience. The existence of an unseen, but audibly present, audience has therefore been central to much television comedy, and the trope can be seen not only in the sitcom but also in other genres such as the sketch show, the quiz show and the chat show. For Medhurst and Tuck, the laughter track is the 'electronic substitute for collective experience' (45), inviting audiences at home to read the programme in a manner identical to that of the mass of laughers heard on-screen; such laughter can therefore be read ideologically, for it can be seen to deny alternative readings of programmes and suggests that all viewers read the programme in the same way. In that sense, the sitcom has been critiqued as a conservative form, and its 'traditional' characteristics have been seen as emblematic of this.

Yet responses to some parts of *One Foot in the Grave* show that audiences are capable of reading the series in a range of ways. This is perhaps most evident in sections where audience complaints highlight a rejection of events that the programme wants to be read as comic. *One Foot in the Grave* caused controversy early in its life when its third episode, 'The Valley of Fear' (18 January 1990), featured a dead cat Victor finds frozen in the Meldrews' freezer; this cat is not only referred to but is also seen, a convincing prop banged on the kitchen table in order to demonstrate the animal's fate. Similar concerns were raised about the depiction of the treatment of old people in residential care in the episode 'Hearts of Darkness'; the complaints were upheld by the television regulator, the Broadcasting Standards Commission, and the episode was re-edited for repeat showings. Complaints about sitcoms always highlight the boundaries audiences have about what is suitable for comic treatment, and in what manner, and considering that *One Foot in the Grave* was shot in the 'traditional' manner, this can be seen by audiences to point towards the kinds of humour the series was likely to engage in. In that sense, this series – alongside others about which audiences have complained – can be explored relative to mainstream audiences' perceptions of television comedy and what is suitable for humorous treatment. Broadcasters such as the BBC repeatedly engage in audience research to try and delineate what audiences expect, and this shows that a majority of viewers disagree that 'any aspect of society is fair game when it comes to comedy' (Sancho 74), even though similar research also acknowledges that comedy is a 'unique genre' which is 'almost entirely a matter of personal rather than general taste' (BBC 34). By this account, *One Foot in the Grave* may have been traditional in its aesthetic and performance style, but also managed to marry this with comic moments that audiences do not expect from such programming; the fact that, on the whole, such complaints were not upheld by regulators or the BBC suggests that sitcom is a more flexible genre than is often assumed.

Like many studio-based sitcoms, *One Foot in the Grave* also contained sections of location shooting, and these are conventionally played to the studio

audience during the recording of the series partly so that laughter reactions can be recorded, but also so that the story in those episodes that mix both studio and location filming make sense to that audience. Yet some episodes are shot entirely on location, and these can be explored because of the ways in which they negotiate the conventions of traditional sitcom and the practicalities and possibilities of location shooting. For example, the episode 'Hearts of Darkness' concerns a day out in the countryside which, because of a series of unplanned circumstances, results in the regulars being trapped in the woods. In its mist-filled scenes of characters lost in threatening woodland, the programme points towards the film *Apocalypse Now* (1979), which is an adaptation of the Joseph Conrad novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899). While the characters wander through dense forest and journey downriver, incidental music implies exotic overseas locations rather than the English countryside. Yet the episode primarily maintains a shooting style aligned with that of the 'three-headed monster', relying on reaction shots for much of its comedy and constantly framing characters in lines so that they all face towards the camera. At the same time, the episode makes use of the extra geographical space location shooting allows. For example, one sequence involves Victor and Mrs Warboys getting their feet stuck in a bag of cement, resulting in them lumbering through the woods together, dragging the bag as they walk. The point at which this is revealed to the audience is done via a long-distance shot as both characters walk up a hill, so the bag on their feet is slowly revealed as they come over the path's brow, heading towards the camera. Such a shot would be very difficult to re-create in the studio simply because it relies on there being a large distance between the camera and the actors; it is likely the reveal would instead be done in the studio by an edit, resulting in the joke being told suddenly rather than, as was broadcast, gradually. The episode therefore represents an intriguing case study for the conventions of the traditional sitcom and how those tropes remain in place – while being subtly tweaked – when such series engage in location filming. That the episode adopts visual methods for delivering jokes that would be difficult to do in the studio, yet still signals its alliance with the conventions of the sitcom through the majority of its framing and the laughter track, shows both the flexibility and rigidity of genres and the visual and aural cues used by sitcom to signal its 'comic impetus' (Mills, *The Sitcom* 5–8).

One Foot in the Grave is also innovative in terms of narrative structure. While the vast majority of sitcom episodes tell narratives set in multiple locations and covering various amounts of time, with each episode made up of multiple separate scenes, a number of *One Foot in the Grave* episodes are set in a single location and tell their story in real time, or an approximation of real time. All of these episodes centre around the idea that characters are stuck in a particular place, and their humour is centred on the boredom of such circumstances and the things people do in order to keep themselves occupied. In that sense, they are a microcosm of the series as a whole, for

Victor is himself trapped by his circumstances and forever trying to find things to fill his days. The first of these kinds of episodes is 'Timeless Time', in which Victor and Margaret are in their bedroom, unable to sleep, and the episode conflates an entire night of insomnia into 30 minutes. The cameras never leave the bedroom, even though the characters do, and the episode is an intriguing study of long-term marriage. In 'The Beast in the Cage' (23 February 1992), Victor, Margaret and Mrs Warboys are trapped in a car in a motorway traffic jam, and it offers up the lack of vehicular movement as a metaphor for the journey of life as a whole. In 'The Trial' (28 February 1993), Victor is home alone waiting for a phone call to see if he is needed for jury duty; the episode is notable because Victor is the only character, and it therefore constitutes a monologue in which Victor talks to himself throughout. Victor and Margaret await an appointment with a solicitor in 'Rearranging the Dust' (15 January 1995) and the whole episode is set in the waiting room which they never leave. And 'Threatening Weather' (6 November 2000) is set during a powercut during a heatwave, as the Meldrews are stuck at home trying to find ways to cool themselves.

'The Trial' is useful for thinking about how sitcoms tell stories and what happens when some of the conventional ways of doing so are removed. This episode – like many of the others listed above that are set in a single location – does not employ the programme's usual opening titles and therefore signals itself as 'special' compared to the rest of the series. Because Victor has no other characters to interact with, he must repeatedly be given reasons for reading things out or talking to himself, though the programme has shown in other episodes that his verbosity means that he often speaks aloud when thinking. Twice in the episode Victor rings people to complain about the services their companies have given him, meaning that there is a logical rationale for him talking aloud (though we never hear the other person at the end of the line). The episode is interesting here as it demonstrates that even when he is home alone, Victor is at the mercy of, and dependent upon, the work of others. Throughout the series, Victor criticises the poor workmanship and customer relations of services, companies and governmental bodies from whom he cannot escape as they monopolise the resources he needs access to. Many analyses of narratives argue that the outside world is repeatedly perceived as a threatening place, which characters must enter in order to overcome some obstacle, returning home to restore equilibrium (Propp). In that sense, we are used to stories in which the home is the safe place, and it is elsewhere that contains threats. *One Foot in the Grave*, however, sets up quite a different relationship between the individual, the home and society, as those threats external to the domestic space repeatedly encroach upon the supposedly safe environment, and the distinction between the inside and the outside is dissolved. This is telling, because it means that even in episodes where the characters never leave home, they are depicted as being at the mercy of social structures, suggesting that no

one exists outside of society and there is no place to hide from its incompetence. This means that even though society has rejected Victor from its workforce and has defined him as being without value, that society continues to define, control and upset his life, but via his enforced retirement, he is powerless to do anything about this. His ranting and raving is the logical consequence of being rendered voiceless by society; that such protestation repeatedly fails to have any effect means that the series recurrently highlights the futility of the individual and the power of the social.

Furthermore, the programme frequently highlights how ineffectual the individual is in practice too. In 'The Trial', Victor twice puts off work that he admits he should have done some time ago; there is a letter he must write and he has often intended to clean the house's Venetian blinds. In both cases Victor chooses to do nothing rather than complete either of these tasks, implying that doing them is even more tedious than doing nothing at all. When he finally gets around to writing the letter, he begins by saying 'It's been all go at this end' and then pauses, unable to think of anything else to write. He has spent his time filling his days with mundane and trivial activities, all of which constitute his life, but none of which are deemed of enough interest to put in a letter. He instead fills his time with activities that could be understood as far more trivial; doing crosswords, looking up ailments in a medical dictionary and eating. His angst can be seen as being emblematic of the 'fears, anxieties and pain' (Nixon 296) resulting from his demasculinisation due to his lack of work, and his behaviour is emblematic of 'lone older men, who are particularly likely to experience isolation and loneliness' (Davidson *et al.* 168) compared to women. That the programme offers up such malaise as funny is telling, for the empathy felt by viewers towards the character and the links made by journalists, doctors and the wider public between Victor and wider social conditions (see below) suggest that it is assumed that his condition is one that is comprehensible to audiences rather than entirely alien and individualised. Victor's lack of gainful and fulfilling labour – either in the workplace or the domestic sphere – is comic because it draws on wider social debates about the relationships individuals have with their work in a de-skilled workplace where lifelong employment is no longer the norm (Muffels and Luijckx). Television has often been interested in portraying the domestic sphere because that is where it is primarily consumed (Brunsdon); that the home can become a place of entrapment rather than leisure because of a lack of anything meaningful to do makes sense in societies where unemployment is common and labour is hard to come by for those of a certain age (Vettori).

This entrapment is even more evident because the serial nature of a television genre such as the sitcom requires its central premise to be played out in every episode. While in many episodes Victor does find work, by the end of the episode he is always once again unemployed for reasons that are sometimes his responsibility and sometimes not. In the end, Victor's only escape

is death, and the programme ends as his life does. This means that Victor's powerlessness is played out in every episode, even though he is a character repeatedly attempting to assert power. The sitcom has commonly centred around characters who are trapped in some way; *One Foot in the Grave* repeatedly literalises this, creating narratives around characters' entrapment and offering no resolution that might suggest some kind of escape. The programme is therefore innovative not only in formal terms, as it offers up narratives set in single locations, but also epitomises the ennui that has been at the core of British sitcom since its inception, yet does so in a manner that offers that malaise up directly as a core element of its humour.

3 Representations of age

Central to *One Foot in the Grave* are depictions of age. The programme features many older actors and characters, and engages with debates about being old, death and mortality frequently. Sitcom – and perhaps television more broadly – features older characters far less frequently than that of other ages, and this is perhaps even more noticeable considering the growth of older people as a proportion of many Western populations due to advances in medicine and healthcare (Vincent, *Politics* 104–109). Other comedy series centred on older characters include *The Golden Girls* (NBC 1985–1992) and its British remake, *Brighton Belles* (ITV 1993–1994), *The Old Guys* (BBC1 2009–2010) and *Still Game* (BBC2 2002–2007). In drama, such characters are focused upon in series including *New Tricks* (BBC1 2003–) and *Last Tango in Halifax* (BBC1 2012–). That older people appear on television quite rarely is significant considering there is a straightforward correlation between age and television consumption, and those aged over 65 consume more television in the UK (nearly six hours per day on average) than any other age (Ofcom 155). To that extent, television is a medium dependent upon older audiences; that depictions of particular demographics are largely absent from broadcasting points towards the representation of the social world common in television.

The paucity of older characters on television generally and, in this case, sitcom in particular is also noticeable in the academic work on television and comedy. Debates about representation are central to the subject area, with analyses of gender, race, sexuality and nation recurrent in works on the sitcom (see Mills, *Television Sitcom* 100–134 for an overview); such analyses rarely debate age. Blaikie notes that much culture gives a 'broadly pessimistic picture of age' (29) and he argues that old age is a 'foreign land' (1–27) that is rarely explored or discussed in detail. It is therefore unsurprising that analyses of popular culture have examined such representations as there is a severe lack of them. That *One Foot in the Grave* could be so popular while insisting on foregrounding age as a topic for comedy not only suggests that this is an area ripe for humour, but also that the topics explored by the

series are of concern to a wider range of audiences than simply those who are older.

One of the key ways in which sociologists have explored old age is that it commonly exists within a discourse that presents ageing as a problem. This problem manifests itself in two ways: older people are perceived to be a problem for society because 'the state's role in social provision for the aged' (Estes 7) conflicts with a '*Neoliberal ideology* [which] argues for a "minimalist state"' (Estes 102, emphasis in original); old age is a problem for the individual because it affects health, work and a sense of self (Vincent, *Old Age* 109–130). Such analyses reject the idea that old age is a stable and coherent category, and critiques the notion that older people are inherently a problem. Instead, they argue that we should see 'ageing as a cultural process, [therefore] moving from the view that ageing is something that happens to people towards recognizing it as something individuals have to engage with' (Gilleard and Higgs 13). 'Being old' is therefore an outcome of an individual's interaction with society rather than an intrinsic fact of a physical body, and so exploring representations of age and ageing can tell us something about how the category of 'the elderly' is constructed in this society at this time.

It is clear that *One Foot in the Grave* is interested in the idea of what it is to be older and the social norms that delineate what is appropriate for such people deemed to be within that category. For a start, it is telling that the series is often discussed as being about retirement, and a clear equivalence is made here between Victor's age and assumptions about his probable social role. Of course, the programme is actually about someone who has been made redundant and is keen to return to work, yet he cannot find a job and those he does find are menial and unfulfilling (precisely those kinds of labour societies often require older people to engage in). In that sense, Victor spends much of his time trying (and failing) to reject the category that society wants to place him in, and that category is one predicated on assumptions about his age. The fact that presumptions about the series *as a whole* make the same mistake demonstrates how powerful this social norm is, such that a programme about a character older than that commonly seen on television is assumed to be one about retirement.

As already noted, age can also be seen to be a problem for the individual, particularly in terms of health. Estes, Biggs and Phillipson note the 'power that "medicalization" holds over contemporary ageing' (82) and the concomitant power structures which science and medicine represent that disempower older people and their bodies. By this account, being old is a problem to be solved, and medicine is the answer. *One Foot in the Grave* certainly refers to the physical difficulties of old age; in 'The Eternal Quadrangle' (1 February 1990), Victor, in pain due to posing for a long time for a painting, asks of Margaret as she tends to him: 'I suppose this is what it's all about when it comes to it, marriage: reaching sixty and spraying each other with Ralgex?'

The programme repeatedly employs physical humour and finds comedy in the physicality of its characters and causing them pain. Yet there is a question here as to what extent this occurs in this series more than other comedies, for sitcoms such as *Bottom* (BBC2 1991–1995) and *Miranda* (BBC2/BBC1 2009–2015) similarly contain a lot of physical comedy and invite audiences to find people being hurt funny.

Indeed, there is a case to be argued that *One Foot in the Grave*'s representation of the older body is a progressive one simply because it is something that is so rarely acknowledged by popular culture. Feminist writers such as Mellenkamp and Rowe have argued that comedy offers a ripe site for the critique of patriarchy because it is a space in which female characters can take up physical space and be disruptive towards the men around them. They call this phenomenon 'the unruly woman' and cite series including *I Love Lucy* (CBS 1951–1957) and *Roseanne* (ABC 1988–1997) as exemplars of this phenomenon. It is therefore tempting to argue that *One Foot in the Grave* represents 'the unruly elderly' as Victor is a character who refuses to conform to the social category ascribed to him and disrupts the ways in which others wish to treat him. His complaints about litter, poor customer service and the horrible ways in which people treat one another demonstrate a character insisting on remaining a part of the social world, and therefore constructs a future for himself rather than seeing death as the inevitable next step of his life. Thus, we can see *One Foot in the Grave* as a powerful corrective of representations of older people, even if it might be hard to see what influence this has had on wider social debates about age or its depiction in the media more generally.

4 Afterwards

The series has continued to have a legacy in the UK. In 2004 the BBC conducted a public poll to find 'Britain's Best Sitcom'. *One Foot in the Grave* came tenth, beating series such as *Absolutely Fabulous* (BBC1 1992–1996, 2001–2004, 2011–2012), *Steptoe and Son* and *Hancock's Half Hour*. The series was also included in the British Film Institute's list of the '100 Greatest Television Programmes of All Time'. It continues to be repeated on cable and satellite channels in the UK.

Perhaps more significantly, Victor Meldrew, as a character, remains in the public consciousness and is used as shorthand for references to older and/or angry and exasperated people. Research suggesting that older people laugh less as they grow old refers to the process as the 'Victor Meldrew syndrome' (Maynard 27). The 'syndrome' is also referred to by those exploring the ways in which older people fear younger generations, and therefore stereotype teenagers and young adults as 'disrespectful and antisocial' (Bennetto 13). Both references to such a 'syndrome' demonstrate the lack of representations of old age that can be drawn upon and how Meldrew has, in some sense, come

to stand in for older people as a whole. Such references also misrepresent the character to some extent, as they assume that Meldrew's exasperation is unreasonable when the series makes it quite clear that his behaviour is a reasonable response to the absurdities of the world. This once again shows how representations of older people are limited, whereby some aspects of his character are seen to be indicative of that group as a whole, while others are written out of popular usages of his name. There is a discussion to be had, then, as to whether *One Foot in the Grave* critiqued or contributed to stereotyping of older people and ageing, even if its intentions clearly were the former.

The particularities of British sitcom can be seen when *One Foot in the Grave* is compared to its American remake, *Cosby* (CBS 1996–2000). That series, starring Bill Cosby (as Hilton Lucas, the renamed Victor Meldrew) and Phylicia Rashad (as Ruth, the renamed Margaret), failed to be the massive global hit of their previous collaboration, *The Cosby Show* (NBC 1984–1992). Direct comparisons of American versions of episodes from the original British series are telling, for they signal the different sensibilities of the two nations' broadcasters. For example, the *One Foot in the Grave* episode 'We Have Put Her Living in the Tomb' (11 October 1990) was remade as the pilot episode (16 September 1996) for *Cosby*, and a key plot for both episodes is Victor/Hilton looking after a friend's tortoise. In both episodes the pet is nearly killed when the lead character burns some garden waste, and it is assumed the animal is in the pyre. However, in *Cosby* the tortoise is rescued, and there is a subsequent close-up shot of it moving around, making clear that it survived its ordeal. The version in *One Foot in the Grave* is rather more macabre, with the tortoise dying in the fire, and a shot of Victor carrying it smoking on his garden spade while Margaret hoses it with water to try and cool it down. Margaret then attempts to replace the corpse with a living tortoise, but the family it is returned to has already been told of the accident, and so buries alive the living tortoise thinking it is dead, with the episode ending with the child of the family crying over the animal's grave. Like many episodes of *One Foot in the Grave*, the programme here finds humour in death, but the ending is difficult to read as funny, and the events result in two tortoises being dispatched within 30 minutes. That this narrative was rewritten for *Cosby* suggests quite different assumptions about the appropriateness of death as a subject for comedy and audiences' willingness to find the death of a child's pet funny.

In some ways it is hard to discern *One Foot in the Grave's* television legacy. It was – alongside *Only Fools and Horses* – one of the last traditional sitcoms to reach massive audiences. Since 2000, much British sitcom has instead been filmed using a single-camera approach and has been broadcast without a laughter track, so the genre has mutated into something resembling the majority of television fiction. Key series from that time include *The Office* and *Gavin & Stacey* (BBC3/BBC1 2007–2010), both of which use this newer

form of filming. Indeed, some have argued that the traditional sitcom is dead and that we will never return to a format with such theatrical conventions. *One Foot in the Grave*, by this account, may indeed be the point at which the traditional sitcom genre moved towards the grave. That said, three of the most successful sitcoms on British television of the last decade are *My Family* (BBC1 2000–2011), *Miranda* (BBC2/BBC1 2009–2015) and *Mrs Brown's Boys* (RTÉ1/BBC1 2011–), all of which employ the traditional format (even though *Miranda* and *Mrs Brown's Boys* often acknowledge their theatricality, with actors talking directly to the audience). Therefore, it remains to be seen whether *One Foot in the Grave* was part of the last hurrah for the traditional sitcom or simply an extremely successful example of a kind of comedy whose future remains secure.

Filmography

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Part IV

The 2000s: Britcom Boom – New Britain = ‘Cool Britannia’?

19

Spin, Swearing and Slapstick: *The Thick of It*

Anette Pankratz

1 Introduction

The Thick of It, devised, co-directed and co-written by Armando Iannucci and broadcast by the BBC,¹ is the most popular and critically acclaimed political sitcom of the early twenty-first century. It presents the rather minor Department for Social Affairs and Citizenship (DoSAC)² run by a succession of mediocre ministers – Hugh Abbot (Chris Langham), Nicola Murray (Rebecca Front), Peter Mannion (Roger Allam) and Fergus Williams (Geoffrey Streatfeild). While ministers come and go, the protagonist remains the same: head of communications Malcolm Tucker (Peter Capaldi), who has turned swearing into a fine art and bullying into a spectator sport. The mixture of satire, colourful expletives and well-made sitcom has won over audience and critics alike. *The Thick of It* was awarded the BAFTA for Best Situation Comedy in 2006 and 2010. Chris Langham received a BAFTA for best comedy performance in 2006, and so did Peter Capaldi and Rebecca Front in 2010. In 2012, the latter two actors also received British Comedy Awards.

From 2005 to 2012, in four series and two specials,³ *The Thick of It* has kept its basic comic situation – aggressive Scotsperson terrorising politicians and journalists – but it has gradually broadened its scope, moving from a department in the backwaters of government to the political system at large, including the opposition and representatives of the media. The series purports to be a fly-on-the-wall documentary using shaky, hand-held cameras, without a laugh track or incidental music. In addition to these mockumentary aesthetics, some of the long-term plot lines take up actual political events. The change from Tony Blair to Gordon Brown as Prime Minister is alluded to in the two specials of 2007. Series Three of 2009 ends with the call for a general election; Series Four, which was first broadcast in 2012, features a coalition government resembling that of David Cameron and Nick Clegg. *The Thick of It* thus seems to offer an authentic view behind the scenes of Whitehall and Number Ten, a characteristic commented on by both politicians and journalists, with Mark Lawson going even so far as to call Series Four ‘prophetic’

(Lawson). This chapter will look more closely at how the series frames politics as sitcom by combining reality effects with comic formulae, the meanings this strategy produces and how it fits in with recent trends in British sitcoms.

2 From minister to minister: *Yes (Prime) Minister* vs. *The Thick of It*

The Thick of It is not the first and only sitcom dealing with politics. Probably its best-known British predecessor is Jonathan Lynn and Antony Jay's *Yes (Prime) Minister* (BBC2 1980–1984, 1986–1987).⁴ In this series, the Minister for Administrative Affairs (and later Prime Minister) Jim Hacker (Paul Eddington) constantly loses out against his Permanent Under Secretary of State, Sir Humphrey Appleby (Nigel Hawthorne), who wants to maintain the status quo and his comfortable position in it. The awkward Minister is countered by a suave civil servant gifted with verbal dexterity and an extended network of friends. The mandarins of red tape and institutionalised inefficiency regularly win over party politics (Berman 41; Oakley 76). This more or less conservative stance ties in with a conventional format: filmed with a multi-camera set-up in front of a live audience, who also provide a laugh track.

The Thick of It changes quite a few parameters in terms of character constellation and style. The network of civil servants which had been so prominent in *Yes (Prime) Minister* recedes into the background and the party spin doctors move centre stage. The seemingly subservient 'puppet master' Sir Humphrey is replaced by the confrontational 'playground bully' Malcolm Tucker (Stagg). The level tone and the staid aesthetics of *Yes (Prime) Minister* are substituted by dynamic camera work and politics full of spin and testosterone: 'policy-making is reactive and panicky, expedient and reversible. Those notionally in power are choking under a brutal scrutiny' (Martin). The impression of a rapidly changing world is enhanced by the acting and filming methods. In addition to the mobile camera, the actors are invited to ad-lib and to improvise, hence creating a raw and direct feel.

Heavy swearing plays a major part in the construction of authenticity and clearly distinguishes *The Thick of It* from *Yes (Prime) Minister*. Apart from appropriating stereotypes about the inhabitants of the Celtic fringe and indicating a general shift in norms and values, this is motivated by the different positions of Tucker and Sir Humphrey. Being the government's Director of Communications, Tucker acts as the mouthpiece of the Prime Minister, not as assistant to the Minister. The affirmative 'Yes Minister' can thus be rewritten as confrontational 'Fuck You, Minister'. A simple 'fuck', however, usually does not suffice. The team of writers includes a so-called swearing consultant⁵ and provides Tucker with intriguing conceits and neologisms:

Not only have you got a bent husband and a fucking daughter that gets taken to school in a fucking sedan chair, you're also fucking mental.

Jesus Christ, see you, you're a fucking omnishambles, that's what you are. You're like that coffee machine, you know: from bean to cup, you fuck up. (Series Three, Episode One)

While the quality of the ministers does not seem to have altered since the times of Hacker and Sir Humphrey, the erstwhile dominant civil service assumes a secondary role in *The Thick of It*. Senior civil servant Terri Coverley (Joanna Scanlan) is neither interested in politics nor in her work for the department. In her permanent position, she is unfazed by impending cabinet reshuffles or elections and makes a point of leaving the office at six at the latest.

However, despite the shifts in style and the constellation of characters, both *Yes (Prime) Minister* and *The Thick of It* rely on a similar premise and work with the same sitcom formula: both claim to provide the audience with a realistic view behind the scenes, with insiders quoted as witnesses for the authenticity of the shows in reports, interviews and promotional material (Oakley 69; Midgley; Rawnsley). The impression that *The Thick of It* feels more 'real' (Rawnsley) is due to filming and viewing conventions – the shaky camera as result of portable equipment, which nowadays is employed as more or less conventionalised reality effect (Sommer 183). But behind the fly-on-the-wall immediacy, one finds sitcom-specific plot structures and characters. The basic constellation of wily Tucker versus dumb ministers comes close to the opposition between Sir Humphrey and Hacker. Both sitcoms depict politicians as flawed, incompetent and easily manipulated, thereby feeding into commonly held prejudices (Oakley 73–75; Fielding). Usually sticking to the conventional sitcom plot of problem, resolution and eventual return to the status quo (Feuer 69), Tucker's position – just like Sir Humphrey's – is hardly ever in danger. The dominance of the two master manipulators raises the question of 'who *really* runs the country' (Oakley 75) and points towards unethical manoeuvres behind the scenes. In short, *The Thick of It* to a great extent appropriates the formula already tried and tested in *Yes (Prime) Minister* and transfers it to a political system which has undergone quite a few modifications since the 1980s. At the same time, it employs new strategies of representation concomitant with contemporary (media) culture.

3 Framing politics as sitcom

The differences between *The Thick of It* and *Yes (Prime) Minister* can be related to a move away from the 'old world of Whitehall' (Sturm 35) with its civil servants to organisations oriented along party-political lines, a more pronounced media policies, and the ideal of an open, inclusive national identity. By focusing on spin and a Britpop-ish style of governing, the series gets slightly stuck in a time warp, harking back to the early days of New

Labour, when the government was associated with 'an unprecedented youthful bounce, and an up-to-the-minute smoothness in keeping with a world which had undergone a communications revolution' (Marwick 385), when most people still believed in Tony Blair as the people's Prime Minister and his project of a New Britain, and when spin doctors like Alastair Campbell and Peter Mandelson had not yet come under close scrutiny and lost their offices.⁶ By the time of the first broadcast of *The Thick of It* in 2005, however, the initial enthusiasm had given way to scepticism about Blair and his advisors 'sexing up' reports about weapons of mass destruction and supporting the so-called War on Terror (Schmidt 390, 406). In spite of *The Thick of It's* topicality, decisive political events are conspicuously absent: neither 9/11, 7/7 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq nor the global economic crisis feature in the first three series and the two specials.⁷ The recession and the cuts of the coalition government form the backdrop of Series Four, albeit with few consequences for the main plot, which focuses on 'the culture of leaking', which in 2012 was no longer one of the 'hot political topics of the day' (Midgley).

The series uses public events like the change of prime ministers or general elections as pegs upon which to fix their long-term story arcs. The main focus, however, lies on the clash between style and substance, a point already highlighted at the beginning of the first Blair government when critics denounced New Labour as 'Thatcherism with a few frills' (Fairclough viii). Considering the problems besetting the British governments, however, this was no longer a central part of political debates in the twenty-first century. Thus, indirectly and ironically, the series feeds into the nostalgia for New Labour evoked by films such as *The Queen* (2006) or sitcoms such as *Beautiful People* (BBC2 2008–2010). The satire on spin and politics foregrounds the successful forging of a New Britain (to borrow Linda Colley's term). On the one hand, *The Thick of It* exposes the acts of forgery, but on the other hand, it implicitly works with the ideal of a dynamic, productive and open Britain promised by New Labour as a contrastive foil to Tucker's machinations and DoSAC's policies. This is enhanced by means of the characters from the opposition, who hint at the not-so-good old times New Labour set out to leave behind. Opposition MP and later minister Peter Mannion represents a 'Robert-Palmer-on-a-speedboat-sponsored-by-Dunhill vibe' (Iannucci *et al.*). Politically, he stands for old-school patriarchal Conservatism, insisting on calling a 'yobbo' 'yobbo' and not 'young men with issues around stabbing' (Specials One) and denouncing the 'Nanny State'. His floppy-haired personal advisor Phil Smith (Will Smith), greeted by Tucker as 'Shitehead Revisited' (Series Three, Episode Four), is a fan of *Star Wars* and adamantly claims that 'a lot of good things came out of the eighties. *Miami Vice*, deregulation of the stock exchange, us being in power' (Specials One).

In contrast to plays such as Howard Brenton and Tariq Ali's *Ugly Rumours* (1998) or sketch shows like *Little Britain* (BBC3/BBC1 2003–2006), which

feature a/the Prime Minister, big politics in *The Thick of It* happens very far away from DoSAC. The prime ministers as well as the politicians in the departments which are deemed really influential – Treasury, Transport or the Foreign Office – remain off-screen. What the audience gets to see instead is a rather insignificant government department run by backbenchers and their talent-free staff, all of them definitely not in the thick of governing, but thick people desperately trying to make politics. In Series Three, Nicola Murray would like to promote ‘social mobility’. However, all she is able to come up with are clichés and soundbites. Her team is not much help either:

Murray: Social mobility, what does that actually mean?

Coverley: ... Every time I hear the word social mobility, I keep thinking about one of those shopping trolleys that go down the pavement, the electric things that ...

Murray: What does it mean to normal people? It means really lifting people out of a world of, erm, disadvantage and into a world of opportunity ... Fourth sector – mean anything? Nothing. Great. Because we’re about to create it. The fourth sector, it’s basically real people, ordinary people. (Series Three, Episode Four)

Murray and her colleagues tend to use New Labour vocabulary (‘opportunity’) and cultivate Blairite notions of Britain as a ‘vibrant modern place’ (Tony Blair, quoted in Kamm and Lenz 8), indicated by open-plan offices, the latest technology and cutting-edge strategies of government such as focus groups. But the sitcom format undermines any claims to vibrancy: most episodes return to the status quo at the end – the ministers stay in power; Tucker maintains his position in the loop. At first sight, this is undercut by the long-term plot lines featuring cabinet reshuffles, a general election and the erstwhile opposition in power. Tucker briefly loses his job in Series Three and faces a major criminal inquiry in Series Four. But in each new series, the situation at DoSAC has not drastically altered: the ministers blunder on with the help of Terri Coverley, and even Tucker manages to stay afloat despite all the scandals and power struggles. The overall impression thus created is one of stasis.

Similarly, the casting emphasises politicians living in a world apart from ‘vibrant modern’ places. In government, white, male, middle-class Middle England dominates, with Tucker and his assistant Jamie MacDonald (Paul Higgins) playing the odd Scots out. And even they know how to adapt. Tucker might use the language of someone from the Gorbals, but he lives in a Georgian terraced house (Series Three, Episode Eight), is impeccably dressed and can behave quite politely if needs be. Women like Nicola Murray are allowed to play along, but they are never fully accepted as ‘one of the boys’. This exclusive set-up is not presented as the unquestioned norm, though, but subtly contrasted with a multi-ethnic, open and diverse ‘real’ Britain

represented by minor characters such as Murray's Ukrainian chauffeur 'Elvis' or the students of Millners Academy visited by Mannion. A recurring situation of the series shows the politicians hectically plotting at night, while their offices are vacuumed. Not one of the characters seems to notice the cleaners, yet to the audience they are very conspicuously present (for example, Series One, Episode One; Specials Two). Also quite significantly, it is Baroness Sureka (Priyanga Burford) in the Goolding Inquiry who by means of her pertinent and probing questions manages to silence Tucker and precipitates his downfall (Series Four, Episode Six).

Especially the ministers appear as a breed of their own, out of touch with contemporary life. Abbot is not able to pick up references to *Little Britain* or *EastEnders* (Series One, Episode Two); Mannion does not know what an app is and stumbles over the name 'Rajesh' (Series Four, Episode One). It is the politicians themselves who admit to being stuck in a closed system. Abbot, for example, complains: 'I work, I eat, I shower. That's it. Occasionally, I take a dump, just as a sort of treat ... I sit there and think, "no, I am not going to read the *New Statesman*. This time is just for me. This is quality time"' (Series One, Episode Two). In contrast to this idyll of tranquillity, meeting 'real people' or 'civilians' (Series Four, Episode Six) means real trouble, because, according to Mannion, 'the public are fucking horrible' (Specials One). An especially adamant member of the public, Mr Tickel, even camps outside the department building in Series Four in order to protest against the cuts in the NHS and later commits suicide. Mr Tickel is frequently talked about, but never seen, a fact that exacerbates the atmosphere of a hermetically sealed world. 'Real people', be they members of the public or of the politicians' families, are mostly invisible. All the main characters deal with politics or the media – or both.

4 Mediating spin as meta-comedy

The closed system is kept running by spin, putting pressure on politicians to toe the government line and on journalists to reproduce the desired image (Marr). Tucker here stands in the tradition of brusque Machiavellians from Thatcher's Bernard Ingham to Blair's Campbell (for the details, see Jones *passim*; Marr; Sturm 30–32). The series' focus on spin serves as a much-commented-on anchor to reality (Rawnsley) and it provides the main source of comedy through Tucker's Caledonian Campbelligerence. In the very first episode of Series One, for instance, the new minister Abbot tries to get 'on the map' by launching a 'Snooper Force', a special unit supposed to detect benefit frauds (Series One, Episode One). He misinterprets the Prime Minister's non-committal 'This is exactly the kind of thing we should be doing' for an official authorisation and calls for a big press conference. One second after the news is broadcast on BBC radio, Tucker phones and informs the minister about the finer points of semantics: 'should' does not

mean 'yes'. Hence, Abbot and his team are faced with the task of talking to the media without saying anything. As if this were not absurd enough, the episode ends with another twist. The Prime Minister supports the new policy after all, because he thinks the Treasury is trying to play a trick on him, and Tucker re-creates reality from scratch:

Tucker: The announcement that you didn't make today. You did.

Abbot: No, no, I didn't. And there were television cameras there while I was not doing it.

Tucker: Fuck them.

Abbot: I'm not quite sure ... what level of reality I'm supposed to be operating on.

Tucker: Look, this is what they run with. I tell them that you said it. They believe that you said it. They don't really believe you said it. They know that you never said it.

Abbot: Right.

Tucker: But it's in their interest to say that you said it, because if they don't say that you said it, they're not gonna get what you say tomorrow or the next day when I decide to tell them what it is you're saying.

This is not the only instance in which *The Thick of It* shows how spin and the media live off of each other. The media thrive on insider information and scandals; politics needs the media to broadcast sanitised versions of reality. Tucker browbeats journalists into not publicising their knowledge because otherwise they 'never even get a job on hospital radio' (Series One, Episode One). At the same time, the master 'Malciavellian' stages political crises in order to maintain his own 'unfuckability'. In Series Three, for instance, Nicola Murray is photographed under an election poster for Liam Bentley which is made to read 'I am Bent' (Series Three, Episode One). After this public humiliation, she depends on Tucker to clear her image and is thus made to follow his orders.

Apart from extreme versions of crisis management, spin in *The Thick of It* deals with matters of style, presenting politicians as 'clued up' (Series One, Episode Two) or 'fun' (Series Three, Episode Two), notwithstanding political content or personality. Very often and literally, this ties in with New Labour's 'supermarket language applied to a whole society' (John Gross, quoted in Schmidt 399). Terri Coverley's past as press representative for Sainsbury's and Waitrose (Series One, Episode Two; Series Three, Episode Four) aptly fits her credo at DoSAC: 'I sell the apples ... If you want me to sell oranges, I go and tell the people that the apples are shit ... and say "go on, check out our oranges"' (Series One, Episode Two). At the end of her short working day, it all boils down to selling stuff.

The opposition follow the same approach. Their chief media advisor, Stewart Pearson (Vincent Franklin), cherishes inventing 'policy flavours' and vibes

(Specials One). In the specials, one of the running gags consists of him trying to stop Mannion wearing a tie, thereby promoting the veteran politician as up to date, irrespective of his actual political ideas. In their attempts to win the voters' favour by any means, the parties become interchangeable. Tucker resembles his opposition colleague the 'Fucker' Cal Richards (Tom Hollander) in both name and bluntness. The strategies of spinning and leaking permeate both government and opposition, as becomes very clear during the Goolding Inquiry.

Creating a sitcom about the symbiotic albeit problematic relationship between politics and the media not only provides glimpses behind the scenes of DoSAC, it also seems to allow insider views into the workings of the press, radio and TV. Parallel to the power struggles after the Prime Minister's resignation, for instance, the second part of the specials shows the staff at the *Daily Mail* desperately trying to turn the contradictory and constantly changing information into articles for their next edition. This already very self-reflexive situation is taken one step further by cameo appearances by radio and TV presenters such as Jeremy Paxman or Richard Bacon. In these instances, the BBC often celebrates its assumed function as a neutral force in politics that cannot be manipulated. But the series does more than that – it confronts the audience with a complex hall of mirrors, a combination of 'immediacy' and 'hypermediacy' (Sommer 181–183). Fiction integrates the reality created by the media and reflects on its own constructedness as part of the media world. Due to the considerable popularity of the show, this also works the other way round. During the 2010 election campaign, *The Guardian* ran a column supposedly by Tucker (actually written by Jesse Armstrong) and quite a few commentators drew a comparison between Gordon Brown's 'Bigotgate' gaffe and *The Thick of It* ('Bigotgate'). One of Tucker's neologisms, 'omnishambles', has become part of the political vocabulary and was even declared Word of the Year 2012 by the *Oxford English Dictionary* ('Omnishambles'). The series provides a frame for interpreting and perceiving politics, it influences 'how viewing voters think about government' and it serves as 'reference point for how the practitioners of politics perceive themselves' (Rawnsley).⁸

One could see these fusions and overlaps as examples of Baudrillard's hyperreal simulacra. In addition, one can interpret them as part of the self-observations and self-descriptions of contemporary culture. *The Thick of It* abounds with references to TV series, stars, songs and films. Intradiegetically, pop culture serves as a successful weapon in the verbal skirmishes, belittling the coalition partners as 'Inbetweeners' or denouncing Mannion as an ageing Robert Palmer lookalike, for instance. The characters employ popular culture to make sense of the world – turning politics into a special version of *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Matrix*. Moreover, being 'clued up' on pop culture seems as important as being 'in the loop' politically: Tucker's fall is foreshadowed by his attributing 'It's the End of the World as We Know

It' to the Bangles (Series Four, Episode Five). Apart from adding to the satire and connecting the world of the audience with the world of *The Thick of It*, these strategies point towards and make use of the function of pop culture as providing pithy and compact formulae for sense-making, shared by all members of a culture (Huck and Zorn 26, 29).

5 Personalisation and comic contingencies

The final scenes of Series Four show Tucker and his lawyer running away from the pack of journalists in a remake of Richard Lester's *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) (Series Four, Episode Seven). This is not only another nod to pop culture, but also highlights the series' predilection for slapstick, personalisation and simplification. Using the sitcom structure, *The Thick of It* personalises politics. The audience do not encounter systemic flows, balances of power or the processes of neo-liberal capitalism, but a bunch of people shouting and muddling through. This makes complicated things easier to grasp and it lends abstract structures a funny face.

Usually, personalisation replicates common media strategies and stays within the realm of plausibility, if not topicality. Nicola Murray's attempts to launch the 'Fourth Sector Initiative', for example, run parallel to a plot line about her daughter Ella, which takes up the recurring debate about politicians' children and their choice of school.⁹ At the behest of Tucker, the minister's daughter has to join a local comprehensive, develops into a violent bully and is about to be expelled. The personal crisis undercuts the minister's policy and it exposes the government's populist stance of 'zero tolerance on bullying' as counterproductive (Series Three, Episode Four).

These near-disasters may to a certain extent highlight the flaws in the political programmes and the hypocrisy of the ministers, but they also lend them some depth. After all, Murray dares to take a stand against Tucker and seems to make an important point: 'does it never occur to you that it is your poisonous male obsession with conflict which is making people despise politics?' (Series Three, Episode Four) Simultaneously, Mannion lives up to his beliefs and refuses to gain political capital from his opponent's personal problems, claiming that 'if you have to wade through all this shit to win the election then I'm happy to lose it' (Series Three, Episode Four). Even Tucker is granted some moments as genuine human being – especially in Series Three and Four, when he is confronted with the end of his career.

But one minute, Tucker announces his wish to step down with 'fucking dignity' (Series Four, Episode Seven), and the next we find him running around in a room full of rubbish bins and scrambling into a taxi looking for an escape from the press. Indications of the characters' depth are undercut by reducing their actions to child's play, slapstick and comedy routines. Tucker's outbursts are matched by the squabbles of the aptly named advisors Glenn and Olly, their Laurel-and-Hardy-esque combination complemented

by Coverley's clumsiness. In moments of crisis, people frantically pass on responsibility or simply run away. Abbot hides from Tucker in a cupboard (Series One, Episode Two) and Murray scuttles about like a chicken on speed clucking 'Malcolm Tucker, Malcolm Tucker, Malcolm Tucker' once the spin doctor approaches DoSAC (Series Three, Episode One).

6 Cultural function

Representations of politics in *The Thick of It* oscillate between slapstick and satire. Its comic strategies of personalisation and simplification forego a critical analysis of the political system. The show focuses on symptoms and offers contradictory causes. It might be the processes of late capitalism, which are as faceless as and even more anonymous than the people with real power; it may be human stupidity, childishness and greed, which play havoc at DoSAC. The restricted focus, omitting views of both central political institutions and the characters' private lives, indicates a version of reality which reveals the workings of a government department, but it also insinuates that this might not be the whole picture. DoSAC can thus be interpreted as the symptom of a flawed political system or as the exception in an otherwise functioning community; the series can be read as both criticism and endorsement of the 'real' political system not filmed by the cameras. Furthermore, *The Thick of It* deals with more and less than just politics. As the analysis of spin in the series has indicated, it reflects on the working of the media and the pop-cultural knowledge provided by it, feeding into pop culture's function as 'short-term memory' due to its flexibility and speed (Huck and Zorn 18). This is enhanced by the serial structure. The conventional return to the status quo at the end of an episode is complemented by long-term plot lines which suggest development of some sort fuelled by the contingencies of the political system. The contrast between the stasis at DoSAC and the rapid shifts in the 'real' world of politics add comic friction. More importantly, in confronting the audience with variations, contrasts and repetitions, the combination of the short episodes with their relatively small cast of relatively stereotypical characters nevertheless purports to offer a panoramic view on British culture and a bricolage on (pop-)cultural discourses (Klein 232). The overlapping forms of long-term and short-term narrative provide a reservoir of cultural knowledge, which reduce and order complexity with the help of the serial framework (237).

The layers of references and the meta-textual games point towards a cultural function of the series that goes beyond politics and satirical norms. *The Thick of It* appropriates elements from British culture and integrates them into a world of its own, which resembles but is not identical to life in Britain. By providing an alternative model to reality (Luhmann 112), it instigates an ongoing comparison between what the audience thinks is real and what the series claims is real; what they believe in (in all senses of the

word) and what they do not (114). Due to the generic framing as sitcom, *The Thick of It* indicates that we do not have to take it too seriously (O'Shannon 114; R  wel 37, 48). Politics appears personalised and simpler than in real life, but also more irritating and funnier because of comic incongruities, which undercut the usual ways of making sense.

The result of the double framing as both fictitious and humorous alternative world is a constantly shifting game of self and other, of real and not real (Sommer 239). *The Thick of It* enforces this by its topicality and its reality effects. It is of course not the only sitcom to play this game. Iannucci started his claim to fame as writer and TV producer with *Knowing Me, Knowing You – with Alan Partridge* (BBC2 1994–1995), in which Steve Coogan plays a cheesy chatshow host in a cheesy chatshow, who, in 1996, even interviewed then Labour Leader Tony Blair (Wagg 270).¹⁰ Recently, the mockumentary format has developed into a sitcom standard. The trend started with fake docusoaps such as *People Like Us* (BBC2 1999–2001), in which an unseen TV presenter follows supposed pillars of New Britain (amongst others, a managing director, estate agent and head teacher) while they get entangled in blunders and failures. The better known *The Office* (BBC2/BBC1 2001–2003) merges supposedly authentic glimpses into the mundane routines of a paper merchant's office in Slough with a satire of neo-liberalism in Blair's Britain (Walters 137; Sommer 204). *Outnumbered* (BBC1 2007–2014) uses fly-on-the-wall cameras and improvisation in a classical family situation. *Gary Tank Commander* (BBC Scotland 2009–2012), a sitcom about a group of soldiers fighting in the 'War on Terror', contains clips supposedly made by the characters when stationed in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as interviews with the eponymous tank commander Gary McLintoch (Greg McHugh). Another mockumentary, *Twenty Twelve* (BBC4/BBC2 2011–2012), follows the mishaps of the Olympic Deliverance Commission. Like *The Thick of It*, the series works with pronounced parallels to contemporary Britain and also features cameo appearances by celebrities, the most prominent being Sebastian Coe. Moreover, the mockumentary mix produces similar viewing positions: while the members of the Olympic Commission, supported by the equally incompetent PR agency Perfect Curve, produce utter omnishambles, the usually invisible Lord Coe somehow manages to get things organised. The series makes fun of inefficiency and media speak, but it also maintains that the Games must and will go on.

Just like *The Thick of It*, mockumentary sitcoms use authenticating strategies to provoke the viewers to take what they see seriously and as factual only to find themselves confronted with slapstick, verbal wit and funny disasters. Although they focus on different situations – office work, politics, war, the Olympic Games and family life – they deal with the same territory: life in a neo-liberal, post-Fordist, hybrid media culture. They all provide a comic other and thereby play with contingent 'maps of meaning' (Hall 134) which the audience in turn can play with. Sitcoms in general prompt flexibility, the ability to live in a changing world and to observe constructions of

this world by the mass media (Räwel 44). By irritating, according to Räwel, perceptions of what is regarded as normal and deviant, serious and funny, real and fictitious, *The Thick of It* thus serves as a 'self-test' (Emig 155) for a whole way of life, going beyond the world of Whitehall.

Notes

1. Written by Armando Iannucci, Jesse Armstrong, Ian Martin, Simon Blackwell, Tony Roche, Roger Drew, Will Smith and Sean Gray.
2. In the first series it is called the Department for Social Affairs.
3. With two spin-offs created by Iannucci and his team: the movie *In the Loop* (2009) and the US sitcom *Veep* (2012–).
4. See Jürgen Kamm's chapter on *Yes (Prime) Minister* in Chapter 8 of this volume.
5. A term which Ian Martin, the swearing consultant, does not like, though (Drew).
6. The set-up of *The Thick of It* also resembles early political satires such as Alistair Beaton's play *Feelgood* (2001). For an analysis of the strategies of political drama and New Labour, see Tönnies.
7. Admittedly, *In the Loop* focuses on impending war in the Middle East, but with British politicians more spun against than spinning.
8. This blurring of boundaries is not restricted to British politics. During the debate in 2010 about then German Minister of Defence Karl Theodor zu Guttenberg and his 'PhD', Oliver Nagel commented on the affair by posting Tucker's definition of a good resignation on his blog.
9. In 2013, for instance, the media reported about then Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg sending his son to a Catholic state school. During the 2015 election campaign, Prime Minister David Cameron announced that his daughter Nancy had been accepted at a state secondary school.
10. More surprisingly, the Conservatives organised a youth rally in 1986 starring the comedians Bob Monkhouse, Jimmy Tarbuck and Kenny Everett (Wagg 267). Again, the blurring of boundaries works both ways: in 2007, Blair had a cameo appearance in a sketch for Comic Relief, in which he told comedian Catherine Tate that he was not 'bovvered'.

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20

Life is Stationary: Mockumentary and Embarrassment in *The Office*

Philip Jacobi

1 Introduction

The Office, written and directed by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, was first broadcast on BBC2 on 9 July 2001. It consists of two series, with a running time of approximately 30 minutes for each of the 12 episodes, and two 45-minute Christmas specials. Initially troubled by low ratings, *The Office* narrowly avoided cancellation to become one of the most successful British comedy programmes worldwide: averaging a 22 per cent market share in its second series, it was exported first to the BBC's international channels and, subsequently, to over 80 countries. Various international broadcasters have adapted *The Office* for their respective domestic markets, most prominently in the United States as *The Office*; other notable adaptations include *Le Bureau* (France), *Stromberg* (Germany), *La Job* (French Canada), *La Ofis* (Chile), *השרשרת* (Israel) and *Kontoret* (Sweden).¹ During its two-series run, it garnered numerous awards, amongst others the Best New TV Comedy Award in 2001, the Best TV Comedy Award in 2002 at the British Comedy Awards, as well as two BAFTAs for Best Sitcom and Best Comedy Performance by Ricky Gervais, who stars as the main character David Brent, in 2002. In 2003, *The Office* swept the Golden Globe Awards and was the first British comedy ever to win, with Ricky Gervais also receiving the award for Best Actor in a Television Series: Musical or Comedy.² The Christmas specials were nominated for two Emmy Awards in 2005.

With Gervais regularly citing *This is Spinal Tap* (1984) and the American comedy *The Larry Sanders Show* (HBO 1992–1998) as inspirations in the creation of *The Office*,³ the series is presented as a semi-authentic workplace 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary. It details the day-to-day business at Wernham Hogg, a fictitious paper merchant company in the Slough Trading Estate – a place former Poet Laureate Sir John Betjeman infamously wished 'friendly bombs' (22) to fall on.⁴ The eponymous office is led by general manager David Brent (Ricky Gervais), who believes sternly in his comedic genius to save his staff from their monotonous office lives, and his doltish assistant (to

the) manager Gareth Keenan (Mackenzie Crook), a former lieutenant in the Territorial Army. Disillusioned sales representative Tim Canterbury (Martin Freeman) and receptionist Dawn Tinsley (Lucy Davies) fill the lower ranks in the company and are secretly in love. Minor characters include bawdy outside sales representative Chris 'Finchy' Finch (Ralph Ineson), David's competent immediate supervisor Jennifer Taylor-Clarke (Stirling Gallacher), Dawn's boorish fiancée Lee (Joel Beckett) and, in Series Two, David's new supervisor Neil Godwin (Patrick Baladi). While each episode revolves around the petty humdrum of office life, the overarching storyline of the first series witnesses the Slough staff learning of possible cutbacks at the company, which ultimately culminates in a merger with the Swindon branch of Wernham Hogg. Series Two subsequently explores the clash between the bored Slough workers and the – initially – energetic new additions to the office; a larger, traditional sitcom subplot spans both series and follows Tim and Dawn's flowering yet unconsummated romance.

2 'Sue me if I make them laugh along the way': comedy verité and the mockumentary

The Office is representative of a reaction to developments within the media and an institutional change of conventional comedy television programming in and around the millennium, which saw traditional formats struggle with an 'increasingly fragmented audience' (Beeden and de Bruin 7). Although it was initially broadcast as part of BBC2's 'Comedy Night' slot, firmly placed in a definite generic context and, on a structural level, featuring programmatic sitcom tropes, such as a single setting, a singular narrative disruption per episode and recurring characters and foils, the opening titles already fail to provide the 'metacommunicative cues' (Schechner 92) of comedy: where a regular comedy programme would feature, for example, headshots of the main characters or an edit of particularly funny scenes accompanied by an upbeat theme tune to insinuate an appropriate interpretation of the communicated content, *The Office* serves up quite the opposite. To a torpid cover version of Mike D'Abo's 'Handbags and Gladrags' by Big George, we follow the languid camera as it creeps over various Slough landmarks, like the Brunel Bus Station and Car Park. Shot on what must have been a particularly overcast day, the prominently featured and slightly decrepit mid-1970s Brutalist architecture establishes a brackish colour palette and an even drabber atmosphere. Wernham Hogg's environs, seemingly devoid of human life, but overpopulated by cars and lorries endlessly circling Brunel Roundabout, are not part of the higher-profile locales we associate with the established comedic atlas.⁵ *The Office's* opening titles, by providing a seemingly realistic impression of Slough, thus fall short of establishing the necessary signals that unambiguously communicate the comedic intent of the programme: Slough, we are led to believe, would be better suited for gritty lower-class drama, as these parts of the country, far away from the affluence of larger

cities, are very likely home to the underprivileged and powerless. Arguably, what we encounter here is not so much a realistic depiction, but a realistic depiction by proxy in a Baudrillardian (1994) sense: the series takes on Betjeman's version of Slough⁶ as a sign of late-capitalist economy to deliver a heightened version of reality that depends largely on preconceptions about the state of industrial estates and, more particularly, the workspaces situated there. This circumstance, in turn, signals a departure from conservative or traditional half-hour comedy programmes. Most visibly, the setting again emphasises the 'fragmentary' lives of its audience by shifting towards the workplace as the most coherent approximation of, but ultimately ersatz, family space.

The title sequence's mood is carried over into the episodes' cinematographic construction and largely determines the look of the series as a whole: instead of being shot in a well-lit studio space with a three-camera set-up, the series employs only one shaky hand-held camera, whose field of vision is often haphazardly blocked by the fronds of dying office plants and half-drawn blinds, with an array of fluorescent lights providing naturalistic, diegetic lighting that replicates the cheerless palette inside the office. *The Office* as a televisual text carries the distinct visual markers of one particular format of television that emerged to dominate the British television landscape of the late 1990s and early 2000s. The so-called 'docussoap' occupies a middle ground between the soap opera and the documentary; there it appropriates tropes and structures of both to create a hybrid form of media. The docussoap aims to deliver, on the one hand, the regularly heightened drama found in the private lives of soap opera characters and, on the other, plays with the purported realism and the authenticity of its protagonists. As Anette Pankratz notes with regard to *The Office*: 'The spectators of *The Office* are ... confronted with hyperreal medialisations: televised signs refer to a set of other televised signs referring to a documentary about the Slough branch of Wernham Hogg' (209).

The format – frequently attacked for allegedly exploiting its unwary subjects for entertainment – has been and still is very successful with British audiences⁷ and is often seen 'as an example of the "dumbing down" of British broadcasting' and as a reference 'to the audience's stupidity or ... baseness' (Coles 27), situating it on the lowest possible cultural ranks of entertainment. Originally conceived as a cheap panacea to the flagging ratings of expensive sitcoms and game shows in the early evening programming slots of the 1990s, the docussoap combines human spectacle with realism⁸ to great effect. Yet, the lasting success of the docussoap lies not so much in its clever incorporation of several popular televisual styles, but precisely in the way it feeds on its subjects' – and our – need for spectacle.⁹ As critic Jonathan Bignell remarks:

Docussoap subjects are drawn from the 'middle' of society: neither members of a powerful elite nor powerless or socially excluded ... They are 'like us', as ordinary as their audience, but being on television makes them not 'like us', and they occupy a middle position between ordinariness and

celebrity ... In docusoap the divisions between television and ordinary reality, programme and audience, public and private, stardom and anonymity, are crossed. (Bignell 200)

The docusoap thus furthers the fantasy that television acknowledges, reflects and caters to its audience and not the other way around.

The Office shares the generic make-up of the docusoap: when the merger and the ensuing layoffs are announced at the end of Series One, the characters' reactions and the impact on their interpersonal relationships are explored at length; the economic impact on either branch on a larger scale for the company is barely mentioned. It is this particular focus on characterisation that also emphasises the series' narrative construction as a mockumentary (which employs a formal documentary style, approaches it by means of imitation and has a comedic/satiric intent)¹⁰ and is largely responsible for the series' success and comedic impact. Termed 'comedy vérité' (75) by Brett Mills, *The Office* eschews – quite paradoxically – the use of metacommunicative comedy cues not only in its opening titles, but also internally, where markers such as breaks in the scripted dialogue to accommodate audience laughter or a laugh track are absent: viewers are left hanging in-between their expectations of a comedy programme and their assumptions about reality television. The programme's comedic purpose consequently lacks a clear narrative alignment with the sitcom format and its inherent social codes; its humorous agenda is further obscured by the docusoap format and the, for the traditional sitcom, unusual 'faux-improvizational [*sic*] style' of performance (Mills 69), which regularly breaks the fourth wall. As is customary in the docusoap, the cinematographic construction of episodes includes sequences where characters are singled out to expound upon events or other people in 'confessional' interviews, are aware of being filmed by the camera crew while they are working or are secretly shot from behind filing cabinets or through doorways without their knowledge or approval. The characters' behaviour and the comic potential of it thus adjusts itself in three distinct patterns according to whether the camera is the sole addressee, acts as an observer or trespasses into otherwise secluded situations. In interview situations, characters are highly aware of what they say and exert the greatest control over how they want to be perceived by the crew and the implied audience. When others are present, the characters' behaviour must compensate for the uncontrollable behaviour of others, who potentially have agendas contrary to theirs that could disrupt the image they want to transmit. In situations where the camera crew secretly observes, the characters behave at their most unrestrained and unself-conscious. In 'Judgement', the last episode of Series One, David muses on his role in the office:

You grow up, you work half a century, you get a golden handshake, you rest a couple of years and you're dead. And then the only thing that

makes that crazy ride worthwhile is: 'Did I enjoy it? What did I learn? What was the point?' That's where I come in. You've seen how I react to people, I make them feel good, make them think that anything's possible. If I make them laugh along the way, sue me. [He pauses] And I don't do it so they'll turn around and go 'Ooh, thank you, David, for the opportunity, thank you for the wisdom, thank you for the laughs!' I do it so one day someone'll go 'There goes David Brent. [He pauses again] I must remember to thank him!'

The humour contained in the assessment of his performance as a manager is only superficially funny because of the ironic inversion in the punchline, even less so since David perceives humour as an 'indication of personal value' (Gray 158). Considering David's awareness of the interview situation, the iron-fisted grip he thinks he has on it and the message he tries to impart, a subtler, more acerbic level of comedy is exposed on closer inspection: as is usual in docusoap confessionals, the interviewee's gaze is anchored off-camera on the interviewer and does not acknowledge the presence of the crew. David's body language and facial expression display a casual attitude; he is in no rush to get his point across. His eyes, however, start to wander and sneak occasional glimpses at the camera. Evidently, David's self-deprecating 'confession' is nothing more than a very persuasive mirage. He is not interested in making anyone feel good – he is interested in fooling people into thinking he has made them feel good, thereby fooling himself about the positive *and* comedic impact he has had on their lives.

Earlier in the episode, after a talk with Neil, the Swindon branch manager, David informs his employees of impending changes:

There's good news and bad news. The bad news is: Neil will take over both branches and some of you will lose your jobs ... I know... gutting. Gutting! [He pauses] On a more positive note, the good news is: I've been promoted, so... [He pauses and grins] ... every cloud! [The staff is aghast. There is no reaction] You're still thinking about the bad news, aren't you?

According to Craig Hight, it is David's idea of not only his image, but also of its perception by the viewer that creates a comedic feedback loop between reality, reality as depicted in the docusoap and the fictitiousness of the mockumentary:

The tension that his presence creates is because he assumes that he is able to control how he appears on camera. He has seen the ability of (British) docusoaps to propel their subjects into instant stardom, but has not closely watched how such programmes appear to capture character flaws. (Hight 282–283)

The camera lingers slightly too long for comfort on David's perplexed staff, implying how he must be aware of their blatantly obvious reaction. As a self-declared funnyman, David¹¹ repeatedly hijacks the camera for his own ends and thus 'undermines the distinctions between sitcom and documentary, between seriousness and humour, demonstrating that the outcomes of one can be achieved through the conventions of the other' (Mills 74) by means of metaleptically transgressing the divide between scripted comedic performance and reported reality. David is oblivious to the subtext his performance reveals: 'the commodification of the self which reality TV entails is also a comedification' (Thompson 397). His desperate need to be the centre of attention, to be an entertainer to both the office and the television audience is not at all funny to them – it is, however, funny to us.

3 'Porno laughs are not funny': the comedy of embarrassment and political correctness

The Office is a series filled with excruciatingly awkward silences and non-plussed characters, aligning it with a form of comedy that is closely tied to the mockumentary format, but is by no means exclusive to it.¹² The fact that *The Office's* humorous impact is often described as 'cringe comedy' rests, of course, primarily on David Brent's shoulders. His ability to make audiences squirm synchronously with the victims of his wit is especially powerful in the context of the mockumentary: embarrassment depends on a violation of (or the mere threat of transgression into) the private, on the coerced exposure to attitudes normally considered too disruptive for smooth social interaction, and on the possible and frequent lack of reprimand that such actions entail, making us aware of our inability to compensate for them as an audience. Instead, we are taken hostage by the affective power of embarrassment: 'it leaves us with a sense of our own, real, damage' (Gray 147). Alastair Clarke argues that the comedy of embarrassment hinges first on the visible confirmation of the '*required response*' (376; emphasis in original) from the victim of embarrassment and, second, on the 'minification of ... maturity, dignity' or other markers of social propriety, whose depreciation or questioning are unbearable for the victim. The fictitious nature of the comedy used in *The Office* cannot be considered harmful per se, since the humour's targets are fictitious and cannot be hurt (Gray 146) and does not make victims of *us* directly, in the sense that our values are potentially only diminished by proxy. Nevertheless, the series still exerts power over us: through the ordinariness of its characters and setting, *The Office* becomes an echo chamber of our own memories of being put on the spot.

The workplace environment of Wernham Hogg is easily relatable; it is an everyday kind of office, as is implied by the *mise-en-scène* in particular. Next to Dawn's desk, an alder-veneered monstrosity, we see shelves and

cupboards that hold the remnants of transient office life: leftover plastic cups from office parties, boxes full of frayed tinsel and untidy stacks of paper. In short, the setting is authentic in its dreary universality and fully embraces the 'sense of entrapment' (Beeden and de Bruin 7) that is essential in the construction of relatable comedic situations that are both restrained and inescapable enough to facilitate a basic sitcom structure.¹³

David, 'a friend first, a boss second – probably an entertainer third' ('Downsize'), we learn over the course of the series, has a boundless capacity for self-dramatisation: he is constantly putting on a show, for his audience and for us as the camera's audience. His interminable need for pageantry occurs naturally within the closed system of Wernham Hogg because, much like his utilisation of comedy as a tool of self-referential proliferation, the premise of the office itself 'is fully self-referential. It's just about keeping the office going, not about what is actually produced' (Vandekerckhove and Tsahuridu 43). In this, we, as actual viewers taking on the roles of the implied audience of the docusoap, are made to be complicit in, if not guilty of 'keeping the office going' by not looking away, with the office being the stage for David's performance.

In addition, as Frances Gray notes:

An individual lacking 'humour' is seen as morally deficient – even if laughter may involve colluding with the victimisation of oneself or another. Hence to be a master of humour, to be one of the class that decides *what is funny* is to assume power over the rules of social interaction. (Gray 158, emphasis in original)

David takes every chance to assume a position of power, while at the same time being wholly unaware that in his hands this power is disruptive to events of a social and – considering *The Office* as a comedy programme – narrative nature. *The Office* teaches us quickly to expect the worst when David hovers at the edge of the screen, since no opportunity to chime in is too banal for him. Social interaction of a private or personal nature in offices is usually regulated by a consensual sanctioning of 'unprofessional' behaviour and is therefore temporally limited to coffee breaks or, at worst, violently purged once a year at Christmas and birthday parties. When the camera crew is shown around the premises for the first time in 'Downsize', we encounter Dawn at her station, who sternly tries to keep a low profile by ignoring the crew. David, however, spots and sidles up to her:

David: [In a breathy voice] Daaaawn, lovely Dawn! Dawn Tinsley: receptionist. Been with us for ages, haven't you? [He looks repeatedly into the camera]

Dawn: Yeah.

David: [Turns towards the office] I'd say at one time or another, every bloke in the office [Looks into camera] has woken up to the crack of Dawn. [Snorts]

Dawn: [Dumbfounded] What?

[An awkward pause]

David: Can I have the mail, please?

Dawn has been entrapped on three different narrative levels: on a larger scale, she is stuck in an unfulfilling job and has few prospects;¹⁴ by initially refusing to 'perform' her role in the documentary, she is now also forced to recognise the crew, who plant the camera next to her face and thus make her an unwilling participant in their narrative. Nevertheless, it is David's comment that emphasises his trapping power over her – as her superior, but also as a man, he thus enforces and confirms a multitude of hierarchical 'trappings' at the workplace. He is by no means aware of the inappropriateness of his joke that, after all, gravely transgresses the boundaries of a social consensus. While Dawn's embarrassed reaction at her victimisation is understandable, it is his lack of comprehension regarding her reluctance to serve as the brunt of the mockery that causes the comedy of the exchange: 'embarrassment ... is never the cause of the humour, only an experiential adjunct' (Clarke 377). In other words, we as an audience share Dawn's values and, by way of the mockumentary format's unclear distinction between reality and fiction, assume that this circumstance is reciprocal. David's reaction, on the one hand, mocks this connection, which further vilifies him; on the other, his transgression of a social taboo carries with it an affective component, since 'transgression not only creates tensions and triggers mechanisms of exclusion or punishment', it can 'also be a catalyst for a controlled release of pent-up aggression ... as is the case with jokes' (Horlacher 15).

In 'Party', the third episode of Series Two, recent transferee Trudy hands out free kisses at her office birthday party, but refuses to kiss David, which culminates in a similarly offensive, yet comedically different scene when he approaches her alone:

David: I know it's your birthday and I see you flirting, I know, you're mucking about. I know you wouldn't take it any further...

Trudy: Oh, I would!

David: Yeah, why not? It's all so equal...

Trudy: Well, I'm just having a laugh, aren't I?

David: I know you are, it's just that I don't know what you're after.

Trudy: A man. Hung like a shire horse.

[They laugh]

David: Big, aren't they? Big magnificent animals. But ... You say what you mean, don't you?

Trudy: [Nods]

David: I'm just not sure you'd find what you're after [points at the room].

Trudy: Well, see, I'd ask you but you're a bit old, really.

David: [Smiles] I'm in my thirties, gimme a break.

Trudy: Born in the thirties!

David: You're having a laugh! I'm thirty ... I'm thirty-something. I'm thirties, so...

Trudy: [Humorously] Yeah, but you've let yourself go a bit, haven't you?

David: I've let myself go a bit?

Trudy: Yeah!

David: [He is outraged] Well, look at *yourself*! You're an *embarrassment*, to be honest!

[He gets up and leaves]

This exchange, shot from a few feet away with neither character aware of the crew, implies through its cinematographic set-up that David does not stage what is being filmed in his usual manner. Rather, he has been caught unawares at a moment when someone conscious of the power¹⁵ game inherent to his comedy not only plays the game herself, but does so with the same comedic ammunition. While Trudy's taunts, given the context and blood alcohol level of those involved, are reasonably appropriate, it is not her mockery of David or his verbal bashing of Trudy that makes for a humorous scene. Instead, it is the sheer extent of his outrage – he stomps away like a petulant child – regarding his having been played that causes great discomfort in the audience. As Cynthia Miller notes, it is in discomfort 'that we, as both audience and subject, reflect our norms, values, ideologies, and ways of being' (xii). The scope of humour contained in this scene thus depends largely on our feelings of sympathy of and/or complicity with the normative systems depicted on screen (Clarke 377). Trudy plays the game well and with authority: 'Oh, I would!' Indeed, she plays it too well for David and thus makes him aware of his own skewed set of values: others exist solely as canvases for his comedy, yet without their willingness to serve as such, his performance and he himself are worthless.

The second series broadens the range of possibly embarrassing moments, since Neil Godwin, the former Swindon branch manager and now David's superior, poses a tangible threat to him by being capable of truly self-deprecating humour. In 'Merger', both Neil and David address their staff, and while Neil aims at levelling the office hierarchy by owning his transfer to Slough and japing via the lowest comedic denominator of homophobia,¹⁶ David chokes and his speech backfires:

Get to the real stuff ... that's just to what he ... he's putting me off ... Welcome to Slough to the ... the ... the new people ... My name's David Brent, and I've always been in the paper industry, haven't I? Yeah. My parents owned a paper shop ... until it blew away. [Staff is uncomfortably

silent] It was made of paper ... Paper? If that wasn't then ... OK. I'm not used to public squeaking, I piss-pronunciate a lot of my worms. [Staff is still uncomfortably silent] Do you not ... that's the Two Ronnies, that's classic stuff!¹⁷

David usually falters in confrontation with real authority,¹⁸ yet here it happens in front of a large audience, the audience David so desperately craves. The eventual outcome of the scene – him failing to get a rise out of his audience – is heralded by ingenious Gervais' performance: in atypical Brentian form, David is visibly flustered, stumbles over his words and fiddles with his cue cards. The use of props signals a form of comedy that is destined to fail in the face of Neil's easygoing nonchalance: David's immense capacity for spontaneity has been diminished to lame jokes and stolen material. Here, the comedy of embarrassment takes on a distinctly harsh note: we laugh not at the jokes and not at David's embarrassment proper, but rather at the 'qualitative recontextualization' (Clarke 377) of his embarrassment. It is not the experience of embarrassment itself which makes for the comedy, but the fact that David is not safe from being embarrassed *himself*. We wish to see David suffer for his inability to conform to social consensus and our value systems as implied by the mockumentary format, and we rejoice at seeing him getting his comeuppance after regularly violating the limits of moral propriety.

The Office offers a variety of these transgressive moments that fly 'in the face of political correctness'. It may be most visible in David's lofty impression of his abilities and how we as an audience feel 'a barely suppressed sense of outrage' (McFarlane 136) when we are forced to witness his scandalisation of social minefields. Yet, as David confesses in 'The Quiz':

There are limits to my comedy. There are things that I will never laugh at, like the handicapped, because there's nothing funny about them. [Pause] Or any deformity. It's like when you see someone look at a little handicapped, and they go 'Oh, look at him, he's not able-bodied, I am. I'm prejudiced'. Well, at least the little handicapped fellow is *able-minded*. Unless he's not, it's difficult to tell with the wheelchair ones. So, just give generously to all of them.

What keeps him from mocking the handicapped is not the obvious moral and social stigma that is contained in making light of the disabled, nor is it the cruelty of doing so, but it is 'the lack of comedic potential that the handicapped present' (McAleer 57) – the audience is left puzzled as to whether this is not actually a redeeming feature of the Brentmeister General. Yet with other characters, especially David's assistant, things are more complicated. Gareth, whose ambitions to maintain a position of power are not unlike David's – a recurring joke concerns his exact job description as assistant

manager or assistant *to the manager* – lacks the capacity for humour, which does not prevent him from having a go at it like his superior David. McAleer classifies Gareth as an example of a classic Aristotelian boor, unable to make¹⁹ or take a joke, who idolises David's apparent faculty for charm, principally in relation to matters of a clearly gendered, sexual nature. The situations where Gareth's 'charm' transgresses the lexicon of appropriate chat-up lines are numerous: at Trudy's party, he offers 'to do [her] from behind if it's just a quick in and out' ('Party'); when he finds out that someone in the office has had a fling with intern Donna, he asks her if she is 'going to sleep with him again or spreading it around' ('New Girl'). Gareth appropriates David's way of 'talking the talk', yet misunderstands the reasoning and aim behind it: where David thinks only of himself, Gareth falsely operates on what he assumes are the desires of others. Here, the comedy of embarrassment is in itself politically incorrect: we laugh at an embarrassing character who, judging from the *mise-en-scène*,²⁰ is impaired on an intellectual, social level.²¹ Gareth's uncomfortable relationship with the female sex is further reflected in his sensibilities when it comes to his own. Throughout the series, David is highly conscious of possible PC violations and actively takes more or less successful countermeasures to avoid them,²² since he is couched in-between Jennifer and Dawn, in-between women who represent two ends of the class spectrum. Gareth, however, is not:

That's one reason why gays shouldn't be allowed into the army. Because if we're in battle, is he going to be looking at the enemy, or is he going to be looking at me and going 'Ooh. He looks tasty in his uniform'. And I'm not homophobic, alright? Come round, look at my CDs. You'll see Queen, George Michael, Pet Shop Boys. They're all bums. ('Work Experience')

Here Gareth exposes his inability to comprehend the concept of political correctness: he knows that homophobia is frowned upon and in violation of social codes – above all in an environment like the workplace, where issues such as racism, sexism and homophobia, ageism and topics like religion and politics should never be part of water-cooler talk – yet the reason for this utterly escapes him. Ultimately, Gareth lacks what David possesses: 'an element of pathos' that arises 'from the fleeting glimpses we get of the protagonists' insecurities, and from our grasp of the solitariness that springs from their inbuilt solipsism' (McFarlane 138). David, at the end of the series in 'Interview', is finally made redundant and the shock at this development registers clearly on his face while dressed in an ostrich costume for Red Nose Day. We later meet Gareth badmouthing David in the first Christmas special, where he has now been made general manager. Throughout *The Office*, it is revealed that Gareth simply uses a negative statement to prove a positive attitude: his callousness should prove his

empathy, his homophobia his tolerance (Manning 148). The fact that Gareth never receives *his* comeuppance is problematic, particularly when the comedy of a situation depends on it:

It's one thing to be entertained, in our superior way, by those who are so obviously less charming, less insightful, less liberal than ourselves, as long as we can be certain, in the ways to which classic Hollywood has habituated us, that these will be brought to book and, possibly, more nearly to our way of thinking in the end. (McFarlane 136)

4 'Two lesbians probably. Sisters. I'm just watching': the truth of comedy verité

The pitfalls of political correctness are a recurring theme in Gervais and Merchant's body of work,²³ and *The Office* makes for great comedy possibly because it exposes how hard it is to navigate, in this case, doubly semi-public situations ripe with embarrassing potential. By the late 1990s, endeavours to counteract the curricula of educational institutions, which were believed to be heavily biased in terms of race, gender and power, were pejoratively termed 'political correctness' by conservative forces. The series emerged at a time when the questioning of dominant discourses was adopted – via academia – by the public, exposing ingrained prejudices against women, non-Western ethnicities, etc. in everyday society. The 'enterprise of PC', however seriously it is handled, 'quickly becomes a laughing matter' (Nys 179), because under its often somehow forced aims, it still is rooted very much in all too real concerns. When Gareth reveals his ultimate fantasy during a management training exercise, 'Two lesbians probably. Sisters. I'm just watching', it is mortifying because underneath the comedy, it shows all is not well with the world and, when faced with the often ludicrous truth, all we are able to do is to laugh at it and our own powerlessness to act. In an interview with *The Office – The Definitive Guide* on the BBC's Internet presence, Gervais and Merchant conjecture that the most offensive joke of the series was probably one party sequence in 'Merger', the first episode of Series Two:

Gareth: Alright, it's Christmas dinner. Royal Family, having their Christmas dinner. Camilla Parker-Bowles goes, 'Ok, we'll play 20 Questions. I'll think of something – you have to ask me questions and guess what it is'. So, what she's thinking is 'a black man's cock'.

David: Oh, trust Camilla! Not racist, is it?

Gareth: No. So, Prince Philip goes, 'Is it bigger than the bread bin?' She goes, 'Yes'. Prince Charles goes, 'Is it something I can put in my mouth?' She goes, 'Yes'. Queen goes, 'Is it a black man's cock?'

Again, Gareth uses his racism to disprove he is making a racist joke, clearly humourising a racial stereotype. Moreover, this is not a joke in a Bakhtinian sense, aimed at undermining an authoritative system or to question accepted norms. The simple truth here is that Gareth wants to be social while defying the concept of sociability in the process. Later, David retells the joke with the same intent, when Oliver, a black transferee from Swindon, joins the party. We, of course, brace for comedic impact, as David tries to abort the joke pre-punchline. Yet Oliver simply answers: 'It's alright, it's funny.'

If this sequence is read as an echo of David's crack about Dawn's crack in 'Downsize', the very first episode, we realise how by the second series, the Swindon staff have taken the place of us as those unaware of David's kind of comedy. Their reaction is not our initial reaction – in a way, they are the ones who have learned to live with the fact that the real underneath the comedy might just be funnier than the comedy itself.

The Office's legacy is best understood in terms of style rather than substance (much like David Brent): its impact on British television is obvious in series like *The Thick of It* (BBC4/BBC2 2005–2012),²⁴ *French and Saunders'* last proper series (BBC2 2004), *Come Fly with Me* (BBC1 2010–2011) and *Twenty Twelve* (BBC4/BBC2 2011–2012), all of which make use of a documentary style to conceal the usually high visibility of established narrative structures and the explicit appearance of constructedness of the sitcom format. Considering series like *The Day Today* (BBC2 1994), *Brass Eye* (Channel 4 1997–2001), *People Like Us* (BBC2 1999–2001), *That Peter Kay Thing* (Channel 4 2000) and *Marion and Geoff* (BBC2 2000–2003), however, we see how *The Office* was by no means the first to use a comedy verité style, yet ultimately was the one to master it. The heavy influence of *The Office's* visual style and narrative form, especially apparent in the American and Canadian market with shows like *Trailer Park Boys* (Showcase 2001–2008, Netflix 2014–), *Reno911!* (Comedy Central 2003–2008), *Parks and Recreation* (NBC 2009–2015), *Modern Family* (ABC 2009–) and Armando Iannucci's Emmy-sweeper *Veep* (HBO 2012–), exemplifies once more that 'comedy verité ... is comedy for audiences raised on television formats' (Mills 78).

Notes

1. The US version is decidedly less acerbic than its British counterpart and conforms to the common American TV trope of likeable but flawed bosses. *Le Bureau's* manager Gilles Triquet is 'the perfect embodiment of a French beauf' (Chrisafis) and an extreme caricature of David Brent. Germany's version *Stromberg* was so popular with German audiences that it not only was adapted for the silver screen, but also inspired a dictionary: *Chef – Deutsch / Deutsch – Chef. Klartext am Arbeitsplatz* (Boss-German/German-Boss: Straight Talk at the Workplace). *Stromberg* was later spoofed in the sketch comedy *Switch Reloaded* as 'Obersalzberg', a mockumentary about the daily routine at Hitler's mountain residence in Bavaria.

2. *The Office* was allowed eligibility only because BBC America contributed substantially to the second series' budget (Walters 160).
3. See Walters for an extensive recount of the series' origins.
4. The poem 'Slough', a protest against the construction of over 800 factories, the ensuing influx of factory workers and the town's usage as a depot for discarded army surplus in the inter-war years, was first published in the 1937 collection *Continual Dew*.
5. For example, the sketchy but charming hotel in *Fawlty Towers* (BBC2 1975–1979), the department store of *Are You Being Served?* (1972–1985) or the more recent nerd den of *The IT Crowd* (Channel 4 2006–2013).
6. The recent 'Heart of Slough Project' aims at major redevelopment of the town centre. The Brunel Bus Station was demolished in 2010.
7. Among the first notable examples are programmes like *Airport* (1996), *Vets School* (1996) and *Driving School* (1997) – all on BBC1.
8. It could be argued that the docusoap expresses decidedly postmodern qualities: it is intertextual in its usage of techniques of different genres, pastiche-like in its hybridisation of high and low culture, and an unashamedly commercial product. Moreover, the wide range of subjects bespeaks a fragmentary, polyphonous audience. Nonetheless, the format is not wholly simulacric, as it *does* originate in reality and is therefore never completely fictitious.
9. Guy Debord argues that 'everything that [is] directly lived has receded into a representation ... The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society and as a *means of unification*' (Debord, emphasis in original).
10. Gary D. Rhodes and John P. Springer see the mockumentary as a text that couches fictional content in a factual, documentary form as opposed to the 'docudrama', which uses a fictional form for documentary content (4).
11. David repeatedly refers to himself as 'Brentmeister General', much to the dismay of his employees.
12. The many embarrassing moments in Basil Fawlty's career are just one example among many. For a general treatment of the phenomenon of embarrassment see Kotsko.
13. The traditional sitcom format for an episode begins in a narrative equilibrium, which is soon disrupted and closes again in the re-established equilibrium. The overarching need for a status quo is often reflected in a limited selection of spaces or by using the same space to establish and resolve the disequilibrium. This in turn generates a (positive) feeling of spatial limitation and entrapment.
14. We learn that Dawn aspires to be an illustrator for children's books and needs the office job to make ends meet. Her brutish fiancé Lee, she concedes, is at least 'thrifty'. In this she exposes an 'ironic distance' (McAleer 61) to her life in general.
15. Power is used here in a Foucauldian sense: 'a complex strategic situation in a given society' (123), that is, the social setting of the office.
16. 'Hello everyone. For those of you who don't know me, I'm Neil Godwin. For those of you who do: keep stumm! [Staff laughs] I'm a man of simple pleasures. I don't need lovely houses, beautiful girls and classy restaurants, so it's a good job I moved to Slough! No, it's great to be in Slough, really it is ... I just spent a year in Beirut! I know David is feeling a bit worried about taking on these new staff, because as manager it's going to mean a lot more responsibility: he'll now have to delegate twice as much work. But there will be perks for him – I'm sure he's looking forward to having a whole new group of *men* underneath him! Anyway, here's the man at the top of the pile – David Brent!'

17. Ellipses indicate silences, where the camera cuts to shots of the audience and their absent reactions.
18. His former supervisor, Jennifer Taylor-Clarke, elicits similar reactions in the first series.
19. McAleer admits that Gareth is not a perfect boor in regard to the Aristotelian model, yet argues that his failure to elicit humorous reactions from his peers is evidence of his inability to be funny (57).
20. Gareth's costumes are limited to oversized khaki suits, which make the actor appear haggard and physically impaired. Moreover, he sports a painfully old-fashioned pudding-bowl cut.
21. In 'The Quiz', Gareth is offered a threesome, which he declines. In 'Judgement', he bashfully slow-dances with a girl, while other couples around them canoodle openly.
22. In 'Work Experience', a pornographic image is sent round the office. David wonders about the culprit: 'It could be a woman. Women are as filthy as men. Naming no names. I don't know any. But women ... are ... dirty.'
23. See *Extras* (BBC2/BBC1 2005–2007), *Life's Too Short* (BBC2 2011–2013) and, most recently, *Derek* (Channel 4 2012–2014).
24. See Anette Pankratz's contribution on *The Thick of It* in Chapter 19 of this volume.

Filmography

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21

From Ever-Lusting Individuals to Ever-Lasting Couples: *Coupling* and Emotional Capitalism

Joanna Rostek and Dorothea Will

1 Introduction

Coupling (BBC2/BBC3 2000–2004), the BBC's successful comedy on the merry art of making couples, is – fittingly perhaps – a joint undertaking by the husband-and-wife-team of writer Steven Moffat and producer Sue Vertue. With Martin Dennis as director, who had previously contributed to the successful comedy *Men Behaving Badly* (ITV/BBC1 1992–1999), the triangle of devoted comedy makers was complete. Series One to Three were produced for BBC2, while Series Four with a slightly changed cast was moved to BBC3. Moffat, the mastermind behind *Coupling*, has arguably become the BBC's universal weapon in its entertainment sector: he is co-creator and writer of *Sherlock* (BBC1 2010–) as well as executive producer and head writer of *Doctor Who* (BBC1 2005–). His earlier projects include *The Press Gang* (ITV 1989–1993), which won him a BAFTA in 1989, *Joking Apart* (BBC2 1993–1995), *Murder Most Horrid* (BBC2 1991–1999) and *Jekyll* (BBC1 2007). He recently received the Judge's Award from the Royal Television Society (2011) and the BAFTA Special Award (2012) for his contribution to television in creative writing. It is therefore not surprising that *Coupling* proved equally successful, winning the Silver Rose of Montreux in 2001 (beating the successful US sitcom *Frasier*) and being named Best TV Comedy at the British Comedy Awards in 2003.

Coupling focuses on the lives, or more specifically the love and sex lives, of six London-based twenty- and thirty-somethings, all of whom have been, are or will be involved with each other. The group of friends consists of three female and three male characters thoroughly absorbed in their private world of dating and relationships. Susan (Sarah Alexander) and Steve (Jack Davenport) represent the standardised couple at the centre of the sitcom, with Susan being the confident and dominant part of the relationship, while 'nice guy' Steve is reliant on her guidance.¹ They both bring a best friend (Sally, Jeff) and an ex (Patrick, Jane) into the group. Beautician Sally (Kate Isitt) is constantly engaged with stereotypical women's magazines

topics, ranging from the elasticity of her skin to a man's penis size, while her persistent love/sex interest Patrick (Ben Miles) represents the epitome of the hedonistic bachelor. Jeff (Richard Coyle) is singled out by his lilting Welsh accent that underlines the eccentricity and craziness of his character. His female counterpart is Jane (Gina Bellman), the outgoing nymphomaniac, whose ill-timed, ill-fitting and inappropriate comments show a constant disregard of sexual norms and social expectations.

By opting for this character constellation, the BBC took on a sub-genre of the domestic sitcom that enjoys great popularity in the US, where productions focusing on a 'family of friends' like *Cheers* (NBC 1982–1993), *Seinfeld* (NBC 1989–1998), *Frasier* (NBC 1993–2004), *Friends* (NBC 1994–2004), *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS 2005–2014) or *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS 2007–) receive (or received) top ratings and can rely on a massive fanbase. Critics have in fact argued that *Coupling* is a hybrid of British and American TV sitcom conventions, as Moffat links British 'comic wordplay and physical buffoonery' with 'the fast pace and romantic carousel storylines' that the audience is familiar with from American productions (Doyle). Moreover, many of the scenes uniting all six friends are set in a bar, with the actors gathering around a centrally positioned couch: this is one of the 'most common space-defining elements [characteristic of] American sitcoms' (Savorelli 23) and a clear nod to *Friends*, the American sitcom of which *Coupling* is often said to be a British version. In fact, *Coupling* is advertised as the 'British *Friends*' on the DVD cover of the first series (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 46). Furthermore, in 2003, the American network NBC bought the rights to *Coupling* for the American market and remade it, hoping that *Coupling U.S.* could fill the void *Friends* had left after its final season in 2004. *Coupling U.S.*, however, proved to be no success story at all and was cancelled after only four aired episodes.

It is interesting to note that the make-up of *Coupling* has neither relevant predecessors nor successors on British TV. A friends-based, domestic sitcom focusing on the (love) lives of urban, middle-class characters in their twenties and thirties is common in the American, but rather unusual in the British sitcom tradition. Few other examples follow a slightly similar pattern: *Men Behaving Badly*, *Joking Apart* (BBC2 1993–1995), *Black Books* (Channel 4, 2000–2004), *Two Pints of Lager and a Packet of Crisps* (BBC2/BBC Choice/BBC3 2001–2011) and *Gavin & Stacey* (BBC3/BBC1 2007–2010). These examples, however, all deviate from the buoyant 'American' layout of *Coupling*: *Men Behaving Badly* is a celebration of political incorrectness and the rising lad culture of the 1990s, *Joking Apart* focuses on the separation and then divorce of its main characters, *Black Books* presents a darker and generally misanthropic take on the world, *Two Pints of Lager and a Packet of Crisps* has a working-class focus in a rural Cheshire setting, and *Gavin & Stacey* deals with (mostly Welsh and English) cultural stereotypes while its protagonists cope with their long-distance relationship. The marked formal and thematic variations across these sitcoms can be attributed to the fact that in Britain, 'the

[strong] role of the author ... does lend itself to the fostering of individuality in a manner perhaps more difficult to achieve within the American system' (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 55).

In some respects, *Coupling* follows the established sitcom recipe: it was filmed with three to four cameras in front of a live studio audience, who replaced the missing fourth wall of indoor settings. Moreover, in line with British sitcom tradition, the show rarely features one-liners or wisecracking gags. Instead, dialogues and plot slowly evolve into 'farical situation[s] where the characters reveal themselves accidentally in what they say' (Moffat, quoted in Doyle). On the level of form, however, *Coupling* deliberately transgresses the audience's generic expectations (Dannenberg 171). In order to spice up the somewhat limited subject matter of the show, Moffat chose 'to do slightly mad things to story-telling' (Series Four, Extras), as he himself put it. The inventive narrative strategies include the presentation of a complete episode in a split-screen technique ('Split'), dream sequences (for example, 'Circus of the Epidurals'), the use of a foreign language ('The Girl with Two Breasts') or a device named 'Captain Subtext', which describes the re-playing of a scene with the characters' polite conversation being replaced by the utterance of their real thoughts and feelings, that is, the latent subtext of the previous scene ('Her Best Friend's Bottom').

These narrative techniques have two major effects. First, they are frequently used to place the viewers in a state of discrepant awareness, so that the audience knows more about the context of a given situation than the characters in question. This dramatic strategy is one of the major sources of *Coupling's* humour, as it creates all sorts of double entendres which for the most part refer to sex and are thus all the more racy. Second, the narrative innovations highlight the significance of communication within personal relationships: the show draws on and subtly mocks the fact that the voicing of one's true (sexual) desires and wishes is frequently inhibited by social norms of politeness, political correctness, etc. In addition, in the episodes in question, the split-screen technique or dream sequences are used to imply the existence of gendered patterns of communication. Here, humour derives from the allegedly different ways in which women and men perceive, talk about and negotiate the complicated world of relationships. Amusing as these scenes are, they nevertheless raise the question of whether *Coupling* does not rely too much on and thereby perpetuates the naturalisation of gender differences.

The hyperbolic representation of the sitcom's characters and situations, the actors' joy in playing and the improbability of certain plot twists led critics to argue that Moffat has actually created a farce. Whilst it has been suggested 'that farce is impossible to write in a contemporary setting because the plot motor of the form – the need to lie to prevent loss of face or exposure – is implausible in a society which has ever less sense of shame', Lawson hints at the fact that what 'Moffat has understood is that there remains one area in which people are desperate to impress and

terrified of revelation: dating' (Lawson). Indeed, the driving comic force behind *Coupling* lies in the contrasting dynamics of the characters' desire for relationships and their inability to 'understand' the opposite sex (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 121). At other times, humour is derived from situations that reveal a tension between expectations and actuality both on the level of the characters *and* the audience. When, for example, Howard, a gay character, asserts that 'Maggie Thatcher is the best Prime Minister this country has ever had' ('Size Matters'), he subverts the implicit assumption that a homosexual man has to be liberal and thus anti-Tory, which is mirrored in Sally's appalled reply: 'How dare you say that? You're gay! You're on our side!' The deviation from what is perceived as a socio-cultural truth becomes the playing field for the joke and the audience is showcased the instability of their own assumptions.

2 Sex in the time of the free market

The British sitcom generally tends to display 'little or no explicit regard or reference to the world outside the series' (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 57) and *Coupling* is no exception to this rule, especially since it focuses on matters private and personal, namely sex and intimate relationships. The temporal horizon is at best delineated by Mariella Frostrup's cameo appearances and scattered pop-cultural references to showbiz celebrities of the early 2000s. Politics are only explicitly mentioned once, but this occurs as early as in the show's second episode, as if to situate it within the socio-cultural climate of New Britain. In 'Size Matters', Sally has to decide whether the apparent size of Patrick's penis is worth breaking her promise never to sleep with a Tory. As the conversation progresses, sex talk evolves into a short political debate:

Patrick: Oh, don't be so PC.

Howard: Typical leftie puritan.

Sally: Typical what? Come the revolution.

Patrick: What revolution? You guys are in power! We're the revolution now.

Sally: No ... no, it can't be right.

Patrick: You're the evil empire ...

Sally: No! You're not the goodies! We're the goodies. We're lefties! We're always goodies! ('Size Matters')

The short exchange makes apparent that under New Labour, traditional political affiliations have become unstable. Given that the conversation unfolds in the context of the show's favourite topic, a tenuous connection between the mellowing of political doctrines in New Britain and a comparable sexual reorientation is implied. The playful (and nearly literal) incorporation of the public into the private sphere posits that a feelgood third way

is permeating Britain's chambers: an ostensible waning of ideologies, both in terms of state and sexual politics.

Yet sex and romance are neither purely private nor ahistorical. The reference to New Labour itself hints at the fact that the topics *Coupling* is mostly concerned with – gender relations, sex and romantic relationships – unfold within a larger socio-historical context. In spite of their seemingly intimate and secluded nature, they are determined by time and place; they result from and in turn influence questions of power, politics and economy. As such, they are subject to ongoing, albeit not necessarily consciously articulated, (re-)negotiations. In Ingrid von Rosenberg's words: 'We may think that "sex" as short for "sexual desire and activities" is the most natural and therefore universal experience based in biology, but a look at history shows that the term covers a great range of behaviour according to different cultural patterns, norms and values in various societies and at different times' (von Rosenberg 45). Laughter offers a particularly fruitful arena for probing sexual norms. Like sex, it is a subversive, emotion-driven bodily act capable of counteracting standards dictated by the ratio, which is why both, as Manfred Pfister argues, have encountered various 'attempts to limit, control and civilize them' (vi). Yet, depending on who is laughing, who is being laughed at and who authorises the joke in the first place, humour may just as well serve to buttress existing hierarchies and values. The awareness of this Janus-faced nature of humour – as both challenge to and confirmation of particular norms – is especially relevant with regard to sitcoms, as the amusement which they provoke is scripted. Particularly in sitcoms employing a laugh track (such as *Coupling*), audiences are clearly induced to jointly laugh at specific characters, their attitudes and convictions. It is here that humour may easily turn from individual subversion to the collective exclusion of 'deviant' others who become the butt of the jokes. Needless to say, this tension between the negotiation and validation of norms also applies when the stuff of comedy is sex, as is the case in *Coupling*. It is therefore instructive to consider which conceptions of intimacy are promoted and/or rejected in *Coupling* and what they reveal about the sexual politics of early-millennial Britain.

Coupling's handling of sexuality and romance can be related to a phenomenon which the American sociologist Eva Illouz has termed 'emotional capitalism':

a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other, thus producing ... a broad, sweeping movement in which affect is made an essential aspect of economic behavior and in which emotional life – especially that of the middle classes – follows the logic of economic relations and exchange. (Illouz, *Cold Intimacies* 5)

In her earlier study, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia* (1997), Illouz had demonstrated how: 'Postmodern romance is characterized by the fusion of

culture with commodity, the construction of desire within the idioms of consumption' (82). Of course, the interweaving of personal relationships with economic concerns pre-dates the postmodern period. The commodification of intimacy already manifested itself in the eighteenth century, which witnessed the rise of the middle classes, a concomitant consumer revolution and a pervasive commercialisation of society (McKendrick *et al.*). Colin Campbell argues for this period that 'the "romantic" ingredient in culture [can be] regarded as having had a crucial part to play in the development of modern consumerism itself' (Campbell 2). Illouz, on the other hand, seeks to unveil the specificity of relationships under late capitalism, which to her consists in the difficult challenge of fulfilling 'two contradictory requirements, one affective-gratuitous and the other instrumental-utilitarian' (*Consuming the Romantic Utopia* 196). The first requirement emphasises the hedonistic side of love as a gratifying union of free individuals who spontaneously make and enjoy their emotional choice. For Illouz, this individualistic, pleasure-seeking aspect of romance is related to the economic spheres of leisure and consumption, not least because media products and advertisements repeatedly suggest that contemporary couples must literally consume – food, drinks, jewellery, exotic holidays, etc. – in order to sustain and stimulate the affective side of their relationship. This pleasure principle is counterbalanced by a tendency which Illouz associates with the spheres of work and production: here, relationships are viewed as long-term projects involving a cost-and-benefit calculation. They consequently require management, compromises and hard work in order to yield 'best value' for both parties.

Coupling, whose first series appeared three years after the publication of Illouz's *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, reiterates many of her findings and suggests that the commodification of sex and romance has become as pervasive in the UK as Illouz claims it to be for the US. This, in turn, can be arguably related to economic and cultural globalisation as well as to the free-market ideology endorsed by Conservative governments from Thatcher onwards and largely sustained under New Labour in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In an analysis of the public discourse under Tony Blair, Bill Williamson posits a shift:

from a collectivist model of social welfare to a market-based, highly individualized one in which people expect and are expected to take care of themselves. ... The language used is that of choice, accountability, personal responsibility, efficiency, targets, social inclusion and censure for those not willing to try and look after themselves. (Williamson 149, 159)

Echoing this public discourse and supporting Illouz's hypothesis, sex and personal relationships in *Coupling* likewise revolve around, on the one hand, work, competition and self-discipline (corresponding to the

production-related side of romance mentioned by Illouz) and, on the other, pleasure and consumption (pertaining to Illouz's hedonistic dimension).

3 Sex and romance between consumption and production

As regards the role of competition, a pertinent case in point is provided in Series One in an episode entitled 'The Cupboard of Patrick's Love', in which it is revealed that Patrick videotapes the numerous women he sleeps with. He stores the best films in a walk-in closet of his trendy apartment, while the less satisfying female 'performances' are taped over. This competitive and commodifying take on sex sets the tone for the rest of the episode, but is also indicative of the show as a whole – which, as a media product in itself, forms part of a 'highly profitable business' (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 54). In the course of the episode in question, Jane attempts to seduce Patrick, but when she is told that he has a female visitor stripped to her underwear awaiting him in his bedroom, she withdraws, saying: 'I don't compete with other women' ('The Cupboard of Patrick's Love'). This could be read as a confident repudiation of the sexist and market-based approach endorsed by Patrick, but a moment later Jane seductively enquires: 'Underwear? What's that?', thereby suggesting that her erotic 'value' is higher than that of the other woman. Jane thus willingly exposes herself – or rather the show has Jane 'willingly' expose herself – to what Laura Mulvey has called the 'determining male gaze [that] projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*' (Mulvey 589). Mulvey's phrasing, with its emphasis on stylisation, impact and display, suggests a proximity of the male gaze with the commodification, marketing and branding of products. Taking up a similarly capitalist approach to sex, Sally, upon learning that Jane nearly slept with Patrick, exclaims: 'This isn't fair. I was going to have Patrick ... I'll be the only one who hasn't been Patricked.' She behaves as if she missed out on a particularly attractive bargain or shopping item, and it is quite revealing that she speaks about 'having Patrick', treating him as something that can be possessed. The reason why she is so keen on 'having' him is not because he is a nice person, but because he has an 'enormous' penis. Sex is viewed here as a matter of relative asset, not of mutual affection. A similarly competitive attitude is discernible in Steve and Patrick's discussion of the latter's home pornography collection. Patrick suggests to Steve that he might be offended upon seeing an older tape showing Susan: 'What if she does stuff on the tape with me she doesn't do with you?' And Steve is indeed upset when he realises: 'She's never done that with me!' In other words, he complains about Patrick having had a better 'bargain' with his girlfriend than he does now. Moreover, their heated dispute about who has the 'naked rights' to Susan calls to mind property-rights questions.

The example discussed here shows that in episodes such as 'The Cupboard of Patrick's Love', *Coupling* exaggerates the competitive approach to sex in order to make it laughable. The episode's title, an obvious misnomer, might even be read as a subtle criticism of the vacuous language of advertising which pervades our daily existence, including our relationships. The home porn stored by Patrick arguably does not have much to do with 'Love', so that the inappropriate usage of this word in the episode's title betrays how marketable, ubiquitous and yet meaningless this signifier has by now become. The irony is, however, that it is nevertheless precisely the desire for romantic 'Love' – and not just sex – that fuels *Coupling's* overarching plot.

The sitcom oscillates between the two poles identified by Illouz, thus mirroring the contradictory requirements that postmodern couples have to meet in late capitalist Britain. A look at the settings in *Coupling* brings this twin connection of personal relationships with consumption and production/work to light. The privileged setting of the show is a bar, that is, a 'public sphere of consumption' (Illouz, *Consuming* 14). It is complemented by an elegant wine-drinking place that serves as a venue for the three women. (Note the gendering performed at the level of drinks: when alone, men drink beer while women drink wine.) In scenes showing the characters at home, they eat, drink or turn to media products such as magazines, television or computer games, thereby establishing a connection between collective consumption and personal affection. This conspicuous and leisurely consumption is recurrently offset by showing the protagonists in their professional surroundings. Yet the sphere of work is not construed as antithetical to personal relationships. On the contrary, echoing Illouz's conviction that postmodern romance is simultaneously marked by consumption *and* work, most relationships in the sitcom actually originate in the corporate office in which Susan (who holds a degree in economics – see 'The Freckle, the Key and the Couple Who Weren't') and Jeff (who likewise has a background in economics since he applies for the position of senior accountant – see 'Sex, Death and Nudity') work. Susan and Steve's first meeting takes place at a party there ('Flushed'), as does that of Sally and Patrick ('Remember This'), while Jeff's only gratifying (particularly in sexual terms) relationship in the course of *Coupling* is that with his boss Julia. The setting which unites the spheres of production, consumption and personal relationships in the most flagrant way is Sally's beauty parlour, where several scenes of the second and third series are set. It is in beauty salons such as these that the (female) body is worked at and 'produced' so that it may turn into a consumable commodity on the 'market' of intimate relationships. As Susan half-mockingly puts it during her short-lived break-up with Steve: 'I'm single. I have to look good naked' ('Split'). Incidentally, her statement again calls to mind Mulvey's notion of the male gaze to which Susan surrenders willy-nilly.

The choice of settings in *Coupling* suggests a manifest interpenetration of the sphere of intimate relationships with that of economy. And yet to claim

that the capitalist view of sex and intimacy forms the prime target of the sitcom's jokes would be to overstate the case. *Coupling* registers and reproduces the fact that intimacy and economy are, well, coupled, but on the whole laughter is rarely used to deliberately lay bare and criticise this connection. Emotional capitalism casually emerges as a fact of life, but not as a fact of life to be positively rallied against through humour.

4 (S)explicit content, implicit norm and the alignment of deviance with the market

'Since its early days', writes Klaus Scheunemann:

television has been under pressure from two opposing forces in society – [on the one hand those] who want TV to promulgate certain values and norms and feel offended by deviations from these values and norms; on the other hand the groups that want TV to depart from traditional patterns and to depict what they see as reality. (Scheunemann 110)

Coupling's uninhibited references to pornography, masturbation, threesomes, lesbian sex, etc. might suggest that it privileges the latter attitude in being open to and appreciative of diverse sexual practices. Yet a second glance reveals that the sitcom performs an implicit assessment of sexual behaviour at the level of characters and it is through this strategy that the (sexual) norm is distinguished from its 'deviant' counterpart. This distinction is then functionalised within the framework of (emotional) capitalism, in keeping with the logic described by Rainer Emig: 'If the perverts have become friendly and non-threatening, this does not mean that their mainstream environment has become altogether tolerant and suddenly attuned to "diversity" in any other forms than commercial and economic exploitation' (Emig 40).

Steve and Susan form the normative centre of *Coupling*. The development of their relationship frames the entire show, which begins with their first date and ends with the birth of their son – the grand narrative thus projecting the desirable trajectory of togetherness. Their friends and exes, by contrast, all have apparent failings: Jeff and Patrick, whose favourite pastimes seem to be sex, computer games and going out for a drink, are presented as dim-witted; Sally is overly obsessed with her looks and ageing, while Jane's pronounced egocentrism makes her incapable of successfully engaging in any social interaction. In contrast, Susan and Steve are considerate, rational, smart and, above all, capable of critically assessing their own behaviour as well as that of their friends. They display a considerable degree of self-control as well as emotional and social intelligence, which is often lacking in their four friends. Consequently, when situations get out of hand, Susan and Steve act as the voice of reason: Susan interrupts their acquaintances' trivial discussions with an authoritative 'For God's sake!', while Steve reprimands

his male friends. Their normative importance is underlined further by the fact that they frequently sit in the middle, surrounded by their friends. This spatial arrangement not only mirrors the other characters' eccentricity, but also underscores their normative ex-centricity.

If Jeff, Patrick, Sally and Jane display a lesser degree of self-control in social matters than Susan and Steve, the same is true of their sexual preferences. Jeff has an obvious predilection for breaking the rules of polite conversation by saying dirty words in public; moreover, he is also a fan of bondage. Patrick is an insouciant sexist gigolo whose insatiable libido matches the size of his ego. Sally, in turn, decides to sleep with a man whom she neither likes nor respects simply because of the impressive size of his genitals. Jane's self-centredness makes her throw herself at willing and unwilling men, acting upon her instincts whenever she is 'gagging for a shag' ('The Cupboard of Patrick's Love'). Given that these four characters are generally portrayed as deficient or immature in social terms, their correspondent lack of sexual self-discipline acquires the same derogatory characteristics. They can be liked, tolerated and laughed at, as long as their behaviour is repeatedly put into perspective by their sensible friends. Their trespasses on the terrain of sexual correctness are welcomed for their comic potential and are contained at the same time. Steve thus accuses Patrick of having 'the sexual politics of a Viking attack' ('Inferno'), reminds him that 'here on earth there's a gap between seeing someone you like and having sex with them that we like to call conversation' ('The Man with Two Legs') or admonishes his best friend Jeff not to see women as mere 'transport for breasts' ('The Girl with Two Breasts'). In these examples, the sitcom explicitly takes a stance against sexism and misogyny, yet it also comically exploits and thus partially perpetuates such attitudes by allowing them to be voiced in the first place. Whether the audience laughs *at* or *with* them remains up to debate.

Drawing on Freudian terms, one can claim that within *Coupling's* character constellation, Jeff, Patrick, Jane and Sally allow the audience to indulge in the id, that is, to at least imagine abandoning social norms in favour of (erotic) pleasure. Susan and Steve counterbalance this desire by serving both as the normative superego to their friends and as an epitome of the composed and socially acceptable ego for the audience. In this way, *Coupling*, albeit seemingly a sitcom about a group of friends and thus non-hierarchical relationships, subtly reintroduces the hierarchical constellation of a family. Susan and Steve function as parents who have to remind their unruly children about the standards of appropriate behaviour. It is precisely because Jeff, Patrick, Sally and Jane are cast in the role of children that their 'immature' behaviour can be legitimately enjoyed by the audience; it can be watched, even envied, and forgiven, provided that it is systematically checked by a parental voice.

What then is the norm of sexuality and romance endorsed by the sitcom's model couple? Surprisingly perhaps for a TV production which prides itself

on being frank and modern (the DVD of the first series is advertised as 'the naughty new comedy about nothing ... but Sex!'), its standard for relationships is heterosexual, monogamist, long-term and procreative. At the same time, *Coupling* bears witness to a postmodern transformation of intimacy and reflects a new, liberal attitude towards sex, as the group's discussion topics freely revolve around sadomasochism, home pornography or premature ejaculation. Here the sitcom proves to be a child of its time in which the: 'Old stigmas ... were rapidly fading, while new cultures of sexual pleasure, explicitness and conspicuous consumption had become increasingly normalized' (Weeks 393). In keeping with the changed sexual standards of the early 2000s, the audience is made to understand that certain forms of sexual behaviour which would have been deemed offensive only a few decades earlier are by now permissible. It is, for example, acceptable for unmarried couples to become parents, just as women and men may sow their wild oats before committing themselves to permanent relationships and concomitant responsibilities. Moreover, through Steve, we learn that men in relationships should be allowed to watch pornography, masturbate and fantasise about sex with other women.

While the explicit articulation and sanctioning of such needs on public television can seem somewhat liberated, we should not overlook the fact that the framework within which these desires are legitimised remains highly gendered. *Coupling*, although it clearly strives to promote gender equality within relationships, nevertheless reinforces the naturalisation of gender differences. As has been noted earlier, this occurs with regard to the characters' patterns of communication and consumption, but there are numerous other instances. Jane's alleged bisexuality, for example, makes her character only more attractive for the male characters in the show as they see her as their lesbian/threesome fantasy come true: Mulvey's male gaze revisited. Steve, the male normative voice of the sitcom, justifies his erotic wishes by repeatedly evoking an essentialist notion of heterosexual masculinity with a simple 'I like naked women. I'm a bloke. I'm supposed to like them. We're born like that' ('Inferno') or 'we are men. We are different. We only have one word for soap. We do not own candles' ('The Girl with One Heart').

That the fulfilment of erotic needs might be just as legitimately claimed for women is, by contrast, rarely taken up. Susan is an attractive, successful, self-confident and sexually well-versed woman whose long record of former erotic adventures is repeatedly and playfully hinted at. *Coupling* thus documents an ideological shift from earlier conceptions, privileging women's sexual innocence and inexperience, to a new outlook where a woman's value is measured against her knowledge of erotic practices (Gill 247). Yet this revision of female sexuality does not displace the traditional romance plot, but much rather reinstitutes it within a capitalist context. Susan's 'mastery of the arts of seduction, sexual gratification and consumer display ... preserves the story as one in which eroticism and ambition are inevitably

and inextricably linked, in which feminine ambition can only be realized through marriage to the right man' (Radner, quoted in Gill 247–248). Significantly, as soon as Susan meets Steven, 'the man [she wants] to spend the rest of [her] life with' ('Split'), the exploration of her sexual needs, fears and fantasies basically comes to a halt. When she is about to give birth, it is tellingly not her but Steve who raises concerns about what is going to happen to her body 'down there' because he is worried about the future of *his* sexual satisfaction ('9½ Minutes'). This is another instance of how *Coupling* privileges a male gaze in its portrayal of contemporary sex life.

Susan's transformation from man-eating vamp to modern mother hints at the in some respects conservative trajectory of the sitcom's grand narrative. Although *Coupling* features traditional self-contained episodes, it exhibits a strong overarching storyline that manifests a clear heteronormative focus. By the time of its finale, the show has lived up to its name by neatly coupling the six main characters into three heterosexual pairs. Sally and Patrick as well as Jane and Oliver (who replaces Jeff in the last series) come together by the end of Series Four, while Susan and Steve's relationship is crowned with the highest form of legitimising a heterosexual relationship: the birth of a (male) child. Even the initially 'deviant' characters, then, gradually evolve towards the implicit norm, which is decisively accentuated with one-time rake Patrick proposing to Sally in *Coupling's* last episode.

The question remains as to how this progress is related to the notion of emotional capitalism. For Illouz: 'The cultural contradiction between the sphere of consumption and that of production is at the heart (so to speak) of the modern meanings of romantic love; romantic practices simultaneously draw from the pervasive but conflicting cultural idioms of hedonism and work discipline' (*Consuming* 11). *Coupling* grapples with this tension in two ways: first, by relegating the characters to the two opposing poles, with Susan and Steve representing work, rationality and self-control, while the others embrace consumption, pleasure and instant gratification. Second, the sitcom uses its grand narrative to figure the contradictory requirements of capitalist love as stages of a life cycle. It suggests that people in their twenties may legitimately give in to the hedonistic-consumptive attitude to sex, but that by the time they reach their thirties, they should opt for the stability of a responsible heterosexual relationship which, while not entirely devoid of consumption and pleasure, is nevertheless concomitant with self-restraint, compromise and work.

5 Conclusion

In times of global capitalism we are repeatedly told that to support domestic and international economies, we should be both efficient producers and ardent consumers – or, as Daniel Bell suggested, 'hard workers by day and hedonists by night' (quoted in Illouz, *Consuming* 11). *Coupling* extends this

late capitalist requirement to the sphere of intimacy. Although its sexual economy clearly privileges and upholds values related to work, it nevertheless legitimises and celebrates consumption, thereby endorsing a model of intimacy congruent with that of the market. The characters' development from ever-lusting individuals to ever-lasting couples epitomises the requirements of (emotional) capitalism today, which demands individuality *and* cooperation, self-gratification *and* self-control, pleasure *and* discipline. At the same time, through its celebration of domesticity and the private sphere, the show somewhat parochially and naïvely turns a blind eye to the global implications of the very market system it reproduces and partakes in. The normative and escapist dimension of *Coupling* is underscored further by the background of the sitcom's six protagonists: they are without exception white, young, good-looking, slim, healthy, urban and middle class. This set of staple characteristics effectively undercuts the sitcom's claim to subversion and exposes the relevance of desirable socio-economic markers for its sexual politics. As Illouz points out:

Although the meanings perpetuated by the postmodern romantic utopia are inclusive, populist, transgressive, and egalitarian, and although the romantic utopia cuts across social divisions, it contains and reproduces these divisions because it demands the cultural and, secondarily, the economic capital of the new classes who have come to dominate the social scene. Romantic practices are intertwined with the meritocratic, work-oriented, and rational outlook of the sphere of production, and this outlook ultimately helps reproduce social divisions. (*Consuming the Romantic Utopia* 13)

When this observation is considered against the background of the increasing social and economic polarisation within the UK, sex and intimacy as presented in *Coupling* suddenly emerge as no laughing matter.

Note

1. This portrayal of a shift in relationship dominance and men's relative loss of power is representative of the sitcom genre since the 1970s and reflects, as Klaus Scheunemann argues, the achievements of the women's rights movement (132).

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22

The Comic Nation: *Little Britain* and the Politics of Representation

Oliver Lindner

1 Introduction

The first decade of the new millennium saw an impressive presence of comedy series on British television: *Human Remains* (BBC1, 2000), *Big Train* (BBC2, 1998–2002), *The League of Gentlemen* (BBC2 1999–2002), *The Office* (BBC2/BBC1 2001–2003), *Nighty Night* (BBC3/BBC2 2004–2005), *The Catherine Tate Show* (BBC2 2004–2007), *Respectable* (Channel 5 2006), *Gavin & Stacey* (BBC3/BBC1 2007–2010) or *Miranda* (BBC2/BBC1 2009–2015) all pushed British TV sitcom and sketch comedy firmly into the twenty-first century. However, the show that has reached the widest audience and that has led sketch comedy to seemingly unprecedented heights of popularity is *Little Britain* (Hall 17).

Created by David Walliams and Matt Lucas and based on a comedy series on BBC Radio 4 (2001), the show has garnered massive success as well as critical acclaim since it went on screen in 2003, winning several awards, including two prestigious BAFTAs for ‘Best Comedy Performance’ and ‘Best Programme or Series’. After Series One in 2003, Series Two followed in 2004 and Series Three in 2005. Furthermore, in 2006 a Christmas Special in two parts, *Little Britain Abroad*, was shown, which had the series’ favourite characters travelling around the world. Sell-out live shows called *Little Britain Live* between 2005 and 2007, a special edition and contributions to Comic Relief (2005–2007) further cemented the status of the show as cutting-edge British comedy. Even an American spin-off was produced, *Little Britain USA*, which, broadcast in 2008 on the HBO channel, featured some of the most popular characters of the original series and also introduced new characters.

Not surprisingly, the DVD release of the first series in 2004 became one of the best-selling DVDs in British media history (Hall 17). The series’ popularity can also be seen in the merchandise it created, from talking dolls of its most popular characters to books, mugs, video games, t-shirts, calendars and other products. Moreover, Lucas and Walliams’ show is one of the most successful British comedy exports of the last decades, being translated into

several languages and shown on numerous TV channels across the globe. Together with writer Boyd Hilton, Walliams and Lucas published a book, *Inside Little Britain* (2006), which is both an autobiography and a diary of their live tour.

This chapter will first look at the show's structure and its comic strategies, and will then explore major themes addressed in the sketches. Furthermore, the critical reception of *Little Britain* in the media and in academic circles will be investigated. Finally, a look at the 'afterlife' of the show in today's online universe will be provided, exemplifying contemporary forms of distribution, consumption and appropriation of popular media products.

2 Structure and strategies

Little Britain consists of character-based short sketches, a format that has populated British TV screens since the 1950s, the most popular series of which include *A Bit of Fry and Laurie* (BBC1/BBC2 1987–1995), *French and Saunders* (BBC2 1987–), *Absolutely* (Channel 4 1989–1993), *The Fast Show* (BBC2 1994–1997, 2000, 2011, 2014) and *Big Train*. The sketches centre on the performances of Matt Lucas and David Walliams, and a group of actors make repeated appearances throughout the series, such as Paul Putner, Anthony Head, Rob Brydon, Steve Furst and Joann Condon. Various comedy screenwriters have contributed to the show, among them Andy Riley and Kevin Cecil. *Little Britain* uses the well-established format of 'canned laughter', a sound track added to the show to indicate moments when the audience is expected to laugh. Each episode consists of 13–20 sketches of varying length, with a tendency towards longer sketches in the later series. The episodes contain both recurring figures as well as new characters which either return in future episodes (for example, Mr Mann and Roy (Series One, Episode Seven) or Maggie and Judy (Series Two, Episode One)) or just feature in a single sketch (for example, the Russian babysitter Boris (Series One, Episode Eight)). The last episode of Series Three, however, has no new characters, opting rather to give the show's favourite icons a conclusive send-off.

Most, if not all, of the sketches are introduced via the off-screen narrator (Tom Baker), who acts as a presenter and delivers humorous comments with a punchline, thus comprising a main source of humour apart from the actual sketches. He acts in his role as a guide supposedly familiarising foreign viewers with the 'British way of life' and also announces the setting of the individual sketches. Moreover, it is primarily the narrator who identifies the regions where the characters live and thereby underlines *Little Britain's* multi-regional setting. The thematic structure of the series, of introducing the British way of life, makes it particularly suitable to an international audience. Developing this concept, *Little Britain Abroad* places the major characters in international settings, ranging from Belgium and Spain to the

USA, while *Little Britain USA* moves the characters to America, tapping the lucrative US market.

The series employs a variety of tried-and-true comedy techniques of British TV, often a combination of grotesque appearance and powerful punchlines. A major source of humour in the sketches rests on repetition, which has the characters reacting in a similar way over and over again. For example, the transvestite Emily Howard is continually recognised as a man, while the gay Welshman Daffyd Thomas is never willing to tolerate gay life in his neighbourhood. These forms of anticipated behaviour serve to heighten the viewer's recognition of the characters while also imbuing him or her with the power to predict what is going to happen. Moreover, many characters are furnished with repetitive catchphrases ('I am the only gay in the village', 'Computer says no', etc.), which greatly contribute to their popularity, this technique having been a hallmark of characters in earlier sketch comedies such as *The Fast Show* (Hall 17). Otherwise, *Little Britain* airs a full repertoire of accents, caricature, parody, hyperbole and irony as the standard techniques of comedy.

It is an inherent feature of comedy, whether in jokes, the theatre, cinema or TV, that boundaries of conventions, morality and etiquette are transgressed, questioned or even subverted (Dyer 114). As even a superficial glance at one of the episodes of *Little Britain* reveals, the treatment of sexuality and the body emerges as a dominant ingredient in the show. One reason for the success of the series lies in its taboo-breaking content (in prime-time TV) in relation to sexuality and the body, both central topics of comedy (Stott 62, 83). Cross-dressing, a cornerstone of a show that has all major characters played by two men, has a long tradition in British comedy that can be traced back to the Renaissance stage and its policy of men impersonating female characters. In *Little Britain*, both Walliams and Lucas play women in many sketches, for example, Vicky Pollard (Lucas), Anne (Walliams), Maggie (Walliams) and Marjorie Dawes (Lucas). It is their impersonation of female characters which attracts much laughter and has contributed considerably to the show's appeal.

The theme of sexuality is explored in a wide range of situations. In Series One, the Jason and Granny sketches depict a young man who is sexually attracted to his friend's grandmother. The sketches show various allusions to sexual intercourse, ranging from verbal discourse to Jason licking the old woman's feet (Series One, Episode Seven) and his fantasy about two old women exchanging passionate kisses. In Series Two, several sketches show how two women in a restaurant look at pictures of potential husbands, with the pictures showing the men's penises, another taboo-breaking twist (Rachel and Nicola; Series Two, Episode Six). The show's treatment of homosexuality, however, is so pervasive that it deserves a closer look and will be discussed below.

When Lucas and Walliams slip into their costumes to play Bubbles De Vere and her rival Desiree in Series Three, their sketches revolve around the

absurdly obese female body. However, it is not only the sexualised body that serves as a source of humour; absurdly exaggerated bodily functions are likewise used as a major prompt in many sketches. The pensioner Mrs Emery urinates in all sorts of public places without realising it (Series Three, Episode One; Series Three, Episode Four). The xenophobe Maggie vomits whenever she encounters things unpleasant to her (Series Two, Episode One; Series Two, Episode Four). Anne, the inmate of a psychiatric institution, gives her therapist a self-made picture that seems to contain excrement (Series One, Episode Six). To a great extent, these characters reveal the Bakhtinian 'grotesque body', which is 'uncontrolled, appetitive, vulgar, dirty and inconvenient, a body that smells and bleeds, and laughs and screams, especially when it is not supposed to' (Glover and Kaplan 64). Although the reading of the grotesque female body as a misogynist strategy is, to some extent, subverted by the cross-dressing of the male actors, the series' treatment of the female body has drawn sharp criticism (Finding 22; Lockyer 131).

Beyond the well-tried strategies of cross-dressing and of portraying sexuality and the unruly body, the success of comic characters also rests in their general ability to pinpoint, tackle or even negotiate their audience's social, economic and cultural environments, their assumptions and beliefs, as well as to address pressing questions of popular debate. *Little Britain* is particularly concerned with aspects of national identity, class, the relationship of mainstream culture with its ethnic minorities, and sexual identity. These issues will therefore be investigated in the following text in order to explore the show's treatment of these central themes and to trace its relationship to the wider social, cultural and political climate of contemporary British society.

3 'Little' Britain?: national identity

A comedy show that has 'Britain' in its title is of course expected to be fertile territory for exploring aspects of national identity. Its title already also hints at what is one of the show's major strategies: the combination of the terms 'Little England' and 'Great Britain' serves to ridicule and expose the absurdities of a supposedly 'Great' British nation. The series introduces characters from various regions of Great Britain, from both real and fictional places. Most of them are located in England, ranging from Northern England (Lou Todd and Andy Pipkin) to the south-west (Emily Howard). Whereas Scottish regional identity is present in the character of Ray McCooney (Walliams), an eccentric hotel owner who confuses his guests with his peculiar ways of communication, Wales is represented by out-of-the-closet gay man Daffyd Thomas (Lucas) and his neighbours in the small town of Llanddewi Brefi. Besides the narrator's comments, the specific region is also underlined by the local accents of the characters. Yet the series defies easy allegorical readings, since the characters appear overwhelmingly as individuals rather than as representatives of a specific regional background.

The show's opening theme composed by David Arnold suggests a pompous celebration of national identity with its classical instrumentation, which is, however, subverted by the narrator's announcements, as, for example, in the series' first episode:

Britain, Britain, Britain – land of technological achievement. We've had running water for over ten years, an underground tunnel links us to Peru, and we invented the cat. But none of these innovations would have been possible were it not for the people of Britain. And it is those people that we do look at today. Let's do it. (Series One, Episode One)

This announcement clearly aims at making fun of British self-fashioning as the cradle of the Industrial Revolution. The geographically preposterous claim of an underground tunnel to Peru is a humorous exaggeration and an antidote to the understatement of having running water for 'ten years'. The opening announcement thereby reveals the main strategy of the narrator's humour – of presenting stark contradictions that continually ridicule the idea of British greatness hinted at by the opening theme.

As can be gauged from these examples, the traditional concept of a 'great' British nation is subverted in the show, 'both on the level of characters and their "stories" as well as, and more importantly, on the level of narrative transmission' (Sedlmayr 14). With the narrator's constant undermining of any idea of national greatness through his paradoxical and nonsensical statements and with the characters' absurd situations, their bickering and their funny and even grotesque experiences, the show indeed accentuates a 'little' Britain, devoid of anything related to national pride. Moreover, the presence of the narrator also stresses the discursive nature of the concept of the 'nation' (Bhabha 2). The only figures who cherish a traditional and normative British identity, also expressed through the Union Jack in the scenes, are the xenophobes Maggie Blackamoor and Sid Pegg (see below), whose liberal environment is not amused by their actions and who are 'involved in the business of identifying internal others, who are seen ... as threatening groups that are *on* the inside but must on no account become *of* the inside' (Medhurst 29). As such, the idea of national greatness is even further ridiculed and exposed as both imaginary and, more importantly, irrelevant.

4 'Yeah but no but yeah but no but': class in *Little Britain*

In his illuminating study on English cultural identity in popular comedy, Andy Medhurst has argued convincingly that the issue of class comprises the most central element in the history of British situation comedy (145). In *Little Britain*, working-class characters have contributed most to the series' success. The teenage single mother Vicky Pollard (Lucas) can be regarded as one of the brand-defining characters of the whole show and has found

equivalents in, for example, the character of Lauren Cooper in *The Catherine Tate Show*. During the whole series, Vicky is portrayed in all sorts of situations associated with socially problematic behaviour. She is introduced as a defiant schoolgirl incapable of fulfilling teacher expectations (Series One, Episode One), whereas later episodes show her as a swimming pool bully (Series One, Episode Two), at court accused of shoplifting (Series One, Episode Four) or at the doctor's, where her ignorance of her advanced state of pregnancy is revealed (Series One, Episode Six). Thus, the figure of Vicky crystallises many aspects generally associated with working-class youth in the British media. She has often been portrayed as the face of 'chav culture', a term used to label young people from social housing estate areas with a preference for sports clothes, designer brands and other signifiers of conspicuous consumption.¹ Her fat body ties in with various other depictions of the working-class body in contemporary British television, which, in comedy or in reality TV, often show it as 'sprawling and undisciplined, both symptom and symbol of consumerism itself' (Hunter 167). Besides her behaviour, it is primarily Vicky's fast-paced language in a Bristol regional accent that generates the appeal of her character to viewers. Her utterance 'Yeahbutnobutyehbutnobutyehbutno', the shibboleth beginning of many of her answers, has become probably the most popular and pervasive sketch element of the whole series. In many sketches, Vicky is questioned about her transgressions and, in her reply, talks about events in her own environment, usually circling around sexuality ('But Paul told Yasmin I showed him my tit on the school trip to Wookey Hole, but I never'; Series One, Episode Three), the body ('he's been trying to grow a moustache but it looks like pubes'; Series Two, Episode Four) and its functions ('Samina said I threw a tampon at Ian'; Series Two, Episode Four).

In the opening credits of Series Three, Vicky is depicted with six female children who also appear in the show (Series Three, Episode Two). Her girls wear the same clothes as Vicky so that their clone-like appearance suggests that Vicky has reproduced herself. This plays on common stereotypes of the 'young welfare mother', but also on the alleged high fertility rates of the 'lower classes'. A sketch involving Vicky's mother in *Little Britain Abroad* (Series One, Episode Two) shows both women with similar appearance, behaviour and communication, which again gives the impression that Vicky's family consists of a line of reproduction of seemingly identical characters, forever separated from mainstream society as representatives of an impoverished underclass.

It is not only the working class that is parodied in the series. For example, in Series Two, the viewer is introduced to the upper-class family of Harvey Pincher. Amidst all their country house decorum, the adult son Harvey is breastfed by his mother in the most embarrassing situations, such as his fiancée's visit (Series Two, Episode One) or even at his church wedding (Series Two, Episode Six). What is taken as normal by the family evokes the

bewilderment and disgust of friends and visitors. However, the popularity of characters like Vicky Pollard or Lou and Andy has to some extent eclipsed the less pervasive representation of the upper strata of British society, so that the portrayal of the urban poor remains the most powerful evocation of class in *Little Britain*, which, not surprisingly, has attracted widespread criticism (Jones 128).

5 'Ali Bongo' and 'Ting Tong from Tooting': multi-ethnic Britain

In its 'survey' of contemporary British society, the ethnic other in *Little Britain* is an important part of the show that can be found in all episodes, in major as well as in minor characters. However, the comic aspect lies not primarily in representatives of ethnic minorities, but rather in the response they generate within some characters belonging to mainstream culture, since the ethnic other exposes the bigotry and intolerance of these characters.

In the Fatfighters sketches, the diet group leader Marjorie Dawes (Lucas) is a prominent example of the treatment of cross-cultural interaction. Among the group of dieters is the British-Asian woman Meera, whose cultural background is signified to the audience by her sari, the red dot on her forehead as well as her Indian accent. In nearly all the Fatfighters sketches, a source of humour lies in Marjorie's continuous strategy of pretending not to understand what Meera says, although it is perfectly intelligible to the group. For example, in one sketch, when questioned about 'cravings', Meera proposes 'fish 'n' chips', but this answer is ignored by Marjorie, who writes down 'curry' as Meera's supposed answer (Series One, Episode One). In another sketch where the members bring along private photos, Marjorie suggests Meera's photo must have been taken in India, ignoring Meera's reply that it shows her in front of her house in New Malden (Series Three, Episode Five). Thus, Marjorie perpetually treats her as the outsider whose limited command of English denies her participation in British culture. The viewers laugh at Marjorie's stupidity, but also at her shameless rudeness towards Meera. However, since Marjorie pesters all other members, too, her cultural xenophobia occurs as part of a larger pattern of abuse to establish and maintain superiority.

In the Maggie and Judy sketches, the pattern of pretended non-comprehension as a form of xenophobia is replaced by the physical reaction of vomiting as a grotesque reaction. The character of Maggie Blackamoor (Walliams) represents a middle-class, conservative milieu rooted in tradition and an outdated devotion to Englishness, while her last name provides an example of the show's use of names as a form of (inverted) characterisation. Vomiting occurs when Maggie realises her new kidney was donated by a woman with an Indian name (Series Two, Episode Six) or when her friend

Judy's (Lucas) daughter's black fiancé appears (Series Three, Episode Three). Much of the humour is derived from hyperbole, notably in the grossly absurd fountains of vomit that Maggie ejects and that stand in contrast to her ordered appearance, another example of the show's ample use of bodily functions as comic ingredients.

The sessions of 'Neighbourwatch', initiated and led by Sid Pegg (Walliams), comprise another group of sketches that focus on the ridiculous xenophobic attitudes of an individual. With his martial gestures, a Hitler-like moustache, domineering conduct and the slogan 'Britain fights back', Sid Pegg, like Marjorie Dawes, disconcerts his audience with xenophobic attitudes. Union Jack flags on his desk and in front of his house, and pictures of Winston Churchill on the wall characterise Pegg as a patriotic figure with a nationalist agenda. His ramblings against alleged 'swarms of gypsies' and the 'gypsy threat' are spiced with offensive, dehumanising vocabulary (Series Three, Episode Four). Similar to the *Fatfighters* sketches, the TV audience will identify with Pegg's visitors and their dismissal of xenophobic attitudes, while laughing at the ridiculous performance of the sketch's main character.

The Linda sketches, introduced in Series Two, take us to the halls of the University of the North-West Midlands. Similar to the characterisation of Pegg, the figure's spatial environment is used to introduce his or her ideological convictions, in this case those of university lecturer Linda Flint (Walliams). Her office is stuffed not only with all sorts of left-wing propaganda, from posters, pictures of Karl Marx, a bust of Lenin, a Soviet Union flag to a Thatcher puppet, but also with works of art by non-Western indigenous peoples (Series Two, Episode Two). However, contradictory to the left-wing ideals evoked by this decor, their emphasis on equality, justice and their supposed rejection of any forms of discrimination, Linda's behaviour towards her students shows her to be a snobbish, racist, homophobic and bigoted woman. When she calls a man with a turban 'Ali Bongo' (Series Three, Episode Four) and a British-Asian man 'Ching-chong Chinaman' (Series Two, Episode Two), the series ridicules the gulf between academia's lofty ideals and the rejection of the diversity on its very doorstep, thereby also highlighting the absurdity of an outdated, bookish and orthodox Marxism that fails to recognise society's diversity.

In all the sketches discussed so far, it is not the member of the ethnic minority but the white British character who is drawn as a figure of fun because of his or her intolerance. However, the relationship between Ting Tong Macadangdang (Lucas), the alleged Thai mail-order bride, and Dudley (Walliams), introduced in Series Three, follows a different strategy. In the figure of Ting Tong, stereotypes of Thai people are exploited to the full. It even turns out that Ting Tong has arrived from Tooting (Series Three, Episode Three) and not from Thailand, and that in fact she is biologically a man, considering herself a 'ladyboy' (this circumstance is revealed by Ting Tong's urinating, again foregrounding bodily functions; Series Three, Episode

Two). Thus, to the status of a foreigner is added that of a transvestite, which emphasises the complexity of Ting Tong's outsider position. The word-play around Ting Tong's absurd name (Series Three, Episode Two) and her place of origin (Tooting instead of 'Pong Pong'; Series Three, Episode Three) imbue Thai culture with an infantile simplicity, which is also strengthened by Ting Tong's strong accent and her elliptic sentences. In most of the sketches, Ting Tong gains Dudley's acceptance by her willingness to grant sexual favours, underlining the supposedly submissive character of Thai women. In the final sketch, however, Ting Tong has brought her numerous relatives and turned Dudley's apartment into a Thai restaurant from which its former tenant is turned away (Series Three, Episode Six). Thus, the viewer's amusement stems not only from Ting Tong's preposterous appearance and language, but also from her cleverness, which turns the exploitative relationship between white man and non-white woman on its head.

To conclude, the sketches involving xenophobes as figures of fun seem to suggest that the ethnic and cultural xenophobia of persons like Marjorie Dawes, Sid Pegg or Maggie Blackamoor is prevalent among a few non-educated individuals only, whereas the great majority of British society, symbolised by the Fatfighters group or Sid Pegg's neighbourhood, is free of any discriminatory conduct. However, the taboo-breaking nature of *Little Britain* is particularly evident in the sketches involving the verbal abuse of ethnic minorities, which is at odds with the official British policy of ethnic inclusion and of promoting a tolerant, multicultural society. Because of its status as a comedy show that uses offensive language only to ridicule it, the show can get away with these slurs in a media landscape, which, with its strong emphasis on political correctness, is eager to avoid even the slightest allegations of racism and xenophobia.²

6 'The only gay in the village'

Camp actors and gay or supposedly gay characters have been a bedrock of British comedy for decades, with, for example, the effeminate characters played by Charles Hawtrey and Kenneth Williams in the *Carry On* films (1958–1978), Mr Humphries (John Inman) in *Are You Being Served?* (BBC1 1972–1985) or the camp man Clarence (Dick Emery) in *The Dick Emery Show* (BBC 1963–1981).³ These figures are portrayed as gay by showing 'signs, of gayness, a repertoire of gestures, expressions, stances, clothing, and even environments that bespeak gayness' (Dyer 20). Gay characters or jokes involving gay content comprise one of the most significant topics in *Little Britain*. One of its most prominent and memorable icons, Welsh gay man Daffyd (Lucas), features in all but two episodes of the three series. The Daffyd sketches also include the lesbian character Myfanwy (Ruth Jones). The many sketches featuring Sebastian Love and the Prime Minister, the treatment of Downing Street being reminiscent of the British comedy series

Yes, Prime Minister (BBC2 1986–1988), are driven by Sebastian's unrequited desire for his boss. In Series Three, Norman Fry MP turns up, reading absurd statements concerning his illicit gay affairs in front of TV cameras. Furthermore, transvestite Emily Howard, another chief member of the *Little Britain* crew, is depicted sleeping with men in one sketch (Series Three, Episode Four), and in the first series, the old theatrical actor Bernard tries to seduce a young colleague (Series One, Episode Three).

As an exemplary sketch, Daffyd's appearance at his native village fair illustrates the representation of a gay sexual identity in the series (Series Two, Episode Two). It opens with Daffyd sitting in his 'Gay + Lesbian Stall', decorated flamboyantly with pink triangles and red ribbons, symbols of gay activism and AIDS awareness. As in all other sketches, Daffyd's outfit is ridiculously camp, with a skimpy and shiny bodysuit and angel's wings.⁴ First, an elderly woman asks him about some products typically linked with the gay scene, but Daffyd insists that his stall is for gays only. When the new vicar Glen turns up with his boyfriend, whose sartorial style matches that of Daffyd, he still refuses to see them as a gay couple, instead claiming that he will not back down before the Church and wondering 'whatever happened to good old-fashioned religious homophobia' (Series Two, Episode Two). After the vicar's boyfriend clutches a dildo and proposes this as a present to the Archdeacon, Daffyd explodes and leaves since he wants to remain the 'only gay and the village'. The encounter closes with the old woman's statement that 'what that boy needs is a nice big cock up his arse' (Series Two, Episode Two).

Humour is generated on many levels in this sketch. Most obviously, Daffyd shows himself to be the only homophobe in the village, while his environment is entirely positive and tolerant, a 'utopian' community free of prejudice. Of course, the visual appearance of Daffyd and the vicar's boyfriend attracts laughter, since, in its emphasis on the body as a sexual object, it can be associated with femininity and camp. The sex toys on display at Daffyd's stall, signifiers of a shallow commodification of sex that defies the notion of 'legitimate' (hetero)sexual morality, also feed the conventional stereotype of the sexually insatiable gay man. A main source of humour in all the Daffyd sketches is provided by the numerous expressions for gay sexual intercourse, used by gay, straight or bisexual people alike. The old woman's questions about 'poppers' and 'butt plugs' as well as her sexually explicit language challenge general assumptions about older people's attitudes towards sexuality, turning the viewer's expectations upside down.

Many other gay characters in Daffyd's environment appear in similarly ridiculous clothes and effeminate behaviour, for example the hairdresser (Series One, Episode Four), the Star Trek fans (Series One, Episode Three), the audience at Daffyd's 'gay night' (Series One, Episode Seven), the vicar's boyfriend (Series Two, Episode Two) or Daffyd's younger brother (Series Two, Episode Tree). The portrayal of Daffyd corresponds to the most frequent and

widely disseminated representation of a gay man in Western culture: that of an effeminate, 'unmanly' individual, who, because of his camp, non-aggressive attitude, signifies deviance as well as harmlessness (Emig). The series' depiction of the Welsh town of Llanddewi Brefi, however, also includes many gay characters who do not fall into this category. For example, the tall and bulky worker (Series Two, Episode Six), the vicar (Series Two, Episode Two) or farmer Hughes (Series Two, Episode Six) fulfil the visual and behavioural expectations of 'normative' or 'hegemonic' masculinity (Glover and Kaplan 59; Alsop *et al.* 140). With this, they appear indistinguishable from the heterosexual characters and thereby undermine Daffyd's stereotypical representation of homosexuality. Thus, *Little Britain* clearly plays with the gay stereotype of the effeminate man and presents a wide range of gay identities that reject the visual markers of an alleged 'group identity'. These minor characters not only defy the common association of homosexuality and effeminacy, they also destabilise the notion of 'hegemonic masculinity', since they 'denaturalize the status of heterosexual manhood' (Alsop *et al.* 148).

Sebastian Love (Walliams), aide to the British Prime Minister (Anthony Head), is another gay figure of fun, although devoid of the sartorial flamboyance of Daffyd. Whereas Sebastian's dress and social status conform to the rules of respectable masculinity, it is primarily his behaviour, his hairstyle and his witty, bitchy remarks that mark him as gay and place him in the tradition of the Dandy figure.⁵ His character combines several strategies of comedy: verbal sexual innuendo, an aggressive strategy of sexual conquest and camp gestures. In his lusting after his boss, he embodies what many see as the fears of heterosexual men: that of being reduced to a sexual object. When Sebastian even manages to bribe the Prime Minister into granting sexual favours (Series Three, Episode One), his dominance subverts the matrix of conventional power hierarchies.⁶ However, the stereotype of the gay man is also challenged in the Sebastian Love sketches by including supposedly straight men who express same-sex desires, as when the Prime Minister confesses his love for his aide Gregory (Series Three, Episode Five).⁷

The series' caricature of stereotypes and clichés is most obvious in the representation of the transvestite Emily Howard (Walliams) and his friend Florence (Lucas). In their efforts to dress and behave 'like ladies', they consciously play with set-pieces of traditional and outdated femininity, apparent in their use of Victorian dress, morality and leisure activities (for example, Series Three, Episode One). Emily even declares these clichés as 'shit' while at the same time trying to fulfil them. Their appearance and behaviour present an unsuccessful, repetitive (they are always recognised as men) staging of gender. Similar to how Judith Butler sees 'doing gender' as a performative act, this staging is shown as a performance that needs to be continually reiterated and also reaffirmed by Emily's and Florence's environment, and thus, it can be argued, exposes the artificiality of constructions of femininity.⁸

7 *Little Britain* and the politics of representation

As the preceding examples have shown, the series is caught up in the politics of representation. Indeed, the depiction of non-dominant groups in popular culture has received ample attention over the last two decades in the field of Cultural Studies, as well as in neighbouring disciplines. Michael Pickering summarises the role of representations:

Public representations have the power to select, arrange, and prioritise certain assumptions and ideas about different kinds of people, bringing some to the fore, dramatising and idealising or demonising them, while casting others into the social margins, so that they have little public presence or only a narrow or negative public image. (Pickering xiii)

A comedy series like *Little Britain* therefore has considerable power in influencing majority culture's views on minority groups. Pickering further argues that the stereotype 'fossilises representation and excludes alternative ways of seeing and understanding' (43). Not surprisingly, comedy's reliance on types and repetitive behaviour raises the problem that there is a thin line between caricature and reinforcement of stereotypes. Of course, in a series with hundreds of sketches, it is hardly surprising that arguments can be found for a wide range of ideological assumptions, also taking into account the fact that different viewers might come to multiple, even diverging conclusions. This interpretational openness is part of popular seriality's general appeal and provides the basis for any TV comedy's success. Nevertheless, despite Lucas and Walliams' fierce denial of consolidating stereotypes, the portrayal of Vicky Pollard, Ting Tong Macadangdang and Daffyd Thomas has attracted widespread criticism (Lucas *et al.* 245), which has, for example, seized on the fact that both actors are white, middle-class men and thereby represent the dominant section of British society (Malik 79).

Not surprisingly, the character of Vicky Pollard has aroused heated debate on the representation of the working class. To some, she represents the 'demonisation of the young, working class single mother' (Finding 14) and it is furthermore argued that 'the popularity of this fictional character is repeatedly used as "evidence" for the truth of the existence of this disgusting social type' (Tyler 28). More positive readings, though, point out that Vicky can also be perceived as a character of resistance, as an 'active rejection of middle-class modesty and disciplined behavior' (Lockyer 128). However, particularly in conservative or right-wing circles, the character of Vicky Pollard was seen as an 'accurate' representation of a 'morally degenerate generation' (Jones 128). The Thai bride Ting Tong Macadangdang has also met with harsh disapproval. For example, as Deborah Finding summarises, 'a mocking name, bad yellow makeup, buck teeth and an inability to pronounce "r" certainly do nothing to set this character aside from every bad South-East Asian Stereotype' (Finding 16).

The show also drew severe criticism over its representation of homosexuality. The actor Sir Ian McKellen, one of the leading British gay rights activists, slated the portrayal of Daffyd and the series' association of being gay with camp as not getting 'the right message across' ('Ian McKellen'). Whereas the series suggests that sexual and also ethnic minorities do not need to be integrated because they are already part of British mainstream culture and are only harassed by solitary stupid individuals, in rural areas of Britain, according to a *Daily Mail* article, gay people even had to endure offensive comments on their status as the 'only gays in the village' ('Mother and Daughter'). This sheds light on the fact that the idyllic tolerance of the Llanddewi Brefi community in the sketches is itself a projection that is hardly matched in reality, where discrimination against sexual minorities is still endemic.

Hence, the accusation of catering to conventional stereotypes about gay men, British-Asians or an 'urban underclass' is justified. On the other hand, it could be countered that mainstream British society is ridiculed in equal measure, which is certainly the case. However, viewers who consider themselves 'mainstream' will surely not identify with those characters because they also have a 'mainstream' identity, namely white, middle class and heterosexual. In contrast, members of minority groups are easily furnished with a collective identity by the viewers, so that Daffyd, Ting Tong or Vicky Pollard finally do stand for the groups they falsely represent. It could be argued that Lucas himself is a gay man, which would render any criticism of homophobia futile (Lucas *et al.* 140). However, the fact that most viewers, especially younger ones, probably did not know about Lucas' sexual identity and his activism for gays and lesbians weakens this claim. Moreover, what sticks with the viewer is primarily the humour-generating stereotype and not its more subtle subversion within the sketch or any comments outside the filmic text. Although, as shown, many different gay identities are displayed in the individual sketches, they do not provide the main source of humour and are therefore easily forgotten.

8 The online universe of *Little Britain*

The unbroken popularity of *Little Britain* can be grasped by looking at the presence of Vicky Pollard, Daffyd Thomas and other characters on the Internet. Fan websites, blogs and clips on YouTube or the show's Facebook profile keep the series alive.⁹ *Little Britain* thus provides an excellent example of how cultural products develop a life of their own in the digital media cultures of the early twenty-first century. This also testifies to the fact that a series' TV presence or its DVD release might actually be of lesser importance than in earlier decades, since platforms like YouTube or other websites effectively archive its sketches and provide not only unlimited global availability, but also offer opportunities for commentary and discussion.

A website specifically designed to host fan fictions from TV, cinema, comics and other texts of popular culture also has a section with fan fiction

about *Little Britain* where, for example, letters between Emily and Florence are composed or dialogues between Sebastian Love and the Prime Minister are added.¹⁰ Fans upload their texts and receive comments from other fans, thereby continuing and discussing the stories based on their favourite characters. Fans of the series thus appear as consumers and producers alike, as 'prosumers' and actively take part in shaping the fictional universe of *Little Britain* even after the series has ended. Thus, the online presence of the series testifies to the power of fan cultures in distributing, but also appropriating cultural products in the Web 2.0 era. Although Lucas and Walliams have long moved on to pursue new projects, Vicky Pollard, Daffyd Thomas and other characters from the show continue to amuse audiences around the globe.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the term and its origins and presence in the media, see Jones.
2. A striking example is Carol Thatcher's use of the term 'gollywog', which caused a scandal within the BBC in 2009 (Kiss).
3. The connection between homosexuality and comedy has a long history. Rainer Emig argues that in British culture, the 'representation of men who failed to live up to ideals of masculinity and men with same-sex interests, however, had long been categorised in either of three broad groups: the dangerous pervert, the tragic pervert, and the comic pervert'. Richard Dyer, in his investigation of representations of gay identities in popular culture, distinguishes three common 'types': the 'queen', the 'macho' and the 'sad young man' (29).
4. The word 'camp' generally refers to a cultural practice that can be employed to highlight the constructedness of gender roles in the form of subversive parody and that is traditionally associated with the representation of gay culture (Glover and Kaplan 101; Alsop *et al.* 148).
5. The figure of the Dandy and its emergence and cultural context in Great Britain is, for example, explored in Beckson (34).
6. The theme of same-sex desire in politics had a more serious background in 1930s British foreign diplomacy, where the so-called 'Cambridge Five', a group including allegedly homosexual members, were suspected as Soviet spies, but also in the history of the Cold War, particularly in the United States, where the homosexual man in political circles was considered a security risk (Doherty 222).
7. The apex of same-sex desire of allegedly heterosexual men is presented in *Little Britain Abroad*, which hints at a sexual affair between the Prime Minister and the US President (Episode Two).
8. For a critical inspection of Judith Butler's theory of gender as performance, see Alsop *et al.* 97–105.
9. For example, Daffyd Thomas, Andy Pipkin, Emily Howard and other characters have profiles on Facebook, presumably installed by fans.
10. See the *FanFiction* website – for example, the user Obscure-Asile wrote a farewell letter to Emily by her friend Florence, in which Fred (Florence) decides to give up his transvestite identity and leaves Emily for good.

Filmography

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23

Laughing in Horror: Hybrid Genre and the Grotesque Body in *Psychoville*

Stephan Karschay

1 Thriller and/or comedy: *Psychoville*'s plot and form

Psychoville made its debut on BBC2 on 18 June 2009 and was met with high acclaim, both popular and critical. The first series consisted of seven episodes, the second of six, and the makers produced a Halloween Special in-between the two series. Each episode has a running time of 30 minutes, with the exception of the Halloween Special, which is approximately 45 minutes long. *Psychoville* was written by *The League of Gentlemen*'s Reece Shearsmith and Steve Pemberton, who also acted as the main characters. The show was directed by Matt Lipsey and starred, amongst others, Dawn French and Mark Gatiss, who was also an original member of *The League*. Originally, the title *Psychoville* was used for *The League of Gentlemen*'s broadcasting in Korea and Japan (Armstrong). The show's launch was accompanied by a large variety of promotional fake websites for each of *Psychoville*'s main characters, amongst others: *Jelly Parties*, *Lomax Commodities*, *Best Murders* and *Joy's Advice to Young Mums*.

Psychoville is unusual as a TV comedy series, not least for its elaborate plot, its concomitant formal complexity and its trademark generic hybridity. All of the show's characters are linked by an overarching storyline, which is only gradually revealed to the viewer, who progressively gains a superior vantage point to any of *Psychoville*'s characters. The first episode, 'Black Mail', works as an exposition to the series' convoluted narrative: it introduces the show's *dramatis personae* and opens the mystery by having a man dressed in a black coat, mask and gloves send them all letters containing the same message: 'I know what you did.' Much of the pleasure of watching *Psychoville* is thus that of the traditional mystery thriller: the skein that connects the individual characters is successively unravelled, the hidden secret that binds them together is slowly revealed. As signalled by their titles ('Lomax', 'Jelly', 'David and Maureen', 'Joy', 'Robert'), each of the subsequent five episodes centres on one set of protagonists, while intercutting their respective stories with those of the remaining characters. This filmic device enhances the series' detective credentials: while focusing the viewer's attention on

a specific set of characters and their individual back stories, it sufficiently sustains *Psychoville's* suspense element to keep the viewer looking for the narrative's missing links. Only in the final episode of Series One ('Ravenhill') are all of the protagonists brought together on the screen: they congregate in a dilapidated mental asylum in which four of them had once been institutionalised until a fire destroyed the hospital and killed the institution's villainous head nurse. It is revealed that the show's blackmailer has lured our protagonists to the scene of the accident to exact revenge for the death of his mother, the evil Nurse Kenchington. In a deft marketing ploy, the show's producer, Justin Davies, decided to bill *Psychoville* as a serial comedy thriller rather than a comedy sketch show, thus signalling the series' notable generic hybridity from the very start.

Yet it would be misleading to assume that *Psychoville's* complex detective plot serves the exclusive purpose of creating narrative suspense, since it is equally instrumental with regard to the show's comedic properties. Even though the audience cannot be entirely sure about the connections between all of the characters until the final episode of the show, the viewers ultimately know more than the protagonists and can thus relish the red herrings and the dark humour of *Psychoville* all the more: when David and Maureen Sowerbutts, a pair of Oedipal serial killers, tie up their first victim in order to drown him in his own bath, Graham, an organiser of murder-mystery soirees who once employed David, inadvertently confesses to a court ruling against him for sexual harassment: 'I never laid a finger on 'er. I went through all this at court. I was standing behind her, eating an egg salad sandwich, when some of it accidentally splashed into her hair. And no, I can't explain the DNA report' ('Lomax'). The dark humour of this scene hinges as much on the characters' perverted acts as on their mutual misunderstandings: Maureen believes that her son David has committed a murder and that Graham is now trying to blackmail him for it; Graham, by contrast, assumes that it is Maureen who wants to punish him for a past sexual transgression; David, again, blindly follows his mother and somewhat unwittingly prepares the bath in which Graham shall be drowned. Each of the characters thus acts on false assumptions, and as an ensemble they create a slapstick-scenario familiar from traditional TV sitcoms. Moreover, the result is also significant with regard to audience sympathy: when the sexual predator finally escapes his tormentors only to be run over by a bus, we cannot muster much pity for one who has disgraced himself so thoroughly.

2 Spotting the reference: *Psychoville* and the contemporary horror film

Psychoville is a highly intertextual series which points towards a variety of earlier films and thus involves the audience in a game of spotting-the-reference. What is remarkable about this high degree of intertextuality is that it does

not so much gesture towards earlier forms of TV comedy, but rather towards the cult classics of horror cinema.¹ Even its title may thus be read as a portmanteau word combining a reference to Alfred Hitchcock's classic *Psycho* (1960) and Stuart Rosenberg's 1979 potboiler *The Amityville Horror* (1979). Thus, *Psychoville* encourages the viewer to associate it with a genre which is, at first glance only, impervious to comedy, and horror film aficionados may well devote most of their viewing time to the decoding of the show's intertextual allusions, of which the following are only a small sample: the entertainer Mr Jelly is reminiscent of the monstrous clown Pennywise in Tommy Lee Wallace's film version of Stephen King's novel *It* (1990);² the plot of Joy – the midwife who apparently nurses a plastic baby doll to life – is clearly inspired by Tom Holland's *Child's Play* (1988), better known by the toy-monster's name 'Chucky'; the telekinetic powers of a woman suffering from dwarfism, who feels rejected by her beloved, are reminiscent of Brian De Palma's classic King adaptation *Carrie* (1976); the masked man's enigmatic message chimes with the title of Jim Gillespie's *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997) and bodes ill for *Psychoville*'s main characters; the fourth episode of Series One ('David and Maureen') is entirely modelled on the opening of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) and is shot in only two extended takes (Dean); David, the retarded, infantile son of Maureen Sowerbutts, collects all kinds of serial-killer paraphernalia, amongst them a bedside lamp with a childish version of Jason Voorhees, the monstrous killer from Sean S. Cunningham's classic *Friday the 13th* (1980). Series Two introduces the character of Hattie, who – after marrying Sharouz (her best friend's gay Muslim boyfriend) in order to avert his deportation from Britain – becomes obsessively infatuated with her 'husband' and chains him to a radiator in the bedroom in the manner of Annie Wilkes (Kathy Bates), the delusional hyper-possessive nurse in Rob Reiner's adaption of Stephen King's *Misery* (1990).

The mixture of horror and humour is a staple feature of Gothic film parodies and sitcoms such as *The Addams Family* (1964–1966), *The Munsters* (1964–1966) or, more recently, the *Scary Movie* franchise (2000–2013). Indeed, when reviewing the history of the horror film, one cannot but notice the genre's strong potential for being endlessly parodied and re-appropriated to various comic effects. Kamilla Elliott notes how an early 'triptych' of classical horror films from 1931 – James Whale's *Frankenstein*, Rouben Mamoulian's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and Tod Browning's *Dracula* (themselves adaptations of three of the most enduring Gothic novels by Mary Shelley, Robert Louis Stevenson and Bram Stoker, respectively) – has become a hypotextual mine for later Gothic film parodies, from *Abbot and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948) and *Abbot and Costello Meet Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1953), to *Dracula: Dead and Loving It* (1995) and *Frankenthumb* (2002) (Elliott 223).³ It must be conceded, however, that *Psychoville* is a somewhat different filmic animal, as it does not adapt one singular precursor from the horror genre in order to subject it to a sustained form of creative appropriation.

By contrast, it playfully experiments with general aspects of the horror genre (particularly the notion of 'body horror') to produce its ludic(rous) effects, a structural feature that qualifies it as a 'general' rather than a 'specific' parody in Simon Dentith's terms (7). Yet why should the categories of horror and humour be so readily amenable to mutual appropriation; why can these two modes of writing and filming be grafted onto each other in such imaginative fecundity?

3 Horror and humour: 'horrorality'

In 1983, the film critic Philip Brophy coined the term 'horrorality', a neologism fusing the words 'horror, textuality, morality, hilarity', to characterise the contemporary horror film of the late 1970s and early 1980s, a genre which 'mimics itself mercilessly' (277). According to Brophy, then, there is a parodic element to horror cinema in general, an element that came to the fore of the genre at his time of writing, infusing the modern horror film (his main examples are David Cronenberg's early oeuvre, Brian de Palma's *The Fury* (1978) and John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982)) with 'a violent awareness of itself as a saturated genre' (278–279). Thus, such films highlight their own 'textuality', their self-conscious existence as textual, or rather medial, productions.⁴ They foreground their existence as genre products by using self-reflexive devices; they 'recklessly copy and re-draw their generic sketching' (279). In other words, they employ typical generic conventions (such as the excessive mutilation of the human body) only in order to trump them. Conversely, when parody draws the viewer's attention to film genres and forms, it highlights this inherent constructedness by means of 'incongruity, disproportion and exaggeration' (Elliott 224). However, it is important to note that, in Brophy's understanding, it is the modern horror film as such – and not merely its parodic appropriations – which is characterised by a peculiar form of intermingled horror and humour, the latter undercutting the former to counteract the genre's more horrific moments: 'The humour is not usually well-crafted but mostly perverse and/or tasteless, so much so that often the humour might be horrific while the horror might be humorous' (Brophy 284). The co-mingling of horror and humour can, however, also be traced to an even more remote fountainhead in English culture, and this historical trajectory can further illuminate how *Psychoville* produces its peculiar comic effects.

4 Generic defamiliarisation: laughter and the Gothic

The modern horror film's ancient literary predecessor is the eighteenth-century Gothic novel as initiated by Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which provided many of the stock features so endlessly rehashed in the fictions of the 1790s. In a recent study of the 'comic turn' in Gothic

fiction, Avril Horner and Sue Sloznik point out that Walpole's little book already combined horror with more humorously light-hearted elements familiar from farce and provided in scenes with simple domestic characters so that the Gothic can be understood as 'a mode of writing that has been hybrid since its very inception' (*Comic Turn* 4).⁵ As Walpole pointed out in his 'Preface' to the second edition of the novel, he had taken no less a figure than the Bard himself as his role model in the deployment of humour:

The great master of nature, Shakespeare, was the model I copied. Let me ask if his tragedies of Hamlet and Julius Caesar would not lose a considerable share of the spirit and wonderful beauties, if the humour of the grave-diggers, the fooleries of Polonius, and the clumsy jests of the Roman citizens were omitted, or vested in heroics? (Walpole 10)

We might want to add the image of the drunken porter, just after King Duncan has been butchered by Macbeth, counterpoising a moment of excessive slaughter with lewd laughter. Horror and humour, then, have had a long-standing relationship, at least dating back to Renaissance tragedy, when humour served to provide comic relief in the horrific presence of death, in turn heightening the tragic atmosphere of these plays by means of emotional contrast. In 1819, William Hazlitt defined humour, '[t]he essence of the laughable', as 'the incongruous, the disconnecting one idea from another, or the jostling of one feeling against another' (quoted in Horner and Sloznik, *Comic Turn* 13). At the same time, hybridity has been inscribed into the Gothic since the moment of its birth with Walpole's playful conjoining of 'two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern' (Walpole 9), that is, of medieval romance and the realist novel. Since the properties of humour as defined by Hazlitt are broadly analogous to the textual effects of the Gothic, it comes as no surprise that 'incongruity opens up the possibility of a comic turn in the presence of horror and terror' (Horner and Sloznik, 'Comic Gothic' 322). Horner and Sloznik point out that once we recognise the Gothic's roots in the comic as well as the tragic, we are able to appreciate later Gothic texts in different terms (*Comic Turn* 7). I would argue that, by the same token, it also helps us to better understand the peculiar pleasures to be gained from such hybrid productions as *Psychoville* and *The League of Gentlemen*, two comedy series which are modelled on the principle of incongruity.⁶

The seemingly incongruous concepts of both horror and humour can each be employed so as to be productive of the other, since both horror and humour hinge on audience expectations (Pinedo 112). *Psychoville* brilliantly exploits this sense of incongruity from its very beginning and works a series of defamiliarisations on its audience in order to counter and undermine any pre-formed ideas about plot and genre. The show opens with sinister close-up shots of a figure entirely dressed in black adding the finishing touches

to a pile of letters. A strong sense of Gothic historicity is invoked through the serial display of a number of (pseudo-)historical objects involved in the activity of writing: a flaring Lucifer match, a dripping tallow candle, an ancient writing quill and inkwell, a seal of black wax in the shape of a raven, vellum envelopes labelled in immaculate longhand – accompanied by Joby Talbot's beautifully eerie opening music. Just at the moment when the title tune's violins are about to reach the climax of their vibrant crescendo – in their turn heightening the suspense of the viewer to the utmost pitch – the sound of a bright bell punctuates the mysterious scene, and the camera zooms out to reveal the actual prosaic surroundings: a suburban post office, in which a depersonalised recorded voice summons the man in black to speak to 'cashier number three, please' ('Black Mail'). The antiquarian setting of the Gothic opening is transformed into the mundane reality of the town's local Royal Mail branch. The nonchalant comment of a lady waiting in the queue ('He's forgotten his candle') clinches the absurdity of the situation. Humour is produced through incongruity in Hazlitt's sense: traditional writing tools are replaced by the modern post service, mysteriousness is traded for banality and deflatory laughter displaces a sense of rising unease.

This defamiliarisation of genre is not only evident on the macro-level of *Psychoville's* introductory frame and its general deployment of horror film tropes and themes, but is also operative on the micro-level of its individual storylines. Oscar Lomax is a blind and highly reclusive old multimillionaire, who lives in a sinister Gothic mansion in Ilkley, West Yorkshire. In the first episode of Series One, the viewer first approaches the Lomax residence with Michael Fry, a black teenage social worker who has been sent by the local council to help the old man with his chores. Michael's BMX bike as well as his casual urban outfit – he is wearing a baggy tracksuit on top of a t-shirt with garish print – stand in stark contrast to the gloomy atmosphere surrounding the Lomax residence. At first glance, then, this scene establishes an opposition which can be understood as the organising principle at the heart of the Gothic:

Gothic novels ... thrive on anachronistic emphases, and their narrative effects derive from the clash between 'modernity' and 'antiquity', whether the former finds itself misplaced in the latter, or the latter lives beyond its proper scope and survives into the present. (Baldick and Mighall 220)

The Lomax mansion (and by metonymic extension its owner) thus appears as a vestigial presence, an anachronistic survival from an earlier age. When, inside the house, Michael attempts to turn a doorknob to gain entry to one of the ground-floor rooms, Lomax's booming voice warns him from behind: 'Get your claw out of my holy of holies!' ('Black Mail') and subsequently he addresses Michael only as 'Tealeaf' (which is cockney rhyming slang for 'thief'). So far, the audience is (in proper Gothic vein) led to believe in an appropriately dark secret: like Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens' *Great*

Expectations (1860–1861), Lomax seems to be biding his time to ultimately unleash his revenge for a received injury from the past (the theft of a treasured object) on an unsuspecting, Pip-like character.⁷ However, when ‘Tealeaf’ is finally allowed into Lomax’s ‘holy of holies’ in the second episode of Series One, the old man’s precious ‘commodities’ turn out to be a vast collection of gaudily coloured, first-generation Beanie Baby plush toys. The bizarre incongruity between the audience’s generically fuelled expectations and the banality of Lomax’s actual secret is emphasised through the bright electric lighting, which supplants the gloominess of the Gothic mansion, and Michael’s gob-smacked comment: ‘You got a lot of toys, bruv’ (‘Lomax’). As in the case of *Psychoville*’s general opening, the audience are forced to discard what they have learned to expect.

In *Psychoville*, the viewer is taught to recognise the features of one genre (the mystery thriller, the Gothic novel, the horror film) only to have them defamiliarised to the point of virtual unrecognisability. Yet neither horror nor humour is ever sustained for an extended length of time, as *Psychoville* continuously oscillates between the two effects; thus, the laughter about Lomax’s obsessive search for his collection’s one missing piece, Snappy the Crocodile, is soon undercut by the horrific revelation that the millionaire was willing to sacrifice both of his eyes in exchange for the worshipped plush toy. This may be considered a variety of camp: an over-the-top move in a generally hyperbolic comedy show. However, such a reading would make light of Lomax’s essentially tragic fate. Later in the series, it is revealed that the old man was hospitalised for the treatment of ‘Paradise Syndrome’, a condition in which the sufferer craves to lose what at the same time would constitute the fulfilment of his dreams. Just as much as there is a light touch to the horror tropes in *Psychoville*, there is always a darker side to the show’s comic elements. Nowhere is this more evident than in *Psychoville*’s deployment of the grotesque.

5 Humour and the grotesque body in *Psychoville*

Psychoville’s ingenious deployment of generic hybridity on the levels of both plot and structure is certainly one reason for the show’s astounding success. Arguably, however, none of this would hold an audience in thrall if it were not for the remarkably intense performances of Pemberton and Shearsmith and those of their hand-picked cast. Television critics were immediately gripped by *Psychoville*’s characters and invariably invoked the ‘grotesque’ as an apt descriptive term. Harry Venning remarked in *The Stage* how Shearsmith and Pemberton had assembled ‘a rogues gallery of grotesques’ (*Psychoville* – In the Press) and, according to one Australian critic, the show offered ‘a romp through every classic horror trope in mad succession’, complete with ‘every version of the grotesque’ (Houston). *The Times*’ Tim Teeman praised the troupe’s skilful performances, which allowed

the discerning viewer to 'look past the grotesque drag' (*Psychoville* – In the Press) of Pemberton and Shearsmith's characters and perceive a deeper truth about their ambiguous relationships. And, indeed, the citizens of *Psychoville* constitute a veritable pandemonium of grotesquerie, of which a short character summary may be indicative.

Next to the pair of Oscar Lomax and Michael 'Tealeaf' Fry, the show focuses on the chain-smoking alcoholic Mr Jelly, a depressed, hearse-driving children's entertainer whose act is that of a rentable clown. After having lost his right hand during a routine medical surgery, Jelly uses clip-on prostheses which terrify rather than amuse the children at his performances (deceptively announced as 'Mr Jelly and His 100 Hands'). Throughout Series One, Jelly is tormented by the success of his rival Mr Jolly and attempts to sabotage the latter's act whenever he can. Another deeply frustrated individual is Joy Aston (Dawn French), who works as a midwife specialising in antenatal classes at a Bristol medical clinic. In her seminars, prospective parents are treated to film footage of actual births unaided by the use of anaesthetics, with Joy sadistically gloating over 'the sheer bloody pain of it' – always true to her motto: 'You've got to split the pod to get the peas out' ('Black Mail'). Unsurprisingly, Joy has her own dark secret. After having been traumatised by her son Paul's cot death, she treats one of the hospital's practice dolls as if it were her real baby (aptly named Freddy Fruitcake). With access to all of the clinic's facilities, she steals banked blood to give Freddy transfusions in the hope that he will eventually come to life. *Psychoville's* other great dysfunctional mother-son relationship is that between Maureen and David Sowerbutts. David is a mentally disabled adult who is nonetheless in possession of an almost encyclopaedic knowledge about the world's greatest serial killers. His doting mother, Maureen, takes care of all his needs, from pre-chewing David's breakfast to scratching his psoriasis-ridden back. When Maureen mistakenly believes David to have murdered a colleague at work, mother and son team up in order to eliminate whom they believe to be the five remaining witnesses. Last (and physically least), there is Robert Greenspan (Jason Tompkins), a dwarf actor, who appears in a stage production of *Snow White* in the role of 'Blusher'. Infatuated with the dim lead-actress Debbie, he has to undergo a series of cruel practical jokes about his past in 'midget porn'. Robert appears to have telekinetic powers, which allow him to move objects and explode electrical devices (Episode Five reveals that it is in fact his friend and admirer Kerry who is thus gifted). In an act of revenge, it appears that he causes the glass lid of Snow White's coffin to crash down on Debbie's head before the immediate start of a performance. When she recovers in hospital and seems to suffer from amnesia, he has no scruples pretending to Debbie that they have been a couple for two years.

As this short overview indicates, all of *Psychoville's* characters are 'grotesque' in an intuitive sense of the word: they seem distorted (Greenspan), bizarre (Jelly), unnatural (Maureen and David) and hideous (Lomax). Yet when used

as a critical rather than a merely descriptive term, the 'grotesque' can also be perceived as productive of another kind of defamiliarisation – one of the human body. With origins in classical antiquity, the concept of the grotesque has been heavily theorised in the twentieth century following Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1957) and Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1965), two studies which pre-empted much later work (Yates 13), with Bakhtin's taking pride of place in discussions of the grotesque as a critical term.

Etymologically, 'grotesque' ('la grottesca') is derived from the Italian word 'grotta' (cave) and describes a peculiar style of ornamentation discovered in first-century Roman structures (Kayser 19). In these designs, human, animal and vegetable forms are fantastically blended without clear distinctions between them, resulting in a hybridisation of form which offended the prevalent taste for verisimilitude in classical culture, as Vitruvius declared in his famous *De Architectura* (c. 27 BC): 'Such things ... never existed, do not now exist, and shall never come into being' (quoted in Kayser 20). The creative arts of literature and painting, however, were to become particularly fertile sites for grotesque imaginings during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. For Bakhtin, the prime creator of the grotesque was François Rabelais, that 'purest and ... most consistent representative of the grotesque concept of the body' (Bakhtin 30). In Bakhtin's understanding, the grotesque body is (meta)morphic, as it holds the potential to grow into other bodies and merge with the surrounding world:

the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. (Bakhtin 26)

Showing two bodies merged into one – as during copulation or while giving birth – is thus one of the most effective ways of representing the grotesque (26).

The welding-together of bodies is indeed one of the most notable features of the grotesque in *Psychoville*: Mr Jolly and his 16 different prosthetic limbs; Robert, the dwarf, shown copulating with a fellow porn actress on a videotape of *Whore White and the Seven Dicks*; Joy, the midwife, agonisingly dwelling on the torments of birth, with an ultra-close-up of a woman's screaming mouth on the screen behind her. Yet by far the most excessive fusion of grotesque bodies occurs in the figure(s) of the obese Crabtree sisters: not only are Chelsea and Marie-Su conjoined twins, but they also (by implication) had been blind until Lomax traded his eyes for Snappy the Crocodile,

meaning that each of the sisters is now in possession of one of his eyeballs. This may be painful to watch, but *Psychoville*, in a sense, only exploits the full aesthetic potential which Bakhtin saw in Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (c. 1532–c. 1564): 'Grotesque realism presented a dynamic, materialist, and unflinching view of human bodies in all stages and contours of growth, degeneration, anomaly, excess, loss, and prosthesis' (Russo 92).

The grotesque's emphasis on the body's orifices and appendages (and their loss) produces a strong sense of exaggerated physicality. Kelly Hurley emphasises how, for Bakhtin, the concept always involves 'an act of degradation', in which the human subject is not seen as a spiritual, intellectual, or ethical being, but is rather perceived in all its physical aspects, its 'material *thingness*' (Hurley 138) as a body made up of flesh and blood. This is a body which produces all manner of secretions and excretions: urine, faeces, semen, saliva and sweat. The grotesque body is, in other words, an impure body, a body which is not self-contained, but open in the sense that it leaves physical traces and thus defiles its environment. Grotesque bodies, then, are urinating, defecating and suppurating bodies, and this emphasis on the coarser aspects of physicality is also visible in *Psychoville*, most notably with regard to David and Maureen Sowerbutts (whose mere surname suggests the pair's scatological taint). Mother and son are first introduced with Maureen scratching David's eczema-ridden back with the flakes of his psoriasis accumulating in her lap. When Maureen is playing her electric piano later in the same scene, a small bag of her collected soiled nappies is seen dangling from the door-handle in the background. And like mother, like son: after having staged a country house murder down to the last detail, David is chastised by one of his fellow mimes for being over-zealous: 'Fancy you, smearing the walls with your own excrement – you could have used Nutella, it is exactly the same' ('Joy').

6 Horror and the grotesque body in *Psychoville*

Bakhtin sees in the grotesque body reason for mirth and laughter. In his analysis of Rabelais' works, the grotesque always features as a positive, life-affirming and comedic force, and Bakhtin postulates this quality for the grotesque in medieval and Renaissance culture in general. Even though one might find *Psychoville's* use of the grotesque funny (or at least ridiculous), it is impossible to ascribe to it the liberating vitality and optimism which are such central features to the Bakhtinian grotesque. Indeed, Bakhtin acknowledges a distinct change in the representation of the grotesque in the post-Renaissance world, a transformation which occurred around the time of the Romantic period and strongly affected 'the principle of laughter':

This element of course remained, since no grotesque, even the most timid, is conceivable in the atmosphere of absolute seriousness. But laughter was cut down to cold humour, irony, sarcasm. It ceased to be a joyful

and triumphant hilarity. Its positive regenerating power was reduced to a minimum. (Bakhtin 38)

According to Bakhtin, this transformation of the principle of laughter led to a series of differences between the Renaissance grotesque and a more contemporary understanding of the concept, and he claims that these differences are intimately linked with the experience of terror. Three of these variations are particularly relevant to my reading of *Psychoville*: (a) the world as we know it has become defamiliarised by the grotesque – it is ‘to a certain extent a terrifying world, alien to man’ (Bakhtin 38): ‘All that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognized by all suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile’ (39). In the sense that ‘[s]omething frightening is revealed in that which was habitual and secure’ (39), it is strikingly similar to Sigmund Freud’s notion of the uncanny (Hurley 141); (b) this alienation through the grotesque inspires dread at least as much as joy: ‘The images of Romantic grotesque usually express fear of the world and seek to inspire their reader with this fear’ (Bakhtin 39); (c) finally, the theme of madness becomes inherent to all grotesque forms, because madness makes individuals look at the world with different eyes, and it becomes a tragic aspect of individual isolation (39).

In other words, from the Romantic period onwards, the grotesque has inspired a significantly darker kind of laughter, which is expressive of both mirth and terror – something commonly referred to as ‘dark’ or ‘sardonic’ humour. This can be illustrated with regard to one of Mr Jelly’s unsettling performances (in the show’s first episode ‘Black Mail’) that, according to his motto, are supposed to ‘Keep Kids Quiet’. After a row with the parents who were expecting his rival-in-clownerie, Mr Jolly, to appear at their daughter’s birthday party, Jelly embarks on his bizarre and increasingly frightening act. He makes his child audience break out in fits of coughing by spraying his prosthesis with WD-40 lubricant, he warns a boy to ‘stop fucking spoiling’ his show and he promises to give the birthday girl a ‘princess make-over’ with a comb that disconcertingly resembles a meat cleaver. When the parents have seen enough and ask Jelly to leave, he snaps and, in a fit of rage, tears off his prosthetic limb to reveal the sore wound underneath, consequently frightening the children out of their wits.

It is typical of *Psychoville* that the physical aspects of the grotesque body are unyieldingly foregrounded in this scene: Jelly’s performance hinges on his amputated hand, the ‘red, raw stump’ he waves in front of the kids whom he was booked to entertain. He warns the family’s little daughter that an allergy once made some other little girl’s eye come up ‘like a red egg’, a grotesque simile which is more unsettling than comic. The world of this sketch becomes increasingly defamiliarised: the perfectly normal environment of a child’s birthday party is turned into a stage for a disturbing performance, with Jelly a nightmare version of a clown. His make-up smeared, his costume

soiled, he becomes a menacing presence that makes both audiences – on and in front of the TV – deeply uncomfortable. Furthermore, the scene also inspires a change of vision: as viewers, we gradually recognise that this is no ordinary clown's show. We are in the presence of a mentally deranged individual, someone who is incapable of realising his own position as a children's entertainer: Jelly is in it for the money and not the healthy entertainment of his audience. Ultimately, he is almost a tragic figure, an isolated loner who is consumed by a desire for revenge, and his isolation becomes clear when the parents push him out of the house and slam the door behind him.

What about our reaction as an audience, then? We laugh, we hold our breath, we recoil. The joke which concludes the sketch illustrates that we may even show all of these reactions simultaneously. Jelly literally receives 'cash in hand' for his performance and this may cause the viewer to laugh, but this joke cannot obliterate the image of the ghastly stump of the man's amputated hand. This tragic aspect is further emphasised in Episode Three, which provides scenes from Jelly's previous life in a flashback. Originally a jovial, spick-and-span clown, his career is cut short by a badly botched surgical procedure. After he has overcome the first moments of despair, he is shown in his painful, but committed, attempts to rebuild his life. Only when Jelly realises that his life has been deliberately destroyed by his own envious surgeon (who later turns out to be Jelly's nemesis Mr Jolly) does he degenerate into the monstrous parody of a clown which we encounter at the beginning of Episode One. The above scene is exemplary with regard to the grotesque's ideal audience impact, which Richard Yates characterises in the following terms:

When we encounter the grotesque we are caught off guard, we are surprised and shaken, we have a sense of being played with, taunted, judged. It evokes a range of feelings, feelings of uneasiness, fear, repulsion, delight, amusement, often horror and dread, and through its evocative power it appears to us in paradoxical guise – it is and is not of this world – and it elicits from us paradoxical responses. (Yates 2)

In *Psychoville* the grotesque's full potential to elicit contradictory responses from its audience is unleashed. The show's jokes are 'gags' in both senses of the word: they make us choke on our laughter, leaving us somewhat disoriented in our emotional reaction. *Psychoville* achieves both its comic and its horrific effects through a relentless series of defamiliarisations – of genre, of the body and of the world as we know it.

7 The cultural relevance of *Psychoville* and the contemporary Gothic

It has become something of a critical commonplace to point out that the Gothic is ubiquitous in contemporary culture: 'it pervades media screens,

public discourse, everyday life' (Botting, 'Gothic Culture' 199) As early as 1974, Angela Carter commented in the afterword to her collection of tales *Fireworks* that: 'We live in Gothic times' (Carter 133; Botting, 'Aftergothic' 285). Roughly ten years later, in 1996, Fred Botting confirmed this diagnosis, while at the same time highlighting the difficulties that adhere to the definition of a cultural mode that is conspicuous for its discursive and aesthetic malleability: 'In the twentieth century Gothic is everywhere and nowhere' (Botting, *Gothic* 155). In the first decade of the new millennium, Catherine Spooner ventured to argue that Gothic had reached its 'saturation point' (2) in contemporary popular culture, infiltrating everything from fashion and music styles, through cinema, television and video games, to advertising and consumer culture. That this escalating development has as much to do with the Gothic's far-reaching dispersal in contemporary media and culture as it does with the ever-widening field of Gothic Studies as an accepted academic discipline is implicitly acknowledged by most Gothic critics. However, the definition of what constitutes the Gothic's cultural function in a postmodern consumerist society, in which signifiers are up for grabs like so many commodities, is a much more vexed issue. It is nevertheless necessary to understand the cultural function that a television series such as *Psychoville* with its incongruous effects and its grotesque bodies may fulfil in our present age. Otherwise, as Alexandra Warwick has polemicalised, almost anything could be subsumed under the umbrella term 'Gothic' as long as the commentator feels sufficiently 'gothicky' (Warwick).

Most critics of the genre agree that the Gothic holds a unique capacity for registering cultural anxieties at specific historical moments. The Gothic can thus be understood as a 'barometer' (Bruhm 260) of cultural anxiety, and Jerrold E. Hogle ascribes the Gothic's durability to this inherent potential for addressing widespread cultural fears:

the longevity and power of Gothic fiction unquestionably stem from the way it helps us address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety, from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural, throughout the history of western culture since the eighteenth century. (Hogle 4)

Where the eighteenth-century Gothic registered fears about simmering revolutionary tendencies and the Gothic's late-Victorian strand has been productively read in the context of anxieties about biological and cultural degeneration, it is more difficult to determine a set of cultural concerns regularly addressed by the Gothic in the new millennium. In the case of *Psychoville*, I would argue, these anxieties pertain most persistently to the experience of trauma in contemporary culture.

Psychoville's grotesque bodies function as physical markers of the characters' various psychological and behavioural disorders. In this respect, the

show taps into popular myths about the visibility of deviance, which are the time-honoured descendants of Victorian theories of criminality and psychopathology. According to many nineteenth-century medical researchers like the Italian criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso, inborn depravity would be mirrored in outward deformity so that the deviant body could be reliably read as a marker of biological, psychological and social abnormality. *Psychoville's* roster of grotesque bodies, at first glance, seems to encourage a similar identification of physical and psychological otherness. Furthermore, the series' incessant focus on the lives of its grotesque main characters (all of the physically inconspicuous figures are sidelined to supporting roles) and their initial distribution throughout England have the curious effect of making deviance more pervasive than a clearly defined notion of 'normality' – a feature which is also characteristic of nineteenth-century studies of criminality and madness in the vein of Lombroso.

By contrast with the latter, however, *Psychoville* suggests that its protagonists' otherness is the product of social circumstance rather than biological constitution. Significantly, none of its characters has healthy social relationships: David and Maureen live in quasi-incestuous isolation from the world, Joy adopts a plastic doll as her surrogate baby, Robert tricks the amnesiac actress Debbie into a marital engagement, Lomax (ab)uses the social worker Michael to attain his own selfish ends, and Jelly's social interactions as a family entertainer regularly culminate in antisocial bursts of aggression. Most worryingly, however, social dysfunctionality in *Psychoville* is by no means limited to the show's parade of grotesqueries. When Lomax and Michael travel all the way to Dudley in order to buy Snappy the Crocodile from its present owners, viewers are treated to an uncomfortable slice of lower-middle-class family life. As it becomes evident that Karen Dalton cannot find the much-coveted toy, her inconspicuous husband Bob turns into a threatening bully, who is barely capable of containing his violent impulses. Suspecting that their son Ian has hidden Snappy away, Bob asks his wife: 'Why don't I just go up there and smack it out of him?' ('Joy'). The nonchalance of his question and Karen's feigned exasperation at her husband's suggestion to use physical force against the little boy suggest a degree of physical and emotional violence that is troubling in its association with middle-class 'normality'. Bob and Karen Dalton may not boast the physical markers of the grotesque, yet their behaviour is only different in degree, rather than kind, from the antisocial escapades of the series' main characters. In this respect, *Psychoville* is a prime example of the contemporary Gothic, which regularly 'registers the (Freudian) impossibility of familial harmony' (Bruhm 264). Deviance replaces normality as the default condition of the 'norm', in a move that seems particularly appropriate for our Gothic times, in which 'margins may become the norm and occupy a more central cultural place' (Botting, 'Aftergothic' 286).

The sheer popularity of a show like *Psychoville* (and, indeed, of the Gothic as an aesthetic and representative mode) again raises the question of why our

culture is so fascinated by deviant minds and grotesque bodies, when being 'abnormal', that is, being outside some predefined notion of normality, is not generally perceived as an acceptable, let alone desirable, condition. Intuitively, one might argue, the fascination we have with all things Gothic stems from the vicarious pleasure of indulging our basest instincts and desires at a safe distance. Yet, looked at more critically, *Psychoville* does not offer much in the way of such appealing escapism. In fact, the show's humour can never dispel the sense that deep-seated traumata constitute the *fons et origo* of our main protagonists: Jelly's botched surgical procedure leaves him penniless and scarred for life, the cot-death of Joy's baby throws her into an unceasing state of delusion, the guilt of having fathered his best friend's son makes Lomax develop 'Paradise Syndrome' and the (untrue) conviction that he has killed his own father keeps David trapped in his unhealthy relationship with Maureen. Each of *Psychoville*'s main characters has to some degree been pushed into the marginal position of the social misfit by fateful circumstance, an experience that seems to resonate with contemporary culture, which simultaneously upholds such opposing values as individualism and societal conformity. Inevitably, then, members of such a culture are bound to suffer trauma at some point in their lives, and Alexandra Warwick has provocatively argued that, contrary to intuitive expectations, consumers of the Gothic veritably relish such an experience of trauma:

It seems that contemporary culture *wants* to have trauma, it is induced, predicted and enacted, persistently rehearsed even when it is not actually present. Far from fearing trauma or experiencing it involuntarily, it is now almost not permissible to be without trauma. (Warwick 11)⁸

Following Warwick's argument, *Psychoville* can be seen as feeding the viewers' hunger for traumatic life narratives, while lacing them with just enough comedy to make the experience a sufficiently palatable one.

Psychoville's Series One was greeted with rave reviews and garnered the makers of the show the 2009 British Comedy Award for 'Best New British TV Comedy'. Even though Series Two also won in the rubric 'Best Comedy Drama' in 2011, plans to develop a third series were abandoned after viewer ratings had dropped from a decent average of 1.45 million in Series One to a less than staggering 629,000 in its follow-up ('*Psychoville Killed Off*'). It is difficult to estimate why viewing figures plummeted in this manner, yet one reason might be that viewers became increasingly frustrated with Series Two's outrageously implausible plot (involving a secret organisation engaged in experiments to reanimate the cryogenically frozen head of a dead Nazi general). Where *Psychoville*'s Series One hinged on the Gothic mystery connecting its absorbing characters, Series Two plodded through an awkward mock-sci-fi storyline that tried to add new secrets to a series that had already reached a satisfactory conclusion.

Notes

1. *Psychoville's* precursor series *The League of Gentlemen* (BBC2 1999–2002) is similarly permeated with references to cult horror films, with Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973) as its prime source (Hunt 76).
2. Episode Three of Series One opens with a nightmare sequence in which Jelly is accused of stealing his acts from other clowns in a court trial presided over by 'Judge Pennywise'.
3. Elliott provides a short survey of film parodies, animated film parodies and pornographic film parodies of this triptych and discusses their different popular and critical agendas (223–231).
4. Brophy's term 'textuality' encompasses those elements that may more adequately be captured by the concept 'mediality'. Thus, for instance, he considers the growth of special effects and technological innovation, on the one hand, and the broad distribution of horror tropes and narrative patterns, on the other, as productive of the contemporary horror film's specific textuality/mediality.
5. Fred Botting also notes 'the capacity of Gothic formulae to produce laughter as abundantly as emotions of terror or horror' (*Gothic* 168).
6. For a succinct account of traditional theories of humor, including the 'incongruity theory', see Morreall, *Comic Relief*, particularly 1–26. In an earlier contribution on the subject, Morreall contrasted three reactions to incongruity, namely negative emotion (such as fear, anger or revulsion), reality assimilation (puzzlement when faced with the strange) and humorous amusement ('Funny Ha-Ha' 190–200).
7. Pemberton and Shearsmith in fact acknowledge their debt to the 'Great Inimitable' on the audio commentary to this episode.
8. A quick glance at Britain's TV landscape lends credibility to Warwick's hypothesis. Recent reality series like Channel 4's *Supersize vs Superskinny* (2008–present) and *The Undateables* (2012–present) shine their cameras on a parade of traumatised individuals: the former show exposes extreme eating habits (while pretending to provide curative help), while the latter follows people with physical and mental disabilities in their attempts to find a partner in love.

Filmography

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