

DISSENT IN JEST

**DISSENT IN JEST: THE POLITICAL AESTHETICS OF
CONTEMPORARY MEDIA HUMOUR**

By

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that humour not only constitutes a central aesthetic strategy within contemporary mass media, but can also be understood as a form of cultural production that is central to how we understand our world as a site of value and politics. Drawing on an understanding of liberalism as a politics of “reasonable dissent,” I investigate how humour is thought to operate as an exemplary form of this politics through a consideration of popular and scholarly literature. I then complicate this theoretical and lay consensus regarding humour-as-dissent, through a consideration of the ways in which a range of specific filmic and televisual texts – *Jackass*, *The Office*, *The Sarah Silverman Program*, *The Chappelle Show*, *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, *Family Guy*, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *The Colbert Report* and *Four Lions* – produce an aesthetic of humour through the manipulation and mobilisation of textual strategies and affective registers, such as discomfort, absurdity and provocation. Questioning the easy understanding of humour as a means to challenge existing power structures, I instead argue that the currently dominant forms of media humour are better understood as a political aesthetic that opens up new avenues of understanding and critique even as it shuts down and short circuits previously tenable forms of political interpretation. Through an intertwining of close-reading of popular cultural texts and a critical engagement with wider theoretical models of media production and consumption, I thus propose that the aesthetic aspects of mass media, such as humour, can be understood as cultural precursors that inflect the ways in which we can imagine the problems and possibilities of contemporary politics.

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Introduction - Humour for Fun and Profit (and Mental Wellness, Truth, Beauty, Critical Thinking and Progressive Politics)

“The world likes humor, but treats it patronizingly. It decorates its serious artists with laurel, and its wags with Brussels sprouts. It feels that if a thing is funny it can be presumed to be something less than great, because if it were truly great it would be wholly serious.”

E.B. White, “Some Remarks on Humor” (244).

This project is concerned with humour, and, most importantly, the potentially scandalous notion that humour is an important, perhaps central, aspect of the media-dominated English-speaking world. Despite all appearances to the contrary, humour is not trivial, nor a passing fancy, and though it may appear to be of less importance than the tragic, the serious, the somber and the grave, nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, humour, understood here as an aesthetic, which is to say humour as a style or a form of cultural production, is taken as central to the ways in which we approach and understand the world as a site of meaning, politics and life itself. A therefore necessary and founding proposition of my investigation is that humour is important: both as a subject of study in-and-of-itself, and for what it can tell us about the political possibilities and conditions of a given society. Indeed, I will argue that this is particularly true of *my* society: the postmodern, allegedly post-ideological, (neo)liberal and highly mediated culture of the Anglophone West since the end of the Cold War.¹ Bound together by innumerable historical events and assumptions as well as a common language, the UK and the settler states of North American and the South Pacific share a common media culture as a

¹ I take up what might appear to be a somewhat unorthodox phrasing in comparison to the more customary evocation of Anglo-America in order to emphasise that, though the USA and to a lesser extent the UK, might constitute the central sites of English-language cultural production, they do not constitute the only sites of consumption for such texts. Instead, as a citizen of New Zealand and a resident of Canada, I seek to emphasise the ways in which the media aesthetics of humour extend beyond the borders of their origin.

consequence of the rapid transmission of the televisual and filmic texts that are the central objects of my investigation. It is in the context of this shared media culture that I will argue that a novel mode of humour emerges in the 1990s and 2000s, which comes to assume a prominent role in the cultural production and consumption of this Anglophone world. The central concern of this project is to consider how the contemporary manifestation of humour might be thought to have a bearing upon the political context of the moment – a question which I regard as of critical importance – while also addressing the broader question of how an aesthetic category might be thought to function in a political manner. My project is thus to suggest and to demonstrate an analysis of humour, which can account for its complexity and contingency, premised on an understanding of humour as caught up in wider issues of politics and aesthetics.

In doing so, I seek to illuminate critically what I term a “political aesthetics” of humour. By political aesthetics, I refer to the idea that the aesthetic aspect of a text – its form, style, palette, rhythm, narrative, structure and form – can do political work, by which I mean can it intercede in the negotiation, contestation and distribution of power. In this description of politics, I follow Jeremy Gilbert’s suggestion that:

One of the premises of almost all cultural studies to date has been the idea that the concept of politics needs to be expanded way beyond the traditional focus on contestation over state power between organised groups ... The expanded conception regards politics as involving all those processes whereby power relationships are implemented, maintained, challenged, or altered in any sphere of activity whatsoever. (*Anticapitalism* 7-8)

I am thus distinguishing between a politics as a separate social sphere of governance and state power, which I will refer to as ‘state politics’ when necessary for purposes of clarity, and the wider definition of politics that operates in cultural studies and which can be

thought of as cultural politics, but which I will refer to as simply ‘politics.’ However, the distinction between these two categories is often not as immediate and obvious as this description might imply, and this does have occasional bearing on my wording. My use of aesthetics is also quite particular: contrary to other (legitimate) conceptions, what I mean by aesthetics here is not a concern with beauty, pleasure, or even necessarily with art, but rather an engagement with “not only the sensations of touch, taste, smell, sight and sound, but also ... ‘cerebral sensations,’ like the tingle of evocative ideas coursing through your brain” (Koren 46). While closely tied to the notion of art for historical and institutional reasons, the idea of aesthetics can inform analysis and understanding far beyond the narrow category of art. In this broad sense, aesthetics is the term for the cultural and formal existence of any produced object, be it pulp fiction, video games, gardening or popular humour.

In this study I seek to understand the aesthetics of humour as something that extends beyond the bounds of a single text, and instead can be perceived as a common cultural category that extends across multiple texts. Indeed, an aesthetic idea such as humour only exists insofar as it is held in common across a wide range of cultural artefacts: it can never meaningfully be the possession of a single text. Thus, I want to suggest that the notion of the aesthetic as a site of political potential need not be restricted to particular works or artists, but that we can also speak of a dominant mode or modes operating within a given cultural space at the level of aesthetics. Such an approach involves wedding the sociological perspective of the mass culture tradition, which emphasises the historically specific and structurally determining role of culture, with an

aesthetic reading that attends to the formal qualities of texts and the political opportunities afforded in their production and interpretation. In doing so, it becomes possible to introduce the possibility of agency into the traditional sociological framework of the mass culture critique, such that the meaning and value of cultural artefacts are not always already completely determined by abstract systems. Moreover, at the same time, this theoretical synthesis also provides the foundation for a sociologically inflected aesthetics: one that is not completely caught up with out-dated and conservative notions of beauty and the civilising power of art, nor simply reduced to a Bourdieusian game of position and social struggle, where art is simply a tactic in a struggle for status and power, rather than a carrier of cultural meanings.

Beginning with an examination of how humour has been frequently taken up as a site of free speech and subversion within the context of liberal politics, this project characterises the emergence of a distinct mode of humour in the globalised media culture during the 1990s and 2000s through the analysis of a series of texts of that period. This largely formal analysis is not an end in itself, however: rather, its role is to provide a concrete set of examples through which to consider how humour might be thought to act politically, and what this means for the examination of aesthetics as a political force. In other words, the central concern of “Dissent in Jest” is to investigate the ways in which the aesthetic category of postmodern humour reshapes the limits and assumptions of cultural politics and political culture. The three chapters that compose the body of this investigation will address, in turn, the three major questions which motivate the project: how is humour understood in terms of politics, especially in what I term the

contemporary ‘liberal moment’? What is the dominant aesthetic or form of contemporary humour? How can that form be understood to work politically? These will roughly correspond to three main approaches: the first, historical and sociological, the second, textual analysis, and the third, theoretical.

The World that Jokes Built: Establishing the Society of Humour

Before I speak to particular contours of this aesthetic of humour – the specific forms of which will be the focus of my second chapter – I would first like to consider the multiple contemporary sites at which the central cultural importance of humour may be perceived and from which I draw my argument regarding the fundamental necessity of the analysis of humour. First, the importance of humour can be perceived in terms of economics. The production and distribution of situation comedies and comedic films are significant sources of profit for the cultural and media industries, not to mention the profitability of humour in other media forms, such as video games, popular publishing and internet content. While high-budget action and adventure films, especially sequels, may generate the greatest profits on an individual film basis, comedy films constitute a staple of the Anglophone film industry. Though one should not overstate the importance of box office statistics, which, despite their celebration in the popular and industrial press, constitute only a small section of the overall profit of a film (Epstein 21-4), these figures do certainly retain some validity as a measure of relative importance. In the UK, comedy is consistently the most profitable of cinematic genres, responsible for 24 percent of releases and 20 percent of box office takings in 2009. Placed within a broader context, these are historically low numbers for comedy film in the UK, which claimed us much as

30 percent in 2003, and rarely less than 25 percent of the total box office over the last decade. Similarly, in the USA in 2008, the most recent year for which figures are currently available, comedy films took in the highest average earnings of any genre with an average gross of \$22.41million. In addition, in that year comedy films made up 20.27 percent of all US cinematic releases, second in number only to the drama genre, which display much lower average earnings of only \$5.07million (Screen Digest, “Movies”). Comedy films thus form a major source of industry revenue due to their combination of sheer volume of production (which is to some extent made possible because of their low production cost in comparison to action and adventure films) and relatively high revenue per film. Nor do these figures take into account those forms of humour not confined by generic boundaries: top-grossing action movies of 2008, such as *Iron Man*, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skulls*, and *Hancock*, all incorporated strong elements of humour (the notable exception is the top-grossing film of that year, *The Dark Knight*, which proved a largely grim affair).

A similar situation applies in the televisual context where – while live sports and reality show finales may command the largest once-off audiences – situation comedies live on generating income, in syndication for years, if not decades. While it is difficult to measure the economic impact of shows across their entire run, especially when trying to take into account the financial returns of syndication, some hint of the massive earning powers of these shows can be estimated from a consideration of the success of individual shows and the impact on secondary markets. Of the six highest-rated season finales (in the USA) during the period, 1990 – 2010, four are situation comedies, *Cheers* (1993),

Seinfeld (1998), *Friends* (2004), *The Cosby Show* (1993), and the fifth, *The Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson* (1992), is almost entirely comic in focus (TV Squad). Nor does economic impact necessarily need to be derived from ratings and advertising alone: even late in its run, *The Simpsons* generated \$750 million in merchandise sales in 2007 (Lieberman), with an estimated franchise revenue of \$12.33 billion over its entire run (Statisticbrain). Further establishing the economic clout of humour, comedy also drives the TV-DVD and rental markets, with sitcoms consistently constituting just less than a third of rental charts and dominating sales throughout the early 2000s (Screen Digest, “Comedy tops”; “Comedy earns”; “Comedy triumphs”). In 2004, the top ten best-selling DVD-TV titles in the US market were comedies (Screen Digest, “Comedy is top genre”). To phrase it succinctly, then, the production and consumption of humour is a major economic concern.

The second site at which the importance of humour may be ascertained is the social sphere, wherein humour frequently operates as a site of subjective identity and affect. Moreover, this identity and affect is overwhelmingly regarded as positive, such that “it is generally regarded as beneficial to laugh about things, including ourselves; to get problems off our chests and ‘see their funny side’; to look back on what was previously regarded as very serious, maybe even tragic, and ‘have a good laugh about it’.” (Lockyer and Pickering 4). Speaking to this social role of humour in the contemporary moment, sociologist Michael Billig argues that “we belong to a society in which fun has become an imperative and humour is seen as a necessary quality for being fully human” (13). Billig’s argument is that not only has humour become obligatory at the current

moment, but that this operation is so profoundly ideological, that the demand for humour is taken up as a tacit and persistent *desire*. Humour is not a virtue that might feel imposed upon us – such as charity, tolerance or fiscal responsibility – but rather one that we clamour to possess. In our current moment, then, humour has become something to which most of us would gladly seek to lay claim: if not to be humorous, then at the least to be able to recognise and appreciate it, to lay claim to what is commonly referred to as a ‘sense of humour.’ As Billig observes, there is no equally desirable, opposing claim: “people will no more declare themselves to be humourless than claim to be selfish, insensitive or criminally insane” (12): a ‘good sense of humour’ comes to function as an almost universally desirable personality trait. Similarly, Daniel Wickberg notes that “anyone who has read letters of recommendation or glanced at the personal ads that fill the backpages of urban weekly newspapers knows that the term ‘sense of humour’ recurs with amazing frequency” (1): a fact that has been quantified in a casual study by Robert Provine who found one-eighth of personal advertisements in metropolitan American newspapers mentioned “laughter or laughter-related behaviour” (33-4). Moreover, a sense of humour is also frequently attributed to the recently deceased in newspaper articles and obituaries. At the risk of sounding ghoulish, it would seem that very few die without being in the possession of a generous and well-developed sense of humour. Yet it should not be particularly surprising that at moments of self or altruistic promotion, we turn to a virtue perceived to be as benign and uncontroversial as a sense of humour.

So strong is this belief in the social utility of humour that it increasingly appears to assume quasi-spiritual powers to promote social, mental and even physical well-being.

A wealth of publications over the past two decades attests to a widespread belief in a link between humour and increased self-worth, social cohesion and psychological health: with titles such as *Becoming A Humor Being: The Power To Choose A Better Way* (2005), *Using the Power of Humor to Improve Your Life* (2005), *Humor: The Psychology of Living Buoyantly* (2000), *The Fun Factor: Unleashing the Power of Humor at Home and on the Job* (2003), *Humor for Healing: A Therapeutic Approach* (1999), and *Serious Laughter: Live a Happier, Healthier, More Productive Life* (1998), this literature enlists humour as a means by which the stressed, agitated, anxious and sad can find strength and solace in an oppressive world. Under this regime, humour comes to function as a physical and mental cure-all, one which can, in the words of humour scholar and motivational speaker John Morreall, “reduce stress, boost morale, and [make] communication more effective” (“Keynotes”). At an institutional level, consultants are on hand to improve the productivity and morale of businesses and bureaucracies through the judicious application of humour (Wickberg 219). Morreall goes so far as to suggest that humour can even aid physical recovery and healing, asserting that “humor is not only healthy, but has actual healing power” (*Laughter* 108). In support of his assertion, Morreall draws upon the oft repeated example of Norman Cousins, who in 1964 overcame a debilitating illness through the application of large doses of Vitamin C and the Marx Brothers. Cousins’s recovery, which he personally detailed in a number of books, most notably *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient*, is frequently cited as evidence for the ability of humour to affect the body in medically beneficial ways. Building on Cousins’ initial foray, a whole subfield of medicine has since sprung up around the purported medicinal

benefits of laughter, which has been the basis of a number of physiological, psychological and immunological studies (Provine 189-207). As a force for good, the purview of humour is not limited to medicine, but now extends across the scope of contemporary Anglophone society:

Teachers are increasingly urged by educationalists to enliven their delivery with jocularly. Social protestors train newcomers in the use of humour for non-violent resistance. Teams of doctors dressed as clowns deliver an optimal dose of laughter in children's wards. Psychologists advise organisations on how to use humour to enhance workplace wellness, while negotiating the thorny issue of 'political correctness'. When work pursuits are over, laughter clubs offer a means of relieving stress, and personal column editors supply acronyms to assist in the search for a mate with a G(ood) S(ense) O(f) H(umour). (Hynes and Sharpe 44)

In light of such accounts, humour would appear to be not only a way in which we seek to define ourselves and our interaction with the world, but also an inexhaustibly positive means by which in which people from all works of life can improve their social, mental and physical health.

The third site at which I locate the contemporary importance of humour is the realm of aesthetics, where it increasingly comes to perform cultural work once reserved for categories such as 'beauty' or 'truth.' This is not achieved through the displacement of those terms – the persistence of which can be perceived in both the content and controversy surrounding volumes such as Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* – nor through any obvious or easy equation of the humorous and the beautiful: but rather with the ascendance of humour to an almost unassailable aesthetic category in its own right. By this I mean that humour becomes taken up as a marker of cultural value, whose evocation speaks to notions of quality, function and desirability. Hence, though that which is humorous is not beautiful per se, *it might as well be*. In a sense, then, the

assessment of whether or not a text is funny now bears a strong resemblance to the judgement of whether a certain text is understood to be art: both designations are frequently thought to be “most personal and true” (Myrone 10) and both are capable of legitimating a text deemed otherwise irredeemably obscene, ugly or otherwise unworthy.

One major consequence of this development is a tendency to explicitly produce, exhibit and interpret artworks in terms of humour. This trend is evident in the increasing acceptance of humour into the gallery space – such as the 2005-2007 exhibition, *Situation Comedy: Humor in Recent Art*, and 2010’s *Rude Britannia: British Comic Art* at the Tate Britain – which not only provides a forum for contemporary art premised upon the use of humour, but also re-interprets established art schools and movements in terms of humour and older examples of humour in terms of art. Thus, smutty postcards, newspaper cartoons and caricatures are inducted into the art world, while humour is declared “central to the cultural politics of movements such as Dada, Surrealism, Situationism, Fluxus, Performance and Feminism, and of course much recent art practice that defies categorization” (Higgle 12). This inclination to interpret the historical avant-garde in terms of humour rather than shock or critique speaks to a shift in the understanding of those works (Holm), which in turn sets the stage for art theorist Sheri Klein to strike out against what she perceives as a cult of seriousness within the world of art and assert that “humour is a force in art to be reckoned with, and that galleries and museums should take notice” (130). This declaration comes at the conclusion of an episodic parade of examples from Bruce Nauman and Jeff Koons to the Guerilla Girls and Sarah Lucas, where Klein argues for an interpretation of each artist and their work in terms of humour. Matthew

Collins summarises this contemporary situation in a more economic manner when he simply states that “there are many jokes in Modern art” (184). Nor is the new aesthetic role of humour restricted to the art world, but also comes to play a central role in the circulation and legitimation of various forms of popular culture. Just as humour comes to operate as an increasingly important value within the realm of art, it also comes to function as the primary-stated purpose behind the production and consumption of a large body of mass-produced texts as a desirable popular aesthetic. As a consequence, we see a proliferation of popular humour texts: films, books, television and radio shows, theatre, stand-up, comic books and internet content characterised by an aesthetic of humour, insofar as they aspire to funniness and the production of laughter. The abundance of such texts speaks to the manner in which humour has come to serve an increasingly prominent and profound role in the organisation and interpretation of contemporary culture, in terms of both elite and popular aesthetics: as Berys Gaut asserts “humor is a major (and remarkably understudied) aesthetic mode” (52).

Why Humour? Why Now?

It is not that the social consumption and celebration of humour is a new phenomenon; humour has always played a meaningful role across a wide range of societies. Indeed, if one desired to furnish a collection of culturally significant examples of comic culture prior to the 1990s, or indeed prior to the twentieth century, the exceedingly long-running British publication *Punch*, the bawdy novels of Francois Rabelais during the French Renaissance, or the Classical comedies of Aristophanes offer ready examples. However, though it would be ridiculous to argue that these examples do

not constitute humour of some sort, the current aesthetic role of humour does differ from that of the past, certainly in degree and arguably also in kind. A first point is that, while it may often be treated as historically constant and even “natural” (c.f. Cameron 5-9), humour is not a static and stable category: meaningful distinctions arise from historical shifts in the mode, purpose and understanding of humour. Hence, while all the three aforementioned texts might be currently recognisable as humour – at least to those with the relevant training and knowledge to appreciate the cultural references and asides (Eco “Rule” 270) – and while we certainly are able to laugh at certain elements and episodes contained within, there is sufficient doubt as to whether we laugh in the same manner as the original audience, or if that audience understood those texts as humorous in the same manner as would a contemporary audience. For example, Wickberg argues that the meaning of humour undergoes a historical movement during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries “away from an antipathetic response to deformed objects and towards a sympathetic perception of incongruity” (8). While I’m not suggesting that any equivalently radical reorganisation of the notion of humour occurs during or immediately prior to the period under consideration, the mutability of the concept therein implied speaks to the way in which not only the understanding of what aesthetic strategies constitute humour can change, but what the designation humour itself can mean.

On a straightforward level, this shifting understanding of humour gestures towards the argument put forward by Umberto Eco, that humour arises through the challenge and violation of implicit cultural rules and is therefore bound by “time, society, [and] cultural anthropology” (“Rule” 269). It follows that to appreciate humour in a direct

and immediate manner – to find something funny without the need for explanation, which more often than not proves fatal to comic intention – the audience must be familiar with the cultural codes, logics and values as well as the formal cues and structures that underpin the humour in question. Thus, on the one hand, something that is funny in one culture can be shocking, embarrassing, or even repugnant in another” (Kuipers *Good* 10), while on the other hand, it can prove difficult for the subject of a particular culture to appreciate the humour of another society, separated from her by space, time or historical social oppositions and divergences. Furthermore, we must also be cautious when attributing humorous aspects to the texts of another culture, as a lack of communication between codes can lead to the perception of humour where none was originally intended. This does not mean that one is technically ‘wrong’ to find such texts funny – although some may find such a reaction ethically troubling – simply that in such circumstances one must acknowledge that one may be locating this funniness at the expense of the text, rather than alongside its textual cues.² While people in the past no doubt laughed (or smirked, or smiled), they did so under radically different cultural conditions and thus did not do so in the same manner as the contemporary subject. Accordingly, the apparently modern humour of historically distant humour texts is better understood as something that arises during the process of contemporary consumption, rather than as an inherent motive of production. I argue then that the apparent historicity of humour can potentially serve as

² This may involve either misreading a text as humorous, when within its culture of production it would not be thought of in that manner, or knowingly finding humour in a text because of its representation of different sets of social norms. The first is an aesthetic phenomena, the second is sociological.

further evidence of the contemporary mindset that is always prepared to understand and praise a text in terms of its humour.

At the same time, it is clear that most individual societies are by no means isolated and autonomous in time and space: cultural cues and logics flow between them, and thus humour may too. The closer in time and social organisation we are to a previous culture, the greater the possibility of comic comprehension: consequently, the humour of *Punch* is more familiar to a contemporary Western subject than that of Aristophanes. The spatial flow of humour is fundamentally central to this project, given that I suggest a commonality between different national Anglophone cultures, such that certain forms of humour, though by no means all, are mutually comprehensible between the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Moreover, not only can humour travel between cultures to the extent that those communities of sense share certain beliefs in common, it can also be productive of those cultural commonalities, as well as reliant upon them. Thus, like any other cultural object, humorous texts carry within them certain sets of embedded ideological assumptions that may potentially play a role in the transmission and construction of socially shared systems of interpretation. Humour must always be understood within the context of a particular “structure of feeling” (Williams *Analysis* 48) or, as I have suggested elsewhere “a distribution of the nonsensical” (Holm) in relation to which it is simultaneously dependant, constitutive and productive. When separated from that structure, humour’s interpretability, affect, and often its very legibility as humour, evaporate. The particular forms and concerns of the current mode of humour will be the

focus of the second chapter, while their relation to particular ideological and epistemological assumptions will be discussed extensively in the third.

One can also more straightforwardly characterise the difference of its aesthetic role in terms of the degree of humour circulating within contemporary media culture, the marker of which is a sheer predominance of humour. As Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering argue “humour is one of the most pervasive elements of public culture. It occurs across all contemporary media, in most of their different institutional formats, as well as being a central aspect of everyday life and our day-to-day relationships. Humour is not confined to any particular genre or form of narrative, even though certain genres and narrative are defined by their mode of being funny, regardless of whether they achieve this” (3). To some extent this is reflected in the previously quoted economic statistics: much of what Anglophone society watches in film and television can be classified as humour, and that which does not meet strict generic definitions of comedy often incorporates substantial humorous aspects. For example, it seems common sense, or at least non-remarkable, that there exist television channels devoted solely to comedy, such as the Comedy Network in Canada, the Comedy Channel in Australia and Comedy Central in the USA, with its localised variations in the UK and Ireland, New Zealand and a number of European countries. Other media institutions are also heavily involved in the production and distribution of the comic. For example, as noted earlier, comedy is a major concern of the film and television industries while also playing a major role in industries such as radio broadcast and publishing: a category which includes not only the obvious sites, such as comic novels, humour columns in mass-market publications and

syndicated newspaper comic strips, but also greeting cards, postcards and calendars.

Comic strip characters, such as Charlie Brown or Dilbert, are among the most recognisable contemporary cultural icons. Utterly unquantifiable in its scope and range, the centrality of humour in printed material, from Thomas Pynchon to a Garfield Calendar, is nonetheless difficult to deny.

Beyond the usual suspects, humour can also be located in a diverse range of somewhat unlikely media environments: for example in video games, where the role of humour can range from fleeting bathetic functions, as it does in *Warcraft II*, or can act to successfully define a text, such as games like *Day of the Tentacle* and the *Monkey Island* series published by LucasArts in the mid-1990s. Much has been made of the internet as a distribution network for pornography, but just as important is its role in the communication of multiple forms of humour: in blogs, YouTube videos and jokes forwarded via email. Similarly, humour is an often over-looked aspect of popular music, where it can prove essential to the appeal of a musician or a band, as in the case of The Flight of the Conchords, Frank Zappa, The Darkness and ‘Weird Al’ Yankovic, or appear more subtly through the disruption of anticipated musical structures (Kembrew). The role of humour in the art world has been considered earlier with reference to the increasing acceptance of humour in gallery spaces, but the plastic arts do not exhaust the cultural reach of humour, which is perhaps even more evident in the terms of live performance, such as the continued success and media exposure given to improv troupes and stand-up comedy. Though commentators such as a stand-up historian Ted Zoglin might lament, in lapsarian fashion, the decline of stand-up comedians as a countercultural force, they

nonetheless do not argue against the persistent cultural currency of the stand-up genre or the increasing respect and cultural capital afforded its practitioners (223-4). In a different register, the status of stand-up as a legitimate, if not lucrative, profession has been cemented through the establishment of an international comedy circuit, focussed around festivals such as the Edinburgh Fringe, Montreal's Just for Laughs festival, the Melbourne International Comedy Festival and the New Zealand International Comedy Festival.

And at what many might consider the opposite end of the aesthetic spectrum, humour also serves a central role in contemporary advertising. Since the early 1990s, there has been little debate regarding the utility of humour in advertising, where its effectiveness goes almost unquestioned. This automatic acceptance is a distinct shift away from earlier attitudes regarding humour in marketing where:

A half century ago it would have been unthinkable to advertising executives, copywriters, and their clients that they could mobilise an attitude of comic detachment for the purpose of selling products. The classic analysis of early twentieth century advertising held strict warning against the use of humor in advertising. (Wickberg 220)

As recently as the 1980s, there was still doubt as to whether humour, and in particular more aggressive or juvenile forms of humour, might constitute a self-sabotaging sale strategy (Beard 27-9). In contrast, humour constitutes a dominant aesthetic of current advertising: "estimates of the use of humor range from 15 percent to as high as 46 percent in U.S. television advertising and more than 30 percent of U.S. radio advertising, with similar and even higher levels of use in other countries" (Beard 8).

Finally, to the extent that advertising comprises what might be considered the cultural background of contemporary capitalist society, it is joined by a host of other incidental commodities informed by a postmodern design aesthetic of humour. So far as humour can infuse less semiotically dense forms such as industrial design, architecture and fashion design, especially the blank canvas of the T-shirt, the comic becomes imbued in the objects of our everyday lives. And although perhaps very few would break into laughter at the sight of a referential building or a brightly-coloured kettle, the constant low level buzz of humour engendered by design and fashion no doubt contributes on some level to the ever-present influence of the society of humour. Once again, I am not arguing that all of these sites and forms of humour are necessarily historically new: modern stand-up comedy emerges following the decline of vaudeville, the situation comedy format was a stalwart of early radio broadcasts. What is new, however, is the manner in which the sum of all these forms contributes to the saturation of contemporary Anglophone culture. To summarise, we are surrounded by humour every day: it is a ubiquitous aspect of our media and cultural environment: the distinguishing factor of humour in the current moment is that it becomes a dominant aesthetic. And in an age when humour is increasingly considered to be important, it is important to consider what humour is.

That's Not *Really* Funny: Theorising the Society of Humour

In spite of this cultural centrality, however, humour remains woefully under-theorised and is instead commonly, and reductively, understood as either inevitably trivialising or inherently subversive. For example, such positions structure the majority of

popular and academic responses to Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show*, understood alternately as contributing to an apolitical culture of apathy (Baumgartner and Morris 361-2, Hart and Hartelius 263-6) or partisan smugness (Hitchens 101-10) or as a site of ascendant “public intellectual”-ism, where Stewart functions as a court jester or adherent of Foucauldian parrhesia or candid truth telling (Baym 268-74, Hefflin 26-31, Jordan, McKain 424-9, Warner 37-58). The first tendency, which reads humour as an exercise opposed to serious critical or political consideration, is generally the discourse of pundits and editorialists, rather than sustained inquiry: those who reject humour as unimportant are unlikely to then undertake an extended study of its manifestations. Consequently, in academic work this perspective most often appears as a straw-man interlocutor, as in Russell Peterson’s suggestion that “late-night comedy does more than simply induce apathy and dumb down our discourse” (3), or Tim Walters’s hypothetical assertion that “*The Daily Show* is to political coverage what Pop Up Video is to music videos: instead of committed and detailed analytic critique, it offers little more to the viewer than wiser and more immediate cracks about the worrying intellectual poverty of its subject” (2). A notable exception is a study carried out by Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris, where the authors assert that existence of a “*The Daily Show* Effect,” whereby viewers of late-night comedy treat (state) political matters as a subject of jest, producing a cynical attitude towards politics and other “detrimental effects, [such as] driving down support for political institutions and leaders among those already inclined toward nonparticipation” (341). However, possibly the most effectual, and surprising, source of this discourse is the comedians themselves: Stewart and his team have frequently retorted

to charges of bias or journalistic inaccuracy with the rejoinder that the show is ‘just comedy.’ Stewart most famously offered this defence during his much feted 2004 appearance on the CNN debate show, *Crossfire*: in response to a series of stinging criticisms of their journalistic practice, *Crossfire*’s hosts attempted to turn Stewart’s points back upon his own show, whereupon Stewart quipped, “You’re on CNN. The show that leads into me is puppets making crank phone calls” (qtd. in Bárcenas 98). In this manner, the most influential purveyors of the notion that humour has no direct political consequence may in fact be the humourists themselves, whose protestations serve to confuse any attempt to attribute directly political function or intention.

This denial of explicit engagement on behalf of the comic producers, however, has not prevented many from attempting to attribute to humour a critical and liberatory political project as a form of socially desirable dissent from authoritarian or dominating structures of power. This second tendency, whereby humour is celebrated as a critical and subversive strategy, does not want for adherents, which is at its most celebratory extremes in popular publications such as *The Daily Show and Philosophy* or *The Colbert Show and Philosophy*. Nor is this interpretive mode consigned to the non-academic sphere, but is also present in more scholarly works, such as the anthology *Satire TV*, which takes as a starting premise that “all humor challenges social or scientific norms *at some level*” (Gray et al. 8-9, italics in original), or volumes whose titles – *Revel with a Cause, Laughter and Liberation, Rebellious Laughter* – suggest the ways in which they seek to link humour to the pursuit of a liberal political project. Thus, though Wickberg’s assertion that “those in cultural studies tell us that popular humor is a ‘transgressive’ or ‘subversive’ expression

of ‘resistance’ to oppression” (219) may overstate its claims, with scepticism oozing from its scare quotes, he does accurately diagnose a certain tendency within the contemporary study of humour: the widespread desire to attribute to humour an inherent progressive political power. The question of why such readings of humour might appear particularly attractive in the current political moment is the subject of the first chapter, where I consider in greater detail the role of humour as a form of “reasonable dissent” that resonates with the political goals of currently dominant forms of liberal politics.

However attractive such easy equations of humour and liberal politics might appear, analyses that work within this field of assumptions prematurely limit the conclusions that can be drawn regarding the political function of humour: shutting down other, possibly less appealing, interpretations. It is especially crucial at this moment, where humour constitutes a major force within media culture, to move beyond analyses that seek to either denounce or celebrate the function of humour as a cultural force: such a move is necessary if we wish to get at the ways in which humour – its particular forms and its aesthetic predominance – can speak to us about the wider cultural and political possibilities of the present. In theoretically impoverished analyses, humour is effectively reduced to an already-known entity whose function can be read-off in a straightforward manner: yet such a simplification can only be sustained through a rejection of the complexity of actually existing comic texts, an interpretative strategy that favours the imposition of a monolithic understanding of humour, without attention to the specifics of the texts under investigation. A responsible analysis of humour needs to examine how humour emerges out of particular texts, rather than imposing an abstract model. By

failing to consider how and why humour is being employed, such unrefined approaches, be they celebratory or dismissive, cannot account for how specific instances of humour inflect the political and, instead, can offer only fore-drawn conclusions. It is in order to escape this trap that the integration of the theory and philosophy of humour becomes necessary.

One does not have to look too far to discover precedents for a theoretical study of humour. Historically, humour has been of concern to many prominent thinkers – Aristotle, Henri Bergson, Immanuel Kant, Mikhail Bakhtin, Søren Kierkegaard, Sigmund Freud, Thomas Hobbes, Arnold Schopenhauer– though frequently only as a passing concern. As a consequence, humour theory finds itself saddled with a broad range of theoretical models, often quickly sketched and frequently conflicting. A favoured contemporary method for making sense of this proliferation is to organise the multiple competing theories into a tripartite structure of Relief, Incongruity, and Superiority theories. Following the lead of much contemporary writing on humour, I will be focussing almost exclusively on the latter two categories at the expense of Relief theory, which assumes a highly contextualised and frequently physiological model of humour that is largely incompatible with aesthetic concerns at a social, rather than individual, level. It should be noted as well, that much modern humour research and criticism, breaking with these classical approaches, rejects any clear distinction between these formulae. Paul Lewis, for example, has described humour as a “whole made up of many parts, many variables, many potential topics of inquiry” (*Comic 6*), rather than as a unified abstract entity. However, in adopting this grab-bag approach, such theorising

tends to jettison any critical concern with the politics of humour, reducing it, instead, to a rhetorical tick that can be added to any political point: Lewis himself argues that the political work of humour is always equivalent to the argument which it is invoked in service of (*Cracking* 113). This account rules out the possibility of political consequences at the level of form, which brings us back to the original concern with a lack of theoretical attention to the political work of humour itself.

Consequently, it can be useful to consider the ways in which humour has been historically conceptualised by way of the categories of Superiority and Incongruity humour. Briefly summarised, Superiority theory suggests that humour is generated when the subject has a sudden realisation of supremacy with respect to another person or situation. In the words of Thomas Hobbes, often cited as a founding figure of Superiority theory, “the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from the sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly” (54-5). Superiority theory thus understands the experience of humour to arise from a sudden perception of supremacy in the audience with respect to another person, which causes the audience enjoyment. This feeling of superiority can arise for a number of reasons: for example, if the object of the humour, or the ‘butt’ were, in classic slapstick style, to trip and fall, or if a butt were revealed to be stupid or culturally ignorant. Racist or other disparaging jokes are often cited as an example of Superiority theory at work because they generate humour through the ‘unveiling’ (or maybe more correctly the construction) of the joke teller and audience as superior to the racially conceived butt. Through its recourse to such notions of normality and inferiority,

Superiority theory therefore runs counter to understandings of humour as inherently subversive, offering instead an interpretation of the comic as a site of ridicule, rather than rejoicing, that serves to reaffirm existing structures of power and ways of being. The repressive aspects of this understanding can be developed even further with reference to the work of Henri Bergson, who, while often associated with the Incongruity tradition, famously stated that humour demands “a momentary anaesthesia of the heart” (3), by which he meant that to find humour in a fellow human’s situation, it is necessary to regard them without sympathy, and pay no heed to the suffering or humiliation that may be inflicted on them in the course of the humour.

Incongruity theory, on the other hand, surmises that humour follows the substitution of an unexpected event or remark in the place of what is expected. Often linked to the interpretations of humour offered by Kant and Schopenhauer, Incongruity theory proposes that humour arises when a particular interpretation or understanding of a statement or situation is suddenly disproved and another substituted in its place. Given that Incongruity theory focuses attention on the formal mechanism of the substitution, rather than the butt of the joke, this model allows for a much more generous reading of the comic in contrast to the negative social implications of the Superiority model. The contemporary ascendancy of this model can thus be thought to reflect the wider social tendency, discussed earlier, to imagine humour as a desirable and benign force, as opposed to the aggressive or antisocial function of humour according to Superiority theory. Furthermore, while there is nothing inherently political about the incongruous construction of humour – it simply relies upon the bringing together of two disparate

elements, so that they uneasily coexist (a squirrel wearing a hat, a political pundit obsessed with bears, or a faux-Kazakhstani anthem at an American rodeo, for example) – subsequent commentators have reconfigured the notion of incongruity in a number of politicised ways, many of which regard incongruous humour to be, or at least invoke, a profoundly subversive gesture. Chapter One will consider, in greater detail, the manifestations and consequences of this politicisation of humour.

Neither of these models – Incongruity or Superiority – should be regarded as correct in any final or total way. Both have been debunked through the extensive provision of counter-examples. For example, Michael Billig goes to some length locate the hidden malice in apparently incongruous jokes (156-8, 202-7), while the history of opposition to Superiority theory can be traced at least as far back as Francis Hutcheson's 18th century observation that a true believer does not find the inferiority of a heretic cause for amusement (11-4). In light of the necessary gaps within any universalising theory, we should not therefore treat these models as final or full accounts of how humour operates, but rather as what they are: models. Both are simplified abstractions that allow one to conduct analysis and draw conclusions out of the chaotic complexity of actual occurrences. As such, these models are not universal accounts of humour – though their authors may have attested otherwise – but instead should be better understood as historically situated attempts to make sense of the way humour works at a particular historical conjecture. There is a danger that applying them wholesale and unmodified to current humour risks drawing distorted conclusions. Nonetheless, the totalising tendency of these theories should not be taken to disqualify them entirely either; they are not magic

formulas to be played off against one another, but neither are they crude fictions with no explanatory force. Rather, with a full awareness of their located and contingent nature, I will seek to take up and assess those theories as a starting point for making sense of humour in the current moment. The construction of a theoretical model aware of its own limitations while adequate to the task of accounting for the particular forms of contextually-specific humour that emerge in the cultural texts of the 1990s and 2000s is therefore a central goal of the current project that will be pursued at length in the third chapter.

A Note on Terminology

Finally, prior to beginning my argument proper, an explanation is necessary regarding the terminology of humour. While terms such as humour, laughter and comedy have been used interchangeably up till this point, more rigorous discussion requires their separation. When addressing humour, especially in regards to its historical-theoretical trajectory, one is confronted with an immense proliferation of definition and nomenclature. Humour, depending upon the theoretical framework, can be defined as separate from the comic, though both function with respect to laughter, a condition distinct from comedy though often concerned with jokes; which is not to mention the role of wit, *witz*, irony, parody, funniness, satire or the oft-cited carnival. To complicate matters further, there exists little direct correspondence between the uses of this terminology in the work of different writers, some of whom are at great pains to differentiate the varying names, while others treat them as more or less interchangeable. And, as one last twist of the screw, it is not uncommon for authors to invest their specific

typology with a political, aesthetic or moral judgement; for Eco the comic offers only false transgression, whilst humour is truly subversive (“Rule” 277-8); for Freud the comic is found, whereas humour is made (181), and Alenka Zupančič, Paul Lewis and Simon Critchley simply see fit to distinguish between good and bad humour; true and false manifestations of the humorous.

In the current work, humour will be distinguished as a separate phenomenon from laughter, which is a physical, physiological action that often, but not necessarily, arises in response to humour. While historically the two have been conceived interchangeably in the foundational work of Immanuel Kant (160-1), Thomas Hobbes (54), Mikhail Bakhtin (62-135) and Henri Bergson (2-4), humour need not necessarily lead to laughter, and laughter does not arise solely in response to humour (Lewis *Cracking* 6, 163). As argued by John Dewey, “[T]he laugh is by no means to be viewed from the standpoint of humor; its connection with humor is secondary ... A very moderate degree of observation of adults will convince one that a large amount of laughter is wholly irrelevant to any joke or witticism whatever” (157). The converse is also true: humour need not induce actual laughter to be accepted as funny. Yet, many conclusions regarding laughter have been applied wholesale to humour as a consequence of this false equivalence, which has had the unfortunate consequence of distorting the understanding of humour through the introduction of untenable assumptions, prime among them the social function of laughter. Thus while Bergson, and Billig following him, understand laughter as a shared social activity that does not typically arise in isolation (Bergson 3-4, 66-8; Billig 195-9), it does not necessarily follow that humour, as distinct from laughter, is also inevitably social in

this sense. Indeed, in an era when much humour is produced for profit and distributed via monodirectional mass media, humour is often experienced in isolation, a situation which may not be conducive to laughter but which in no way compromises a text's status as humorous: humour is a quality of the text, not of the response to the text, a distinction that is crucial to the argument that follows.

I will also distinguish between the notions of humour and funniness: humour will be treated as an aesthetic quality operative at a cultural level, whereas funniness will be used to refer to a particular subjective reaction to those texts. Humour is a textual quality whose presence can, in most instances, be agreed upon within the context of shared cultural conventions. This is not to suggest, though, that humour is any sort of timeless quality inherent in any given text: humour always arises out of particular cultural relations and practices. The identification of humour proceeds through the recognition of certain sets of generic and formal indicators that mark a text as attempting to produce a particular affect connected, but not reducible to amusement, mirth, ridiculousness or laughter. Funniness is the term for when those texts successfully produce this affective response: a judgement that can only be understood subjectively. Thus, humour is culturally shared category, whereas funniness is an individual and subjective assessment of the success or failure of particular instances of that category. Recent work in neuroscience has even suggested that this separation of humour and funniness, which can alternately be understood in terms of cognitive versus affective criteria, correlates to different neural effects in different brain regions, associated with the “resolution of contextual ambiguities,” on the one hand, and “emotional and visceral sensation,” on the

other (Moran et al. 1059). Hence, though still bound to a worryingly reductive conception of humour in terms of punchlines, such scientific research does conveniently support my central thesis that humour detection and appreciation are distinct entities and, though it is not addressed in Moran et al.'s research, that humour detection might occur without appreciation.

One of the central consequences of this understanding of funniness is that it stands as an inviolately subjective and individual assessment, “if you think something is funny, it is. You may be (collectively) puzzled by your amusement or disapprove of it, but you cannot be wrong about it.” (Limon 11). For example, while we can probably agree that *Everybody Loves Raymond* is humour, we may not all find it to be funny. Funniness arises out of the interaction between the audience and the text, and can therefore only be determined only at the level of the individual either psychologically or psychoanalytically. Consequently, while all humorous texts aspire to be funny, there is no intersubjective means through which to determine whether a text is *objectively* funny. In fact, in terms of my schema, such a declaration makes no sense. In this current study, then, I am not at all concerned with funniness, and my examination of texts as humorous should not be taken as an endorsement of their funniness on my behalf. Instead, I am concerned with the shared cultural conventions of what designates humour.

Finally, I will also seek to distinguish between comedy and humour. In contrast to literary historical conceptions, where comedy is often treated as if it were consistent and stable over time, I will employ a broader and more flexible definition of comedy. Following Andrew Stott, I seek to depart from an understanding of comedy as a locatable

and categorical set of generic conventions, to instead emphasise the manner in what is commonly referred to as comedy frequently oversteps the strict generic and classificatory boundaries laid down by figures such as Aristotle or Northrop Frye (Stott 1-2, 17-31). However, whereas Stott goes on to identify comedy as “tonal quality” synonymous with humour (2), I instead wish to preserve a distinction for greater analytic clarity. Thus, for the purpose of the current study, ‘comedy’ will be used to describe those texts that are assumed to have been produced in order to be humorous – defined more restrictively as a generic category of texts whose dominant purpose is to produce a humorous affect – as opposed to those texts or events that are perceived to be funny, but are not widely seen to have been produced with the intention to be, such as two squirrels fighting. In contrast, the related term of ‘comic’ will be taken up as a synonym for humour, largely in order to avoid repetition for stylistic reasons.

And finally this brings us to the central question of humour. To offer a definition at the outset is to run the risk of foreclosing the analytic and critical possibilities of humour as a category: a problem I argue characterizes previous efforts to theorize it. Yet, despite this risk, it is also useful and necessary to provide a working definition of humour, albeit with the proviso that such a definition must remain both broad enough to account for a wide range of examples while also remaining aware of the local specificity of humour in time and space. The second specific part of this definition is attended to in some detail in the third chapter, following a series of textual analyses, and so for now I will restrict my discussion to an unsatisfyingly broad definition of humour. As an aesthetic category, humour is a particular set of formal attributes, rhetorical and narrative

assumptions, extra-diegetic frames, and affective or tonal registers. These formal attributes code a text in such a way that the audience recognises it as a site of permitted and encouraged laughter. Such coding is here understood, in terms of a weak Incongruity theory, as a particular method of interpreting the juxtaposition of two frames of reference that imply apparently contradictory world views. Frames of reference can refer to a broad range of subjects: social norms, good sense, common sense, the behaviour and personality of characters, laws of nature, laws of narrative, textual boundaries and political boundaries. When these frames come into conflict with one another – a character defies social norms, the fourth-wall is broken, a text presents an inappropriate stereotype – the audience is presented with a situation they can interpret as funny. This is the textual operation we recognise as humour. The subsequent perception of funniness therefore relies upon three textual aspects: the content of the frames themselves, and the formal relation of their connection and the separation between them. If no connection is perceived, then the incongruity will appear too weird; if no separation is perceived, then it just is. If the interpreter objects to either frame of reference – if she has a strong aesthetic, ethical, political reaction to them – then odds are she won't find the humour to be funny, but that does not make the juxtaposition unhumorous. We can also not like the proposed relation between the two, on the grounds that it may be too extreme or profane. One of the advantages of such a model is that it can begin to account for Superiority theories of humour – which can be understood as the ridicule of a deviance from a norm – while not reducing humour to only superiority. As will be expanded on at length later in the study,

the relation between the frames can be used to define different forms of humour depending upon which types of frames are in conflict with another.

Like punch lines, humorous answers – those both regarding and employing humour – often appear at first to not to be answers at all, but rather distractions from the immediate issues at hand. E.B. White, who furnishes the epigraph that opens this introduction, notably compared the analysis of humour to the dissection of a frog, “the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind” (243). To this we might add that anyone found persistently and publicly engaging in such an act is liable to receive censure for daring to engage in such a frivolous task when seemingly much more important demands may be made upon their time. Frogs and humour do not press upon the social consciousness as heavily as other issues – social justice, violence, trauma, inequality, economic and political oppression – might. However, just as an investigation of the frog might reveal not only the mysteries of physiology and anatomy, but also clues about genetics and environmental health, I would like to propose that the study of humour can lead us back (or perhaps forwards) in powerfully productive ways to the wider cultural, social and philosophical issues that such an analysis, on the surface, might appear to eschew. Onwards then: to the killing fields of the frogs.

Chapter One - Laughing All the Way to the Revolution: Humour in the Liberal Moment

Last night I saw Lester Maddox on a TV show
With some smart-ass New York Jew
And the Jew laughed at Lester Maddox
And the audience laughed at Lester Maddox too.

Randy Newman, “Rednecks” *Good Old Boys*

On a mild Autumn afternoon on the thirtieth of October 2010, over two hundred thousand people (according to most estimates) gathered at the National Mall in Washington D.C. in order to attend a political rally that had received a level of national and international media attention almost unprecedented in recent years. Promoted by its organisers as a “clarion call for rationality,” the event was hailed by many as a watershed moment in the midterm election cycle and as a potential means to revive the flagging fortunes of the incumbent Democrat party, if not the entire political process. The involvement in, or tacit recognition of, the project by public figures ranging from Oprah Winfrey to President Barack Obama, not to mention the anxious denunciations of the rally by a host of personalities associated with the conservative media network Fox News, as well as other less openly partisan news organisations, would seem to indicate the wide level of interest in, or at least concern with, the rally across the political and social spectrum. However, as many readers are probably already aware, the guiding force behind this gathering was not a politician, or even a political commentator in the traditional sense, but the comedian and satirist, Jon Stewart, most well-known as the host of the late night comedy television show, *The Daily Show*. The gathering in question is what had come to be known as “The

Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear,” a celebrity-infested variety show-cum-carnival-cum-demonstration that hovered uneasily between satire and earnestness.

Stewart had publicized his rally – originally entitled “The Rally to Restore Sanity” – as an opportunity to argue for the importance of reasonable and rational political discourse, which was in turn positioned as a means to reclaim the American political discussion for those who would normally eschew direct public engagement. Ostensibly forging a middle ground between the extremist Right and the extremist Left – those who would resort to volume, disrespect and frequent Hitler analogies in order to dominate the political conversation – Stewart’s rally sought to carve out a space for those who “may lack the theatrical flair necessary for today’s twenty-four hour, seven-day-a-week news media” (Sep. 10). The message of the rally, as well as the overall tone, is perhaps best conveyed through an appeal posted on the rally’s organising website:

We’re looking for the people who think shouting is annoying, counterproductive, and terrible for your throat; who feel that the loudest voices shouldn’t be the only ones that get heard; and who believe that the only time it’s appropriate to draw a Hitler mustache on someone is when that person is actually Hitler. Or Charlie Chaplin in certain roles. (rallytorestoresanity.com)

Publicised as a light-hearted event with a serious message, the event was organised around a straightforward demand to purge the political sphere of tendencies, such as insanity and intolerance, that are, pretty much by definition, an obvious anathema to the ideal conduct of contemporary state politics. If any of the participants considered this an odd demand to be couched in the aesthetic of humour, no such doubts were on display: this was despite the possibility for comic disruption promised by the Rally to Restore Sanity’s earlier amalgamation with its erstwhile pseudo-competitor, “The March to Keep

Fear Alive,” organised by Stewart’s colleague, Stephen Colbert. The official designation of the resulting meta-rally, “The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear,” was frequently, perhaps intentionally, overlooked in many press accounts, which referred to the entire event by Stewart’s original name, thereby emphasising the serious pro-sanity aspects over the satirical fear aspects. While Colbert’s involvement muddies the water somewhat through the introduction of additional levels of absurdity, irony and performance, on the actual day of the event his presence was muted through his constitution as an extreme comic foil or a form of comedic pantomime boogeyman (surprisingly literally when a giant papier-mâché facsimile of Colbert took to the stage), who served to reinforce the overarching message regarding the desirability of reasonableness. Moreover, nowhere was it questioned whether humour was the best complement to reason, or the thought entertained that humour might be, on some level, unreasonable, even as Colbert illustrated how unreason could prove a much more fertile soil for humour. It was instead taken for granted that humour and a progressive political praxis were obvious, mutually inclusive and reciprocating bedfellows.

The reason that I turn to “The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear” at this juncture is because it offers a near perfect illustration of the contemporary state of relations between democratic politics and humour. I am not concerned with assessing the Left political credentials of the rally or reading it as a comment upon the fortunes of political activism and involvement. Rather, what I take to be notable is the manner in which Stewart’s (and to a lesser and more complicated extent, Colbert’s) rally made remarkably evident the perceived connection between humour and the liberal (as opposed to Left)

ideal of tolerant, reasonable critique. The very fact that a comedian would publically intercede in debates about political climate and rhetoric indicates a belief that humour is by no means alien—and may actually be central – to the concerns of twenty-first century politics. Moreover that, in doing so, Stewart was neither denounced nor ignored, but instead widely hailed as a saviour of the American political sphere – particularly on what is often identified as the Left of American politics – offers a profound comment on a broad acceptance, at least in part, of the general interrelatedness of humour and liberal politics.³ The anxiety and interest that greeted the “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear” thus offer a way to begin considering the role of humour in contemporary politics: not simply as an indication of the implication of humour in American liberal politics, but as a concrete manifestation of humour as a key fixture in the dominant political ideology of the Anglophone world.

In light of this assertion, the purpose of this first chapter is to consider the central discourses by which humour, in particular politicised or controversial humour, has been made sense of within the allegedly ‘post-ideological’ and liberal democratic societies of

³ There were, of course, dissenting voices within the mass media commentariat: television commentator David Zurawik, denounced the “postmodern mockery” and “cool smug ridicule” of Stewart and Colbert, arguing that “what we need in this country is not more satire ... what we need as a nation are jobs and a government that will protect our savings and our homes from the predatory actions of Wall Street and some parts of the banking and mortgage industries. The right way to get that is in the voting booth on Election Day.” Similarly, writing in the Huffington Post, Bob Samuels argued that the rally involved the mockery of state politics and institutions, and the idealisation of the individual: the upshot of which is individual non-accountability and implicit support of the free market (‘Why Jon Stewart is Bad’). Samuels’ argument bears a striking resemblance to that offered by Michael Billig, which will be considered in more detail later in the chapter. Taking a slightly different approach, Timothy Noah, of the online-publication, *Slate*, argued that the rally would prove to be counter-productive because the combination of satire and political conviction would enrage the opposition, producing a higher conservative turn-out at the upcoming midterm elections (“Stay Home”). In addition, many commentators criticised the rally for its claim to non-partisan status, despite what were interpreted as clear Leftist overtones.

the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In doing so, I will trace the political function and power attributed to humour by its advocates, commentators, theorists, philosophers, historians, practitioners and, indeed, its critics, and thereby elucidate the moral, cultural and political weight with which humour is repeatedly invested in the context of (neo)liberalism. Often understood as a benign and desirable site of affect, humour is frequently tied to the expectations of liberal democratic society, taken up as a measure of social tolerance and self-critique, and declared an indispensable attribute of the reasonable subject of liberal society. Accordingly, humour has been largely characterised as a positive and critical force inherently compatible with the demands of democratic politics: within the liberal moment, it has been dominantly conceived of as a site of subversion, liberation and a free play of affect wherein the self can critically appraise the political conditions of its existence. Contemporary laudatory accounts of humour have sought to tie humour to a liberatory political project that challenges authoritarian or oppressive governmental technologies by its very nature: a belief that manifests in diverse but related forms across a wide range of theoretical works addressing humour, including Simon Critchley, John Morreall, Jonathan Gray and Alenka Zupančič. Very few commentators, it would seem, are willing to come out against humour or present it as anything less than a political panacea – at least in its “good” forms (as defined by those authors) – and this can be related, in turn, to a broader social celebration of humour. Even those who criticised, as distinct from critiqued, Stewart’s rally, made clear that they were not against humour per se, but only against its particular partisan, poorly executed, inappropriate or arrogant form in this instance: almost all, with the

notable exception of Bob Samuels of *The Huffington Post*, held out the possibility of a good, or at least entertaining while inoffensive, form of humour. This continuity between the academic and popular accounts of humour should not come as a surprise. Like other cultural theories, academic notions of humour do not circulate in a vacuum, but instead exist in relation to other cultural norms and assumptions. To phrase this in a slightly different way, explicit academic theorisations of humour are closely bound to implicit everyday theorisations or understandings of humour, which they may criticise or just as often reinforce.

The everyday applicability and explanatory power of those academic theories, as both manifestations of and commentaries upon popular understandings, becomes most apparent at moments when humour, and its relation to liberal politics, is thrown into confusion. Thus, the assumptions of liberal theories of humour, and the consequences thereof, may be drawn out through a consideration of discourses of crisis and conflict that emerge around controversial texts presented under the auspices of humour, such as the *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons controversy. These sites of conflict illustrate the manner in which particular understandings of humour, especially the dominant ‘incongruity’ model of humour, are evoked and mobilised in order to legitimate interpretations of particular forms of humour, such as satire, as politically desirable. This account will be nuanced, however, with recourse to the work of writers, such as Michael Billig, who challenge the notion of humour as a space outside of ideology and argue instead for an understanding of humour as an aggressive and even repressive force. In doing so, Billig offers a means to make sense of the often hostile, occasionally violent,

and sometimes deadly responses to humour from those who reject its liberal interpretation. The purpose of this chapter will not be to privilege either of these interpretations as determinately ‘correct’ in any sense, but to hold these two perspectives – humour as liberation and humour as social control – in tension, so as to illustrate the political oppositions and assumptions that structure the interpretation and reception of humour in the contemporary liberal moment.

Laughing in Liberal Times: Reasonable Dissent and Humour ⁴

What, though, does it mean to refer to our contemporary moment as ‘liberal’? Liberalism is a slippery term, especially with regard to the domain of politics: to refer to liberalism is to bring a number of competing definitions and priorities into play. The interpretation of liberalism I draw upon in the current analysis owes much to the work of Wendy Brown, one of contemporary liberalism’s most influential and careful interrogators, as well as that of Slavoj Žižek, Jeremy Gilbert and Thomas Frank. Picking up on a series of interrelated ideas that emerge from across Brown’s corpus, I want to suggest that liberalism can be construed very broadly as a belief in the inherently positive

⁴ In order to avoid possible misinterpretation, I want to make clear that critique of liberalism that I provide in the following section, and throughout this project, is in no way intended as a straightforward denunciation of liberalism or dissent as such. It is certainly not conceived in opposition to liberalism in the American sense, where it seems to operate as an ill-defined synonym for an under-thought Left politics, and if it reads as a reproach of liberalism as a politics founded on notions of freedom and autonomy, it is not because I understand myself in outright, easy or stable opposition to such politics. Above all else, I want to make very clear that this should not be read as a defence of any position which might be labelled either conservative or Conservative. As the ultimate political horizon of our time, I think it is impossible to be anti-liberal in any consistent or meaningful sense, though I do think it is therefore absolutely essential to critically examine liberalism as a social, philosophical, cultural and, indeed, political, category. I understand this position to be dialectic, insofar as I have ever been able to determine what that word might mean. I offer this critique of liberalism, then, because I think it is too valuable and important a political idea to be left unexamined, and this applies especially to the notion of dissent, which I find suspicious because I am so attracted to it, and always have been. I thus offer this critique from the position of what I have become accustomed to describing, following Gorky, as a “bad Marxist”: too saturated with the liberalism of my own life to ever believe in my ability to step outside of it, however much I might want to.

and desirable nature of equality, freedom, tolerance and reasoned dissent as guiding political tenets (c.f. “Neoliberalism” 39, 46; *States* 144-6, 154-6; *Aversion* 5-9). Not related to the demands of any single political movement, liberalism is instead here taken up as an over-arching meta-political framework which can inform competing sets of values: a flexibility enhanced by virtue of the inherent slipperiness of its central precepts. Understood in this manner, liberalism is empty of specific content and is thus better conceived of as a broad structuring cultural logic born within a privileged rhetoric of freedom and equality – a cultural dominant in the sense laid out by Raymond Williams (“Dominant” 121-7) – rather than as a well-defined set of state political institutions, rights and rules.

This is not to say that liberalism as discussed here should be understood as somehow separate from the political projects which it informs and that are carried out, often explicitly, in its name. Liberalism as a political philosophy has a long and storied existence stretching back to the French Revolution, but the iteration I am addressing here is specifically located within the political relations and constellations of the 1990s and 2000s. In particular, this contemporary form of liberalism emerges within the context of two related state political approaches: the Third Way and neoliberalism; where the Third Way refers to that body of political thought that rejects both laissez-faire capitalism and socialism in favour of a purported third, or middle, path that seeks to use the free market to realise the goals of democratic socialism (Giddens *Critics* 1-7); and neoliberalism refers to the extension of market rationality and values to all spheres of political and cultural life, while retaining the notion of the market as a distinct entity (Brown

“Neoliberalism” 39-40). There are many similarities between the two state political programmes that have been noted and catalogued by a wide range of commentators (c.f. Ryner, Steger, Giddens *Renewal, Critics*, Martell), but what I am particularly concerned with is the common rhetoric and logic that informs them both: an emphasis upon flexibility, innovation, entrepreneurship and freedom and an opposition to traditional structures, central planning, control and authority. The consolidation of the Third Way and neoliberalism as state political narratives in the 1990s reflects the extent to which the liberal worldview became increasingly dominant during this period, displacing older political narratives of state communism on the Left and unreformed conservatism on the Right. Speaking to the advent of neoliberalism, Jeremy Gilbert suggests that:

Arguably the key reason as to why both the Republicans and Conservatives lost power in the 1990s was that their brand of nationalistic social conservatism came to seem increasingly anachronistic in the individualised world of highly mobile, consumer-focussed advanced capitalism. The libertarian values which had once been the preserve of the 1968 generation sat perfectly with the new world of diverse and ever-proliferating forms of pleasure, and the New Right’s articulation of neoliberal economics with social conservatism no longer made political sense in this context. (*Anticapitalism* 61)

Neoliberalism takes up these ideals within the context of the market: a translation that does not dispense with the organising categories of liberalism, but instead re-employs them. For example, equality, previously predominantly understood as legal and political equality, now becomes equality before the market; freedom becomes freedom to participate in the (free) market. On the other hand, the Third Way, with its notions of “social entrepreneurship” (Giddens *Renewal* 83) and an emphasis on multicultural, community, and ecological responsibility over self-interest (Steger 51), is a more Leftish interpretation of the same central categories of freedom, equality and reasonableness in

terms of “community spirit ... creativity, diversity and achievement” (Giddens *Critics* 6).

I am not, however, arguing that the Third Way is simply a window-dressed variant of neoliberalism, but rather that both neoliberalism and the Third Way are themselves variants of a wider “structure of feeling” (Williams 48 “Analysis”) – whose ideological entrenchment is attested by the fact that in the current moment few would come out against freedom, tolerance or equality (unless seeking to shock or provoke) – that I here refer to as liberalism.

Understood in this manner, liberalism is more than simply the concern of select political agents, but rather operates as a cultural-political dominant, such that the obvious desirability of equality and especially freedom goes unchallenged not only by mainstream political parties, but by almost all political subjects in the Anglophone liberal democracies (though those terms may be configured in very different ways by those with divergent interests and projects). Liberalism is “a contemporary cultural text we inhabit, a discourse whose terms are ‘ordinary’ to a very contemporary ‘us.’” (Brown, *States* 142). This is not to say that liberalism is *the* cultural-political dominant; there clearly exist competing sets of values – such as patriotism or religion, syndicalism or even fascism – by which we can express our desires and dreams. Instead, liberalism is better understood as *a* dominant among several competing ideological forms, in comparison to which, however, it is frequently cast as the only *reasonable* choice. Nor should my reference to liberalism as a form of rhetoric be taken as a dismissive suggestion that it operates in an illusionary manner, and as such can be swept aside through critical and careful analysis in order to reveal a true set of motives underneath. Rather, I refer to liberalism as a rhetoric

that enacts a certain logic, a way of understanding and interpreting the world, which it expresses and provides with form and explanatory power. Approaching the world through the lens of liberalism leads us to frame social subjects and relations, material situations, problems and their solutions as matters of freedom and equality, and promotes a manner of being in the world marked by tolerance and reasonableness.

Situated within this nexus of cultural and political priorities, the subject of liberalism is expected to believe, behave and be in certain ways. More precisely, in terms of conduct, the contemporary liberal subject is expected to comport herself in a ‘reasonable’, ‘decent’ and ‘agreeable’ manner, a desire which provides a weak pun on the notion of “civil society,” where civil refers to both non-market citizenship and well-mannered behaviour. To be liberal is to be well-mannered, as Toby Miller notes, “the civic cultural subject ... is produced as a polite and obedient servant of etiquette, within limited definitions of accepted behaviour” (223). This well-mannered liberal subject can be marked against its opposite of antisocial, extreme and, above all, violent behaviour, to the point where “opposing all forms of violence, from direct physical violence (mass murder, terror) to ideological violence (racism, incitement, sexual discrimination) seems to be the main preoccupation of the tolerant liberal attitude that predominates today” (Žižek *Violence* 10). In this account, violence becomes the term which names the ultimate political wrong of liberalism: its meaning expanded beyond simply physical force to encompass any action that contravenes the desired behaviour of a flexible and accepting liberal attitude. It is in opposition to violence that the liberal subject becomes able to mark herself as such through the practice of tolerance and reasonableness. Brown identifies

tolerance as a central demand made upon the liberal subject and a central mode of “governmentality” within liberal society, where, although it might lack the explicit backing of law, “tolerance nonetheless produces and positions subjects, orchestrates meanings practices of identity, marks bodies, and conditions political subjectivities” (*Aversion* 4). In this manner, the liberal subject becomes the tolerant subject, that subject who is accepting and respectful of difference.

Yet, for both Brown and Žižek, the discourse of tolerance is indicative of the depoliticisation of lived difference, now understood as fundamentally ‘cultural’ and therefore “something given, something that cannot be overcome. They can only be ‘tolerated’” (Žižek, *Violence* 140). As a consequence of its detachment from any particular ideological project, the call for tolerance thereby becomes “endorsed across political lines”: it becomes an obligatory stance towards those aspects of life that are thought to be personal, and consequently outside the purview of state politics (Brown, *Aversion* 15-7). In this movement of omni-political approval, what becomes apparent is the extent to which tolerance requires a decidedly non-political understanding of difference: difference must be tolerated, but only so far as it remains an ostensibly apolitical aspect of identity, only insofar as “opinions, beliefs, practices are cast not as matters of conscience, education or revelation but as the material of the person to which certain attributes (racial, sexual, gendered or ethnic) are an index: hence, the notions of ‘black consciousness,’ ‘women’s morality,’ ‘cultural viewpoint,’ or ‘queer sensibility.’” (Brown *Aversion* 43). Therefore, even if tolerance does become a cardinal virtue in the liberal moment, it remains a truism that ‘tolerance has its limits.’ Thus, alongside

tolerance emerges a twin demand that one not test one fellow liberal subject's tolerance too much; in short, that one remains *reasonable*.

Reasonableness plays a central role in liberal thought, as a form of ultimate criteria by which the suitability or truth of an idea may be assessed; see for example John Rawls claim that “political liberalism does not attack or criticize any reasonable view” (xxi). What, though, does reasonableness mean in this context, and how are we to separate the reasonable from the unreasonable?⁵ The answer to these questions turns upon the central liberal belief that the subject is inherently self-contained and may therefore be abstracted from their social being, in order to offer rational judgement unclouded by the corruption of particular cultural mores. Indeed, this figure of the autonomous individual is a central pillar of liberalism, which “can be defined as that body of thoughts, feelings, expectations, discourses, modes of governance, and political fictions that [take] the autonomy and rights of the individuals as the basis for collective life.” (Werry xxiii). Understood to be reasonable insofar as they are autonomous, and thereby freed from the corrupting or distorting influence of particular points of view, subjects of liberalism are required to imagine themselves as fundamentally equivalent, and without recourse to any substantial difference, and certainly not to any politics premised on that difference. One is reasonable so long as one conducts oneself as an autonomous subject. Consequently, the liberal subject is, somewhat ironically, *compelled* to consider themselves as autonomous

⁵ Rawls, himself, is silent on this point: he never defines reasonableness in any complete or final way (Freeman 31).

– free from compulsion or coercion by exterior forces – or at least engaged in the pursuit of autonomy, as an ideal state of being.

Rather than rehearse the critique of this position – expertly articulated by numerous Marxist, feminist, post-structuralist and other (proto) postmodernist critics before me – I instead want to suggest that this construction of reasonableness can be usefully compared with the liberal antagonism towards ideology. In this I follow the argument of Žižek, that “we designate as ideology that which stands out from [the] background: extreme religious zeal or dedication to a particular political orientation” (*Violence* 36). The ideological is therefore understood to be that which departs from the norms of common sense and accepted practice: the ideological subject is one who holds beliefs that challenge the central assumptions of the moment on a fundamental level. Ideology is thus reconfigured as dogma. In contrast to this position, the reasonable liberal subject can be understood as that subject who is non- or post-ideological, who is thought to lack any ulterior motive beyond the public attainment of the unquestionable goods of freedom and equality (whatever they may mean). From this perspective the liberal subject is thought to be able to transcend the messy partisan extremism of the twentieth century, and work towards an equitable and free society within the absolute freedom afforded by the infinitely respectful and tolerant parameters of capitalist democracy. This reasonable liberal subject has no axe to grind, no ‘special interests’ in the American parlance, no intellectual or social project other than an earnest desire to advance their rational self-interest and, where possible, to help their fellow citizens: in this interpretation all the problems of the current moment can be understood as the consequence of ideological

deviations from the common liberal consensus. This model also provides us with limits of tolerance: one is expected to tolerate the behaviour and beliefs of the other, only so far as they remain unrelated to any ideology: as soon as they are conceptualised as political, or in any manner fundamentally challenging the precepts of liberalism or the market, then it is no longer necessary to extend the liberal virtue of tolerance. Such ideological deviants have broken the social contract of pragmatic liberalism, and thereby voided their claim to its beneficent protection. Consequently, in the liberal moment, the reasonable subject must aspire to escape ideology and emerge into the light of a pragmatic, reasonable and tolerant world.

Moreover, if this desire to ‘escape’ ideology is important to the reasonable subject – and indeed to liberalism as a whole – it is in part because of its affinity for what is perhaps the central virtue of liberalism: freedom. Freedom is marked as an ever-present reference point within the frame of our liberal moment, the contemporary function and value of which can be understood as a consequence of the ultimate negative horizon of the historical memory of totalitarianism (Žižek *Totalitarianism* 1-3).⁶ However, despite its centrality, this definition of freedom lacks any single, final meaning; it consistently proves itself to be “historically, semiotically, and culturally protean, as well as politically elusive” (Brown *States* 5). Freedom thus comes to function as what Jeremy Gilbert refers to as an “empty signifier,” which describe “those symbols or terms shared by a community which come to mean literally nothing (or almost-nothing) because they

⁶ The discourse of totalitarianism’s problematic collapse of all other state political systems into a monolithic programme of anti-liberalism does not remove the fact that it still functions as an effective political bogeyman.

simply signify the very idea of the community as a community” (*Anticapitalism* 156).

This is especially true in the current moment, where, as a consequence of its implication in the (at least ostensibly) opposed discourses of the Third Way and neoliberalism, freedom is rendered almost infinitely flexible, even as its value is constantly highlighted and underscored: freedom here becomes a “performative repetition of discourse” whose repeated performance trumps any substantive, semantic meaning (Boyer and Yurchak 210-1).

Courtesy of its abstract and ephemeral nature, freedom currently serves as the rallying cry for multiple and contradictory political projects. In the current moment freedom from constraining structures is understood to be as much a concern of the Right as the Left (Brown, *States* 17). The difference between divergent political interpretations of freedom emerges in the manner they perceive and characterise those structures from which they wish to be free: as the interference of the state or the inequality of social prejudice and entrenched poverty, in the ostensibly competing appeals to freedom in the context of the Third Way and neoliberalism, respectively. Indeed, one can be free from many things – economic dominance, government interference, religious mystification, political correctness, military oppression – and free to do many things – speak, move, earn, assemble, trade, bear arms, be oneself. Thus, freedom need not hold any particular political valence, and is instead reconfigured as a matter of individual flexibility, resistance and dissent: an abstracted concept of freedom that is equally applicable across political divisions. Hence, in our liberal moment, very few would argue against the need for resistance to domination, though there is clearly some disagreement as to who is

dominating whom (perhaps a general rule that could be suggested here is that we construct the dominant as that against which the struggles of our own position might seem the most heroic). As such, almost any struggle can be framed as a demand for freedom, and indeed often is in the contemporary liberal moment. Consequently, it would be the very rare state political operator who would couch their project as an attempt to impose a system upon the public, just as it would be highly unusual for any non-fringe state political figure to openly call for increased inequality or intolerance.

I would like to suggest, then, that freedom is currently concerned above all with the ability of the liberal subject to resist and strike out against oppression in all its forms, wherever it is perceived: in some instances this takes the form of demands for “empowerment,” whereas in others it is couched in terms of “resistance” (“States” 21). Yet, this call for resistance to structures of power does not always (or often) mark itself as such outside certain political and scholarly circles, but instead usually appears in more prosaic forms: as calls to be creative and original, escape tradition or convention, to express oneself, to value innovation or invention, or in the form of business clichés such as ‘think outside the box.’ All these examples share a common rhetoric of an individual standing up to or against wider systems of power or sets of constraining norms. Functioning at this abstracted level, the depoliticised discourse of dissent can be taken up by anyone: it is the rhetoric of recourse for both the global business elite – Richard Branson is characterised by his “lack of respect for figures of authority” (Dearlove 32) – and radical opponents of global capital – “disobedience to authority is one of the most natural and healthy acts” (Hardt and Negri 210). Nobody seeks to be on the side of

authority, and certainly no one would admit to possessing it. This is somewhat akin to Gilles Deleuze's "society of control," where increasing flexibility and complexity comes to mark both power and resistance to it: where the individual improvisation of surfing replaces the discipline and rules of "older sports" (6). Within the confines of such logic, all political and cultural actors seek to position themselves in opposition to prevailing convention. Indeed, scepticism towards authority is sometimes linked to the ur-political value of democracy (Giddens *Renewal* 21). This becomes possible because "resistance by itself does not contain a critique, a vision, or grounds for organized collective efforts to enact either" (Brown, *States* 49). Under such conditions, cultural and political players from rock musicians to activists, financiers to academics, appeal to the desirability of chaotic Dionysian ferment, understood as action and creativity, over the stifling order of the Apollonian. This creates a cultural, political and social order wherein dissent is the desired mode, such that "the most conspicuous and pronounced feature of contemporary struggles is the desire to rebel, reject and denounce" (Touraine 50). Hence, not only is the liberal subject expected to be tolerant and reasonable, they must also seek to challenge authority, demolish hierarchies and seek to declare their unique creative self against an uncaring and stifling establishment.

This liberal order finds its purest incarnation in the cultural figure of the entrepreneur: an archetypal embodiment of contemporary capitalist liberalism. Indeed, Brown argues as much in her description of neoliberalism as a mode of governmentality that "resignifies democracy as ubiquitous entrepreneurship" ("Neoliberalism" 50). However, whereas Brown evokes the entrepreneur as the epitome of capitalist rationality

that “reduc[es] every value and activity to its cold rationale” (44), capitalism can just as easily be understood as a hot and heated process: not a force of cold logic, but of “instantaneous cruelty, ... incomprehensible ferocity ... fundamental immorality” (Baudrillard 15). While capital does certainly calculate, it is also the driver of the bourgeois epoch in which “all that is solid melts into air” (Marx and Engels 26): clearly a process of heating, rather than cooling, if there ever were one. Based on this difference in temperature, the neoliberal entrepreneur can be understood as an irrational, as well as rational, figure, particularly insofar as the entrepreneur can be thought to value, even encourage, dissent. In re-emphasising this aspect of the entrepreneur, I follow thinkers such as Boris Groys who suggests that it “is generally known, success in the market does not depend on calculation, on coolly logical reasoning or rational reflection; instead, it requires intuition, obsessiveness, aggressiveness and killer instinct.” (*Total* 22). Whereas mid-century critiques of capitalism understood it as a “highly regulated and bureaucratic form of society” capitalism has since proven surprisingly adept at adapting to liberal demands for creativity, fluidity, flexibility and mobility (Gilbert “After” 37-47). This is capitalism as what Jeremy Gilbert, following Deleuze and Felix Gutarri, refers to as “a permanently self-revolutionising force, which is in some senses the external limit of every known human society” (“After” 49). Thus while capitalism does have its rational and rationalising tendencies, to conceive of capitalism as an entirely logical process is to overlook the manner in which entrepreneurs take up, rather than oppose, liberal discourses of dissent. The neoliberal feting of the entrepreneur speaks to the extent to

which contemporary capitalism is not a rigid, mechanical monolith opposed to change, but is, at its heart, a dynamic and liberal system.

In a less critical mode, this interpretation also informs Giddens's Third Way economics, where capitalism is understood as a site of innovation and adaptation (*Renewal* 4-6, 13-15). Giddens even goes so far as to associate the entrepreneur with this form of dynamic capitalism *against* neoliberalism: presenting the entrepreneur as an innovator operating against the rule-bound nature of neoliberalism (*Critics* 75), an interpretation that underlies his notion of the "social entrepreneur," a central figure of the Third Way who uses her or his powers of creative dissent to encourage community building and social justice (*Renewal* 84-4, *Critics* 82). It is this phenomenon of entrepreneurial dissent that Žižek is addressing when he documents the new political category of "liberal communists," his term for global entrepreneurs, such as Bill Gates, George Soros and Steve Jobs and corporations such as Google and Intel, who "endorse the anti-capitalist causes of social responsibility and ecological concern" and whose "ideology has become all but indistinguishable from the new breed of anti-globalist leftist radicals" (*Violence* 16). Although adopting a slightly different terminology, Žižek is accounting for the same set of historical and cultural conditions when he suggests that:

The signified of this new reality in the liberal communist Newspeak is 'smart': smart indicates the dynamic and nomadic as against centralised bureaucracy; dialogue and cooperation against hierarchical authority; flexibility against routine; culture and knowledge against old industrial production; spontaneous interaction and autopoiesis against fixed hierarchy (*Violence* 16-7)

Lauded for their 'creativity' and 'wealth-creation,' the "liberal communists" do not stand against the current cultural and political consensus, but instead can be understood to

embody the liberal moment's aspirations, assumptions and logics. To such an end, such figures can even be regarded as contemporary manifestations of Antonio Gramsci's "organic intellectuals" who articulate the ideology of a social group, which in this instance enjoys widespread cultural hegemony (7-1). Gramsci himself singled out entrepreneurs as organic intellectuals, even in his particular moment of earlier illiberal capitalism (6). Thus, the set of liberal values espoused by these organic intellectual entrepreneurs does not represent so much a specialised concern of a particular socio-economic group, but instead a manifestation of the underlying logic of the liberal moment, when the preference for the dynamic over the static, the co-operative over the hierarchy, or the spontaneous over the planned becomes automatically assumed. That is to say, dissent and affiliated notions become ideological cultural dominants: the impulse to fight against systems becomes the leading prerogative of the system itself.

This affinity between discourses of dissent and the prevailing system of liberal capitalism underlies Luc Boltanski's argument that "it is ... not an exaggeration to say that capitalism, in its most liberal or radical forms, continuously touches upon the idea of total revolution," by which Boltanski refers to the belief that liberation from social conditions will allow the "full realisation of humanity" ("Left" 3-4). This position is also articulated by the curmudgeonly cultural critic, Thomas Frank, who argues that the language of liberation is, and always has been, closely intertwined with corporate capitalism. Capitalism does not co-opt dissent, it produces it. In drawing this argument Frank traces the manner in which the social and political critique of the 1960s counterculture and its descendants against conformity, hierarchy and "logocentrism,"

replicates, rather than refutes, the neoliberal ideology of corporate America (“Johnny” 31). He therefore refutes historical accounts of the 1960s that imagine the era as a conflict between restrictive corporate culture and the freewheeling youth – and which continue to underpin narratives of cultural politics and resistance – not because the counterculture was co-opted or inauthentic, but because of the fundamental similarity of the two apparent opponents (*Conquest* 5-6, 18-20). Transgression was, and is, not a political act of challenge to liberal consumerist capitalism, but absolutely in keeping with the demands of that system. Thus, as Hal Niedzviecki articulates, “ideas such as the freedom of the soul and the individualist rebel are, essentially, built into the system” (139). This revolutionary business ethic emerges with particular force in the advertising industry which thrives upon self-critique and Leftist denunciation of shallow consumerism as a driver for the “constant rebellion” of the consumer fashion cycle (*Conquest* 60-73, 90-2). Hence, though he does not situate his critique within the context of the cultural dominant of liberalism – he is more concerned with revealing the ‘hypocrisy’ of consumerist counterculture – Frank’s account fits with the general assessment offered here as regards the ideological co-ordinates of contemporary liberalism, where a depoliticised form of dissent becomes the lingua franca of multiple, dominant and competing aspects of the current capitalist moment.⁷

⁷ It is important to make clear at this point, that in assembling and offering this critical stance on the role of dissent and resistance in the context of contemporary liberalism, I do not seek to dismiss dissent, or indeed liberalism, as entirely without merit. I am not arguing against dissent, or suggesting that it is always immediately co-opted, captured for, or produced by reactionary or exploitative forces. Rather, I am suggesting that dissent and resistance have become the common language of our moment, and thus as a cultural categories, they might not necessarily be as oppositional as we might expect, at least when taken in a more abstract or metaphorical sense (more particular forms, such as violent protest or even civil

However, though dissent has been considered here as a depoliticised form, this should not be taken to mean that it is always without politics. Due to its fundamental operation as a means of disruption and opposition, dissent always threatens to enact politics, even if it does not always realise this threat in any final or stable manner. Thus, when Frank makes a distinction between good, effective and authentic dissent and bad, ineffective, commodified dissent, he overlooks the extent to which even mass-marketed dissent may enact or even elicit a desire towards disruption and opposition to existing systems of domination, even if it does not enact this desire in a tangible or productive manner. In any particular, context-specific incarnation, dissent can potentially take on a contingent but concrete political form (although that form is by no means tied to any pre-determined political project). Accordingly, even though “nonconformity is the now accepted norm of society.” (Niedzviecki xvi) – especially for privileged, white, middle-class subjects (Hale 1-10) – concrete manifestations of dissent may not always meet such approval: “even in hyperliberal societies, not all practise of autonomy are equally valued – consider the indigent person resistant to being managed by social services or the teenager hanging around a street corner with nothing to do” (Brown *Aversion* 257 n.38). When that rebel is made concrete, when that rebel takes up a cause, there then exists a possibility that the social sanction extended to that rebel will be withdrawn. When actually existing subjects attempts to voice their dissent within a particular context, they

disobedience, are, of course, not always embraced by liberal society [Brown “End” 50]). Dissent is perhaps at the heart of the liberal order of the world, but that does not mean it should be sheltered from critique, by liberals or any others. Accordingly, I am not suggesting that the political possibilities of dissent are over, but rather that we must move beyond any immediate or easy reading of dissent as an obviously productive and progressive political tactic: simply because a cultural text walks like dissent and quacks like dissent, doesn't mean it is politically desirable (or a duck).

risk voiding their claim to tolerance, and opening themselves up to the persuasive and possibly coercive powers of the cultural dominant and the state. Consequently, liberal dissent or resistance always walks a fine line between being hailed as ‘reasonable,’ apolitical stance and risking censure as an unreasonable, ideologically informed, and therefore threatening, politics.

To understand dissent as a ubiquitous and widely valued rhetorical and logical trope is not to call for it to be abandoned, or strip it of its usefulness as a means to unsettle structures of economic, cultural or state politics, nor is this a call to develop a means to determine good from bad dissent. Rather, it is to recognise a need to be aware that virtually all political agents and forces not only employ this rhetoric, but, for all we know, may actively believe in it. This is at the heart of what I am characterising as the liberal moment, which is, overall, framed by the desirability of the freedom from domination – understood in terms of empowerment, resistance and transgression – as an organising category of political and cultural thought: this is a culture not just comfortable with dissent, but desiring of it. A transition from a desire for stability to a desire for flux holds similarities with the transition from modernist certainties to postmodern fluidity charted by theorists such as Fredric Jameson (*Postmodernism* 16, 25), and discussed in more depth in the third chapter. Alongside the demand that the liberal subject comport herself in a reasonable, tolerant, and hence ostensibly non-ideological manner, the desire for a depoliticised notion of freedom marks the culturally dominant mode of liberalism during the 1990s and 2000s. Within the dominant culture of liberalism, the expression of subversive, critical or anti-authoritarian perspectives comes to be seen as an essential

political and cultural duty, open to and expected of all. Resistance to the status quo is no longer the sole purview of culture jammers and carnivalesque activists “whose antics and messages are often simply indistinguishable to the wider public from the activities of viral marketers and cutting-edge corporate publicists” (Gilbert *Anticapitalism* 102). Under such conditions, it becomes incumbent on the liberal subject to resist her/his incorporation into organising systems – understood as slippery slopes towards totalitarian oppression – but in a reasonable and non-violent manner. It is on the grounds of the continuation and domination of these organising categories of political, cultural and social existence, that I stake my claim that we live in a liberal moment. The question, now, is what, then, does this liberal political moment and its construction of the liberal subject, have to do with humour and what does humour mean in this political and cultural context?

“Against the Assault of Laughter Nothing Can Stand”: Humour as Freedom

The rationale behind the detour through liberalism and dissent is that the contemporary desirability of freedom through opposition is central to current conceptions of humour. What I have identified as the central tenets of the liberal structure of feeling are also central to characterisations of humour, a complementarity observed by a historian of humour, Daniel Wickberg, who argues that by the mid-twentieth century “the values that the sense of humor had come to signify – tolerance, sympathy, perspective, balance, freedom – were so closely allied with the meaning of liberal democracy that the idea of humor served as a kind of easily understood shorthand or signpost for democracy itself”

(204).⁸ In particular, I want to emphasise the relation between humour and the value of freedom that manifests in the articulation of humour as a form of rebellion, of subversion, of an informed and critical dissent. For the majority of commentators it is a given that humour that serves a positive social and political function is subversive humour, and vice versa: in other words, humour that is thought to do positive political work is thought to do so subversively: “if laughter serves to ridicule oppressive powers or galvanize marginalized peoples, then it is judged as having been put to the service of the good. Conversely, if laughter signals social exclusion or political apathy, then it is said to have been used for malevolent ends” (Hynes and Sharpe 45). Thus, contemporary advocates of humour, in contrast to its Classical and early modern apologists, do not stress its potential to aid in controlling a population or reinforcing social norms, but instead imagine humour to exist as an entirely liberatory force in the aid of ‘the people’ or as opposed to the forces

⁸ Wickberg does not, however, present the connection between humour and liberalism as an eternal and universal truth, as do some contemporary theorists of humour. Rather, he frames this connection in terms of humour’s initial historical articulation in the English language, with Englishness and later the doctrine of Anglo-American exceptionalism, serving as a link between political liberty and humor (41). That an understanding of humour that lays emphasis upon its commonalities with liberty should find its beginnings in the context of the English language and territories, I think reinforces the current project’s focus upon the Anglosphere (though as an American, Wickberg repeats the common mistake of forgetting the existence of the English-speaking world beyond the motherland and her most ‘successful’ offspring). Moreover, Englishness, in this instance, functions in a way akin to Fredric Jameson’s notion of the “vanishing mediator” (“Vanishing” 25-6): the term that connects humour to liberty, but then fades from recognition once this connection is established. This mediator is vanishing because Englishness must disappear from the equation of humour and liberty, if this equivalence is to seem natural and universal. This is not to suggest that this connection between liberty, humour and Englishness is in any way correct or proper, but rather, as Wickberg suggests “it makes no difference whether humor was or was not distinctively or uniquely English; what is important is that so many Englishmen clearly thought it was. And they thought so because they were able to link it to specifically English notions of political liberty, character, ‘race,’ and nationality” (42). The ongoing ramifications of this nationalisation or “racination” of humour will not be considered at length here, though these notions do continue to inform the modes of humour herein addressed, particularly to the extent that they are considered to be American or British forms of humour. The unspoken “Angloness” of these forms of humour – though probably more discursive than in any way actual – even as they go global, is perhaps what ties their cultural resonance most strongly to England and its former colonies.

that would oppress others. Yet, reasonableness and dissent need not be considered opposing forces: as considered above, liberalism privileges a particular notion of an abstracted, depoliticised dissent, which creates the possibility of less politically aggressive and more cultural forms of resistance, which, in turn, may be more likely to fit within the parameters of liberal reasonableness. Indeed, it is the ability of humour (as it is currently understood) to overcome the apparent contradiction between the competing desires for dissent and reasonableness which renders it a preferred form of permitted subversion and thus an aesthetic form uniquely desirable within the liberal moment. In a liberal context, humour comes to be valued insofar as it is thought to promote freedom and challenge oppression in a transcendent or cultural manner; in other words, when it is believed to serve a liberal (a)political function.

The notion of humour, or ‘true’ humour at least, as an inherently subversive practice that challenges social norms and upsets hierarchies and traditions is prevalent in contemporary writing on the subject. In such accounts, humour is thought to carry the possibility of dissent, the purposes and limitations of which, however, are usually left extremely vague. Such interpretations, which arise in the work of thinkers as varied as Simon Critchley, Umberto Eco, Louis Kaplan and Andrew Stott, reflect the larger social tendency to imagine humour as a desirable and productive force, which, in line with dominant liberal ideology, is here primarily conceived in terms of boundary-breaking, order-challenging, and carnivalesque freedom: what Alenka Zupančič characterises as

“the humanist-romantic presentation of comedy as intellectual resistance” (4).⁹ This attitude towards humour manifests in a diverse range of historical and cultural spheres from the Cold War characterisation of totalitarian states and dictators as without humour and the subsequent characterisation of humour as protection against authoritarian habits of mind (Wickberg 44, 203-4) to the celebration of humour as an antidote to bureaucratic mindset of Riesman’s conformist “outer-directed man” (Wickberg 75-7). Indeed, in the context of liberalism’s demand to stand against and beyond all forms of ideology, humour serves as a mark of one’s autonomy: “In the words of one sociologist [Anton Zijdervald], humor and laughter ‘render all our legitimating ideologies and helpful utopias powerless and helpless. This may be humor’s most important function: it often works as a de-ideologizing and disillusioning force’” (qtd. in Wickberg 205). The critic who would come out against humour traces a dangerous path, and must be careful to situate and justify her opposition, most often in localised and specific terms, to avoid an unenviable reputation as a petty dictator, fanatic, egoist or snob.

From a liberal perspective, this understanding of humour informs the wide scope of contemporary politics, from democracy-as-usual to foreign revolutions. The desire to appear beyond ideology, and the harnessing of humour to that cause, extends to politicians of all stripes in the current moment, such that a sense of humour has become more than simply a desirable personality trait, but instead is transformed into a necessary symptom of one’s underlying democratic character. Thus, the public perception that one

⁹ There do exist alternatives to this belief in humour as innately liberal and beneficial force, such as Billig’s defence of Superiority theory, and Lockyer and Pickering’s anthology, *Beyond A Joke: The Limits of Humour*, which takes as its premise the belief that limits need to be set upon humour to prevent unethical laughter than reinforces prejudice and oppression.

possesses a sense of humour is not a mark of light-hearted frivolity, but rather a sign of one's political fitness:

In today's environment, it is the political leader who refuses humor and laughter that runs the risk of damaging his credibility. No politician wishes to be accused of lacking a sense of humor. The demagogue and the fanatic, the autocrat and the dogmatist, it is widely believed, are without a sense of humor. Humor is a sign of political flexibility, moderation, willingness to see both sides of a question, capacity for compromise.
(Wickberg 197-8)

It should come as little surprise, then, that American presidents since Franklin Roosevelt have responded to public pressure to demonstrate their ability to take a joke, if not to deliver one. In his account of the relation between American state politics and late-night comedy, Russell Peterson observes that “presidential aspirants now routinely show up on late-night shows to demonstrate their comedic chops” (170). This has become almost mandatory, Peterson asserts, because “a late-night guest shot . . . affords a candidate the chance to demonstrate that he or she has a sense of humor, just like a regular person” (171). In the Canadian context, politicians from both the Conservative and Liberal parties became eager participants on the *Rick Mercer Report* or *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* (Tinic 182), while in the USA primary election candidates, foreign leaders and other high-profile politicians eagerly appear on *The Daily Show* (J. Gray “Throwing” 153). The compulsion to demonstrate a sense of humour is perhaps even more palpable in the case of the current sitting president, Barack Obama, who has made two unprecedented appearances on two late-night American comedy chat shows, *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno, and *The Daily Show* in the run-up to “The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear.”

Moreover, the liberal and liberalising power of humour is not limited to Anglophone politicians, but has been evoked in wildly different political contexts, such as the popular revolutions of the 2010-11 Arab Spring and the subsequent uprising in Syria. Western reporters and pundits made much of the comic placards and signs hoisted by Egyptian protesters amongst more strident and directly-phrased political demands during the protests in Tahrir Square and of the protestors' use of social media to pass along jokes and quips regarding the Mubarak regime. Anna Louie Sussman of *The Atlantic* declared humour to be “one of the oldest and most subversive political tools there is” and central to the Egyptian revolution, while Michael Slackman of *The New York Times* argued that “humor and sarcasm played a crucial role in [the popular uprising's] coping and conquering.” Slackman quotes local activists and commentators who also emphasised the role of humour as a revolutionary tool “to motivate people and bring out the crowds” and as one of the “main weapons” of the protestors. In a widely-circulated story from the *Los Angeles Times*, Molly Hennessy-Fiske and Amro Hassan profiled an Egyptian social-media activist who drew inspiration from Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert and *Family Guy*. Nor are such claims limited to the Egyptian context. David Smith writes in *The Guardian* that “humour is the weapon of choice against the Libyan government,” while in the context of the 2011-2 Syrian uprising, Phil Sands of the Abu-Dhabi-based *The National*, Zeina Karam of the Associated Press, and journalists at France 24 charted the opposition's use of social media satire, puppetry, songs and “subversive gallows humour” as a means to critique the Assad government. From Syrian street fighters to American political primary candidates, humour is understood by the Anglophone media as an

aesthetic closely intertwined with a desirable political practice of freedom and flexibility: one that challenges oppressive forms of consensus and demonstrates a capacity for free-thinking. This is humour as “an escape from restraint, as an act of freedom in the face of a constrictive social order” (Wickberg 182) and as a means to attain the liberal aspiration of an ideology-free existence.

To return to my original example, such an understanding of humour can also be seen at work in *The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear*, which went to great lengths to represent itself as non-partisan and therefore free from the habits of thinking thought to characterise the ideologically compromised. Nowhere does this appear more clearly than in Stewart’s initial announcement of the rally, where, while holding aloft a sign reading “Got Competence?” he quipped “How’s this for the dissatisfied, but non-ideological among us?” What is important in this moment is not the hoary critique that Stewart’s call to go beyond ideology fails to recognise that he himself, and indeed all of us, are always implicated within ideology, but rather the implied (and closely-related) belief that ideology is inherently unhelpful and alien to the political process. In this understanding, humour is not simply a means by which the humourist can deny her ideological coordinates; instead, it has come to be seen as inherently oppositional to, or even disruptive of, any and all forms of ideology. Humour here is conceived as a practice inherently destructive of ideology: a tool by which to clear a space outside of dogmatic and distorting structures of thought. Hence, not only is humour conceived of as a means to attain everyday and democratic freedom: it is also thought, in particular, to convey the desirable defining characteristics of democratic individuals, in particular the tolerant and

flexible stance of the pragmatic post-ideological subject. In the broadest terms possible, this is humour as a force of freedom: not simply as an addendum, but as the very heart of a liberally focussed culture and politics.

How, though, is humour imagined to carry out this disruptive political work? The precise details of the mechanism by which this subversion is thought to occur differs from theorist to theorist. Perhaps one of the ‘purest’ accounts of humour as a liberal force for dissent can be found in the work of psychologist Harvey Mindess, who offers what he dubs the “liberation theory” of humour.¹⁰ In the tellingly named, *Laughter and Liberation*, Mindess explicitly rejects both Incongruity and Superiority (which he refers to as “degradation”) theories of humour, as too intellectual and too aggressive respectively and instead “proposes that the most fundamental, most important function of humor is its power to release us from the many inhibitions and restrictions under which we live our daily lives” (237). He thereby identifies as humour that which breaks us free from our normal constrained manner of thinking and understanding the world, and we take pleasure in this operation, because being freed of constraints is regarded as fundamentally enjoyable in Mindess’s account (241).

Mindess comes to this assertion through an extrapolation of his starting assumption that “thinkers simple and profound agree that the ability to see the funny side of things, to savour the ridiculous in life, and to laugh at ourselves and our troubles is an asset of the greatest magnitude” (13). Accordingly, given his unadulterated embrace of

¹⁰ Though Mindess originally published his account of humour in 1971, the perception of its continued relevance is made apparent by the decision to republish *Laughter and Liberation* in 2010 with a new introduction provided by prominent “humor studies” scholar, Arthur Asa Berger.

humour as a force for good in the world, and his uncritical acceptance of the desirability of dominant liberal political mores, Mindess concludes that humour must serve liberal causes, or in his own oft-repeated formulation: humour “breaks us free from the ruts of our minds” (22). Humour is here understood as a flexibility of the mind that allows an escape from convention and conformity (Mindess 30-5), and in doing so is thought to make possible a commitment to flexibility and dissent so profound that it can potentially do away with any and all ideological investments:

Were we to take [the satirist’s] message to heart, we would no longer support any cause or movement, subscribe to any political or philosophical doctrine. Neither capitalism, nor socialism, black power nor white power, women’s rights nor masculine ascendancy, pragmatism nor existentialism could command our allegiance, for we would know full well that all positions are biased, all arguments meretricious, all claims exaggerated.
(105)

For Mindess, then, humour operates as a key means by which a liberal subject might recognise and realise her own absolute autonomy. In an argument notably similar to that traced in a more critical manner by Wickberg, Mindess suggests that “the religious zealot, the righteous patriot, the racial bigot, and the black power militant are all, it is said, incapable of laughter at the particular topic about which they feel so intensely. The assertion stands to reason, for laughter would soften the single-mindedness and waylay their unswerving drive” (184). Thus, no ideology can stand before the critical force of humour, which Mindess argues liberates the individual from the intellectual oppression of contingent beliefs and oppressive structures of thought.

The reason that I begin with this dramatic and somewhat acritical articulation of humour as liberation is that Mindess’s argument makes explicit a series of logical steps –

where the assumed desirability of both humour and liberal freedom leads to the argument that humour invariably does liberal work – that to a greater or lesser extent informs much contemporary thought on humour. And though later and more sophisticated commentators are much less upfront regarding the basic assumptions that inform their work, the basic moves of Mindess’s arguments continue to recur in both popular and academic accounts of humour as an ostensibly critical or liberating aesthetic mode. On the more popular (or at least less rigidly academic) end of the spectrum, this understanding of humour as dissent circulates through popular culture in the form of ‘truisms’ such as the Mark Twain quote – “against the assault of laughter nothing can stand” (674)¹¹ – which opens this section, and has served at the title for at least two books on American humour. In common parlance, humour understood in this manner is frequently referred to as ‘satiric,’ particularly by those who regard such humour as desirable. However, in contrast with satire’s historical role as a well-defined genre and set of sub-genres (Juvelian, Horatian, Menippean, Varronian), the contemporary meaning of satire is “becoming more obscure as its fan base expands” (Marc “Foreword” ix) encompassing any form of humour that is thought to contain a critical message: a category that is expanded to include *Saturday Night Live*, the work of Al Franken and Michael Moore, *South Park*, George Orwell (*Day Satire*, Gray et al.), the music of Eminem (Braund 410), the *Scary Movie* series (Magistrale 187), Dr. Seuss’s *Yertle the Turtle* (Freedman 102) and even Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* (Dickson-Carr 182-90). Thus,

¹¹ As Russell Peterson points out, this line is, in fact, spoken by Satan in its original context, which perhaps somewhat alters its meaning (221 n.29). This has not, however, influenced subsequent decontextualized repetitions of the phrase.

though such works correspond to the broad definition of satire as “an attempt to diminish a subject through ridicule” (Abrams 188), the means of diminishment operate in increasingly diffuse and indirect ways. Rather than attempting to refute this contemporary usage as somehow incorrect with respect to a more proper, traditional definition, I believe it is more productive to take up this contemporary meaning in order to better understand its assumptions and implications for the wider social understanding of humour. Consequently, satire is understood here not so much a particular form of humour, distinguishable by formal traits or genre, but rather a particular way of looking at humour, one that takes for granted its ability, or at least intent, to disrupt systems of meaning and power.

Even if the precise meaning of satire is in doubt, its political force is not. At its heart, this new notion of satire is the conflation of humour and (often, but not necessarily politicised) critique. Such a view of satire is operative in Jonathan Gray et al.’s assertion that “the unique ability of satire TV to speak truth to power ... is apparent around the world” (*Watching* 6). Peterson repeats this claim, declaring that “if ‘speaking truth to power’ is part of a journalist’s job, it is the satirist’s primary mission – a higher calling, in fact, than merely being funny” (8). The connection between truth and humour, as if humour could never not tell the truth, is a common trope in multiple accounts of humour from Michael Gelven’s traditional humanistic celebration of high culture humour in *Truth and the Comedic Art* to Hub Zwart’s anti-humanist Nietzschean philosophy in *Ethical Consensus and the Truth of Laughter*. Nor is this simply truth – a truth supportive of its subject would be neither satire, nor likely humour at all – but a subversive, challenging

truth: British Prime Minister John Major grasped this potential when he said, of satirical attacks on his person, that they are “intended to destabilise me so I ignore [them]” (qtd. in Batchelor et al. 81). Yet, while such accounts may suggest that it is possible to distinguish satire as some sort of subset of humour more broadly conceived, in practice, almost all forms of contemporary humour can be, and often are, understood in terms previously reserved for satire. The force of truth need not be limited to satire alone; moving beyond his narrower concern with satire, Peterson also argues that “truth is the essence of comedy” (125). For once satire is defined as humour that uses ‘truth’ to critique an idea, person, institution or structure of power – as humour that offers a critique of its subject – then all humour can potentially be thought to operate in a manner akin to satire: as can be seen in Mindess’s account of humour as liberation. It is not simply then that satire, as traditionally construed, frees one from social and political mores: but also that puns free one from rules of grammar and language (Mindess 86-8), nonsense frees one from regimes of lucid sense (Mindess 76-83), and sick humour frees one from moral obligations (Mindess 59-70). For Mindess and his heirs, it is not so much the particular target of humour that is important, but the very fact that there is humour, which generates the critical, liberating function.

As noted above, the influence of this account of humour extends far beyond Mindess’s writings. Indeed, an understanding of humour as liberating and critical, even in the absence of a satirical target, informs much popular and theoretical discussion on the subject. This belief in the critical power of humour underlies Steve Vanderheiden’s assertion that “humor can’t be disconnected from the broader social project of liberation”

(206) and John Bruns' claim that "comedy's most crucial, though unacknowledged, aspect [is] its critical function" (175). This ostensible extension of satiric critique to encompass all humour is what makes it possible for Kirby Olson to assert that "comedy is ... rule-breaking and iconoclastic" (14); for John Morreall to state that "humour ... is a powerful force for liberation in our lives and is clearly a boon to the human race" (*Laughter* 113); and for Sheri Klein to declare that "all humour is subversive, that is, aims to disrupt our assumptions, emotions, patterns of thinking, ways of knowing and the world as we know it" (132). Indeed, from Kenneth Burke's "comic frame" (166-8) to Louis Kaplan's treatment of comic transgression of "the confines of officialdom" (345) and Andrew Stott's interpretation of humour as a divided and doubled experience of social reality, which allows the humourist to, in his words: "recognize the social order and comically subvert it" (11), an unquestioned understanding of humour as a productive breaching and breaking of boundaries characterises the majority of contemporary thinking about humour. Even Michel Foucault endorses the liberation of humour in the opening passage of *The Order of Things* where his "laughter that shattered," in response to oft-quoted Borges' account of the Chinese encyclopedia, sets in motion that volume's critical project (xvi). Indeed, the idea is repeated so many times, in so many different contexts, that the idea that humour enacts a critical, transgressive, subversive form of politics would almost appear to become a truism.¹² From art theory to philosophy to literary

¹² The list of examples provided above only skims the surface of the amount of literature that testifies to a belief in the critical power of humour, which informs Richard Zoglin's history of comedians as rebels, avant-garde artists and "antiestablishment provocateurs" (3-5), John Leland's celebration of contemporary "tricksters" who, he argues, use humour to call social certainties into question (161-85) and Leonard Freedman's articulation of the common idea that "throughout history the jester has been allowed to speak

theory and popular culture studies, humour (and its synonyms) has been embraced as a form that enacts a desirable, complicated, complicating, mutually-informing and constituting project of critique, transgression, dissent and truth-revealing.¹³

Probably the most fully developed and influential account of this model of humour can be found in Simon Critchley's *On Humour* where he claims that "humour is a form of *liberation* or *elevation*" (emphasis in original, 9). Drawing on the Incongruity model of humour, Critchley asserts that humour functions subversively by revealing the incongruities in the everyday structures of power in order to render the familiar unfamiliar and thereby produce opportunities for critique. Thus, he opens his account of humour with the declaration that:

Jokes tear holes in our usual predictions about the empirical world. We might say that humour is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke, between expectation and actuality. Humour

truth to power" (ix). Ted Gournelous and Viveca Greene tacitly equate humour and satire with dissent (xi-xii), Joanne Gilbert declares that "comics perform a unique and important social function dating back to the traditions of ancient fools – they hold a mirror to the culture, showing us our (and their) frailties and foibles, eliciting the laughter of recognition" (xiii), while Danielle Jeanine Deveau nationalises her claim that "In Canada, comedy has long served as a vital form of cultural critique, by providing space for a mainstream dialogue on controversial and often overlooked issues" (133). The idea of humour-as-critique is also a common aspect of more popular writings, such as Blackwell Press's Philosophy and Pop Culture series and Open Court's competing Popular Culture and Philosophy series, which between the two have them have addressed wide range of pop culture comedy. A common line of argument in such volumes involves directly comparing comic characters – like Jerry Seinfeld (Irwin 3-14), John Stewart (Barad 69-81; MacMullan 57-68; Michels and Ventimiglia 81-92), the boys of *South Park* (Young III 10-2) and Stephen Colbert (Ralkowski 145-62) – to Socrates: using their humour to bring established truths into disrepute

¹³ To a large extent, such panglossian theorising of humour overlooks the potential harms or negative consequences of humour. The belief in the positive power of humour manifests itself theoretically in the torturous operations some critics enter into in order to disavow the comic nature of those instances of humour deemed to be conservative or oppressive. Jokes that are thought to be racist or otherwise objectionable are rebranded as "untrue" or non-genuine humour (Critchley 11-2), in order that the designation 'humour' may be reserved for those examples that are thought to be properly progressive. There is no substantial justification forthcoming, though, for why purportedly progressive humour might be more 'truthful' than openly scornful or abusive humour; this assertion is made as if it is unproblematic – and indeed the fact that it is often taken as such indicates the manner in which the connection between humour and desirable sociality has become so deeply ideologically embedded in the liberal moment.

defeats our expectations by producing a novel actuality, by changing the situation in which we find ourselves. (1)

We can see here how the shift between expectation and actuality, that is to say incongruity, becomes interpreted as a critical project whereby our predictions are thwarted and change is produced. Critchley goes on to repeat and develop this point further and in a more directly political manner, asserting that “by producing a consciousness of contingency humour can change the situation in which we find ourselves, and can even have a *critical* function with respect to society” (emphasis in original, 10). Indeed, this claim recurs throughout Critchley’s celebratory account: humour does desirable, liberal political work whenever it operates through incongruity, whether this entails the incongruity of the animal and the human (31), of the mind and the body (41) or of stability and contingency (74-5). Regardless of its subject, incongruity is thought to shake the stability of any single understanding of the world by introducing the uncertainty of multiple possibilities of interpretation and hence the prospect of transformation and change. Critchley thus offers us a politicised and critical theory of the comic, wherein “humour effects a breakage in the bond connecting the human being to its unreflective, everyday existence” (41), and frees its subject into new critical spaces of thought and action.

At the heart of such assumptions regarding humour, then, is the notion that humour either creates or allows for a moment of freedom within the otherwise oppressive political, cultural or ideological spaces of everyday life. In this belief, these accounts of humour can be thought to echo one of the more influential models of the politics of humour – Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the carnival – though most do not do so explicitly.

For Bakhtin, the carnival, or the “carnavalesque,” was a comic state of being that occurred regularly during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as a respite from official order and the everyday repression of the lower classes: a site of festivity and liberation wherein boundaries and hierarchies were inverted or overcome, rationalism and fear were revoked and seriousness was repealed, if only briefly. As an aspect of the carnival, laughter is here understood to overcome fear, limitations and authority as an anarchic force that allows the people to confront terror and class oppression (90-1). Moreover, Bakhtin argues that this laughter need not be tied to any actual physical carnival, but can also be taken up in other forms, such as literature, where it “consecrate[s] freedom [and liberates] from all that is humdrum and universally accepted” (34). In Bakhtin’s description of carnival, we can perceive a similar range of rhetorical tropes and values to those present in contemporary, celebratory accounts of humour and laughter.

Indeed, Bakhtin’s account of humour as “positive, regenerating [and] creative” (71), would appear to preface a view of humour as inherently liberatory and critical; a politically optimistic understanding of humour as a political aesthetic that has proven particularly influential. For example, in their celebratory analysis of contemporary satire, Gray et al approvingly cite Bakhtin to support their assertion that “all humor challenges social or even scientific norms *at some level*” (emphasis in original 8-9): in this account, “[Bakhtin] sees the continual reflection, analysis and ridicule of social norms as enacted by humor as a necessary device for warding off the entrenchment of any norm into becoming wholly acceptable and beyond rebuke” (9-10). For these Bakhtin-influenced theorists, then, humour does not just function independent of political intention; it

inevitably subverts any political project that would make use of it, by foregrounding the contingent nature of the project and its goals. Nor is this perspective limited to those who openly cite Bakhtin, but, as I have suggested, can be thought to inform all those previously considered accounts whereby humour is taken up as a profoundly and inherently subversive form or force. Thus – though not all interpretations of humour as subversion directly evoke the spirit of the carnival – insofar as the carnival represents the ability of (folk) humour to challenge authority and realise the contingent nature of existing structures of power, the notion of the carnival can serve as a useful metonym for the constellation of theoretical approaches that locate in humour an innate capacity for dissent or subversion.

If we were to read the “Rally to Restore Fear and/or Sanity” in these terms then the role of humour in that context could be interpreted as a means to challenge, or at least poke fun at, authority, understood in this instance as the structures and personalities that constitute the state political leadership of the United States as well as the assumptions and values that sustain those structures and the wider society that gives rise to them. Following this strain of thought, Stewart et al. could be considered agents of the carnival, upsetting hierarchies, transgressing boundaries and thereby reclaiming power in the name of the people, their audiences, who, through the medium of humour, are liberated from their daily oppression and are provided with the tools whereby they may challenge the status quo. Humour is here understood to be not just a rhetorical tick that can be turned to any given political ends, but a fundamentally subversive force with an unalienable

political function, perhaps most succinctly described in Carl Hill's formulation of "Groucho Marxism" (230).

The Revolution Will Not be Humorised? Reining in the Claims of Liberal Humour

Hill's quip (accepting the prevailing assumption of truth in humour—even in puns) offers a useful starting place to investigate further the nature of the liberation offered by the liberal model of incongruous and carnivalesque humour. What are we to make of this evocation of one of the most controversial (to say the least) political projects of the twentieth century? Even though this account, and the others for which I am forcing it to speak here, declare humour to possess a politics, the abstract nature of the politics attributed – conceived in general terms of disruption and the challenging of authority and order – prevent any sustained consideration of what, in particular, this political project might do or mean. Accordingly, even as Hill draws parallels between Marxism and humour, he evokes a form of Marxism stripped of all its more detailed analysis and critique: a Marxism without class conflict, dialectical determinism, or historical materialism, but instead simply a Marxism composed of broad opposition and scepticism towards ideology. This is Marxism as "radical critique;" an interpretation which is not wrong, so much as it is empty of any particular meaning and therefore of any practical use or theoretical enlightenment. Reduced in this manner, such a programme of Marxism is not clearly distinguishable from Tea Party libertarianism, a particularly empty form of deconstructionism, or teen rebellion in cola advertising: in short, to the abstracted notion of dissent that dominates in the liberal moment. An interrogation of the political status claimed for humour thus returns us to an earlier point about the contradiction at the heart

of liberalism's dreams of transgression and subversion: while dissent in the abstract is understood as a desirable, laudable project, particular forms of dissent, such as Karl (rather than Groucho) Marxism, are not appreciated in the same manner. This is because critique arising from perspectives such as Marxism is regarded as ideological, rather than rational, and hence not a candidate for tolerance or pragmatic consideration. As Hill's cavalier – and perhaps here unfairly overburdened – quip illustrates, even in the spheres, predominantly academic, where Karl-Marxism still retains some cachet as an analytic strategy, there exists the potential for it to be regarded as a crude denunciation of contemporary conditions, rather than a critical engagement with them. By no means is this Hill's concern alone; the celebration of abstract, somewhat moralised, subversion, recurs throughout the liberatory accounts of humour traced above. The contradiction here, between the idea of dissent as innately desired and certain practices of dissent as fundamentally forbidden, speaks to the emptied-out form of liberal dissent and the particular oversights of the carnivalesque and incongruity interpretations of humour.

Bakhtin himself was also sceptical as regards the possibility of any straightforward manifestation of the carnival in the post-medieval world and, in contrast to some of his more enthusiastic modern advocates, he cast explicit doubt on the possibility of a modern carnival. He even went so far as to set the "genuine" historical carnival in overt opposition to the "negative and formal parody of modern times," which he thought lacked the regenerative thrust of the carnival and therefore existed only as a force of "bare negation" (11). This point is further developed in the work of Eco, who argues that the majority of contemporary humour fails to manifest the carnival proper.

Eco understands this failure not as a consequence of the character of contemporary humour itself, but rather of the world in which that humour takes place: the carnival “can only act as a revolution ... when it appears unexpectedly, frustrating social expectation In a world dominated by diabolical powers, in a world of everlasting transgression, nothing remains comic or carnivalesque, nothing can any longer become an object of parody, if not transgression itself” (6-7 “Frames”). Here again we can perceive an understanding of the hegemonic demand for dissent in the current liberal order, but rather than support humour’s claim to resistance, the widespread celebration of dissent is here mobilised as a dismissal of the political role of humour. Eco is not denying that carnival comedy violates social and cultural rules, but rather suggesting that the breakage serves in the present context only to reinforce the sanctity and force of those rules. Hence, though disruption is taking place, it is, in fact, only possible in the context of a controlled and passing disruption that serves to retrace the rule it breaks. Thus what appears as a moment of liberation is argued to actually institute a reinforcement of the existing order: in the modern media, “laughing is allowed precisely because before and after the laughing, weeping is inevitable” (“Rule” 275). In this manner, Eco begins to nuance and perhaps threaten the notion of Bakhtinian humour as an inherently subversive and disruptive practice, in terms that correspond to those earlier used to mark the liberal moment. Consequently, Eco rejects the suggestion that contemporary humour is the carnival itself, and posits instead that it be thought as an unsatisfied and unrealised drive towards the carnivalesque (3 “Frames”): an important caveat that allows for a critical distinction

between what some perceive as humour's utopian impulse towards iconoclasm and its political ramifications as an actually existing text.¹⁴

Similar qualms arise with regard to the more sweeping political claims made in the name of Incongruity theories of humour, which directly inform Critchley and Morreall's accounts and indirectly inform many others. However, humour-as-incongruity has not always been conceived of as a radical and disruptive site. Indeed, the historical rise of Incongruity humour has been closely tied to the tastes and social mores of the bourgeois middle class and their desire for a stable and polite social sphere. Addressing the rise of the Incongruity mode in the eighteenth century, Wickberg suggests that the theory became widely embraced because it allowed an understanding of humour as safe and unthreatening, in contrast to notions of humour as an ill-natured, scornful or uncouth affiliated with the Superiority tradition. While it was considered a matter of impolite ridicule, humour would not be admitted to the salons and entertainments of the genteel middle class, and therefore understanding humour as incongruity was:

A means of 'defanging' laughter, of domesticating it and making it acceptable as part of everyday behaviour in a society that was growing increasingly leery about the dangers of personal attack, rudeness and abusive behaviour ... The idea of incongruity as the foundation of laughter turned ridicule into a game, a matter of intellectual cleverness, rather than a species of attack and abuse; the abusive and

¹⁴ It needs to be noted though, that Eco does not entirely reject a belief in the critical power of humour. In contrast to the previously discussed form of humour, which refers to as "comedy," he also poses a form of "humour" proper. Humour is regarded as a positive force, wherein a social or textual rule is *explicitly* established and acknowledged within the text and then broken ("Comic" 276-8), such that the values therein embedded are revealed ("Frames" 7-8). The distinction between the comic and humour can therefore be framed such that carnivalesque comedy breaks the rule and, in doing so, re-inscribes it; whereas humour acts to de-familiarise the rule and therefore make it known. While this is a useful distinction, that is for example directly relevant to comparative discussion of *Seinfeld* and *Friends* in the next chapter, it is not clear, however, how this reflexivity would engender greater political effects – this would seem to simply be the carnival reconfigured as incongruity.

scornful elements might remain in ridicule, not now they were subordinated to the purely intellectual elements involved in the relation of incongruous ideas (Wickberg 56)

It would seem ironic, then, that today the relative political resonance of the Incongruity model seems to have become inverted: while the Incongruity theory was once advanced in order to ensure that humour was not seen as disruptive or threatening to the existing order, today it forms the basis of arguments that humour does, in fact, constitute a form of disruption. Moreover, that disruption is openly celebrated. Or, perhaps, this is not as ironic as it seems, for in light of its history the dissent promised by Incongruity theory would appear to be a particularly safe, abstract, bourgeois form of dissent. Not wishing to overstate the matter, nonetheless the origins of Incongruity theory as a means to render humour safe call into question the radical claims made on its behalf. Hence, while the contemporary understanding of Incongruity humour conceives of itself as a radical critique of existing frames of sense, what its historical origins make more apparent is that it overwhelmingly does so in an tolerant, reasonable and non-violent manner. Thus we must entertain the possibility that just as “Incongruity made laughter safe in company” (Wickberg 57), it also rendered humour safe for political dissent, which is to say robbed it of the potential to offer any sustained, particular critique that might upset existing structures of power in a meaningful manner. Understood in this manner, the affiliation of the incongruity model of humour with liberal celebration of humour is no coincidence, but rather the result of the way in which incongruity domesticates and “defangs” humour, thereby rendering it a politely abstract, and therefore potentially ineffective, form of politics.

Both the incongruous and carnivalesque accounts of humour as disruption, then, would seem to be subject to the criticism that their capacity for dissent are exaggerated by both theorists and practitioners of humour. And yet while such a critique may appear sweeping, it is still somewhat limited, insofar as it continues to take the liberal interpretation of incongruous and carnivalesque humour as a given. This is because even as it undercuts some of its more grandiose claims, this perspective still understands humour in terms of incongruity and carnival – as dissent, albeit of a relatively minor, sort – and, as such, continues to take the liberal interpretation of humour as the only interpretation: it is still assumed that when humour serves a social and political function, it is a subversive function. Thus, liberal accounts of humour, in contrast to its Classical and early modern apologists, do not stress its potential to aid in controlling a population or reinforcing social norms, but instead imagine humour to exist, at least potentially, as an liberatory force in the aid of ‘the people’ or as opposed to the forces that would oppress others.

Not So Funny Now: Controversial Humour and Superiority Theory

The interpretation of humour as a form of tolerant, reasonable, autonomous, enlightening critique in line with the demands and desires of a liberal politics is a perspective that dominates accounts of humour within the Anglosphere: one which usually goes unmarked and questioned. There are, however, moments when this celebratory interpretation begins to break down, or at least comes into sustained consideration: a situation that most frequently emerges in light of incidents of contentious or controversial humour, when humour is thought to cross the line from critical to

offensive. Under such conditions the limits and limitations of the liberal position become more apparent, and alternate explanatory frameworks are often evoked in order to make sense of these challenges to the prevailing model. Most instances of controversial humour amount to no more than a flash in the pan, and have few lasting cultural or political ramifications. During 2010, there were several such incidents, including Sarah Silverman's speech at the 2010 TED conference, in which she made liberal use of the word "retarded," *Family Guy*'s opaque reference to Trig Palin (also involving a debate about disability), New Zealand comedian David Fane's comments regarding AIDS patients and Jewish people, Joel Stein's *Time* magazine Article "My own Private India," which was widely criticised in the Indian-American community, and the two-hundredth episode of *South Park*, which dealt extensively with the depiction of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. However, whereas most of these examples were quickly forgotten, except perhaps by those involved, the *South Park* example points towards, and indeed is a direct result of, the most infamous example of controversial humour this century: an incident which took on global significance and has had lasting political and cultural ramifications: the 2005 *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons controversy.¹⁵

¹⁵ It is perhaps not clear at first how the Muhammad cartoons might constitute a form of humour; after all, many might struggle to find anything 'funny' in these images. However, as discussed earlier, funniness is a subjective response, as opposed to humour which is here understood as a cultural aesthetic category. This raises the question, though, how does one determine the existence of humour in instances where there is no consensus? There is no easy answer to this question, which would seem to endlessly beg further questions regarding the production of any and all shared cultural meanings. In the case of the immediate example, I suggest that cartoons can be understood as humour because they were discussed in those terms: the defence of the cartoons mounted by their supporters, we see time and time again the evocation of various discursive manoeuvres in common with discussions of humour, and even the criticism of the cartoons is phrased in denials of their funniness, a denial that makes no sense if the cartoons are thought of as something besides humour. The cartoons can be understood as humour because those were the terms in which they were widely taken up in public debate.

The *Jyllands-Posten* controversy began with the publication of twelve caricatures of the Muhammad in the popular conservative Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, on 30 September 2005. The cartoons were commissioned by Flemming Rose, the editor of *Jyllands-Posten*, as part of what he declared to be an “experiment” testing the limits of self-censorship in a society he believed had become too fearful of criticising Islam. To this end, Rose approached the union of newspaper illustrators with an open call to “draw Muhammad, as you see him” (qtd. In Klausen 14). Twelve cartoonists responded, and all were published. There is no unifying narrative or style to the resulting cartoons, besides their common depiction (or allusion to the depiction) of Muhammad: several could be interpreted as critical of the Islamic faith, while others are self-reflexive commentaries on the experiment, and others still are ultimately ambiguous. Jytte Klausen offers insightful analysis of the individual cartoons (21-7) in *The Cartoons that Shock the World*, on which much of my account here is based. Yet, despite their potentially provocative content, the initial response to the cartoons was muted: other Danish newspapers published editorials critical of the stunt, while the general response was that “the newspaper [*Jyllands-Posten*] was at it again, bashing Muslims” (Klausen 15). Anger at the cartoons built over the next few weeks, however, as the images circulated over the internet and international satellite news channels so that by the end of November the cartoons had been republished in several local newspapers around the world, and by the end of December, Denmark and several Muslim countries were exchanging diplomatic threats with both sides calling on the United Nations to intervene (Ibid 185-8). By the end of January, boycotts of Danish goods in Muslim countries was well underway, and by the end of February, protests

related to the cartoons in eleven countries had left embassies and other buildings torched and over two hundred dead (Ibid 106-13). As Klausen notes, “It is hard not to marvel at how twelve little cartoons could cause so much trouble” (2).

I turn to the example of the of the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons for two reasons. The first is because of the way in which they provide an example of how the liberal account of humour can be mobilised, even by those critical of liberalism, and the second is for the way in which they simultaneously undercut the assumptions of that liberal model. To develop this first proposition we can turn to Žižek’s interpretation of the *Jyllands-Posten* controversy, where he constructs the co-ordinates of the conflict in terms of two central tenets of liberal thought. On the one hand is the Western liberal response based upon a belief in “freedom of the press [as] one of the highest goods” (*Violence* 105) and on the other is a liberal tolerance for the Other, which seeks to respect the “Muslim belief in the sacred status of writing” (*Violence* 106). Thus, he asserts that “two opposing stories can be told about the caricatures, each of them convincing and well argued, without any possibility of mediation or reconciliation between them” (105). The first story can be seen in Flemming Rose’s defence of the cartoons, where he evoked parallels with the use of humour by dissidents in the Soviet Union as a means of resistance (Klausen 15-6). Citing the cartoons as a means of resistant political speech, and declaring demands to censor the cartoons as anathema to secular democracy and free speech (Klausen 18-9), Rose’s defence perfectly illustrates how the liberal understanding of humour as dissent is evoked within concrete situations to make sense of the cultural work of humour as a desirable liberal act. The international re-publication of the cartoons took place within similar

rhetorical parameters, premised upon an interpretation of the cartoons as critical acts of satirical free-speech (Klausen 48-52). The second position is that thrust upon the opposition to the cartoons, and suggests that they failed to understand the cartoons as humour, because, Žižek asserts, whereas joking and humour are central to Christianity, they are alien to Islam (*Violence* 106). The *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons did not create this belief that Muslims lack a sense of humour, but they did serve as “a dramatic articulation, with global impact, of an already emerging discourse about Muslim humourlessness,” that served to define a liberal understanding of humour as a necessary criterion of modern subjecthood (Kuipers “Politics” 74-6). Opposition to the cartoons was thereby reconfigured as a failure to ‘get the joke,’ and a hostility to joking more generally, rather than as the consequence of a different, but equally legitimate perspective.¹⁶

One particular liberal understanding of humour, on display in the rhetoric of both Žižek and Rose, therefore becomes party to what Brown refers to as a “civilizational discourse.” Though Brown is primarily concerned with the civilizational discourse of “tolerance,” as discussed earlier, humour is inextricably connected to the subject of tolerance. Thus, just as Brown suggests that “in the modern West, a liberal discourse of tolerance distinguishes ‘free’ societies from ‘fundamentalist’ ones, the ‘civilized’ from the ‘barbaric,’ and the individualized from the organicist or collectivized” (*Aversion* 177), I suggest that in the case of the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons, humour also comes to serve as a

¹⁶ It is important to note here that the pro- and anti- cartoon camps did not line up along West versus Muslim lines as implied by Žižek. The position of humour as free speech was not the sole province of Western liberals, nor opposition to the cartoons that of Muslims: significant Muslim voices defended the cartoons as a form of free speech, while many in the West interpreted the cartoons as an attack (Klausen 126-8). As Klausen notes, this is further complicated both by the fact that European Muslims are, by definition, Western, and by the simplifying work done by both terms: “Muslim” and “West” (2).

civilizational discourse, wherein the liberal (read “Western”) subject is seen to be capable of appreciating the form of tolerant, reasonable critique known as humour, while the non-Western subject is not. This position informs Žižek’s argument; those who opposed the cartoons are thought to have done so because they oppose the reasonable, critical form of free speech that humour embodies. Thus, even as he attempts to disrupt and escape from the repressive aspects of liberal toleration through a rejection of the civilizational discourse of tolerance in favour of atheistic critique (*Violence* 139), Žižek reproduces a division of the world into liberal West and non-liberal non-West. This time round, though, this division is enacted through humour, rather than tolerance: the liberal humorous subject, who understands the cartoons as an exercise in critical free speech, is defined against the zealous seriousness of Muslim opposition. Žižek substitutes a civilizational discourse of critique, and in this particular instance, comic critique, for a civilizational discourse of tolerance. In this account, the distinction between liberal West and non-liberal non-West is maintained, through the assertion that those who oppose the cartoons do so because they do not understand or subscribe to a liberal culture of freedom, autonomy and critique.

In such a manner, opposition to the cartoons is framed by Rose and Žižek as a form of failure of interpretation: an inability to get the joke or take part in the humour. This perspective suggests that those who opposed the cartoons did so because they did not understand that the cartoons constituted humour. Indeed, when someone is taking humour as offensive in this manner, it follows they are no longer conceiving of it in terms of tolerant, reasonable, joyous, enlightenment. However, this interpretation does not

necessarily mean that the aggrieved party has simply failed to correctly interpret the humour. Rather, in contrast to this position, I instead argue that opposition to the cartoons speaks to the possibility of alternative interpretations of humour, which brings us to the second reason I call upon the cartoons: because they usefully upset (perhaps even subvert) the assumptions of the liberal model of humour as it has been laid out so far. Accordingly, the true importance of the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons lies in the way in which, even as they provide a platform for the evangelising of the liberal position, they simultaneously challenge that understanding and thereby suggest alternative interpretations of the political and cultural role of humour. Until now, I have focused upon the liberal interpretation of humour, which I have argued is the dominant understanding of humour in the current moment, due to the convergence of a certain form of liberal politics and a widespread approval of humour as an aesthetic mode. However, those who perceived the cartoons as an attack open the way for a consideration of another, often overlooked or denied, model of humour: Superiority theory.

As discussed in the introduction, Superiority theory understands humour to arise as a consequence of a sudden perception of superiority in regards to another person, culture, institution, object or event. Therefore, if the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons are regarded as an exercise in superiority, rather than incongruity, then their primary cultural function is no longer to enlighten and respectfully question, but instead to insult and deride. According to this explanation, the cartoons are humour not because they bring multiple explanations and accounts into play, but rather because they inform their Western audience that they are superior to an Islamic faith represented as ridiculous.

Hence, the Superiority theory of humour would seem to inform the perspectives of those who interpret the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons as both humour and a malicious exercise in disrespect: if one believes that the fundamental source of humour is the humiliation of its butt, then it is a short step to condemning the cartoons as an attempt to deride the Islamic faith. While from the liberal perspective, humour is always on the side of freedom and its opposition always constitutes oppressive censorship, this alternate perspective understands humour as mockery, as disrepute, as insult.¹⁷ Thus, once we take Superiority theory into consideration, we can reconsider the assumption that the angry, violent reaction to the cartoons was a result of a failure to interpret them as humour, or an “over-reaction” to a reasonable, enlightening form of critique. To the contrary, in terms of Superiority theory the angry response indicates that those opposed to the cartoon understood its humour perfectly well: as a declaration of supremacy, malice and disrespect.

Superiority theory therefore furnishes a counter-argument to those offered by incongruity and carnivalesque theories, which regard humour as an exercise in popular dissent and speaking truth to power. As with Incongruity theory, in its historical iterations the Superiority theory of humour does not lay out any explicit political programme. Yet, also like incongruity, Superiority theory has been politicised by later commentators. The

¹⁷ A third position, adopted by many who understood themselves as liberal but opposed the cartoons, arose from a position of Left cosmopolitanism (Kuipers “Politics” 67). Many arguing from this position attested that the cartoons were not in fact humour at all, despite the fact that they circulated and were socially marked as such. This third position confirms closely to liberal theorising of humour that seeks to deny that offensive or racist humour is humour, and thereby preserve the central liberal assumption of humour as a tolerant critique. To my knowledge, no commentators, beyond the racist and illiberal far-Right, took the position that the cartoons were humour and were offensive and were acceptable.

most prominent modern proponent of Superiority theory, Michael Billig champions an understanding of humour directly opposed to the dominant liberal model. Openly declaring his opposition to the Bakhtinian model of humour, Billig positions himself as an “agelast” – one who is against humour – and suggests that humour is intrinsically disciplinary, rather than rebellious (200-1). Rejecting even the attempt to distinguish between rebellious and disciplinary humour, Billig instead asserts that humour framed as rebellion can serve disciplinary functions, both in similar terms to those proposed by Eco, and through the suggestion that release from social rules often takes place at the expense of others (“Rule” 221-34). Billig therefore implies that the political function of humour may be quite different than the humourist’s intention; thus, a joke that is intended to serve a subversive function may actually operate conservatively. Billig supports this interpretation further through recourse to the Freudian notion of the “tendentious joke,” a form that Freud argues inadvertently or unconsciously reveals hostile or obscene thoughts (Billig 154). Tendentious humour permits a disregard of social taboos by ‘bribing’ the listener with the pleasure of jest and joking, so that they might consent to the expression of what is customarily repressed, which, in turn, affords even greater pleasure (Freud 137). The notion of tendentious jokes thus necessitates a distinction between the subject of the joke and the joking form, which, in the case of tendentious humour, merely operates as a Trojan Horse, allowing obscene, hostile or blasphemous ideas to be given expression (Freud 96-114). Billig takes this explanation one step further, arguing that, because tendentious humour operates primarily unconsciously, while the humourist may not set out with the sole desire to express hostility or obscenity, the tendentious joke

proffers the possibility that all humour, no matter how innocently conceived, may have at its kernel a repressed aggression towards its butt, and may thereby reveal a serious hostility behind the facade of play. By discounting any distinction between innocent and aggressive jokes, the theory of tendentious humour allows one to argue that all humour, even that which attempts to actively promote a progressive or subversive politics, has a suppressed purpose to discipline through ridicule (200).

The repressive aspects of tendentious humour are thought to be compounded by a lack of empathy, a point that Billig arrives at via Bergson's already cited declaration that humour demands "a momentary anaesthesia of the heart" (Billig 120) By this Bergson means that to find humour in a fellow human's situation it is necessary to regard them without sympathy, and pay no heed to the pain or suffering that may be inflicted on them in the course of the humour: hence in order to laugh at the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons it is necessary to momentarily discount (or even potentially enjoy) the manner in which they might offend observant Muslims. Given this lack of empathy, Billig suggests that all humour must inherently belong to the political Right, as demonstrated by the rise of radio "shock-jocks," because it disregards the value of human life, while the political Left in contrast, because it is defined by compassion, cannot properly engage in humour without compromising its principles (241-3). Thus Billig, as the central proponent of modern Superiority theory, rejects any distinction between carnivalesque positive and repressive negative humour because, in his conception, all humour is inherently tied into normative demonstrations of superiority and indifference for human life, and thereby can only be

used to reaffirm, not subvert, existing social power structures and trivialise, not address, social problems (25-32).¹⁸

In this conception, though humourists may imagine themselves to be subversive, and their intent to be beyond reproach, they invariably act only to punish and ridicule those lower than them in the social hierarchy. Regardless of the political or rhetorical intention, in Billig's account such evocations of the comic are not liberating or critical moments of freedom, but simply the mocking reassertion of normative behaviours and structures. In terms of Superiority theory, humour contains an ordering moral statement that acts to assert rather than dismantle a hierarchy. Thus, through Superiority theory we can perceive a politics of humour as conservative as Incongruity theory's vision is liberatory. Viewed from the perspective of Superiority humour, the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons are not an exercise in free speech, but rather an attack. Therefore, in contrast to an incongruous or carnivalesque model, where humour is thought to be destructive to all forms of dogma and incongruity, the Superiority model offers an alternate explanation as to how humour can be thought to do ideological work. In these terms, the liberal claim of humour to enact a subversive humanism beyond and against the repressive force of the status quo can itself be considered deeply ideological: by offering the promise of a subject utterly unhindered by hierarchy or dogma through the free play of humour, the liberal understanding of humour establishes a more deeply assumed and uncritical space of ideology. As Zupančič notes, "ironic distance and laughter often function as an internal

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that Billig's declaration that, "Comedy, just like warm water, is constantly on tap in contemporary affluent society" (13), closely parallels Adorno and Horkheimer's assertion that "fun is a medicinal bath." This confluence speaks to the parallels between Billig and Adorno in terms of both attitude and analysis.

condition of all true ideology, which ... has a firm hold on us precisely where we feel most free and autonomous in our actions” (4). The assumptions of the non-ideological and hyper-critical work of humour assumed by liberal accounts thus break down when considered in light of controversial instances of humour, and the understanding of humour as superiority which inform those conflicts.

Wait, so what are the Politics of Humour then?

I am not suggesting that the Superiority theory of humour is correct, and that all humour is ridicule and repression, no more than I completely support the liberal understanding of humour as pure carnival and enlightening incongruity. Indeed, it is probably not even possible to separate these two competing theories of humour that are deeply and dialectically intertwined: to break free from a hierarchy is in an important way to attack it and demonstrate one’s superiority to that way of organising and seeing the world, and to those who continue to subscribe to it.¹⁹ Thus, instead of squaring off these competing claims against one another, it is better to consider Superiority theory as an alternate model for understanding humour beyond the celebratory liberal model of humour-as-critique. My point here is not that humour can never function subversively, but rather to caution that any attempt to claim a subversive function for any specific instance of humour must be wary that it does so critically and does not simply reproduce dominant ideological assumptions. It is also important to note that the Superiority theory

¹⁹ The difficulty of separating these two accounts of humour can be seen in Abrams’ attempt to distinguish between the two on the grounds that in one form “we are made to laugh at a person ... because he is ridiculous,” while in the other we laugh ‘because he is ridiculed’ – as if the ridiculous and the ridiculed were clearly distinguishable categories.

does not simply speak to negative or ethically inferior forms of humour as some have argued (Critchley 70, 95-6; Morreall *Comic* 6-8), but rather captures aspects of humour that its advocates would rather not recognise under the dominant liberalism of the current moment, where freedom from systems of control is an ultimate good.²⁰ The purpose of this survey of historical and contemporary interpretations and attitudes towards humour is to emphasise how, in any analysis of humour, we must be alert to the political oppositions and assumptions that structure the interpretation and reception of humour.

The utility of this approach can be illustrated if we turn to the Randy Newman quotation that opens this chapter. While the scenario described might put some in mind of Jon Stewart, Newman is actually recounting the appearance of the governor of Georgia, Lester Maddox, on *The Dick Cavett Show* in 1970. For those unfamiliar with Maddox, the audience's laughter might seem an instance of superiority humour and derision; indeed Newman's narrator presents it this way, as a slight against the elected official. However, when we take into account Maddox's stance in the popular imaginary of the time, as a figure representative of Southern racism, we could interpret the laughter as a critique of the cultural structures of racial prejudice. Reversing this again, however, we can consider that within the confines of the New York television studio, it is more likely Cavett, rather than Maddox, who represents the dominant social hierarchy. Moreover, one last reversal is also possible, if we consider that in respect to the US broadcast audience for the show, the mockery of the entrenched status of structural racism in State

²⁰ Nor is humour seen through the lens of Superiority theory necessarily a lesser or inevitably undesirable interpretation of humour. Historically, in the work of writers such as Hobbes and Bergson, superiority has been regarded as a way of maintaining social order, and hence a positive aspect of humour.

governance could be considered a highly radical political act. And this is not even to begin to account for the subtle ironic humour of Newman himself. Similarly, “The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear” can be conceived as a radical act of liberal reasonableness, or as a mockery of the political ‘extremes,’ as naïve, irrational or uneducated, as indeed it was interpreted by many on the Left and Right.

I am not arguing that humour can be interpreted in any number of ways depending upon the audience: if a text that is encoded as humour is to be decoded as humour, the number of possible interpretations is highly circumscribed. Instead I am asserting a need to attend to the specificity of humour texts. Like the politics of irony in Linda Hutcheon’s account (with which they bear a family resemblance), the politics of humour “are never simple and never single” (17): humour takes on political form and function in specific, located instances. When describing the political role of humour, one cannot generalise across space and time, and should not offer sweeping statements without recourse to example; rather there is a need to consider closely the central humour texts that inform a given time and place. To this end, the next chapter will engage with a series of texts that I argue represent a specific form of humour that rises rapidly in cultural importance in the Anglosphere during the 1990s and 2000s, and which becomes particularly important in light of the social and cultural weight with which humour is invested. Ultimately, the liberal belief in the cultural and political power of humour cannot be dismissed as false consciousness, because liberalism doesn’t just believe in humour as a site of critique; it makes it one through the centrality and attention it affords it. However, in order to address the consequences of this ascension to prominence of liberal humour, we must

move beyond the sweeping claims that paradigm implies and address the specificities of the humour aesthetic in the current moment.

Chapter Two - More than Jokes: Mapping the Aesthetics of Postmodern Humour

To return to E.B. White's remarks about humour and frogs, there is little question that following sustained analysis both frogs and jokes can appear less funny, but they can also appear more interesting. To extend the metaphor beyond the bounds of all possible taste and patience, I am sceptical whether this particular frog can actually die. Instead, I envision postmodern humour as akin to the seemingly immortal second-tier Loony Tunes character, Michigan J. Frog, who always escaped attempts on his life while continuing to belt out various ragtime hits: those who attempt the dissection of postmodern humour are as likely to suffer humiliation as is their subject.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse and map out the aesthetic features which inform the construction of the specific mode of postmodern humour that emerged in a distinctive form in the Anglophone mediasphere of the 1990s and 2000s. To this end, this chapter will consist of a series of textual and intertextual analyses in order to establish the existence of particular modes of humour that achieved wide cultural resonance during the period from 1990 to the present. Textual analysis serves as an important rejoinder to the generalising tendency of much humour theory, as it allows one to assess the actual function and form by which specific texts generate humour. Humour is a charged formal register that inflects its subject material with a certain politics, but that politics, whether repressive or liberatory, cannot be determined in advance. Though humour is an abstract aesthetic and affective category, it only emerges through particular examples: one is therefore forced to engage with humour at its own level: as it manifests within individual texts, and, indeed, with the forms of individual gags, jests, stunts, put-downs, wry asides,

wisecracks, ironic remarks, non sequiturs and other basic units of comic meaning.²¹ Such instances of humour are not necessarily bound to one another or to a wider narrative, but frequently operate as:

Lexical, segmented units, [that] can stand alone from whatever narrative these units might be part of. The spirit of comedy often involves moving from joke to joke in quick succession, and frequently the role of such narrative devices as characters, settings, themes and plot serve mostly as material out of which the next joke can be fashioned, not as co-developing, complexities. Admittedly, great humour has the ability to build upon itself, but comedy as a whole is not as dependent upon narrative, and upon narrative development as are other genres. It builds with largely self-contained blocks, and is inherently and unproblematically lexical and segmented (J. Gray *Watching* 86)

Following Gray's interpretation, my analysis will be more concerned with instances of humour rather than the wider texts in which they appear, with the necessary caveat that the wider text is a key component that establishes the conditions for that humour. I am less concerned with humour texts than with the humour of texts, and therefore will only engage with the wider themes, narratives, and ideological assumptions and constructions, in so far as they are relevant to the production of humour. Such an approach clearly relies upon an analytic abstraction: humour texts cannot be reduced to *just* humour: no matter how focussed upon the production of humour, comic texts typically involve organising personalities, be they characters or comedians, and narratives, or at the very least specific tones and sites of reference and these extra-comic sites are essential to the pleasures, motivations and interpretations of these texts. A focus on the humour to the detriment of

²¹ Like any other reading, an interpretation of humour is necessarily tentative. There will be exceptions and contestations to my attempts to understand the humour of these complicated texts. My goal in approaching these texts is to do so in an innocent manner – whereby humour is read out of the engagement with the text, rather than the imposition of a pre-formed theoretical framework – that I recognise as both impossible and naïve.

other approaches thereby fails to account for the texts as they actually exist and are encountered in their entirety. However, with those caveats in mind, this analytic abstraction does allow me to focus upon the particular aspect of these texts that is the intended subject of the current analysis and, in doing so, to speak to the ways in which the defining attribute of these texts – their humour – can be considered across and between texts and within the context of the wider social and political moment.

In this chapter, I will attend to the manner in which a series of popular texts, primarily televisual and filmic, inflect their representations in order to be perceived as humorous. The overwhelming focus on mass media, mostly televisual, texts (rather than literary sources for examples) arises as a consequence of my focus upon popular or mass aesthetics, with television (and to a lesser extent film) serving as the *mass* medium par excellence, particularly during the 1990s and early 2000s before the wider expansion of what has been called “new media.” Thus, to consider the state of contemporary Anglophone humour is, in many ways, to consider the state of contemporary Anglophone television and film. Central to my work here is the assumption that film and television, in particular the situation comedy or sitcom genre, are key sites at which media societies produce and engage with humour, and that the televisual and filmic humour and social notions and norms of humour are mutually reinforcing. Moreover, the televisual nature of postmodern humour is also an important aspect of its emergence, which takes place within the political economic context of the increasing ubiquity of cable-delivery, especially in the United States. In the USA, where the majority of texts herein examined were produced, shifting televisual technologies, economics and regulation practices

during the 1980s permitted the increasing development of niche programming in the 1990s and 2000s and thereby created spaces outside of the direct jurisdiction of the Federal Communications Commission. The subsequent rise of cable television in turn created the cultural conditions for experimentation and the development of increasingly ‘edgy’ programming in order to distinguish one’s brand and compete in an increasingly fractured marketplace (Day *Satire* 52-3). It is no coincidence that of the texts investigated here, five are associated with Comedy Central, one with early MTV, one with the early years of the Fox network and two with the relatively experimental environment of the secondary BBC channels.

These textual analyses will be organised around three central aesthetic operations of postmodern humour: discomfort, absurdism and politicised humour. Each section will be discussed in light of a series of primary texts, chosen for both the way that they crystallise those aesthetic features under consideration and their popularity or resonance within wider media culture.²² In addition, almost all the texts under consideration share the common virtue of having achieved some degree of cultural resonance or notoriety, and most have been the subject of wider controversy at some point in their run. The first category of shock, which is primarily concerned with humour that arises out of the

²² My method for selection of the individual episodes is not at all scientific – I have not devised a randomised method or a quantitative survey – but instead is unapologetically populist in a manner that might even be considered somewhat akin to the aesthetic theories of Clement Greenberg in an inverted, distorted manner. Whereas Greenberg argued that the best art is that which realises the innate qualities and potential of its particular medium, I have made the assumption that the best episodes of a given show are those whose humour realises the particular form and mode of humour employed in that series. However, unlike Greenberg I do not trust my own judgement, so have canvassed online fansites in order to gauge what an informal (or in the case of *Seinfeld*, surprisingly defined) canon of each show might look like. I thus work on the utterly unsupported and unqualified assumption that the most popular episodes of each show best demonstrate that show’s particular mode of humour.

upsetting of social taboos, will be based on analyses of the *Jackass* franchise, *The Office* (BBC), *The Sarah Silverman Show* (*Silverman*) and *Chappelle's Show* (*Chappelle*).

Though operating in very different registers, all these comedians and texts generate humour primarily through the breaking of taboos and borders related to different levels of social behaviour. The notion of how such boundary-breaking could be considered humorous will be considered with respect to examples drawn from these texts. The second category, absurdity, will be primarily addressed through primetime animated comedies: *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy*. These texts offer a succession of variations on the notion of what I will refer to as the “postmodern absurd” wherein the instability and immorality of the diegetic world is used as a means by which to reflect upon political and ethical flaws of the conditions of those works’ production. The third category of politicised humour will consider the extent to which humour directly engages with state political issues of governance and governmentality, and will take as its subjects, *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and the work of British comedian, Chris Morris. This group of texts uses humour as a means to make partisan and often potentially controversial political and social statements, and the purpose of this subsection is to examine the ways in which these materials may be coded as humorous and how such coding succeeds or fails in directing the reception of their political messages. In all cases the central examples will be joined with secondary examples where relevant in order to demonstrate the different forms such comedic tropes can take. These three categories of discomfort, absurdity and politicisation should not be considered entirely distinct from one another, but instead inform all of the texts involved to varying extents: a text like

South Park could be used as an example of all three aspects of postmodern humour. Thus, I am not, for example, claiming that *The Office* employs solely uncomfortable humour, or that the humour of *South Park* is only absurd, but rather making the more limited claim that such texts provide useful examples of the types of humour that I suggest are central to postmodern humour. Furthermore, this is not intended as a comprehensive review of humour in general during this period, but instead seeks to map the particular formal logics of what I will refer to as postmodern humour: a set of aesthetic forms and strategies marked and circulated as humorous that emerge and consolidate in liberal democratic media culture during this period.

It is also crucial to note that, considered in terms of aesthetics, humour is not one thing, but rather it is a collection of modes and forms that shift in relative importance and relation over time. Certain aspects of humour are given priority or at least take precedence at different times. Thus, whereas jokes could be understood as a relatively central form of humour at an earlier moment, that is not so much the case now. If it persists at all, joke-telling is now a form of humour affiliated with everyday conversation, and even there a pre-scripted, performed joke can appear somewhat dated – often associated with the figure of the older relative – in relation to the stream of quips, non sequiturs, pop culture references and taboo-busting shocks that constitute much of contemporary humour.²³ However, neither have jokes disappeared altogether: they have attained a new media afterlife through the medium of email and we are still utterly

²³ Given the dated nature of the joke form it is odd that much contemporary humour criticism retains the joke as a basic unit of analysis: a holdover from an earlier era whose persistence would appear to stem from a desire to retain existing analytic models, rather than any critically motivated or analytically justifiable stance.

familiar with the formal structure of jokes. To adopt the language of Raymond Williams, traditional jokes could thus be considered a “residual” form of humour (“Dominant” 122). Postmodern humour should not, therefore, be understood as a clean break that occasions a wholesale replacement of a prior mode of humour with another, but instead operates as a recalibrating of existing tropes and techniques, such that some become more common and popular at the expense of others. Postmodern humour is not a revolutionary aesthetic, but a gradual change that occurs in fits and starts in relation to the structures it employs, the targets (or butts) that it takes, and the audience it presumes. In seeking to characterise postmodern humour, I will argue that it does not rely upon jokes as such, but instead draws on a wider set of aesthetic ‘tools’ such as irony, sarcasm, pastiche, absurdism, excess and shock as ways to engage the world in a manner intended to elicit amusement or laughter. To return to Williams’s terminology, these postmodern forms can thus be considered “emergent” or arguably newly dominant modes of humour during the period studied (“Dominant” 123-4).

What this means is that rather than simply introduce humour into a situation as if it emerged naturally within that diegetic frame, postmodern forms will frequently foreground the primacy of humour to the formation of the text, drawing attention to the structured and constructed nature of humour. In extreme cases, postmodern humour can even directly threaten the stability of the narrative, generic or formal frame of the text. Such an aesthetic tactic often takes the form of a knowing and reflexive approach towards humour, whereby a text’s acknowledgement of its own fictional status and function – be it *Seinfeld*’s sitcom within a sitcom storyline in the fourth season, *The Colbert Show*’s

unstable sense of its own conceit or *Family Guy*'s more baroque cut-away sequences – allows postmodern humour to subject its own formal aesthetic logics and conventions to comic interrogation. The complexity implicit in such a perspective indicates how postmodern humour consciously and actively circulates in a saturated media culture, where there exists an assumption of advanced prior knowledge on the part of the audience. More than simply jokes, postmodern humour offers jokes about jokes, deconstructed jokes, blank jokes, anti-jokes and non-jokes. Such considerations will inform the remainder of this chapter, as we consider the different and novel forms humour takes during the ascendance of postmodern humour, where a frayed relation to truth and coherence give rise to new emphases upon tactics of shock, absurdity and ambiguity.

I've defined this contemporary mode of humour as 'postmodern' – and in the process dredged up a term that many probably thought was gone and buried, and were possibly happy to see the back of – for several reasons. Most important, I believe the term can still do useful work in describing a particular socio-cultural attitude, an aesthetic, and especially the relation between the two. In this chapter I will focus upon the postmodern in a primarily aesthetic sense to refer to a sense of sensitivity with regard to openness, imprecision and reflexivity in relation to formal conventions. However, I also wish to retain the wider political and social sense of the postmodern, which will be developed more in the next chapter in particular relation to the postmodern aesthetic. I have tried to take up the term carefully, aware of the extent to which the reach and dominance of postmodernism have been overstated in the past, but also aware that the same enthusiasm

marks the launch of its potential replacements – such as “pseudo-modernism” and “digimodernism” (Kirby) on the one hand, or discourses of globalisation or neoliberalism on the other – which fail to wash away all that was once considered postmodern about contemporary Anglophone society and culture. Consequently, I wish to make clear that I am evoking postmodernism as *a* cultural dominant, not *the* dominant, and that I do so primarily in direct relation to humour. Moreover, this formulation is not meant to suggest that the forms of humour that immediately precede the current examples, and continue to co-exist alongside it, can be considered “modern;” that term carries too much aesthetic and intellectual baggage to helpfully illuminate Archie Bunker, Bill Cosby and *The Flintstones*. Nor am I attesting that the humour I identify as postmodern is the only mode of humour operative during the period studied, nor even that it is always inarguably dominant, even with relation to humour: there exists a particularly strong strain of residual modes of comedy, particularly within the bounds of the sitcom and late-night formats, where shows such as *Home Improvement*, *Two and a Half Men*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Late Show with David Letterman* and *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* draw upon styles of humour with longer, more continuous and unbroken traditions and continue to enjoy wide economic, if not critical, success. Hence, in order to more clearly articulate the differences between these residual, more traditional forms of humour of the sitcom as “a representation art committed to harmony and consensus” (Marc *Comic* 118) and the postmodern mode which I am interested in, I will now briefly turn to two sitcoms that span much of the period herein discussed and which are widely considered to be definitive of the 1990s: *Friends* and *Seinfeld*. It is in the differences between these shows,

and in particular the ways in which they take up and use humour, that I believe we can locate a better sense of what I am referring to as postmodern humour.

New York City in the 1990s: The Funniest Place on Earth

First broadcast on 22 September 1994, *Friends* followed the comic adventures of “six twentysomethings living in New York [as they] deal with love and friendship” (Owen 112). Throughout its ten seasons *Friends* consistently obtained a top ten rank in share of viewers, peaking in its eighth 2001-2 season, when it commanded the highest viewer-share on American television. Such figures still might underestimate the cultural impact of the show, which was disproportionately popular with the younger demographics that had become known as “Generation X” (Owen 112-6), and whose growing financial and social clout is intractably tied up with the period. *Friends* has thus been considered both reflective and productive of a distinct social and cultural bloc (potentially in the Gramscian sense) just as that group began to have an impact upon Anglophone society. However, *Friends* was far from alone in its success: upon its debut the show occasioned frequent comparisons to that other definitive situation comedy of the 1990s, *Seinfeld*, often to the detriment of the former. Indeed, at first *Friends* appeared ostensibly derivative of *Seinfeld*, in that both followed the lives of groups of friends – George, Elaine, Kramer and the eponymous Jerry in the case of *Seinfeld* – living in New York City, pursuing romance, employment, sustenance, fulfilment and living space. *Seinfeld*, which referred to itself as a “show about nothing,” had debuted in 1989, but had really only begin to obtain critical and popular acclaim since 1992. Between 1993 and its finale in 1998, *Seinfeld* was ranked as one of the top three shows in terms of viewership,

finishing first during both its 1994-5 and 1997-8 seasons. Even in its afterlife of syndication, *Seinfeld* is still occasionally hailed as one of the greatest sitcoms, or even TV shows, ever produced.

Yet, however similar *Seinfeld* and *Friends* might appear at first glance – both follow groups of white, heterosexual, comfortably well-off (somewhat mysteriously in the case of *Friends*) friends in New York City during the 1990s – the two shows employ conflicting modes of humour which speak usefully to the postmodern distinction that this chapter seeks to map. Taken broadly, on the one hand, *Friends* can be considered an example of a long tradition of American sitcom humour, where humour is premised on the behaviour of wacky characters, placed in unusual or uncomfortable situations. On the other hand, *Seinfeld* can be interpreted as a departure from the ethical and aesthetic strictures of not only its antecedents, but also its contemporaries (Mirzoeff 39-43): to be more precise, *Seinfeld* is a show where humour is premised on the acknowledgement of the structures and systems that shape our everyday lives, rather than on particular individuals and their deviations from those largely unspoken systems. This is a broad characterisation that clearly overstates its case – *Seinfeld* did still rely on wacky characters and situations, increasingly so in later seasons. Nonetheless, in *Seinfeld* there is the beginning of a turn away from laughter at characters to laughter at the expense of structures and systems, even if that turn is never fully realised.

Perhaps the most perfect example of this mode of humour can be found in the most lauded *Seinfeld* episode – Season Seven, Episode Six, “The Soup Nazi.” The episode revolves around a tyrannical chef, the Soup Nazi, who produces the best soup in

New York, but who demands his customers adhere to a rigid ordering routine, the breach of which results in angry abuse and a denial of service, or, in the character Jerry Seinfeld's words, "He yells at you and you don't get your soup." The strictly delineated routine of the Soup Nazi's customer works as a fairly straight-forward extension of the everyday structures and systems with which *Seinfeld's* characters grapple in every episode, here taken to their comic extremes in the pedantic and inflexible nature of their edicts, the draconian manner of their enforcement, and the fraught banal-yet-redemptive nature of their reward. Yet, despite the bathetic extremes of the Soup Nazi system it is possible to perceive within it the echo of everyday life, such that this challenge seems merely a logical next step of the romantic, commercial and formal etiquettes with which the show is overwhelmingly concerned.

It is crucial to note that the humour of the ordering routine is not premised upon its disruption: George Costanza and Jerry's first order, which is played absolutely straight, is greeted by laughter from the studio audience in response to their mechanical and deferential performance of the expected behaviour: even their voices are flat and emotionless (this is repeated later in the episode, when the minor character Newman goes through the same procedure, again to laughter).²⁴ However, the audience laughter builds further once George begins to deviate from the accepted script: peering into his bag he

²⁴ In this instance, Henri Bergson's theory of humour as "something mechanical encrusted on the living" (18) would seem particularly applicable. Bergson's oddly specific notion of humour understands laughter to be the result when humans act mechanically according to patterns and systems, and here Jerry, George and Newman are reduced to a robot-like entities in pursuit of soup. However, despite its relevance here, Bergson's theory is too narrow to explain the wide range of situations understood as comic that appear in this chapter and therefore is better understood as a particular instance of a more capacious theory of humour, rather than a total theory in itself.

realises he has not been given any bread, even though those customers before him were. As Jerry, sotto voce and with a growing sense of discomfort, tries desperately to convince his friend to drop the issue, George learns that his appeal to the fairness doctrine of everyday life has no power here, and he is stripped of his soup. The store of the Soup Nazi is both a place of extreme and exaggerated social rules, where borderline behaviour is punished, and a space outside of normal social rules, where George's apparently "reasonable" appeals to fairness as well as common practices of courtesy are rejected. The Soup Nazi has, in fact, instituted a space of new rules, where some everyday behaviour is curtailed and some enforced with increased ferocity. Humour arises in the adherence to these rules, the breaking of them, and the apparent idiosyncratic ambiguities between those two positions, which becomes even more clear when we learn that while Kramer is apparently exempted from the rules – because he has recognised the Soup Nazi's genius – Elaine is not. Confident in her own exception to the Soup Nazi rules, Elaine flouts them in cavalier fashion: the humour of the scene building because the audience is aware from previous examples what happens to those who make even minor deviations from script. Humour can be found here because on the basis of earlier scenes the audience themselves have internalised the Soup rules: without the previous scenes, which instruct us in the requirements of the Soup Nazi, Elaine's behaviour wouldn't seem particularly out of the ordinary for someone ordering in a take-out restaurant. Thus, humour arises not simply from the breaking of rules, but from both the formation and breach of those rules in tandem. Neither the Soup Nazi's rules, nor Elaine's behaviour, are the sole site of humour, which arises instead from the gap between the two, which

also exists in comic tension with a third set of rules: those carried by the audience and understood as realistically reasonable and reasonably realistic.²⁵ In its obsession with the pedantic intricacies of these rules, and their complicated interrelations and interpellations, “The Soup Nazi” is not an exception to the general rule of *Seinfeld*, but the explicit manifestation of the show’s driving concerns.

How, then is this different from the humour of *Friends*? A striking difference in the forms of humour is that whereas *Seinfeld* is concerned with rules, *Friends* is concerned with norms. And while the difference between the two might seem trivial, it is of central importance in the interpretation of humour. Rules appear as explicitly socially constructed, whereas norms operate invisibly. Rules are broken in their breach, whereas norms can only be deviated from. In the case of *Friends*, the social codes being broken are not spelled out: rather it is assumed that the audience will already have internalised those rules (“Rule” 272). In order for the comic to be appreciated as such, the rule must be presupposed to the extent that it is socially implicit; “comedy” is therefore only perceptible to those who have internalised the rule to the point where it is regarded as inviolable (“Rule” 275.) The consequence of its adherence to this framework is that the humour of *Friends* arises not from the interaction of characters with abstract sets of social rules, but rather largely through presentations of buffoonery and stupidity, the humour of

²⁵ However it would be a mistake to think that *Seinfeld*’s obsession with rules pertains only to codes of etiquette and best social practice. This is best seen in episodes such as “The Bizarro Jerry” or “The Opposite,” where George decides to do the exact opposite of his instincts: a practice that leads him to find uncharacteristic success in romance, employment and self-respect. Meanwhile, Elaine apparently absorbs George’s excess “looseness,” and subsequently loses her job. “The Opposite” seems to suggest that these rules are not just social, but somehow tie into larger universal convergences and thereby suggests that not just social etiquette that may be up for grabs, but wider considerations of historical, sociological and potentially even physical laws.

which is often fixed through the competitive interactions of the characters with one another, whose quips serve as a form of comic exposition. Buffoonery and stupidity can only exist and be understood in light of systems of norms; however they are not explicitly presented or understood in this manner within the context of *Friends*, and instead appear only as personal failures on the part of characters to behave in a manner that is understood as obvious and correct. Thus, the humour of *Friends* is often (but not always) composed of two parts: the first is when a character fails to adhere to a social script, and the second is when another character brings this to our attention. It is surprising when returning to *Friends* with a careful eye to realise how much of the humour is based upon the different characters mocking and making fun of one another (or themselves) for being stupid, weak, unmasculine, unfeminine, too opinionated, unobservant or possessed of poor taste: a veritable roll call of metropolitan, middle-class white anxieties in the 1990s. Examples can be furnished from the central humour dynamics of various lauded episodes: the superficially feminist episode, “The One with the Poker Game,” centres upon poking fun at those who fail to perform contemporary gender roles; “The One with the Prom Video” draws its humour from Joey’s lack of taste and the stupidity and body size and shape of the characters Rachel and Monica as teenagers; and “The One Where No One’s Ready” is a rolling series of wisecracks regarding different characters’ central quirks: Joey and Chandler’s childishness, Monica’s neurotic obsessions, Rachel’s fickleness, Ross’s passivity and doubt.²⁶

²⁶ Drawing on such examples, the humour of *Friends* adheres surprisingly well to models of humour based in the Superiority tradition, where humour is thought to arise from a sudden experience of one’s superiority

In order more clearly to distinguish how I understand this difference between *Seinfeld* and *Friends* I now want to turn to a particular case study of the two sitcoms' relative treatment of homosexuality. In the episode "The One with the Baby on the Bus," Joey and Chandler are mistaken for a homosexual couple while minding their friend's baby. This case of (ostensibly) mistaken identity occurs while the two men are attempting to use their temporary custody of the child in their heterosexual quest to meet women. Thus, on one level the humour of this situation could be considered simply a product of the failure of their ruse: laughter that greets their comeuppance. However, this reading is complicated by the characters' expressions of shock and anger upon their faux-outing, which suggests that the humour of the scene is about more than simply the failure of their wacky scheme. The primacy of this anxiety is confirmed later in the episode, when the pair anxiously reassert their heterosexuality when they are asked what they are "out doing today?" The humour of these scenes is predicated on the assumption that for Joey and Chandler to be mistaken for gay men is in itself comic. This does not necessarily mean that this is entirely a matter of superiority – there is at least a possible incongruity present

to another being. Whether the audience is witnessing a character put down by another or themselves, or simply observing behaviour that is somehow coded as deficient (easier to spot in *Friends* by virtue of the laugh soundtrack), they are being invited to consider themselves superior to the subject of the humour, if only fleetingly and in relation to a particular area of life. This can arise either through identification with a particular character in the instance that they make fun of another character or through a direct relation of superiority between the audience members as themselves – the viewing subject – in relation to the fictional characters. Despite the farfetched success of these unusually good-looking and successful young people, the text permits and encourages the audience to take pleasure in their consistent failures to flawlessly perform expected gender, race and class codes. Moreover, this humour appears as an almost textbook manifestation of Freud's theory of "tendentious jokes" (noted in the previous chapter) whereby aggression or prejudice deemed to be socially inappropriate can be safely presented through the psychological bribe or 'trojan-horse' of the joke-form. Indeed, *Friends* is something of a psychoanalyst's dream, because not only does much of the humour seem to revolve around the expression of repressed anger and resentment, but also because there occasionally emerge sexually motivated wisecracks.

here, in the mistaking of a heterosexual man (especially one attempting to seduce women) for a homosexual man – though the way that the characters attempt to disavow this reading of their sexuality does suggest that the perception of homosexuality is at least troubling to them, and it is this discomfort that is implicated in and extends the humour.

Compare this to the *Seinfeld* episode, “The Outing,” whose title suggests the extent to which the episode is explicitly and predominantly concerned with a revelation of homosexuality, in this instance the purported homosexuality of Jerry and George. Following a series of miscommunications, a reporter concludes that Jerry and George are a homosexual couple and decides to ‘out’ them in an article. As with *Friends*, some aspect of this humour is still tied up in a fear of sexual misrecognition; however, in the case of “The Outing,” there is an additional twist to this humour: throughout the episode Jerry and George repeatedly deny that their relationship is homosexual, but always modify their denial with what has become a well-known *Seinfeldism*: “not that there’s anything wrong with that.” This qualification was apparently added at the last moment during production and thereby saved the episode from being abandoned, “by transforming its potentially offensive tone into satire” (Lavery and Dunne 7). David Mirzoeff posits this disavowal draws attention to the politicised anxieties of everyday life and speech about issues of sexuality, while still acknowledging the prejudices that shape such interactions (92-3). Compounding this ambiguity, the episode also explicitly foregrounds the manner in which Jerry and George’s relationship could be read as legitimately queer, as Mirzoeff notes George’s faux declaration to Jerry that “you’re the only man I ever loved,” might well be true (107). The humour of Jerry and George’s outing is therefore

more than simply an incongruity between homosexuality and heterosexuality: the episode discourages this reading by emphasising the possibility throughout that this boundary is not as clear, particularly in this instance, as might be thought. Indeed, Katherine Gatz offers a queer reading of *Seinfeld* that suggests that a firm distinction between hetero- and homosexuality is never possible in the instance of Jerry and George. It also seems difficult to interpret the humour here as simply as instance of mockery, at least with regards to homosexuality: more immediate is a sense that Jerry and George find themselves trapped between different systems of social rules and priorities that cannot be resolved in a straightforward or easy manner. I am not interested in adjudicating between *Friends* and *Seinfeld* as to which sitcom is the more queer-friendly: that is not my project here (though it's relevant to note that "The Outing" received a Gay and Lesbian Anti-Defamation award). Rather, what the shows' different treatments of a similar subject allow us to perceive is the different means by which they generate humour. While the humour of *Friends* can be predominantly accounted for within the frames of traditional humour theory, *Seinfeld* resists clear interpretations within that context: rather than a traditional humour of ridicule and the defiance of norms, *Seinfeld* offers the possibility, if by no means the complete realisation, of the potential for new comic forms that begin to emerge and increasingly define humour within the Anglophone media of the 1990s and 2000s.

Thus, the distinction between the different modes of humour employed in *Friends* and *Seinfeld* speaks to wider distinctions between historically continuous and the more

novel forms of postmodern humour.²⁷ This new mode can be considered more reflexive, in that it constructs its worlds in terms of rules and patterns that can be manipulated, malformed, inverted and broken. While some have characterised this comic focus upon “social rules and customs” as characteristic of a contemporary iteration of a comedy of manners (Pierson 35-46), such an understanding radically underestimates the shift in contemporary humour presaged by *Seinfeld*. In the wider set of texts, this comic reflexivity will apply to not just social rules of etiquette and expected behaviour addressed in *Seinfeld*, but increasingly the cultural, political, cognitive, and physical rules of both diegetic and non-diegetic worlds, and even the aesthetic and institutional markers of mass media and television in general, and sitcoms in particular. This new form of humour takes traditional structures of humour and the expectations they engender as a point of departure; as a set of norms whose subversion produces laughter and amusement. Traditional plots, joke-forms, character types become grist to the mill in this new arrangement, as these new sitcoms thus engage with the form and history of their antecedents at the same time at which they disavow that connection as something that is now subject to ridicule. This is a more useful analytic division than that traditionally offered between sitcoms on and other forms of humour: such as Bambi Haggins’s assertion that “the situation comedy is always about containment – within the twenty-two minute format, within cultural norms, within certainties of narrative closure – [and]

²⁷ However, I am not suggesting that *Friends* is simply entirely of an older mode, and *Seinfeld* is its replacement. Both sitcoms share many features and forms of comedy, and most are perhaps better understood as hybrid forms of postmodern and traditional humour. However, in the differences between them we can locate gestures towards the new models of humour that I seek to develop more fully and thoroughly in the following pages.

sketch comedy is always about transgression” (207). Such generalisations have long-outlived their critical usefulness in a media culture where new forms of humour can arise across and independently of any one generic form, and are therefore better considered as transgeneric and transmedia forms. Likewise, forms of analysis predicated upon traditional straightforward operations of incongruity and superiority are thus increasingly inadequate with respect to contemporary forms of humour that move beyond the modes of humour that I’ve associated with *Friends*. In their place, these new forms of humour demand new ways of theorising and analysing the aesthetic and political work of humour, beyond the location of a butt. In the remainder of this chapter I will consider three different modes of humour – shock and excess, absurdism, and politicised comment – that, while perhaps not entirely novel, take on reinvigorated centrality and importance with respect to the practice of humour during the 1990s and 2000s.

Watching through Your Fingers: The Cringe of Uncomfortable Humour

A young man attempts to jump a small and highly-polluted concrete canal on a pair of roller skates; he fails, however, and has to be rescued by his friends before being taken to hospital with a suspected broken ankle; a smug and domineering authority figure conducts a ‘practical joke’ at the expense of one of his employees whom he pretends to fire, she then breaks down in tears, and when he reveals his jest, she calls him a “sad little man”; a sweet young woman takes an HIV test because she “woke up with the blahs and just wanted some good news”; the “leading voice of the white supremacist movement in America” is revealed to be a blind black man who maintains a constant stream of racist epithets. These are scenarios not typically regarded as humorous. Indeed, they would

more often be understood as horrifying or, in more theoretically laden terms, *abject*. In this sense, these examples from four different texts – *Jackass*, *The Office*, *Silverman* and *Chappelle* – all illustrate what has been referred to as “cringe-coms” (Carr), “cringe comedies” (Elkins) or the “comedy of the horribly awkward” (Page 7), and which I will discuss in terms of “uncomfortable humour,” a form of humour premised upon complete and wilful flouting of regular social definitions of desirable or accepted behaviour to the extent of discomforting or upsetting even sympathetic viewers. Uncomfortable humour holds out not just the possibility, but almost the promise, that the viewer will cringe, or at the very least be forced to view the action from behind the protection of one’s clasped fingers: in short, this is the cringe of uncomfortable and even ostensibly threatening humour.

While such humour certainly has its antecedents – particularly in edgier forms of stand-up in the 1960s and 70s, as well as the mockumentaries of Christopher Guest, such as *This is Spinal Tap*, and even shows like *America’s Funniest Home Videos* in the 1980s for example – it begins to emerge as a major and celebrated aspect of popular humour during the 1990s and 2000s: hence, “where this type of humour may once have been considered avant-garde, alternative or extreme, it now rests comfortably within the mainstream” (Page 7). Uncomfortable humour manifests to a greater or lesser extent in multiple texts, during this period, including but by no means limited to American films like *Napoleon Dynamite* and *Dinner with Schmucks*, television shows such as *Arrested Development*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Freaks and Geeks*, *Strangers with Candy*, *The Cleveland Show*, *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, *King of the Hill*, and the work of the

Farrelly Brothers, the various projects of Canadian comedian Tom Green, British shows such as *Alan Partridge*, *The League of Gentlemen*, *Little Britain*, *Psychoville*, the character work of Sacha Baron Cohen (aka *Borat*, *Ali G* and *Bruno*) and the *Jackass*-derived *Dirty Sanchez*, Australian comedy in the vein of *Kath and Kim* or *John Safran's Race Relations* and New Zealand's *bro'Town*, *Back of the Y Masterpiece Theatre* and films such as Taika Waititi's *Eagle vs. Shark*. And of course, as mentioned above, there's also *Seinfeld*, which has been cited as a direct influence on *The Office* at least (Walters 14). Moreover, beyond film and television, this mode of comedy is almost de rigueur in much of contemporary stand-up comedy.

I have chosen to consider uncomfortable humour through the lens of four diverse texts mentioned earlier: *Jackass*, *The Office*, *Silverman* and *Chappelle*, both in order to speak to the wide range of uncomfortable humour and because, especially in the case of *Jackass* and *The Office*, these texts can be considered seminal texts of uncomfortable humour which both historically and textually established the parameters of most contemporary manifestations. In staking out the initial grounds of uncomfortable humour, these two television shows achieved not only considerable popular success but also a degree of cultural resonance and notoriety: the names of these shows are familiar even to those who never watched them. Between them they also serve to demonstrate the wildly divergent means by which uncomfortable humour might arise: in the one instance, bodily and excessive, in the other, understated and dry. Thus, alongside *Silverman* and *Chappelle*— which serve to further illustrate the ways in which discomfort can be marshalled in the context of more directly controversial topics, such as white

uncomfortableness regarding questions of race and privilege – these four texts illustrate markedly different manifestations of the uncomfortable mode of humour and the broad possibilities of this comic mode.

Uncomfortable humour does not function through any simple form of amusement: it is almost the opposite, in that it confronts its audience with that which is calculated to unsettle by exceeding the regular social and aesthetic rules of good and proper sense. However, in contrast to the argument offered by Evan Elkins, who suggests that cringe humour gives rise to “forms of reception not directly aligned with the supposed merriment of the half-hour television comedy,” I will instead argue that the uncomfortable cringe is indissociable from the aesthetic operation of humour and comprises an alternate inflection of traditional ‘merriment.’ In short, the uncomfortableness and humour are not opposed, but rather interconnected. Uncomfortable humour draws upon a promise of actual bodies or deeply recognisable situations, places and social conventions as material for their disquieting humour: it lingers on quietly terrible moments that are not allowed to pass quickly, but are instead studied and meditated on in ways that reconfigure the both the emotional and affective valence and indeed the very bounds of what can be interpreted as humour. To a greater degree than earlier comedies, then, the uncomfortable humour of the texts addressed here is premised upon direct engagement with the lived experience of the audience – sometimes quietly and creepingly, sometimes aggressively and brazenly – in ways that ground not only the codes and commandments that constitute the represented social order and reality, but also the breach thereof, in the material of everyday life. If we follow

Lewis' suggestion that "for people to be amused, the principle being violated must seem important, but not so important in context as to be seen as morally inviolable" ("Funny" 216), then uncomfortable humour takes place right on, and often across, the edge of that inviolability. There is nothing whimsical or wacky about this humour: even when it often arises in the context of outlandish scenarios, it is humour that is inescapably about the viewers' lives as much the onscreen characters', and this is at the heart of their uncomfortable, cringe-inducing aesthetic of humour.

What the four texts under consideration all hold in common is a shared concern with the comic potential of excess, taboo and a sustained failure to adhere to the strictures of polite society. However, despite a shared logic of humour, the manner in which they defy social expectations is particular to each text. First, *Jackass* can be considered an exemplar of "extreme stunt reality television" (Lindgren and Lélièvre 393): a form of television premised upon a group of young men engaging in a variety of physical stunts, gross-out routines and pranks, including such activities as "urban kayaking" in skate parks and public fountains; reciting the Gettysburg Address while wearing an Abraham Lincoln-esque beard of leeches; renting a car, entering it in a demolition derby, then attempting to reclaim the damage deposit when returning it; numerous variations on engaging with animals such as bulls, bison and alligators while blindfolded, naked, walking on a tightrope or wearing roller skates; and gallon milk-drinking competitions, snorting wasabi and eating a "yellow snow" cone, all of which end in the same

predictable regurgitative manner.²⁸ In their qualitative analysis of 576 such scenes across fourteen hours, from three television series (2000 – 2002) of *Jackass* and the first two *Jackass* films (2002, 2006, a third was released in 2010), Simon Lindgren and Maxime Lélièvre break the show down into the telling constitutive categories of “1) bodily experimentation, 2) sports experimentation, 3) social experimentation, 4) the enjoyment of risk taking, 5) laughter, 6) animal domination, 7) phallocentrism, and 8) the symbolic annihilation of subordinate masculinity” (399-400). *Jackass* thus defies expected social codes of behaviour in a loud, immediate and obvious way, a blatant form of excess which has earned the show multiple denunciations as a faux-carnavalesque mobilisation of “the disgusting and the absurd ... [in order] to do nothing more than draw the eyeballs of a coveted marketing demographic to advertisers” (Martin and Renegar 303), the latest incarnation of “a tradition of inane, risqué, and blatantly lowbrow programming” (Sweeny 137) or a “twilight zone of mindless suffering” (Lewis *Cracking* 60). The excessive taboo-breaking of *Jackass* thus manifests frequently, loudly, and obviously.

In apparently stark contrast, the banal anxiety of the BBC sitcom *The Office* might seem a world apart from the provocations of *Jackass*. Originally screened in the UK across two seasons and two Christmas specials in 2001 and 2003 (and subsequently adapted for French, German, Chilean, Israeli, Québécois and most famously American contexts, with Chinese and Swedish versions apparently in the works at the time of

²⁸ This excess is not always marked as uncomfortable; *Jackass* also traffics in alternate, more established modes of humour, such as the ridiculous, the grotesque or the representation of folly. As has been noted by multiple commentators, *Jackass* bears more than a passing resemblance to Bakhtin’s carnival (c.f. Brayton, Karimova, Palmer) – a form of humour that, while excessive, spectacular and overwhelmingly lowbrow, is not premised solely upon discomfort, but instead can be interpreted in more familiar terms of incongruity or the unexpected.

writing), *The Office* is a faux docusoap addressing the Slough branch of Wernham Hogg, a paper goods supplier, and in particular the egotistical and insecure regional manager, David Brent, who considers himself “a friend first, boss second, probably entertainer third.” Prone to offensive jokes and mangled punch-lines, Brent frequently fails to correctly perform social scripts, such as joke-telling and entertaining, in ways that offend and upset his employees and the majority of comic moments in *The Office* stem from failures of social behaviour.²⁹ While many sitcoms prior and since have addressed the politics and interactions of the workplace, *The Office* distinguishes itself through both its careful character studies of recognisable, unsettling personality types, and its use of the docusoap format to subtly emphasise the awkwardness and unease of slightly-off human interactions. As has been pointed out in multiple instances, *The Office* is consequently uncomfortable to watch, especially in comparison to a traditional sitcom: “[*The Office*] was conspicuously banal in its setting and offered nothing in the way of elaborate plotting or farcical mishap, punchlines or catchphrases. Even its own characters were stultified with boredom, when they weren’t cringing in embarrassment” (Walters 1). Laughter with (or at) *The Office* is thus almost always inseparable from a simultaneous cringe (Tyler and

²⁹ Broader and more easily recognisably comic moments are also present though, and most often arise out of the characters, Tim and Dawn, who are the closest *The Office* gets to heroes, playing pranks and making fun of Brent’s repressed, and childishly aggressive assistant, Gareth, such as hiding his belongings, gluing his phone together or fooling him into engaging in a conversation rife with homosexual innuendo. Such humour is no less cruel in its way – and the complicity of most audience’s in this mockery raises questions about *The Office*’s relation to the social power of humour – but does not produce the same cringe effect, because it operates and is resolved at a detached distance from the audience (it is ironic though, that Frances Gray celebrates this humour as laudable and “creative” in her wider discussion of “bullying humour” in *The Office* [160]). Such humour is important both thematically and structurally for the show, because it both compounds the show’s thematic concern with the implication of humour as a form of social interaction and power and also acts to confirm for the audience that this is indeed a comic text through the presentation of easier and more obvious forms of humour. These moments of more traditional humour – mostly tied to the more broadly drawn character of Gareth – help confirm the show’s overall comic alignment.

Cohen 124). Indeed, embarrassment is central to *The Office*'s comedy of unease where humour is primarily a function of characters' failures to respond correctly to social cues or situations. Concerned with minor, everyday interactions, *The Office*'s exploration of the contemporary workspace offers both a quieter and more familiar scenario than *Jackass*. However, both can be considered manifestations of the humour of discomfort, insofar as they both traffic in a mode of humour that implicates the viewer in quasi-sympathetic relation with unbearable situations. As with *Jackass*, the humour of *The Office* therefore arises out of the repeated breach of social norms and unspoken taboos and demonstrates how deviation from expected behaviour need not always be spectacular in order to elicit discomfort.

Finally, whereas the uncomfortable humour of *Jackass* and *The Office* speaks to unspoken codes of embodiment and behaviour within contemporary Anglophone culture, both *The Sarah Silverman Program* (2007 – 2010) and *Chappelle's Show* (2003 - 2006) generate uncomfortable humour in relation to much more explicitly taboo concerns, which address explicit cultural fault lines and loaded topics, such as race, disability, and the Holocaust.³⁰ In her account of Silverman's 2008, pro-Barack Obama viral video – The Big Schlep – Amber Day suggests that “[Silverman] manages to make us comically

³⁰ The comedic output of neither Dave Chappelle nor Sarah Silverman can be reduced to their respective Comedy Central television programmes: both enjoyed successful stand-up comedy careers both before and after their respective shows and have also practiced their brands of controversial and awkward humour in other contexts, including feature films. However, in both instances their television shows mark not only a stable and easily accessible archive, but also a site at which Chappelle and Silverman retained creative control while still adapting their particular forms of uncomfortable humour for a general and relatively broad viewership. The connection between the two comedians also runs deeper than a similarity in tone and topics: Silverman performed routines from the Chappelle Show verbatim on the *The Jimmy Kimmel Show* (Jenkins) and was mooted as a possible replacement for Chappelle upon his sudden and unexpected retirement from his show in 2006 (Wisniewski 13).

uncomfortable by her flippant use of racial stereotypes, while also communicating an earnest appeal for reconciliation across ethnic lines” (*Satire* 35). To some extent this analysis provides us with a basic formula for much of *Silverman* as well, where the central character – who in a similar manner to *Seinfeld* is ostensibly a representation of the titular actor, but is in practice an exaggerated comic persona – behaves in grossly inappropriate ways as a consequence of her profoundly naïve and self-obsessed worldview. This form of humour resonates productively with that of *Chappelle*, a show whose humour is similarly premised upon engagement with social taboos and edicts: in this instance, almost solely with the (American) experience and understanding of race.³¹ Lauded as “one of the funniest and most incendiary series of American television in the early 2000s” (Haggins 206) and “a milestone to our culture (sic)” (Wisniewski 1), *Chappelle* has been celebrated for its fearless comic engagement with the stereotypes and prejudices of contemporary American life. Both shows provide a range of possible examples for considering the humour of uncomfortable subjects: *Chappelle* predominantly engages with different inflections of racial tension in contemporary America, while *Silverman* addresses a wide variety of uncomfortable topics, such as race relations, abortion, AIDS, the Holocaust, disability, child abduction, and homelessness.

³¹ Of all the examples addressed in this chapter, *Chappelle* probably comes the closest to defying the structuring assumption of a common Anglophone media culture because of the manner in which its concerns are both explicitly and implicitly addressed to specific US anxieties regarding race and histories of slavery. However, given the wide distribution of American media, the social issues addressed by *Chappelle* can be considered broadly recognisable – if not immediately affectively resonant – as far afield as the UK, New Zealand and Australia. Local analogues do exist however: the work of 1980s New Zealand Maori comedian, Billy T James, springs to mind. In his exaggerated performance of his own “Maoriness” (and his problematic portrayals of other racial groups) James could be considered an earlier practitioner of the same critical-comic impulse that informs the work of *Chappelle*.

As will be discussed in more detail, even the mere fact of direct engagement with such issues is often enough to provoke discomfort, let alone when such engagement takes place in the context of comedy and as the subject material for humour.

All these four show then traffic in a form of humour which can be considered part of the broad spectrum of what Paul Lewis refers to as “killing jokes”: instances of humour, such as *Nightmare on Elm Street*, tasteless joke cycles, *Jackass* and action movie quips, that are premised upon the insensitive or even cruel broaching of sensitive topics, especially those that may cause emotional pain to disenfranchised or disempowered groups (‘Cracking’ 24-5). Even the humour of *The Office*, which some might argue is too mild to be placed in such a category, is premised upon deeply anti-social behaviour (in a nod to the stand-up industry term for on-stage failure, *The Office* could be considered “dying humour,” rather than “killing jokes”). However, whereas Lewis argues that such humour leads to indefensible intellectual and empathetic detachment (*Cracking* 158-9) – a point he makes explicitly in the case of *Silverman* whose “contempt for empathy risks causing real pain” (“Empathy”) – this understanding of all examples of such humour in terms of antisocial tendencies too quickly collapses the analytic distinction between different manifestations and contexts of humour offered by figures such as Rush Limbaugh, on one hand, and the texts addressed here, on the other. The forms of uncomfortable humour under examination here not only situate themselves in very different (a)political contexts to those offered by figures such as Limbaugh and, in doing so, appeal to different potential audiences, but more importantly also operate in different aesthetic registers. The “killing” humour of a figure like Limbaugh addresses itself to an

audience's pre-held beliefs and assumptions about which groups and figures are unworthy of respect: there is no reverence paid to the subject, and no acknowledgement that the butt is anything other than what the humour has declared it to be. The humour of *Jackass*, *The Office*, *Chappelle* and *Silverman*, on the other hand, acts simultaneously to highlight and undermine the social sanctity of the subject. The humour here arises out of this contradictory balancing act between respect and disrespect, rather than simply through the mockery of an agreed upon butt. In neglecting these distinctions, Lewis overlooks the subtle aesthetic distinctions and demands upon the audience that can be productively understood in terms of the mobilisation of uncomfortable humour.

The analytic distinction between a dismissive notion such as “killing jokes” and uncomfortable humour is that, in contrast to Lewis's methodology, an analysis of uncomfortable humour attends to the aesthetic elements that shape the particular presentation and subsequent interpretation of humour. For example, it is not difficult to see that pain is central to *Jackass*. What is often overlooked, though, is the way in which the camera frequently lingers over moments of pain following the excessive spectacle of a stunt gone right or wrong. This is made abundantly clear in those sequences which are solely focused upon the unorthodox infliction of pain upon the self and other willing participants. In such instances, humour does not simply arise in the aftermath of a stunt gone wrong, or the demonstration of counter-intuitive behaviour, but rather through a sustained focus upon the moments and consequences that follow such behaviour: a strategy that simultaneously emphasises both the physical suffering and the comic context of these sequences. In one scene from the first *Jackass* film, a baby alligator is

encouraged to bite down on performer Johnny Knoxville's nipple. The alligator is attached to Knoxville's nipple for forty seconds, during which time the hand-held camera moves from a close-up of the alligator's jaws to Knoxville's distressed open-mouthed expression and back again, as he cries out in pain. In another scene from the same film, several crew members attach electric muscle stimulators to various body parts, including cheeks, palms, chest, perineum and scrotum. The manner in which the participants writhe, shriek and complain clearly establishes that this is an incredibly painful experience and in another context, this sequence would be more akin to masochistic performance art.

So far then these examples might confirm Lewis's reading that the humour of such material is necessarily predicated upon a jettisoning of empathy and indeed, a straightforward reading of this example might suggest that, in *Jackass*, pain is humorous. Such an analysis certainly underpins many of the dismissals of the show. However, in practice this situation is slightly more complex, in part because that first reading would seem to assume that *Jackass* somehow has the ability to mark any subject as humorous, seemingly against both dominant social norms and the prior attitudes of its audience, where one might assume a connection between pain and humour would not be immediately salient. This simple reading is also complicated by *Jackass*'s documentary mode: this is clearly not cartoon violence or Chaplinesque slapstick because these figures are marked as real bodies which suffer real damage. At the heart of the uncomfortable humour of these sequences is a failure of the camera to provide relief by cutting away as expected. Instead the viewer is confronted with documentary representations of pain, damaged bodies and fear, which forces him or her to confront the lived horror and

damage of these stunts – and to do so in terms of comedy. Humour here arises from, or at least amidst, both the promise and the realisation of consequences unforeseen or simply repressed emerging, often erupting, across the human body. Importantly, then, while there is discomfort on screen, such sequences also work to engender discomfort in the viewer. The focus upon both the bodily and emotional consequences of these stunts and pranks acts to construct an affective rapport with the performers, to the extent that the audience is no longer safely laughing at someone distant and distinct, but instead is being asked to make a sympathetic investment with the pain and fear of those on screen, and then laugh anyway, just as those on screen do.

Thus, unlike Bugs Bunny or Chaplin's little Tramp, it is quite clear that Knoxville both feels and fears the damage that might be done to his body: *Jackass's* documentary aesthetic transforms the stunt sequences from abstract exercises in unwise behaviour to intense encounters with real human bodies. This is made abundantly clear in the "Riot Control Test" sequence where Knoxville is to be shot with "less lethal" ammunition. While the shot itself takes only ten seconds, the sequence lasts nearly three minutes, most of which is concerned with emphasising Knoxville's terror and discomfort in stark contrast to his regular jovial, sophomoric behaviour. Amidst a series of shots of a pensive Knoxville – standing still and straight, arms nervously swinging back – he asks if the ammunition is considered lethal, and when the sales rep explains "it's considered less lethal": Knoxville fixes the camera with an imploring, deadpan stare. In a longshot that suggests that he is unaware that he is being filmed, Knoxville stands dejected, head hanging down. His expression emphasised in a close-up shot, Knoxville shakes his head,

closes his eyes and lets his head slump after witnessing a practice shot. What these examples establish, even prior to the actual stunt, is that in *Jackass* pain in itself is not funny, or at least not *just* funny: it is also terrifying.

The manner in which the lingering camera plays up the non-humorous aspects of this humour is not confined to *Jackass*. In the case of *The Office*, social failure is substituted for bodily damage, though as a general rule these are not the large character flaws or social faux pas of traditional sitcoms (which are however a much more prominent aspect of the American adaptation) but instead simply small everyday failures – jokes that fall flat, inappropriate comments, petty social conflicts, transparent attempts at self-aggrandisement, small reprimands and miscommunications – captured in great detail, and thereby blown up to uncomfortable proportions. Perhaps the most extreme manifestations of these failed moments are Brent’s failures to live up to his self-proclaimed identity as a comedian, such as in “Merger,” where we not only witness Brent attempting to clumsily ingratiate himself at after-work drinks through the repetition and then explanation of laddish jokes – awkwardly delivered to the backs of uninterested co-workers – but also endure his delivery of “a welcome speech that is full of inappropriate humour and facile attempts to secure recognition of his status in a scene that evokes simultaneous empathy and repulsion” (Tyler and Cohen 123). Having set up his public speaking genius through both conversation with employees and direct-to-camera accounts of his past experience, Brent fails to garner any laughter with his incomprehensible and often offensive speech. Increasingly desperate, he then abandons all pretence of formal coherence, launching into impressions of people his audience does not know, and finally

simply referencing sequences from popular television comedy shows. In a near perfect example of comic failure that lasts an excruciating two and a half minutes, Brent demonstrates no sense of timing or set-up, and angrily blames his audience for his failure. The awkwardness, though, cannot be explained simply with reference to what he says and does – but in the way the camera captures and shapes the interpretation of Brent. Of particular importance, is the way that the camera lingers intently on him, cutting away only to acknowledge the blank faces of his audiences. This concentration on Brent makes visible the small pauses and doubts that play across his face, the gaps and failures in his performance. These disruptions are small here: they are not the exaggerated absurdities of traditional sitcoms, but instead they are more everyday, more real, more personal incongruities which are therefore all the harder to take

Such a scene demonstrates how *The Office* generates humour through an unflinching representation of failure and embarrassment. Just as *Jackass* lingers over the pain and terror of spectacular behaviour, *The Office* refuses to cut away from social failure, instead forcing confrontations with the deadening silence of the office space, and the blank or disgusted faces of Brent's employees. As Mills observes "[*The Office*] plays on the notion of embarrassment by incorporating many shots of Brent's employees looking aghast at what he says and does; that is, their response is as vital to the comedy as the events themselves are" (69). Such cut-away shots to the blank faces of Brent's audience compound both the humour and the awkwardness of the scene by providing the audience with confirmation of the uncomfortable confusion of the performance. Similarly, Frances Gray draws attention to the manner in which the camera itself can

appear to convey embarrassment in *The Office*, not only capturing the judgement of Brent's employees, but conveying discomfort through the recording apparatus itself (160). Where a traditional sitcom, such as *Friends*, would fill the empty space with a laugh soundtrack, quick rejoinders and comic chatter, or quickly cut away following the delivery of a one-liner, *The Office*, by virtue of its docusoap format, instead remains behind to assess the fallout of social failure and public humiliation: picking up the silences that follow faux pas and compelling the viewer to bear unexpected and uncomfortably extended witness. Thus the uncomfortable humour of forced sustained attention to minor human failings wrought large is compounded by an aesthetic strategy that denies generic expectations. This is made all the more unbearable and acute through the absence of the cathartic permission of a laugh soundtrack (Walters 110). Such contexts act both to reinforce the interpretation of social failure, and extend it across time and space, creating an ever-present cultural claustrophobia of social failure.

The operation of excess is again slightly different in the context of *Silverman* and *Chappelle*, whose humour likewise prevents easy relief, but does so through the mobilisation of comic forms that can be considered acute, rather than lingering. For example, in *Silverman*, the title character consistently finds herself insensitively embroiled in controversial situations, of which the most extreme example can be found in "Wowschwitz," the final episode of the show, where Sarah competes with her sister Laura to construct the best Holocaust memorial. From the slapstick of bumbling Nazi pensioners, to a llama that serves as a "reminder of the holocaust and the suffering of the Jews," the episode repeatedly foregrounds the fact that it is treating the Holocaust –

which Sarah describes in the closing denouement as, “like, the worst thing that’s ever happened in the history of ever” – in a tasteless manner and is thereby directly courting controversy and uncomfortableness. This direct tastelessness arguably finds its culmination in the episode’s (and the show’s) final gag: the character, Brian, in response to a query, answers “the Holocaust,” at which point his husband, Steve appears from an air vent to chime in “do doo, do do do.” If this makes no sense – and why should it in written form? – it is because Steve’s interjection needs to be read in light of and in the tune of the song “Mahna Mahna” most widely known as a comedy song number from the first episode of *The Muppet Show* in 1975 and which has served as a point of reference throughout the episode: “The Holocaust” here replaces the lyric “Mahna Mahna” in the original.³² The humour of this particular gag arises from the incongruous juxtaposition of the Holocaust and an intertextual song reference to a puppet variety show emblematic of nonsense and levity. Thus, one of the most secularly sacred historical moments of the twentieth century is ‘dishonoured,’ as it were, by a flippant popular cultural reference.

In his reading of the episode, Steven Alan Carr argues that “Wowschwitz” serves as a carnivalesque critique of the ways in which popular culture trivialises the memory of the Holocaust. However, I suggest that this final joke represents an excessive tastelessness that complicates any easy liberal-political redemption of *Silverman*. While

³² Though the song is frequently discussed in terms of the Muppets, who are the most likely candidate for the subject of this intertextual reference, “Mah Nà Mah Nà” has a long history beyond those particular puppets, who were not even the first Jim Henson creations to sing the song. That honour goes to *Sesame Street* where the song was performed in 1969, and subsequently encored their rendition on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Piero Umiliani originally recorded the song in 1968 to fairly significant international success, and it has been covered by a wide range of non-puppets, including Henri Salvador, Skin, Cake and a variety of advertisers.

Carr certainly offers a convincing (if somewhat pat) interpretation, his argument does this by downplaying the humorous aesthetic of the text, reducing its comedy to a secondary ornamentation of a political media critique. In particular, this reading does not address the excessive nature of this humour, of which the Mahna Mahna joke is a prime example. Because although there is certainly grounds for the episode to be read to some extent as a media critique, this interpretation cannot explain the tenacity with which “Wowschitz” not only acknowledges the secular-sacred position of the Holocaust, but also consistently defies that position for comic ends.

Chappelle’s humour works in a similar vein, although the scope of its comic excess is much more tightly focussed, and consistently resolves around the acknowledgement or performance of stereotypes, most frequently of African Americans, but also other racial categories of contemporary America. This engagement with race takes place in the context of comic sketches built around fantastical scenarios or pop cultural references, where the stereotypes in question are parodied, exaggerated, implicated in incongruous situations or sometimes simply serving as a backdrop for pop-cultural references and the spoofing of celebrities. The uncomfortableness of *Chappelle* can thus be at least partially understood as a particular manifestation of a widespread social discomfort regarding structures and vocabularies of racial and racist representation, especially where they are employed in an ostensibly casual and cavalier fashion. This can be seen one of the more challenging and subversive instances of *Chappelle*’s comic articulation of race, known as the “Frontline: Clayton Bigsby” sketch, where Chappelle plays the blind white supremacist, Clayton Bigsby, who is unaware that he himself is

black and takes part in white supremacist activities while maintaining a stream of racist invective. Writing with regard to the Bigsby sketch, Bambi Haggins suggests that the sketch is uncomfortable for a white audience, because Bigsby's inhabitation of an "authentic" albeit unsavoury white identity reveals the performed nature of their racial whiteness (222-4). However, in offering this interpretation, Haggins underplays what she herself singles out as remarkable about the sketch – its strikingly prolific use of usually forbidden racial epithets, where "over the course of the nine-minute sketch, the word *nigger* and other racial epithets against African Americans (including 'coon,' 'jungle-bunny,' and 'nigras') are uttered twenty times – which must be some sort of record for broadcast television" (224). In her reading, however, this singularly provocative language is only a source of discomfort insofar as it contributes to the making visible of "whiteness as a cultural construct" (221). In this manner, Haggins's reading overlooks the immediate affective discomfort that can accompany racist language, particularly the "N-word," which provokes an extremity of discomfort in a manner akin to *Silverman's* evocation of the Holocaust.

Contra Haggins, then, I argue that the discomfort of this sketch cannot be straightforwardly assigned to a critique of white identity, but also must account for the discomfort of linguistic taboos that precedes and even enables both the humour and the critique. What this means is that it is not simply the unveiling of whiteness that causes discomfort, but the repeated evocation of racial stereotypes widely considered offensive. What's more, this (liberal) discomfort enables the humour of the sketch, which operates in a manner similar to the strategies employed in *Silverman*, where humour is premised

upon the treatment of sensitive topics through incongruous means that contravene normal standards of sufficient respect. Hence, while Haggins's reading would have discomfort arise as the result of a cognitive exercise of interpretation, discomfort – and especially discomfort tied to humour – can also be understood as a more immediate and affective response in reaction to the public broaching to taboo topics: what Haggins refers to elsewhere as the “oh, no he didn't” component of humour (187).

This line of reasoning can be developed further in light of a second example from *Chappelle* – “The Nigger Family” – a sketch whose basic premise is a fictional *Leave it to Beaver*-esque sitcom that features a white family whose last name is “Nigger.” This conceit sets up multiple moments of incongruity between the exaggerated white blandness of the televised family and the frequent and inadvertent attribution to the family of racist stereotypes – a baby is said to have “Nigger lips,” the “Nigger boy” is described as “a talented athlete and so well spoken.” Thus “unlike the Clayton Bigsby sketch, the use of the word itself is more central to the sketch than the performance of race” (Haggins 226). This central incongruity is pushed further, but also disrupted, by the introduction of Chappelle into the sketch as the family's “coloured” milkman, who serves to emphasise the racial and racist incongruity at work. However, Chappelle does not just play along with the basic premise of the sketch – offering remarks such as “Nigger please” and “peace, Nigger” – but he also, following his exit from the scene, pops back to yell loudly and without context “Niggers!” To my mind this is a central moment of the sketch, one in where Chappelle shatters the comic conceit of the previous material by openly acknowledging to the camera that the humour of the sketch is not based (or not

simply based) upon the incongruity of whitebread sitcom and contemporary taboo, but rather upon the repeated utterance of the forbidden word. Chappelle's remark, which makes no sense within the diegetic conceit of the sketch, intentionally overplays the central gag and, in doing so, unsettles the comedic work of the preceding incongruities. Chappelle's out of context exclamation thus dramatically shifts the immediate interpretation offered by the sketch, disavowing the previously implicit suggestion that the humour of the sketch arises from the unlikely juxtaposition: in Freudian terms, Chappelle rips away any pretensions to "joke-work" and instead revelling in the tendentious, uncomfortable comic taboo of the N-word. In this moment, then, Chappelle clues us in to the extent that it is not simply the unmasking of white privilege which is the source of discomfort in *Chappelle*, but rather the very representation of racial stereotypes which can produce discomfort, especially when this is realised in conjunction with the frequent use of taboo racial epithets.

With his fourth-wall shattering declaration, Chappelle thus draws our attention to a crucial feature central to all the instances of uncomfortable humour so far considered: in order to produce discomfort, humour cannot remain safely anchored within the text. Rather, uncomfortable humour almost inevitably strays beyond the immediate bounds of the text through various means. Whether through the use of documentary or hyper-realist pseudo-docusoap methods or through the mobilisation of comic tropes so potentially offensive that they negate fictional/non-fictional boundaries, uncomfortable humour makes a claim on the lived existence of its audience. This can be partly explained by the fact that "embarrassment is, ... whether we are dealing with fiction or reality, equally real

for all parties ... Embarrassment does not mean sympathy with a character's actions – often the reverse – but it does involve the sense of privacy violated, of being an unwilling observer of his *reactions* to what is happening to him, a sense of guilt for speculating about feelings the victim would prefer to conceal” (F. Gray 147). An important aspect of this is that uncomfortable humour is always tightly bound up with the identity of its desired, imagined and actual audience and, as such, the cultural meaning, not to mention the political potential of this aesthetic category is intractably bound up with its assumed audience. Neither humour nor discomfort can be assumed to operate universally or ahistorically. Rather, such discomfort is premised upon precise sets of cultural and social codes that are bound up and viewed differently from different identity positions.

Embarrassment is not universal, but rather congeals upon particular cultural and social faultlines depending upon the identity of the audience and the humourist and the interplay between them. These can vary not only in type, but also scale: a particular topic may be too taboo to be comfortably interpreted in terms of humour at all for some, and, for others, not taboo enough for any frisson or discomfort to be felt. Moreover, such reactions are not subjective or random, but can instead be understood to adhere along social divisions of race, gender, sexuality and other formative sites of identity. In speaking to the aesthetics of uncomfortable humour, it therefore becomes necessary to consider how the manifestation of this comic mode in the texts under examination presumes certain identities in terms of representation and interpellation.

In the case of *Jackass*, such concerns play out across the white, male bodies of the participants. Indeed, so prevalent is the whiteness and the masculinity of the show, that

many commentators interpret the show as a representation of white masculinity (c.f. Brayton, Sweeney, Lindgren and Lélièvre). However, rather than read the show as some form of barometer of white male attitudes and behaviour, I believe it is more important to note how those speak to the privileged viewership of not only *Jackass*, but many of the texts analysed here, as well as to the possible body politics available to different subjects and how the white male body is available for display and damage where other bodies may not be. Non-white and female bodies are more limited in this context, particularly in the prevailing context of liberalism, where histories of oppression render both humour and discomfort more fraught. Indeed, the damage and ridicule inflicted the *Jackass* performers (and also on a character like David Brent) can be understood as a privilege, born of the fact that those comic subjects do not call to mind historical abuses or continuing systematic injustice. The discomfort of those performers and characters can be grounds for humour, because their embodied and social selves are allowed to speak only for themselves, rather than bringing to mind wider issues of sexism or racism that threaten to render the discomfort of humour to uncomfortable for it to widely interpreted as such.³³ In a similar manner, in the case of *Chappelle*, discomfort could be largely understood along racial lines: though most contemporary American subjects will no doubt react strongly to the N-word, the particular reaction is, in large part, as a function of race.

³³ The success of comedy from non-dominant groups – in particular stand-up comedy, which has served as a frequent medium through which disenfranchised and oppressed populations express themselves in contemporary Anglophone culture – challenges this thesis, and suggests the extent to which it applies only to dominant groups. The dominant are made uncomfortable when they are made aware of their domination, whereas those who are dominated can push this form of humour towards more extreme denunciations of structures and histories of oppression.

These questions take on particular resonance in the instance of Chappelle's abrupt and unexpected departure during the filming of the show's third season in 2005. Speaking some time afterwards, Chappelle explained his sudden exit in terms of his own discomfort with the show's humour, and his own inability to clearly determine whether his work was challenging or simply reaffirming racist stereotypes. In his own words: "I was doing sketches that were funny but socially irresponsible." (Chappelle qtd. in Haggins 231). As has been recounted many times, Chappelle's discomfort arose while filming a sketch entitled "The Nigger Pixie": the laughter of a white crew member in response to the sketch, where Chappelle was decked out in full minstrelsy garb as "the visual personification of the N-word" (Chappelle qtd. in Haggins 220). Chappelle's reaction can be understood as a fear that audiences, in particular white audiences, were not sufficiently embarrassed when confronted with stereotypes and taboo language – that their response was no longer predicated upon an uncomfortable awareness and understanding when confronted with the legacies of oppressive histories, but instead at the deficiencies and deviations attributed to racial groups through those stereotypes. Viewers had grown accustomed to the material to the extent that they were no longer embarrassed when confronted with stereotypes, but instead took them as comic characters: which is to say viewers were no longer laughing from a position of discomfort. Chappelle's humour, and his subsequent retreat from and attempt to reassert interpretive control of *Chappelle* speak to the ways in which specific identities are central to the operation of uncomfortable humour in particular contexts, and how the maintenance of the impression of reality is crucial to the intertwined humour and discomfort of these texts.

The importance of documentary reality to *Jackass* can be seen in the extent to which the show goes to both mark itself from the everyday through the use of disclaimers, and the manner in which the humour and coherence of the text are premised upon the assumed truth factor at work. Without the implicit promise that everything depicted is really occurring, *Jackass* would void its claim to not only textual consistency, but its discomfort and its particular form of humour. Any revelation that the pain, terror and damage on display are feigned would compromise both the premise and comedy of *Jackass*, or at least alter its humour to an older, more traditional register of slapstick. This reliance upon documentary aesthetics speaks to the extent to which the discomfort on display is also central to that humour. The show does not permit any gloss of unreality or fiction to form over its antics, but instead reminds the viewer again and again that these events actually occurred. A viewer may be implicated in the emotions of a fictional character – they may cry for them or be horrified by their injury – but such reactions are usually moderated by the viewer’s awareness of the fictional nature of the situation. Beyond the empathy afforded to fictional characters, the damaged bodies of the *Jackass* performers hold out the promise that the affect here is not simulated, but rather has an indexical relation to real pain, which thereby overwhelms not simply the characters on screen, but also the viewer. The audience is thus asked to find humour not only in the representation of discomfort, but also amidst their own discomfort.

As with *Jackass*, the cringe humour of *The Office* is implicated in its claims to represent some form of reality even though that text is obviously not actually a true documentary like *Jackass*. Rather, *The Office* creates its strong sense of realism through

the use of a documentary aesthetic and through its lack of obvious artifice or stylisation with respect to characterisation, narrative or setting. The docusoap format means that the text lacks the means to mark and foreground moments of humour through the use of a laugh track, the editing conventions ensure that the camera does not cut away after moments of social failure, and the commitment to narrative naturalism ensures that none of the characters are ‘big’ or wacky enough to distinguish themselves clearly from lived reality. The characters of the office are not caricatures (with the possible exception of Gareth), but disarmingly realistic people, who the audience are encouraged to consider themselves alongside, rather than against: even Brent can appear sympathetic in his (usually fleeting) moments of shame, sadness and self-realisation. Lacking the generic codes of the traditional sitcom, the humour of *The Office* is never extreme or broad and therefore clear and final enough to provide guaranteed catharsis. Consequently, the deviations from expected behaviour are not blatant or foregrounded, which insures that the viewer has to locate them him/herself. The audience does not create these comic deviations, but they do have to take some responsibility for their location and interpretation, and thereby become implicated through their interpretative participation in the uncomfortable operation of the humour.

This is what makes *The Office*, and in particular the character of Brent, so unbearable: the failure to correctly perform sociality is minor and the mistakes are small, which renders the consequent humour fragile and passing. It is frequently not clear whether a given moment *should* be interpreted as humour, which prevents any easy attribution of humour and the subsequent realisation of catharsis. Consequently, Brent’s

failures hang uneasily between humour and non-humour, an interpretive question mark only emphasised by the blank horror of his co-workers and employees. Brent is thus not humiliated before his peers while we watch; he is humiliated before *us*, and therefore in order to read *The Office* as humour we must first read it ourselves as humiliation, which gives rise to a particularly uncomfortable affect. As Walters so succinctly puts it: “To see a man labouring through an endeavour whose failure is obvious to everyone else is embarrassing; when that endeavour is the provocation of laughter it becomes mortifying; when one is directly implicated in the situation it can be almost unbearable” (2). *The Office* creates a world which the audience is encouraged to recognise as real, but not so real as to feel bound by conventions of accepted social solidarity with respect to its characters. We are placed in a position where we are allowed to laugh more freely than if faced with the immediate reality of subtle social failure, but still must feel bad about doing so. Thus the humour of *The Office* is rooted in an escalation, rather than dispersal, of embarrassment in the face of ruined humour, premised in the interpellation of the audience as active interpretative participants in Brent’s humiliation. To an extent, then, this form of humour challenges the long-standing notion that comedy necessarily involves a suspension of compassion, most memorably expressed by Bergson as “a momentary anaesthesia of the heart” (3). In the instances of both *Jackass* and *The Office*, it would seem as if this anaesthetic begins to wear off somewhat prematurely: such that the viewer remains somewhat detached, but not enough to remain utterly distinct from the humiliation onscreen.

Unlike that of *The Office* or even *Jackass*, the discomfort of the humour of *Silverman* and *Chappelle* is not premised upon any quasi-sympathetic engagement with social or physical failure. Nonetheless, the humour of *Silverman* and *Chappelle* is still closely linked to the mobilisation of discomfort. Rather than the lingering consequences of failure, what is uncomfortable about *Silverman* and *Chappelle* is how they explicitly demand, even dare, the viewer to find humour that implicates sites of horror and social conflict. This is a mode of unconformable humour that draws on social taboos that are much more clearly articulated and nameable than the nebulous bodily and habitual discomforts of *Jackass* and *The Office*. In fact, the Holocaust arguably occupies the position of *the* most inappropriate subject for humour in contemporary Western discourse. *Silverman*'s humour can therefore be understood as realist in a different manner from the previous texts: in *Silverman* the characters and situations are clearly fictional, but the social issues the show addresses, and the discomfort thereby produced, nonetheless resonate beyond the text. It is this excess of comic disrespect which characterises *Silverman*'s particular brand of uncomfortable humour and which belies any attempt to interpret the show in the service of any easily laudable political project by constantly positioning the text within wider (inappropriate) cultural conversations. Consequently, the viewer is not so much sympathising with the imagined discomfort of another, as suffering through that discomfort themselves. It is important, then, to note that *Silverman* does not trivialise the Holocaust, but instead relies upon it remaining a serious, sacrosanct and indeed uncomfortable subject in order for the juxtaposition to be as unexpected and jarring as possible – comfort and discomfort are thus built right into the formal operation

of the humour which plays with the wide and socially-significant gap between the Muppets and the Holocaust in order to engender uncomfortable humour. The purpose is not to render the Holocaust trivial or profane, but to make use of its heightened cultural importance within the production of uncomfortable humour. This uncomfortable humour relies upon the maintenance of an immediate connection to affective registers that transcend character and text.

Chappelle's prolific use of the N-word can be thought to provoke discomfort even more immediately and completely than the Holocaust gag, because the N-word does not need to be taken up in a tasteless or disrespectful manner in order to have this result. The simple uttering of the N-word, particularly in a comic context, can be understood as an unexpected, shocking, and thereby potentially (uncomfortable) humorous gesture. Such a reading of the Bigsby sketch is offered by Richard Gray II and Michael Putnam, who place greater emphasis than Haggins on the way that the N-word operates in this sketch as a "linguistic taboo," which they suggest Chappelle exploits to comic effect (20).

However, Gray and Putnam's assertion that the breaking of this taboo is akin to a carnivalesque comic attack on racism leads them to overlook the extent to which this humour could potentially be considered uncomfortable. Gray and Putnam are so quick to assert that they are in on the joke, and what they see as its consequent politics, that they do not consider how the breaking of a cultural taboo – especially one tied to real histories of racial oppression – might provoke discomfort, either alongside or instead of, humour. This potential for discomfort is evident in Chappelle's exaggerated emphasis on the tendentious aspects of the "Nigger Family" sketch, which projects the slur beyond the

bounds of the fictional space. Such a comic move threatens to withdraw the permission by which the audience was able to find humour, rather than horror, in the comic exploitation of racial taboos. The main consequence of this revelation is how it breaks the tacit agreement of the sketch: calling out the viewer to confront her ability to find humour in the most taboo declaration of race, and thereby to be *re-discomforted*. Through his disruption of the apparently self-contained text, Chappelle directly confronts the viewer with the scandal of the racist term as it exists beyond the bounds of the sketch.

Thus, while the comic frame continues to act to mute the discomfort to some extent, and thereby renders the portrayed action palatable, in contrast to other comic forms like slapstick or the insult comedy of *Friends*, the text works to encourage affective reactions rather than play them down.³⁴ The viewer is thus no longer just laughing at these antics in a completely detached manner, because he or she is now implicated in the action: the “reality” effect of these texts – be it documentary, mocumentary or direct address – prevents detachment, hence the humour is uneasy and uncomfortable. This is perhaps the greatest difference between *Jackass* and traditional slapstick comedy, because

³⁴ In this manner, uncomfortable humour can be thought to both extend and complicate the historical Relief Theory of humour, closely associated with the work of Freud and Herbert Spencer, which suggests that laughter is a means of expelling pent-up nervous energy. A humorous text is thus understood as one which causes its audience feelings of anxiety, horror or expectation which lead to a build-up of psychic stress which cannot find a proper outlet. In order to dispel this energy, the body laughs (Billig 99). However, unlike the traditional examples of relief humour, uncomfortable humour does not often provide relief: instead there is an escalation of pain or shame, only assuaged by the eventual cutting away of the camera without resolution. If there is any relief here it is simply that created by the audience themselves when, unable to bear anymore the stresses created by the text, they spontaneously and unprovoked break into laughter, or a smile or at least a titter, and thereby resolve the tension which has been built up the scene, but for which no clear resolution is provided. In this instance then, the uncomfortable humorous text has gone from an entity that creates and the partially resolves tension, to simply an aesthetic means to increase and increase tension with no internal means of then releasing it.

in *Jackass* one is allowed, even encouraged, to consider the onscreen action as real and actually occurring across real bodies. In a similar manner, the faux docusoap format of *The Office* produces (though not to the same extent as *Jackass*) the impression of realism, and thereby likewise prevents a complete affective detachment from the uncomfortable situations on screen. Confronted with the apparently real only slightly exaggerated breach of everyday practices of behaviour, *The Office* creates a space where the viewer both laughs and recoils. And finally, in the instances of *Silverman* and *Chappelle*, the improper address of controversial topics produces a form of discomfort that exceeds the immediate reality of the show.

Such texts thus produce discomfort and humour in equal parts, because they not only demonstrate such taboo-busting material as wilful self-harm, narcissistic sociopathy and the contravention of accepted discourse regarding the sensitive subjects of racial and sexual identity, but they also act to implicate the willing audience within such transgression. This is achieved through a form of perverted intimacy that the texts attain by either positioning themselves as strongly realist accounts or by constructing their humour such that it resonates beyond the immediate diegetic world of the text: to challenge accepted norms of behaviour regardless of whether they are fictional or not. Uncomfortable humour is that form which gives rise to impure affective aesthetics – both jovial and disgusted – and which in so doing troubles any clear distinctions in not only aesthetic and affective, but also – as will be discussed in greater length in the third chapter – intellectual, social and potentially even political terms. Thus understood, uncomfortable humour troubles long and deeply held liberal notions of humour as a

liberating, intellectual exercise, and speaks to how it operates as a site at which deeply held forms of social tension and anxiety are examined, evoked and mobilised. The perverted intimacy of uncomfortable humour speaks to the manner in which such contemporary forms are predicated upon a lack of concern for standards of politeness and decency, where affiliated affective economies of amorality, disgust and shame play an increasing role in the production and consumption of humour.

Out of Control: The Nonsense of Absurd Humour

In contrast to uncomfortable humour, what I am referring to as absurd humour is not often difficult to watch in any immediately affective sense. Instead, absurdist humour operates in a different register: it is a form of the comic premised in the abandonment of everyday regimes of sense and meaning, rather than decorum and behaviour. Absurd humour is concerned with what *is* rather than what *ought*, and therefore is not premised upon the challenge of the emotional or moral boundaries that criss-cross the terrain of lived experience. Rather, absurd humour is the abandonment of that everyday world, through the thwarting of less tightly held but more stringently obeyed laws of science and nature, drama and form, deduction and inference. Absurd humour is the humour of unreality: trafficking in forms of humour more intellectual than the emotional shock of the uncomfortable, it collects those texts that can be described in terms of nonsense, the wacky, screwball, ridiculous, silly, weird and zany. This is the humour of that which does not make sense, or, in other words, the humour of that which does not adhere to the expected system of rules and logics that structure any given system. Thus, contra uncomfortable humour, absurdity breaks from rules and logics that are typically

understood to be true and immutable, rather than moral and potentially under threat: the breaking of such rules therefore offends sense, rather than sensibilities. In its purest form, absurd humour contravenes physical laws, expressed in the cartoon character who walks over the cliff into open space, but does not fall, at least not until they have had a chance to look down and assess the gravity of their situation. However, absurdity as I'm working with it here can be understood beyond the comic fate of Wiley. E. Coyote: as hinted at above, it arises in the breach of common understandings of logical behaviour and probability, social function and good sense, and even aesthetic form and narrative consistency.

Contemporary absurd humour takes many forms, from *The Mighty Boosh*, *Scrubs*, *Arrested Development* and *Flight of the Conchords*, as well as the continued circulation and popularity of pioneering earlier texts, such as *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, *The Muppet Show* and the BBC series, *The Young Ones*.³⁵ In the current context I have decided to focus upon three highly influential texts, which can also be considered some of the purest examples of absurd humour: *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and *South Park*. It should not come as too much of a surprise that all three of these exemplary texts are animated. Much of the contemporary emergence of absurd humour is animated – from *The Ren & Stimpy Show* to *American Dad!* via *Futurama*, *bro'Town* and the Adult Swim programming block – and this is no coincidence, but rather the expression of a fundamental flexibility and mutability in the animated form that is absent in live-action

³⁵ Going even further back, Doyle Greene details the extent of absurdism in early American television shows like *The Ernie Kovacs Show*, *The Soup Sales Show* and *The Gong Show* in great detail in his book, *Politics and American Television Comedy*.

humour (this is not to suggest that all animated programming is absurdist or only absurdist; shows such as *King of the Hill* are realist in their aesthetic and humour).³⁶ From the wealth of contemporary animation, I have chosen *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and *South Park* because together they have formed the backbone of the resurgence of animated programming during the 1990s and 2000s, while each in its own way has demonstrated and then destroyed the apparent limits of cultural tolerance for absurdity. Thus, while animation is not the be-all and end-all of absurd humour, the animated nature of these particular shows allows them to realise absurdity in new and formative ways that have had profound influence upon not only the mediated practice of humour, but also the practice of everyday humour, if the take-up on *Simpsons* references into everyday conversation is any measure. Moreover, by demonstrating that animated programming can achieve widespread popular success, these texts – *The Simpsons* in particular – made possible the boom in animated content that created a demand for further absurdism, encouraging the propagation of absurdist humour beyond animated programming and

³⁶ This tendency towards ontological dynamism is apparent not only in the aforementioned 1940s and 50s Looney Tunes shorts of Wiley E. Coyote (as well as Bugs Bunny et al.), and contemporaneous work, in particular that of Tex Avery productions, but also to a lesser extent in early animated sitcoms such as *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons* in the 1960s. Not only is it much easier to bend and break the laws of represented physical space within the context of a cartoon, but the inherently anti-realist artifice of the animated text also creates a textual site where the regular conventions of both diegetic reality and narrative hold less force, and are thereby more open to subversion and disruption (Wells 6). The cartoon is almost always obviously a cartoon, and therefore obviously a text with an author, rather than a straightforward capture and representation of an existing external reality: a point well illustrated by the famous Warner Cartoon “Duck Amuck,” in which Daffy Duck tangles with the paintbrush of an omnipotent and interfering author (later revealed as Bugs Bunny). Unable to aspire to realist representation, the cartoon uses this to its advantage to create free license for formal play. In this manner, animated comedy not only provides a forum where reality-defying humour is more easily (and cheaply) executed, but also sets up an aesthetic space where physical and narrative, as well as potentially moral and ideological (Wells 21), disruptions are more easily entertained and interpreted. This fact is only compounded by the historical understanding of animation as a children’s medium (Mittell 33-44), where nonsense and whimsy are historically more permitted than in adult programming.

thereby leading to its increased resonance during the 1990s and 2000s. As a general rule the texts I'm dealing with in this section are massive and in several instances on-going. It would not therefore be possible to account for even one of these texts in its entirety. My intention in addressing these texts is consequently much more modest – to present selected representative instances of each as examples of the aesthetic details of the types of (postmodern) humour that I herein address. These three texts demonstrate the range of comic strategies that can underpin absurdist humour and the different ways in which such humour re-interprets life, politics and art. Together, then, *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy* and *South Park* have established the widely accepted parameters of what it means to live an absurd life at the beginning of the twenty first century.

It might seem a poor idea (one could even say 'absurd') to attempt to write anything new about *The Simpsons*, which is aptly described in *Planet Simpson* as “by far the most important cultural institution of its time: the equal of any single body of work to emerge from our pop-culture stew in the last century in *any* medium” (Turner 5). You could no doubt fill an entire book with a review of existing academic literature offering similar assessments of *The Simpsons* as a satirical masterpiece; “a critical view of mainstream social and cultural norms” (Todd 63); “a stealthy subversive bomb sitting in the middle of prime time” (Turner 9), or a “challenge [to] mainstream cultural and political assumptions, offering a dissenting perspective that seeks to influence the democratic dialogue” (Foy 2). Yet any attempt to account for the postmodern humour of the 1990s and 2000s would be incomplete without some account, however brief, of the adventures of Homer, Marge, Lisa, Bart and Maggie – a manifestation of the ostensibly

average American family, living in the small town of Springfield, occupied by a host of unusual characters. Thus, I follow Jonathan Gray's assertion that "one could study the program from any number of angles and still only scratch the surface of its cultural resonance" (*Watching 9*), because I am happy to only scratch in order to examine *The Simpsons* from the particular angle of the importance of absurd humour. What is of interest here, then, is *The Simpsons*'s aesthetic construction of humour, and in particular absurd humour. This is not to suggest that the humour of *The Simpsons* is entirely absurd – it is also largely premised upon satire and intertextuality (c.f. J. Gray; Todd 63) – but absurdity does function as a central operating principle of much the show's exaggerated and unrealistic humour. Thus, I will focus upon a few choice instances picked from episodes that are widely regarded to reflect the show's unofficial canon, and use these examples to speak more broadly about the absurdity of *The Simpsons*.

The basic premise of *The Simpsons* – a show about a contemporary small-town family – is not absurd. Nor, for the first few seasons, were the details of individual episodes, which typically followed well-worn if slightly skewed family sitcom plots of misbehaviour and family conflict. However, in what has been dubbed the show's "Golden Age" (from early 1992 to mid-1997) (Turner 4) *The Simpsons* dabbled in increasingly absurd stories – Springfield builds a monorail, Homer becomes leader of a secret society, a billionaire hunts for his childhood teddy bear – alongside the merely unlikely: Homer buys a snow-plough or becomes a union leader (this trend was only compounded in the "more surrealistic, less sitcom-based plotlines" of the show's later seasons [Turner 56]). In one episode alone, the union-based "Last Exit from Springfield" we can assemble a

broad assortment of bizarre moments that push the limits of credibility: in a flashback to the turn-of-the-century, an unfairly punished young worker proves absurdly prescient when he predicts the economic rise of Japan; top-of-the-line braces periodically release a perfume entitled “Calvin Klein's Obsession... for Teeth”; the power plant owner, Mr. Burns, has a penguin in his tropical aviary and a thousand monkeys working at a thousand typewriters; in a joyful montage, Mr. Burns and his assistant attempt to run the plant without the workers, and end up unleashing vengeful robots. What renders such deviations from expected behaviour absurd rather than simply incongruous is that they take place against the backdrop of what several commentators have called the show’s “realism,” rooted in the show’s non-cartoon physics, emotional resonance and non-idealistic portrayal of contemporary life (Gournelos “Irony”; Mittell “Genre” 180-3; Mittell “Realism” 23-4; Turner 31-2, 52-3). All of these incidents, some of which are explicit, others very subtle, can be considered examples of absurdist humour that generate humour through defiance of the credulity of the viewer. It is thus in contrast to this realist edge that the humour of *The Simpsons* enacts an ‘absurdity of logic,’ where the predictable and explicable are dispensed with as incongruity is pushed ever closer towards nonsense: that which literally makes no sense. What this means in practice is that the diegetic reality of the show – while retaining the recognisable prejudice and priorities of the contemporary world – stretches the bounds of coincidence, probability and behaviour in ways that constantly threaten to invalidate the show’s diegetic and textual

consistency, but never quite do. *The Simpsons* is a world of the highly unlikely, but never the impossible.³⁷

At its most extreme, these passing moments of absurdity can expand beyond the role of throwaway gags to serve as central points of plot advancement, exposition and denouement. This brand of absurdist humour can be seen in the episodes “Marge vs. the Monorail,” (1993) and “Homer at the Bat” (1992) both of which are regularly included in critics’ best-of and top ten *Simpsons* lists, and both of which showcase different aspects of *Simpsons* absurdity. In the first example, “Monorail,” the absurdist high-point of the episode is reached at the end of the first act, at a town meeting where the citizens debate how to make best use of a cash windfall. Following a series of pedestrian suggestions (“we could use the money to hire firemen to finally put out that blaze on the East side of town”), a smooth salesman named Lyle Langley convinces the town to invest the money in a monorail public transit system. He does not, however, do so through reasoned argument, but rather in a way that would come to be seen as distinctly Simpson-esque: through song.³⁸ Langley’s sale pitch takes the form of a jaunty musical number where the townsfolk join in in a call and response pattern, which eventually gives way to a mass dance number. Clearly here we are in the realm of the absurd: this is a broad deviation from expected behaviour that strains the limits of credibility and sense, but is played as

³⁷ The exception to this rule are the annual “Treehouse of Horror” episodes, which traffic in supernatural and science fiction themes, and the vignette episodes which are increasingly common in latter seasons, and revolve around the Simpson-ised retellings of myths, popular narratives and historical tales within frame narratives.

³⁸ Despite copyright infringement, the song can quite easily be found on YouTube simply by searching for ‘monorail.’ The unprovoked communal song was to become a hallmark of *The Simpsons*, re-appearing in multiple seasons and even giving rise to a double CD collection: *Songs in the Key of Springfield*.

straight within the show's diegetic world. Thus, the Monorail song is neither a utopic escape from the narrative – à la Richard Dyer's influential analysis of Hollywood musicals (28-31) – nor properly justified within the cause-and-effect of social behaviour. Rather, the song exists within the narrative as a (pseudo)utopian communal act without justification or explanation, which is to say as a doubly absurd act: both in its highly unlikely nature and the contrast between the song's utopian exuberance and mock-utopian subject matter of public transit.

Similarly, while the episode "Homer at the Bat" contains many one-off instances of humour, it can also be read, in its entirety, as the set-up for a single instance of absurd humour: perhaps the best illustration of how "often [*Simpsons*'] endings sacrifice logic and ask for considerable suspension of disbelief, and a favourite strategy is to take such illogicality to absurd extremes" (J. Gray *Watching* 51). "Bat" revolves around a wager placed on a beer league softball final between Mr. Burns' power plant and a rival. In order to ensure victory, Burns recruits a team's worth of Major League Baseball players as ringers. The night before the game, Burns crows that his victory is assured and that "there's no way I can lose this bet unless, of course, my nine all-stars fall victim to nine separate misfortunes and are unable to play tomorrow but that will never happen. Three misfortunes: that's possible. Seven misfortunes: there's an outside chance. But nine misfortunes? I'd like to see that." With these remarks Burns sets up and foregrounds the absurdity of what is to come: as, in one of the most celebrated montages of *Simpsons*'

history, we are privy to the eight accidents that befall his players.³⁹ This can be considered an apex of Simpsonian absurdity: not only are the individual incidents that befall many of the players absurd in and of themselves, but together they culminate in a massively unlikely coincidence, whose absurdity is directly pre-empted in the text. This is a tour-de-force of the absurd rendering of everyday life, where convention gives way to coincidence, the mundane to the bizarre, and logic to non sequiturs all while maintaining a fractured and bent commitment to realism. What these examples demonstrate, then, is that as opposed to non-absurd humour – which expresses believable deviations from behaviour (recall *Friends*) or presents incongruities as conjecture and hypothesis – *The Simpsons* gives form to the unusual and unbelievable within the context of its realist world. To return to the early *Seinfeld* example: this is all Soup Nazi, all the time. Such absurd events and moments seem to push the limits of the believability of the text, but, crucially, they do not completely compromise the diegetic world of *The Simpsons*. In this manner, *The Simpsons* can be read as an absurdist humour text, which constructs a world where the improbable and unlikely happen all the time.

Yet as far as *The Simpsons* pushes the bounds of absurdity, it nonetheless forms only the first stage in a progressive extension of absurdity, the next step of which can be

³⁹ New York City resident, Steve Sax is arrested by the local police due to what is best described as “municipal profiling;” Steve Scioscia is diagnosed with radiation poisoning contracted from his work at the plant; Ken Griffey Jr. comes down with gigantism after drinking too much “nerve tonic;” Jose Conseco spends the night rescuing the entire contents of a burning house; Wade Boggs is knocked unconscious in a bar room fight over the greatest British prime minister (he advocated for Pitt the Elder, while town drunk Barney is in favour of Lord Palmerston); Ozzie Smith disappears into a void in time and space at the Springfield “Mystery Spot;” Don Mattingly is thrown off the team for refusing to shave his (non-existent) sideburns; and Roger Clemens believes he is a chicken following a sports-hypnotist mishap. Only Daryl Strawberry, the ninth ringer who plays in Homer’s position, makes it to the game.

found in *South Park*: a show that is frequently taken up with respect to *The Simpsons* as a more radical and debauched example of animated primetime programming. *South Park* follows the adventures of a group of young boys – usually revolving around the central cast of Stan, Kyle, Cartman, Kenny and later Butters – who become implicated in the bizarre and fantastical happenings of the Colorado town of South Park. Over its fifteen seasons, *South Park* has engaged in a number of political interventions regarding a diverse range of topics including global warming, disability rights and awareness, racism (on numerous occasions), the War on Terror and the invasion of Iraq, AIDS, factory farming, the BP Oil Spill, child abuse, consumerism, illegal immigration and homelessness – to name only a fraction. Consequently, in conjunction with its crude(r) animation style and excess of scatological and grotesquely sexual humour, *South Park*'s willingness to take up sensitive and politically charged topics in an absurd and frequently offensive manner has earned the show the analytic sobriquet, “carnavalesque,” several times over (c.f. Greene, Halsall, Karimova, Larsen, Thompson). However, in contrast to such an approach (the limits of which were discussed in the first chapter) I consider it more productive to consider *South Park*'s treatment of politics as absurd. In terms of absurdity *South Park* is arguably much more focussed, albeit more abrasive, than *The Simpsons*. While *The Simpsons* usually adheres to some form of real normality or normal reality, *South Park* “abandons claims to coherent or believable reality while simultaneously presenting issues, characters, and character traits that are recognizable from either everyday life or from contemporary events” (Gournelos “Irony”). Hence, whereas absurdity intrudes upon the reality of *The Simpsons*, it radically disrupts the

world of *South Park*, while *The Simpsons* uses absurdity for its own sake, *South Park* implicates other forms within it, and thereby functions as a catalytic vector of absurdity: one that consistently functions to render absurd any forms, events and ideas with which it comes into contact.

The crucial distinction here is that, on the one hand, in *The Simpsons* absurdity is ever-present but usually tangential to the central narrative and moral-political concern of a given episode, and therefore scattered in its purpose. Understood in these terms, even the culminating absurdities of “Homer at the Bat” are best considered a collection of associated but inherently distinct illogical incidents and, although several episodes of *The Simpsons* revolve around unlikely premises, these almost always serve as simply a set-up for absurd hijinks, and while unusual or odd, are not examples of humour in themselves. On the other hand, the premises of any given *South Park* episode are frequently fundamentally absurd in themselves – for example, oil drilling in the Gulf of Mexico unleashes H.P Lovecraft’s dark god Cthulhu – and hence the premise of an episode frequently serves as the central source of absurd humour itself, which is revisited and rehashed throughout the episode. This is particularly true in the more recent series, from roughly 2002 series five onwards, where *South Park*’s absurdity (when not scatological) tends to focus upon a single issue or idea per episode, the consequence of which is a constant compounding of absurdity with respect to a focussed target which is revisited multiple times. *South Park*, then, is concerned with “specific . . . sets of allusion to (and destabilisations of) cultural norms and popular culture,” in contrast to the “random sets” of *The Simpsons* (Gournelos *Tao* 147). With each revisiting the inherent illogic of that

absurdity is pushed further and further, such that most episodes culminate in what, in the continuity of most television shows, including *The Simpsons*, would be utterly irredeemable nonsense (i.e. Cartman becomes the captain of a crew of Somali pirates; the boys of the town steal an orca, who they believe to be a trapped alien, from the local marine park and launch it to the moon with the help of the Mexican space agency).⁴⁰ Thus, whereas the premise of any given *Simpsons* episode can be considered *a set-up* for absurdity, the premise of any given *South Park* episode *is* absurd, and thus as instance of humour in its own right.

At the heart of this distinction is a difference between what I will refer to (drawing absurdly enough on the terminology of electrical circuits) as parallel and serial absurdity. Parallel absurdity refers to a text where instances of absurdity happen alongside but independently of one another; serial absurdity when latter absurdities build upon the logic of earlier absurdities, such that they compound. *The Simpsons* is an examples of parallel absurdities, for while it often incorporates absurdity in its humour addressing political and social realities, it does not do so in a manner that presents those realities as absurd – for example, the prescient young unionist from “Last Exit to Springfield” is absurd in the extent and detail of his foresight, but his unionism is not presented as absurd and neither

⁴⁰ Accordingly, *South Park* has very few absurd dream or fantasy sequences when compared to other animated shows like *The Simpsons* or *Family Guy* because the absurd flexibility of its diegetic world removes the need for them: in *South Park* if you can dream it, you can probably be it. The most notable exception to this rule involves occurs in the 100th episode, where the character Cartman, in order to more effectively accomplish a school project regarding the American Founding Fathers, repeatedly attempts to induce a flashback sequence by grievously injuring himself. He eventually achieves this by means of an elaborate rig that combines his “electro-whatever fields” with that of a TiVo that has recorded fifty hours of the History Channel. A significant section of the episode is concerned with Cartman’s subsequent adventures in 1776, while doctors try to revive him from his electrocution-induced coma.

is the union-busting capitalism of his employer, Mr. Burns, much to the disgust of at least one commentator (Greene 202). Such an example demonstrates how *The Simpsons* mobilises absurdity *around* social and political issues, but does not present those issues as absurd in themselves. This is parallel absurdity: a collection of absurdities that accompany but do not compound one another. In contrast, the serial absurdity of *South Park* much more frequently addresses such issues *as* directly absurd (this is a not a hard and fast distinction, however: *Simpsons* has also presented certain social and political issues, in particular religion, as absurd, especially in later seasons following the advent of more edgy competitors such as *South Park* and *Family Guy*. However, despite these developments, this brand of aggressive absurd comedy is much more a signature of *South Park* than *The Simpsons*). This becomes apparent in episodes such as “Go God Go” and “Go God Go XII”, where the narrative revolves around representations of both creative design advocates and patronising atheists as fundamentally absurd, and which is then taken to the Nth degree in an imagined science fiction future riven by conflicts between atheist factions (one of whom consists of anthropomorphic otters) (Gournelos “Irony”).

In the bizarre culmination of its absurd logics, *South Park* thus realises profoundly sophisticated forms of absurdity that move far beyond the possibilities afforded by the diegetic world and extratextual positioning of *The Simpsons* and instead draws closer to the historical-philosophical meaning of the absurd as a radical disavowal of all meaning in the universe given form through the absolute triumph of meaninglessness. The world of *South Park* is a bizarre, vicious and disordered place and the concerns and conflicts, fears

and desires that give your life meaning are at their root irrational and meaningless. In some instances this worldview arises simply out of the sheer absurdity of an episode's basic premise followed through to what appears to be its ultimate conclusion – this is evident in the example cited above of the boy's efforts to save an orca by launching it to the moon in "Free Willzy," or an episode like "Towelie," where the boys become embroiled in a convoluted plot centred around a genetically-engineered super-weapon that takes the form of a (substance-abusing) towel. On one level, these two episodes can be considered exercises in extended genre and textual pastiche (*Free Willy*, and a number of 1980s children's adventures films, respectively), which also take time to launch affiliated critiques of animal-rights, the military-industrial complex and merchandising.⁴¹ Yet, despite these ostensibly narrower conceptual frameworks, these episodes can also be conceived as absurdist morality tales: in all these examples the boys are at first openly resistant to the absurd nature of their world and the demands it makes upon them, but eventually triumph by accepting the apparently impossible (or at least highly illogical), and meeting it on its own terms.

Such a mode of absurd morality is evident in any number of *South Park* episodes, but one example will suffice here: "Something Wall-Mart this Way Comes," ("Wall-Mart") "Wall-Mart" addresses the arrival of a new big box store, Wall-Mart (a *very* thinly veiled reference to Wal-Mart) in the town of South Park. Though the townsfolk are at first

⁴¹ On several occasions, the creators of *South Park*, Trey Parker and Matt Stone have referred to Towelie as an explicit exercise in anti-marketing in response to the over-marketing of the show following its initial success. Intentionally conceived as the "worst character ever," he is even referred to as such by Cartman. Towelie has made several reappearances in *South Park* and gone on to achieve almost inevitable ironic success as a marketing icon.

excited about finally becoming “a real town,” the store begins to exert a hypnotic effect over them. Soon, the residents of South Park are shopping all hours of the day and night: Stan’s father, Randy, hears the store calling to him in the night. After proving unable to sustain a voluntary boycott, the townsfolk burn down the Wall-Mart, but it is rebuilt the next day, and its reign of horror continues as the townsfolk abandon their old jobs to work at the Wall-Mart. Seeking a solution, the boys travel to Bentonville, Arkansas, the home of Wall-Mart where they learn the secret weak-point of the store from its founder (who subsequently kills himself from fear and shame at what he has created). Returning home, the boys, despite the betrayal of Cartman and the best efforts of the apparently living store (“The Wall-Mart is lowering its prices to try and stop us!”), reach the heart of the Wall-Mart, which is revealed as a mirror: “that is the heart of Wall-Mart – you, the consumer.” Ignoring the metaphor, the boys destroy the mirror, and the Wall-Mart collapses around them before finally imploding. The important point of this is that while the episode ostensibly produces a critique of consumerism and a moral of self-restraint, this is invalidated when the boys ignore the metaphor and satirical meaning, and instead simply pursue the absurd logic of the Wall-Mart as a living, evil entity to its illogical conclusion. This is made even clearer throughout the episode, when the townsfolk demonstrate time and time again that they are clearly incapable of exercising self-restraint against consumer bargains for their own health and safety. The apparent anti-consumerist lesson of the episode is therefore invalidated multiple times throughout as it is bested by the absurdist logic of the show’s humour. Hence, while *South Park* may appear to be offering satirical comment, the episode actually withholds any logical message, by declaring that people

are unable to resist their base urges and thus the only answer is to resort to mythical narrative structures. However, in the absence of any “heart” in real existing Wal-Mart, there is little message to take away from this text beyond the observation that while the inhabitants of South Park are able to solve their consumerist crisis through recourse to mythically absurd and absurdly mythical means, no such option is available to the viewer. *South Park* doesn’t so much critique Wal-Mart and consumerism, as recast the political debates around those topics in terms of absurdity.

The absurd conclusion of “Wall-Mart” is not unique. Indeed, any number of other examples could also be furnished from the show if space and time permitted. Such endings demonstrate that while *South Park* certainly engages with social and political issues, it never does so at the expense of its underlying absurdity. Rather, *South Park* works to implicate those social and political issues within the excesses of its own absurdity – undermining and undercutting both the normal lines and positions of dialogue that shape those discussion, as well as the potential of any recourse to non-absurd, that is to say sensible, logic to resolve those issues. This, then, is why the notion of the carnival is not sufficient to account for *South Park* – in addition to the objections raised with regard to the overuse and abuse of the theoretical notion of the carnival in the first chapter – because Bakhtin’s notion also relies upon the retention of a social order of order and chaos, which is simply inverted. In contrast, in *South Park* this distinction is obliterated as the improper and the serious become interwoven. While *South Park* certainly does contain grotesque carnivalesque aspects, particularly in relation to scatological and sexual content, these are arguably not as central to the show’s humour as its exercise in extreme

absurdity, which undercuts the potential of any system of meaning to account for existence in what the show presents as a pointless world. The absurd excess of *South Park* thus works to at least partly neutralise the political challenge some critics see within the show, because the humour of the show positions the logic of those transgressions as outside the realms of potential sense and meaning and thereby robs them of wider explanatory or critical power. *South Park* is less about a euphoric stepping outside of the rules of everyday life, as it is about a worried chuckle that accompanies a dismissal of the central sense-making tenets of one's social and political worlds. Or as the creators of *South Park*, Matt Parker and Trey Stone, have declared "Once you start thinking you're the rational one, the one who's right, and everyone around you is irrational or wrong, that makes you the stupid one. We say, the 'truth is everyone's stupid, hooray'" (qtd. in Teeman A22).

If a consideration of *South Park* is understood to follow from *The Simpsons*, then the next logical step in this progression would almost undoubtedly have to be *Family Guy*. Hailed by some as the second coming of animated primetime, and disdained by others as a tasteless act of plagiarism, *Family Guy* closely resembles a more intentionally offensive and aggressive iteration of *The Simpsons*, with the addition of Stewie the maniacal criminal baby, and Brian, the alcoholic, Left-leaning talking dog to the family. However, while it is the crass and uncouth aspects of the show's humour – what sympathetic viewers might call outrageous, while more critical viewers might deem unacceptable – that have garnered most of the media attention surrounding the show, such humour, while certainly an important contributor to *Family Guy*'s intermingled notoriety

and success, is arguably not even the most distinctive or definitive mode of comedy associated with the show. Instead, what has come to define the humour of *Family Guy* is a particular comic technique that is most commonly known as the “cut-away gag.” The basic formula of the *Family Guy* cut-away gag involves a passing reference by one of the show’s characters, most frequently the father figure, Peter, to an unusual situation or juxtaposition, frequently involving a combination of various historical, popular cultural or topical elements: the show’s ‘camera’ then cuts to a visual representation of that scene, whose internal logic is then played out to comic effect.⁴² While it is impossible to account for the sheer scale and diversity of these gags – whose limits are effectively bound only by the imaginations of the show’s creators – a few examples will hopefully suffice to provide some sense of the type of humour here on offer: the Lindbergh baby flushes itself down a toilet; Brian dreams that he and Snoopy are in the 1970’s science fiction film *Logan’s Run*; Peter’s ancestor invents golf and racist exclusion from golf courses; Stephen King half-heartedly pitches a book about lamp monsters; the devil checks things Peter has sold his soul for; Brian appears in a psychedelic Warhol video; Bing Crosby teaches Peter parenting techniques and beats him with a belt; Robert Mapplethorpe draws sexually explicit street caricatures; inner city street toughs solve math problems. This list could fill pages.

⁴² This form of humour was the subject of extensive derision in the *South Park* episodes, “Cartoon Wars” part one and two, where it is revealed that the writers of *Family Guy* are a team of manatees who assemble jokes by choosing balls with random nouns, verbs and popular cultural references on them. It is commonly reported online, though impossible to verify easily in any acceptable scholarly manner, that the staff of *Family Guy* have taken up this terminology themselves, and now refer to cutaway gags as “manatee jokes.”

These cut-away gags operate as visual non sequiturs that are effectively autonomous with respect to the plot of the episode they appear within, and as such do not respect any traditional narrative logic; in their execution, they constitute an absurdist breach of the conventions of sitcom form and narrative. Thus, not only are these cut-away gags absurd in their premises, equivalent to miniature *South Park* episodes, but they are also absurdist in their relation to the overall plot structure, which is to say that they are absurd in form as well as in content, in that they constitute a deviation from the expected path and progression of logical narrative. Even when the content of the cut-away gag is utterly banal or un-interpretable – as is indeed sometimes the case, especially in more recent seasons of *Family Guy*, where cutaway gags have been in Russian or even represented as “missing” or miscued, to the fourth-wall-breaking disgust of the show’s characters – the cutaway still represents an instance of humour by virtue of its incongruous break with expected narrative convention. Thus, the cutaway is not simply an opportunity to represent an absurd situation, but also as a device whose break from the plot itself comprises a form of comically absurdist interruption of formal narrative conventions. In *Family Guy*, form itself becomes grounds for absurdist humour.

Nor is *Family Guy*’s comic experimentation with narrative convention and form restricted to the (admittedly prolific) cutaway gags; rather, the formal breakdown also overflows the bounds of brief gags on several occasions, producing more sustained and even more disruptive comic spectacles. Three such examples – the Shipooopi song from “Patriot Games,” Peter’s fall in “Wasted Talent,” and the chicken fight, originally appearing in “Das Boom,” but eventually extending across multiple episodes – will be

examined in some depth here as a way of considering the alternate forms that narrative absurdity can take in *Family Guy*. The first of these, the “Shipoopi” song occurs in the episode “Patriot Games,” where Peter is hired to play for the NFL team, the New England Patriots. After scoring a touchdown, Peter performs a ridiculously elaborate victory song-and-dance routine, involving the support of the entire stadium joining him in a rendition of “Shipoopi” from the 1957 musical, *The Music Man*. Although arguably more narratively motivated than *The Simpsons* musical number, “The Monorail Song,” discussed above,⁴³ this mass performance of “Shipoopi” is clearly absurd on a number of levels: in the exuberant excess of the performance; in the relative obscurity of the song and the nonsensical nature of its lyrics (Shipoopi is a nonsense term coined by the song’s composer that refers to a “girl that’s hard to get”); in the implicit proposition that the crowd is not only familiar with the song, but will eagerly and spontaneously take part in a flawless mass performance. However, what is even more absurd in this instance is the song’s position and role within the formal progression of the episode. Clocking in at two and a half minutes, this number constitutes roughly ten percent of the episode’s running time while doing very little to advance the plot beyond providing a context for Peter’s subsequent dismissal from the team. Within the context of a musical film, such as *The Music Man*, such a number wouldn’t constitute a deviation, being both expected within the genre and much less intrusive in terms of overall running time. However, within the limited time constraints of a half-hour sitcom, two-and-a-half minutes of singing needs to

⁴³ “Shipoopi” and “the Monorail Song” actually share a common lineage in *The Music Man*, with the latter song being modelled upon “(Ya Got) Trouble” also from that musical.

be understood as a significant breach of generic expectations. This is only compounded by the song's lack of relevance to the episode's progression. In all three of the animated shows here discussed, musical numbers are fairly frequent: however, the expectation regarding such numbers in *The Simpsons* and *South Park* is that they will either advance the plot, or serve as a framework in which to offer jokes and comic observations through lyrics, or both. "Shipooopi" does not serve either of these functions – it is not a parody of a musical number, like "Monorail" – instead it more akin to a straight traditional musical number, fulfilling the classical scene-stopping utopian spectacle expected of such a performance. "Shipooopi" it is simply a grandiose rendition of an obscure show tune presented wildly out of generic or narrative context which is best understood as a joke upon the narrative form and expectations of *Family Guy*.

A similar (lack of) logic informs the moment I refer to as "Peter's fall," in the episode "Wasted Talent." In an extended parody of the 1971 film, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the first half of the episode revolves around Peter's attempts to find a silver scroll in a bottle of Pawtucket Patriot beer, so that he can win a tour of the factory. When Peter does happen upon one of the precious scrolls following a series of mishaps and misunderstandings, he is encouraged by a stranger to "Run Peter! Run as fast as you can!" just as the character Charlie is encouraged in the film. However, as Peter runs home, to the accompaniment of music from that film's score, he trips and falls: the music abruptly stops as Peter sits on the ground, claspng his knee, wincing and making sharp inhalations of pain. This continues for just under thirty seconds. Again, this can be understood in similar terms to "Shipooopi," where the humour of this instance is a

consequence of the breach of narrative rules regarding pacing and repetition. Thus, although when Peter first falls, the humour appears as a moment of parody – as Peter-as-Charlie’s joyful run gives way to the painful reality of an uneven sidewalk – the humour of this scene is transformed by the refusal to cut away from the scene. Indeed, this instance would seem to risk annoying and alienating the viewer in its unexplained and disruptive refusal to adhere to expected narrative progression, instead holding on a single repetitive image for what appears – within the context of a fast-paced animated show – an eon. The extent to which the episode holds this unlikely sequence increasingly heightens the absurdity of the situation – both in terms of Peter’s unbecoming behaviour and the breach of narrative logic, where the gag neither progresses nor ends, but simply continues to exist in an absurd extension of narrative space and time beyond the accepted and expected limits. Peter’s fall, then, is another example of the blatant disruption of narrative logic to absurd ends.

The final example of *Family Guy*’s formal absurdity to which I turn is also probably its most famous, due both to its sheer gratuitousness and repetition across multiple episodes: the chicken fight. In “Da Boom,” Peter mentions in passing how he once came to blows with a giant chicken, which sets the scene for a cut-away gag illustrating that scene. However, while at first this appears as a regular brief cut-away sequence, the chicken fight does not rapidly cut back to the main plot. Rather, the (surprisingly graphically violent) fight sequence lasts two minutes as Peter and the giant chicken act out many action movie tropes: fighting atop a moving truck, hanging from a helicopter, busting into an office block, and finally plunging out a high-storey window.

Nor is the enmity between Peter and the giant chicken restricted to this episode: following the initial fisticuffs, he and Peter continue their perennial brawl on several other narrative-disrupting occasions, most notably in “No Chris Left Behind” where the fight sequence lasts a whopping five minutes – nearly a quarter of the entire episode. In the chicken fights, we have the ultimate expression of *Family Guy*’s absurd narrative digressions, where the very form of the text is bent and distorted to comic effect. This is no longer simply the absurdity of representing what cannot be, but representation in manner that similarly refuses to adhere to the conventions of narrative. Absurdity is not simply something that *Family Guy* presents, but rather a fundamental aesthetic strategy of the text.

As has been discussed in the context of *The Simpsons*, *South Park* and *Family Guy*, absurd humour is that which stretches the boundary of credulity, comprehension and coherence. In this manner, absurdity often verges close to what could be thought of as ‘silliness,’ that is humour or almost-humour that doesn’t quite make enough sense to be interpreted in a meaningful way: faced with what may seem an assault of unrelated and unjustified juxtapositions and breaches of expected conventions, there is a good chance that some members of the anticipated audience will simply reject the text as meaningless, rather than as comic.⁴⁴ Absurdist humour is constantly faced with the threat of

⁴⁴ Reactions of this type are outside the control of the text, and reflect the extent to which humour, like any aesthetic strategy, isn’t the guarantee of a particular interpretation, but rather an attempt to convey a particular constellation of intellectual and affective meanings. Absurd humour is that which presents combinations and occurrences that run the risk of being perceived as ‘simply’ silly, as without sufficient rationale for meaningful interpretation to be possible. The interpretation of absurdity, like all interpretation, is culturally located, and so the extent to which the audience interprets a particular instance as absurdity or nonsense depends upon their cultural environment and their personal identity. Certain social groups will be

disintegrating into nonsense – that which literally makes no sense and is therefore beyond meaningful interpretation – by virtue of its defiance of basic, shared social codes of understanding. In offering this limit-case of the absurd, it is thus surprisingly helpful to consider the possible social consequences of absurd aesthetics through the lens of Edmund Husserl’s theory of the absurd and the nonsensical. For Husserl, nonsense refers to that which cannot be interpreted, while absurdity refers to that which can be interpreted but not in a way that corresponds to existing frames of knowledge: he provides the examples of “a round or [sic]” versus “a round square” which illustrate nonsense and absurdity respectively (516-7). In the case of nonsense, the statement is grammatically incoherent and meaning is absolutely absent, whereas in the case of the absurd, meaning is possible but it does not refer to any actually existing thing. Husserl refines his notion of the absurd through the positing of two separate categories within absurdity: material absurdity, which is that like the round square which cannot exist materially, and “formal, analytic absurdity” which refers to “purely formal, objective incompatibility, grounded in *the pure essence of the semantic categories*” (523). Absurdity of this second category breaks the pure, a priori laws of universal grammar and logic (523-4). And here we reach the end of Husserl’s relevance to a consideration of contemporary humour, for in his system, rules of logic exist as always already given systems of sense. However, outside the pure realm of language and (pre)analytic philosophy, the socially-given systems of logic and meaning appear much more dynamic and hence much messier. Taken as a

more open and accepting of absurd readings than others. One of the defining features of the forms of absurd humour I am here in addressing is how they skirt the boundaries of absurdity of the cultural context of their production, and therefore potentially invite the incomprehension of groups not conversant in the requisite cultural capital.

whole, a given society – say the Anglophone mediasphere of the 1990s and 2000s – lacks a clear consensus regarding the distinctions of sense and nonsense than that present in language. Therefore, Husserl’s categories only hold so far as they are applied to language or a system with clear rules, and when they are used in a less ordered system – say a visual language – then absurdism and nonsense tend towards each other.

Understood in Husserlian terms, there is a constant movement or at least a threat of movement between nonsense and absurdity in the texts examined above. Unlike in the case of formal language, the rules of visual humour, social convention and narrative form are not delineated clearly enough to allow for certain that any given instance of absurd humour is not or will not be perceived as nonsense, or what I referred to above as “silliness.” Moreover, the process of absurd humour as it is on display here would seem paradoxically to constantly work to expand the boundaries of sense and meaning. Once a certain unlikely combination or event has been presented on a show like *The Simpsons* or *South Park*, then its repetition is less likely to appear as absurd than as simply the re-articulation of the show’s established systems of humour. Any given incident of humour will lose its absurdity as it is absorbed into the narrative conventions and expectations of established absurd humour – hence we are faced with something like a law of diminishing absurdity most evident in the chicken fight sequences of *Family Guy* as they become increasingly invasive and baroque with regards to the narrative expectations of the show.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ The law of diminishing absurdity should not be mistaken for the similar form of the running gag, where a line or event becomes comic upon its improbable and overdrawn repetition. In fact the two are actually

On these grounds, I would like to suggest that absurd humour works in a manner that bears a family resemblance to the much more serious and severe theatre of the absurd. Both make use of representationally and formally unconventional forms in order to challenge existing regimes of sense and meaning. However, in contrast to the claims of some that “[*South Park*] is an exemplary incarnation of an older literary tradition, Theater of the Absurd” (Fallows 67), contemporary absurdist animation cannot be considered to enact a similar existentialist logic to that earlier tradition. Whereas the theatre of the absurd offers a relatively bleak perspective on absurdity as the essential and ineradicable nature of the human condition – “the human being as an isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe, to conceive the universe as possessing no inherent truth, value, or meaning, and to represent human life, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end, as an existence which is both anguished and absurd” (Abrams 1) – absurd humour offers a much more upbeat and narrowly defined vision of chaos and meaninglessness. Likewise, whereas, the theatre of the absurd abandoned relatable, sympathetic characters and socially-attuned stories to speak to the grotesque, unmotivated nature of the universe (Esslin 400-3), absurd animation retains recognisable figures with hopes, dreams and desires that structure our encounters with their unpredictable worlds. Consequently, absurd humour focuses upon the lack of sense that informs everyday social rules and norms, political positions and discussions, and

opposed, because the running gag relies upon the improbability of repetition within the bounds of expected narrative rules for its humour – the running gag becomes more absurd and therefore potentially funnier on each repetition. The repetition of absurdity, however, diminishes in comic potential upon repetition to the extent that it appears as stale recycling rather than provocative defiance of narrative and/or comic expectations.

perhaps first and foremost the conventions of television in general, and humour in particular. Absurd humour does not however extrapolate from a local lack of meaning any clear sense of universal isolation and alienation. This can probably be attributed, at least in part, to the localised, irreverent, postmodern context of absurd humour as opposed to the universalising, serious modernism in which the theatre of the absurd finds its roots. The main consequence of this distinction is that absurd humour can be considered a less challenging, and more conservative, but also more popularly palatable manifestation of social, political and formal absurdity that constantly maps and remaps, draws and erases, the dividing lines between sense and nonsense, nonsense and absurdity, that shape the popular epistemologies of humour in the contemporary moment.

Telling Jokes to Power: The Politicisation of Humour

The enjoining of humour to politics is hardly a novel idea. If one is willing to risk the possibility of gross anachronism, we could look back at least as far as the classical playwright Aristophanes (c.f Schutz) to furnish examples of the ridicule of holders of public office. From a more contemporary point of view, such forms of humour may also be located across the Anglophone media spectrum of the 1990s and 2000s, from a string of American political comedy films in the 1990s with *Bob Roberts* (1992), *Wag the Dog* (1997), *Bullworth* (1998), *Primary Colors* (1998), *Election* (1999), *Dick* (1999) to British television shows, such as *The New Statesman* (1987-94), *Spitting Image* (1984-1996), *Brass Eye* (1997-2001) and *The Thick of It* (2005-) (and that show's 2009 film adaptation, *In The Loop*). To a large extent, such humour often demonstrates a tendency to coalesce around particular defining figures in different national contexts, such as the Americans

Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert and Michael Moore, Britain's Chris Morris and Armando Iannucci, Canadian Rick Mercer, New Zealand's Jeremy Wells, and the work of the Australian provocateur, John Safran. Finally, the production and distribution possibilities offered by the internet have proven a boon to multiple forms of political humour that would have been unlikely to pass the scrutiny of media gatekeepers or the profit motives of media corporations in earlier moments.⁴⁶ Political humour is a mainstay of online humour sites such as funnyordie.com, collegehumor.com and new media projects such as "Autotune the News," as well as older forms benefitting from the extended reach of digitisation, such as Gary Trudeau's *Doonesbury* (1970 -) and its contemporary webcomics descendants like *This Modern World* (1988 -) and *Get Your War On* (2001 – 2009), and the wide scale success of the online satirical faux-newspaper, *The Onion*. Drawing from this range of options, I'll be discussing the humour of three central figures – Jon Stewart (of *The Daily Show*), Stephen Colbert (of *The Colbert Report*) and Chris Morris (of *Brass Eye* notoriety and more recently the director of *Four Lions*) – who between them demonstrate several key approaches and aspects to what I will be referring to as *politicised* humour.

I choose to refer to such humour as politicised, rather than the more customary "political humour" – to emphasise that, from the perspective of critical cultural studies, humour need not directly address 'important issues,' such as the give-and-take state

⁴⁶ I am not examining Internet political humour in any greater depth here, though, because I believe that such a transformation would require a dedicated study of its own. Many aspects of online comedy operate as the continuation of "old media" aesthetics, but in order to grasp the formal shifts in humour occasioned by the technical possibilities, priorities and difficulties of the new Internet medium, I would have to conduct a sustained analysis of the particular features of Internet humour: a project for another day.

politics of governments, parliaments, and parties in order to be political: that is, in order to intervene in the definition and contestation of social power. Rather, as will be considered at greater length in the next chapter, all humour can be thought to play a political role through the challenging or reinforcing of existing ways of understanding the world. I will therefore refer to humour that seeks to directly intervene in the attribution and legitimation of social power as “politicised,” rather than simply “political”. Such humour seeks to address issues that reside within the sphere of the explicitly state political – the practice of government, the courting of public sympathy, the description and delimitation of the terms of media debate – as fodder. Humour here, then, emerges as a means of articulating, engaging and even doing state politics through varying proportions of sarcasm, whimsy, absurdity and even satire and this engagement can take many forms, resulting in an odd mix of non-political jokes about politics, jokes at the expense of politics, and jokes that are political statements: forms of politicised humour can be found to varying extents at different moments in the work of Stewart, Colbert and Morris.

Of the three humourists under consideration here, Stewart is no doubt the most well known. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart (TDS)* can be considered one of the central nodes of contemporary politicised humour, particularly for those caught within the globe-spanning orbit of the American cultural and state political sphere. On-air since 1996 – but only really ‘politicised’ in any sustained or directed fashion since Stewart assumed hosting duties in 1999 – *TDS* is a late-night talk show that takes up many conventions of the “fake news” genre that grew out of satirical British show such as *That Was The Week*

That Was in the 1960s, and *Not the Nine O’Clock News* in the late 1970s. However, to see *TDS* as simply a purveyor of satirical news – overwhelmingly the approach taken by academic commentators regarding the show (Amarasingham, Day “The News” 84-102, Gettings 16-27) – is to overlook the wide diversity of comic forms and modes that inform the humour of the show, which extends beyond parodic representations of news-gathering and presenting practices to include witty banter during interviews, absurd characters struck by the show’s team of “correspondents,” immature and inappropriate behaviour, bizarre outlandish performances and impressions, and scads of out-of-place scatological, sexual and popular cultural references.⁴⁷

Originally rising to prominence on *TDS*, Colbert and his show, *The Colbert Report* (*TCR*) enjoy a symbiotic and synergistic relationship with *TDS*, with which it shares a late night Comedy Central programming block, and a production company, Busboy Productions. Moreover, *The Colbert Report* (*TCR*) adopts a similar, basic faux-news format to *TDS*; however, unlike its parent show, *TCR* places a greater emphasis on outlandish and experimental politicised humour. This is made possible because, unlike Stewart on *TDS*, Colbert does not maintain a detached critical persona, but instead adopts a fictional partisan pundit character in the vein of Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly. Hence, whereas *TDS* presents a detached, critical, comic take on political news and events, *TCR*

⁴⁷ Any account of *TDS* or its humour is further complicated by the fluid and reactive nature of the show’s underlying motivations which bear much in common with a news broadcast or, at the least, late night talk show format. Hence, not only does the show produce roughly 180 episodes a year (for comparison, 508 episodes of *The Simpsons* have been produced in the show’s entire 22-year run at the time of writing), but, unbound by any consistent conventions or characters, the style and focus of the show’s humour have been subject to subtle but distinctive shifts over its run. Thus, it is difficult to identify any single consistent form of *TDS* humour or even textual identity.

occupies a more complicated, quasi-fictional space by virtue of the fundamental comic conceit of the programme: “Colbert’s presentation of news and interviews is structured as an extended performance of populist megalomania, with every sign and gesture contributing to a generic image (brand) called ‘Colbert’” (Boyer and Yurchak 195). This form permits *TCR* greater leeway for the pursuit of direct critique as well as matters tangential to news and current events while still maintaining its parodic conceit. Thus, most of the distinctive humour of the show arises from the antisocial and ill-informed antics of the egomaniacal, clueless, super-patriotic Colbert character and so long as he does not break character, pretty much everything Colbert does has the potential to be read within the context of parody, a politicisation that is only compounded by the foolish and narcissistic form of Right-wing politics espoused by Colbert’s character.

Finally, in comparison to Stewart and Colbert, the British satirist Chris Morris is a much more controversial figure. Though responsible for a number of comedic texts on both radio and television since the late 1980s, Morris is best known for his work on the provocative faux-current events programme, *Brass Eye*, originally aired in the late 1990s to critical acclaim and public outrage. Consisting of seven episodes, each addressing a broadly construed social “issue,” the humour of *Brass Eye* was premised on the deadpan presentation of absurdist stories and analysis in combination with interviews with unwitting celebrities advocating for fake public awareness campaigns. Morris’s more recent project, the 2010 feature film *Four Lions*, treads similarly controversial ground as a farce about an attempted bombing of the London Marathon by British Islamic

terrorists.⁴⁸ Though arguably much more measured in its humour than *Brass Eye*, *Four Lions* continues Morris's distinctive brand of politicised humour premised in deadpan provocation and the comic interrogation of media-political narratives.

It is not a coincidence that the three humourists under consideration here have all at one time made use of the faux-news format and engaged with the role of news media in the conduct of contemporary state politics. The common fascination with the mass media as a means of doing state politics (also present in other popular politicised humour, such as *The Onion*) speaks to the way in which those forms dominate political action and understanding and reflects the extent to which it is difficult, if not impossible, to critique state politics without addressing the channels through which it reaches us. The primacy of the news media form in politicised humour reflects the fact that those channels are not secondary distortions, but are actually part of the politics and of the ways in which the construction and distribution of knowledge and argument are at the heart of the political order. In this way, not only does politicised humour challenges assumptions regarding the content it displays, but also operates at the level of structure and medium to rebut those who would seek to by-pass the mass media and cultural apparatuses in order to engage with some vision of proper and pure state politics. Politicised humour is that humour which plays with the way in which norms of accepted and expected structure the contemporary mediascape, and the sense of incongruity that can arise when those norms

⁴⁸ *Four Lions* (like *Brass Eye*) did not receive the widespread distribution in North America that it did in other areas of the Anglophone world, most likely due to the provocative nature of the film's subject matter (however, this point is brought into question by the wide American distribution of films such as *Harold and Kumar Escape Guantanamo Bay*). Thus, while comedians such as Stewart and Colbert, and texts such as *Family Guy* and *The Office* are widely recognised internationally, Morris is most likely of the figures herein studied to be relatively unknown in the USA and Canada.

are ignored or contravened. One of the first points of contemporary politicised humour, then, is that it is impossible to speak of state politics without speaking of or through the organs of the media through which that state politics is conducted.

TDS provides Stewart with what might appear to be the most suitable platform of the three examples from which to launch a media critique. Unlike *TCR* or any of Morris's projects, *TDS* frames itself as a space apart from the news media: its trappings as a faux-news report long since compromised, Stewart tends to speak *of* televisual and print news media, rather than *as* them. There are thus moments in *TDS* when Stewart himself engages directly in mocking analysis of news media coverage, mobilising indirect assaults on political figures and mores by way of discourse and debate about state politics. The basic thrust of Stewart's comic media criticism is to present media imagery in such a way as to bring out incongruities and contradictions within, whether they relate to the form or content of the coverage. This is usually achieved in one of three ways: through the juxtaposition of conflicting accounts which appear foolish in their inconsistencies; through the assemblage of large amounts of different footage that repeat similar points or tropes that appear inane or ridiculous in repetition; or through Stewart's direct commentary regarding the failings of the clip in question. Often such humour takes as its butt the "networks' obsessive focus on formal devices of representation like demographics [that] obscures understanding what actually goes on in the political process" (Boyer and Yurchak 193). For example in a May 31, 2011 segment, Stewart mocks the lack of politically-salient rationale behind the press coverage of Sarah Palin's bus tour; later in the same episode he critiques news organisations coverage of the

Anthony Weiner scandal – where congressman Weiner tweeted a photo of his crotch to a female follower on Twitter – in relation to their reliance upon press releases and sensation, rather than attempting to conduct investigative research or offer analysis (Stewart's subsequent impersonation of a mentally disabled person as an illustration of the mentality of the news media is less politicised and much more politically fraught). The political clout of such humour plays upon the central role of news media in the construction as well as the communication of the political process as Stewart's comic critique highlights how cable news coverage participates in the formation of guiding political narratives.

However, it should not be assumed that simply to address the content of the news media or the raw material of state politics is to produce actively politicised humour. Upon closer analysis, Stewart's engagement with such forms frequently operates in a manner that could be apolitical or even contrary to the explicit political desire of the text. For example, much of the humour in Stewart's treatment of the Anthony Weiner scandal between May 31 and June 9, 2011 on *TDS* played upon the sexually-charged nature of the incident, as well as the unlikely synergy of the congressman's name, in an extended series of innuendos, double entendres, explicit puns and general penis-referencing jokes. Indeed, at several moments, Stewart garners laughter from the audience simply by stating the word 'penis,' or other synonyms, or simply showing the leaked photo of the (clothed) penis. The bulk of the coverage was simply and indeed openly concerned with the taboo nature of discussing and showing pictures of a penis on television. This form of apolitical humour is also frequently in evidence whenever Stewart engages in *ad hominem* attacks

on state political figures, such as his June 1, 2011 mockery of Donald Trump, who was publicly considering entry into the Republic Primaries at the time. Rather than offering critique of the state political platforms or proclivities of Trump, in this instance, Stewart's routine involves ridiculing Trump for the profoundly bourgeois reason that he touts the "Famiglia" chain as authentic New York pizza, while Stewart also engages in various excessive impersonations of New York City inhabitants. The humour of this sequence thus primarily revolves around his critique of Trump's and his guest, Sarah Palin's, deviation from expected norms of bourgeois behaviour – narcissistic, not (sub)cultured enough – and Stewart's own performance of similar deviations – too loud, too declarative, too passionate – rather than any engagement with the content of the state political beliefs held by Palin and Trump. Hence, while at some level we can understand Stewart's mockery as being politically motivated, the mockery does not in itself have much to do with the contestation of governmental norms and despite the initial prevalence of state political subject matter, upon closer investigation, the humour of these segments revolves around apolitical comedy, while state politics functions predominantly as the backdrop or raw material for such humour. Indeed, if there is anything political at work here, it is the conservative re-entrenchment of expected American bourgeois norms of behaviour: a common feature of Stewart's humour that has been noted by other commentators (c.f. York and Ross).

The role of such apolitical politicised humour is more complicated in the cases of Colbert and Morris. For while both humourists certainly present material wherein the humour is more concerned with the fallibility of personalities or the cultivation of non-

politicised absurdity, the critical possibilities of such material is altered by the implication of Colbert's and Morris's characters within media forms and discourses. This can be seen in Morris's earlier work in *Brass Eye*, which was marked by a consistent aesthetic of comic excess that served to ridicule the formal and discursive strategies of sensational current affairs programming. For example, the 2001 *Brass Eye* special, "Paedogeddon," is one of the most perfect and extreme examples of the interrelation between controversial material and politicised humour. Even at a formal level, the *Brass Eye* special is a dizzying and "overcooked" package of dynamic visual effects, blitzkrieg cutting and urgently emotive music (Randall 162-3). The comic dismissal of the news media through satirical excess also calls to mind *TDS*'s use of hyperbolic inter-title sequences, though in the context of the latter show, those sequences have increasingly come to function as exercises in self-contained absurdity and punning, rather than drawing direct connections with their origins in the parody of cable news conventions. It is also relevant to note that in the context of *Brass Eye*, these sequences pass unremarked upon within the fabric of the show, whereas in *TDS*, Stewart frequently offers comment, drawing out and highlighting the comic nature of the inter-titles and thereby constructing such formal qualities as distinct exercises in contained parody that are deserving of mockery in themselves, rather than as symptomatic of currents in state political discourse. Moreover, as a consequence of its often highly politicised content – "Paedogeddon" focussed on paedophilia and the media panic surrounding paedophilia in Britain at the time – even the more comically apolitical moments on *Brass Eye* take on increased political resonance. Thus moments of humour which themselves revolve around the simple revelation of the

stupidity of others, such as when Morris dupes celebrities into espousing absurd nonsense in fake public service announcements,⁴⁹ take on a political charge because they are bringing together a secular-sacred topic with forms of humour associated with sophomoric jest within the context of the faux news format. This stands in contrast to Stewart’s treatment of Trump, because whereas Stewart’s humour works to lambaste and ridicule its butt, *Brass Eye*’s mockery of public figures is implicated in a larger structural criticism of public-political discourse. Within the context of a faux current-affairs broadcast, such humour takes on an added politicised role as a grotesque rebuke of news media practices, such as hyperbolic visuals, scare-mongering and impoverished political analysis.

A similar logic of media satire informs *TCR* and the character of Colbert, who, in contrast to Stewart, ostensibly occupies a critical distance from the media and state politics on which he passes comic judgement. The upshot of this format is that even when Colbert offers less-than-politicised humour, such as a concern with the more sophomoric potential of the Weiner scandal, *TCR* can still be understood as politicised to some extent, because Colbert is here performing the absurd diversions and digressions that constitute much political punditry within the 24-hour news cycle. As the character of Colbert has developed throughout the show’s run, *TCR* has increasingly prioritised this former, more apolitical category of humour where Colbert discusses his own celebrity and prestige in segments such as the self-explanatory “Who’s (Not) Honouring Me Now?”, “Stephen

⁴⁹ A London radio DJ was conned into stating that “genetically, paedophiles have more genes in common with crabs than they do with you and me. Now that is scientific fact, there's no real evidence for it, but it *is* scientific fact,” while other celebrities recount how paedophiles use internet games to remotely drug children via their keyboards.

Colbert’s Fallback Position,” where Colbert tries out various careers, and “Monkey on the Lam,” which recounts the antics of escaped zoo creatures (usually, but not restricted to, monkeys). The humour of these segments arises either from Colbert’s misperformance of social expectations and codes, such as modesty or concern for the welfare of others, or out of the inherently incongruous aspects of the stories covered, which are exaggerated and expanded by virtue of being drawn into Colbert’s absurdist orbit. Thus, even when Colbert is aggressively interviewing the Cookie Monster, his humour can still be understood as actively politicised, because the character of Colbert exists as a simulation of the ego, excess and eccentricities of media-political entities in general.

Furthermore, this indirectly-political absurdity works to reinforce the Colbert figure as a purveyor of slapdash opinion and bad decisions which can then be implicated within more direct politicised humour. Colbert’s celebration of freestyle canoe dancing or exploitation of his intern as a radiation shield works to position Colbert as an ironic anti-taste maker or media gatekeeper and hence, when the show veers into directly politicised territory, there is already an interpretive structure in place that encourages (if not entirely forces) the audience to mistrust any political position or figure endorsed by Colbert.⁵⁰ For example, on June 6, Colbert attempts to defend the historical plausibility of a grossly incorrect account of Paul Revere’s midnight ride offered by Sarah Palin, which had been

⁵⁰ On occasion this general absurdist tactic can backfire and prevent the discussion of any divergent worldview. In the same episode, Colbert interviews Werner Herzog about his new documentary, and the interpretive framework of the show does not allow for a straight reading of Herzog’s distinctive blend of avant-garde filmmaking and post-structuralist attitude towards documentary truth, which is interpreted by the audience as ridiculous nonsense, despite Colbert’s probably authentic deference and respect.

heavily critiqued and mocked in the news media.⁵¹ To this end Colbert not only encourages his viewers to edit Wikipedia's "Bells" entry to reflect Palin's account (the Revere page having been locked by Wikipedia administrators in response to similar revisionist efforts by Palin supporters following the original incident), but also mounts a coin-operated child's mechanical horse with a tricorner hat, a bell, a front-loading musket and the two horns of powder necessary to reload the weapon, in order to re-enact Palin's version of history. As if the clearly inaccurate motion of the faux horse, not to mention the physical humour of an adult on a child's ride, were not enough to render the whole scene, and by association Palin's account, blatantly ridiculous (while still ostensibly *supporting* her case), Colbert attempts to reload the musket and in the process spills gunpowder all over himself and the horse, while still insisting that he has demonstrated the feasibility of the feat. Colbert's ostensible support for Palin leads to an escalating sense of ridiculousness and ironic mockery aimed at not only her gaffe but also the anti-intellectualist logics that inform it. By performing madness while insisting that it is rational and normal, Colbert creates a space whereby politicised logics can be taken up and torn apart without any explicit critique being offered. As Roland Barthes argues, with regards to the politicised comedy of Charlie Chaplin, "to see someone who does not see is

⁵¹ Palin's account was that, "[Revere] warned the British that they weren't going to be taking away our arms by ringing those bells and making sure as he's riding his horse through town to send those warning shots and bells that we were going to be secure and we were going to be free." When questioned on the accuracy of her statements on Fox News, Palin defended her original account and suggested that "He warned the Americans that 'The British were coming, the British were coming' and they were going to try and take our arms, and we've got to make sure that we were protecting our arms ourselves and shoring up all of our ammunition and our firearms, so that they couldn't take them. Part of his ride *was* to warn the British that were already there, that you're not going to succeed, you're not going to take American arms, you're not going to beat our own well-armed persons, individual private militia that we have." Colbert re-joins that he "could not have said a random string of words better."

the best way to be intensely aware of *what* he does not see” (40). Like Chaplin’s characters, Colbert does not see the problems in his own position, which allows us, the audience, to be made “intensely aware” of the ridiculous – that is to say comic – nature of this political conclusion. When Colbert makes political positions and arguments his own, he thus acts to draw out their unsound and unreasoned aspects. His deadpan act tries to pass off the crazy as commonplace, and hence any idea that he adopts also takes on the sheen of the character’s lunacy – rendering political comment as the foibles of a comic character, but in turn transforming those political comments into hypocritical, contradictory nonsense.

In these comic performances of implicated excess and failure, Morris’s *Brass Eye* and even more so Colbert demonstrate how character-humour can actually serve as a more useful model for politicised humour than direct comment by a supposedly detached observer, such as Stewart. *TDS* is not without this form of humour, however, which emerges out of the performances of the show’s team of contributors and ‘correspondents’ – figures like John Oliver, Wyatt Cenac, Aasif Mandvi, Kristen Schaal and Larry Willmore – who interact with Stewart in the guise of pundit-experts, through faux field reports, and who occasionally submit comical takes on journalistic investigation (as noted above, the character of Colbert also appeared as a correspondent on *TDS* prior to the establishment of *TCR*). Unlike Stewart, who overwhelmingly functions as a “straight-man,” the correspondents all take on exaggerated comic personas: Oliver adopts a (at times absurdly) dry, pompous, but easily confused Britishness, Cenac plays a wide-eyed, enthusiastic, and easily excited naïf, Mandvi is a deadpan provocateur who often feigns

ignorance and agrees with his interviewees' most unlikely and upsetting points, as well as often appearing as poorly veiled "fifth-columnist" for an anti-American branch of Fundamentalist Islam. These comic personas allow the correspondents to insert themselves into the state political stories they cover in a way that Stewart's straight persona does not.⁵² For example, on a June 9 episode, Cenac travels to the Alberta Tar Sands, where he pursues the conceit that Canada is a dangerous foreign oil regime – taking up Canada as a Saudi Arabia-esque dictatorship, in the course of the segment, Cenac asks an oil company executive if Canada is a "blood and oil soaked rape-tocracy," 'reveals' that American companies are doing business with the regime, and interviews an oil consultant while drenched in (hopefully fake) blood and wearing a "no blood for oil" sign. Cenac goes on to equate Canadian hockey-fandom with American-hating and advocates for the invasion of Canada, before he is taught that fossil fuels allow internet pornography: a fact which converts Cenac to Canadian oil, and he ends the story driving a Zamboni while joyfully mangling the Canadian national anthem.

The humour of Cenac's Canadian oil story can be understood as politicised on several levels. First, the comic misrecognition that structures the basic (il)logic of the story is premised upon the injustice and oppression that inform governing practices in many oil-producing countries, such as Saudi Arabia, and the complicity of American corporations, governments and habits of consumption in sustaining that oppression. While the humour of the segment is borne out of an assumption of Canada's status as a first-

⁵² This is not to suggest that all the correspondent appearances invariably and inherently give rise to fully politicised comedy: the humour of Oliver's June 6 story regarding Sarah Palin's bus is mostly concerned with the garish, tasteless nature of the bus's design, interspersed with sexual innuendo about "riding the bus."

world and relatively responsible and socialised government, as least in comparison to the USA, it nevertheless functions to draw attention to concerns regarding the role of oil in foreign relations. The politicised humour of Canada-as-petrostate thus allows a fairly detailed exposition of both the abuses perpetrated by the governments of those petrostates and the public services, such as healthcare, offered by the Canadian government (Canada here functions in a familiar role as an idealised socialist paradise for Left-leaning Americans).⁵³ The resolution of Cenac's segment thereby offers a complicated political point by virtue of its humour: while his newfound love of Canada could be considered a declaration of support for the status quo in relation to other petrostates, any straightforward conclusion of this sort also needs to consider the complicating effects of his comic tone. As with Colbert, the comic distortions of Cenac's character – in this instance, his naïve enthusiasm – permit him to make comic decisions without Cenac-the-commentator advocating for them, and in this instance Cenac's embrace of foreign oil can be read as an indictment of American consumers who like Cenac turn a blind eye to foreign oppression if it sustains their lifestyle. That Cenac's conclusion is an explicit manifestation of the self-interested attitude that informs much contemporary petro-enabled consumption in Western democracies only sharpens the politicised aspects of this humour. In this manner, the exaggerated nature of Cenac's comic persona allows him to implant himself into a dominant political logic in order to make evident the problematic assumptions and elusions that inform that ideology.

⁵³ Interestingly, Cenac doesn't mention the catastrophic environmental damage wrought by the Alberta Tar Sands, which would threaten the comic nature of his segment by drawing uncomfortable parallels between Canadian oil and that of other petrostates that could not be easily laughed away.

This form of politicised humour can be developed further within the context of an extended treatment, such as can be seen in Morris's *Four Lions*, which addresses the comic misadventures of five British-born Islamic terrorists: Omar, Waj, Faisal, Hass and Barry. Though Morris himself has characterised the film as a "farce" (qtd. in Roberts), the humour of the film is much more complicated than the pratfalls and mistaken identities such a description might bring to mind. Certainly, much of the humour of *Four Lions* emerges out of the mismatch between the political identities of the central characters as religious terrorists – the bogeymen of the early twenty-first century – and the realities of their everyday lives. As with Colbert and *TDS*'s correspondents, the implication of concrete and comically fallible human figures within the framework of politically-charged discourses acts to politicise the physical and normative comedy of the film, by bringing those discourses into disruptive contact with their actual enactment. However, what is even more important is that these comic moments of farce never entirely eclipse the existence of these characters as terrorists. Hence, while the film certainly has its share of terrorists-as-idiots – in particular as expressed through the character of Barry, a paranoid, white English convert, or in an early scene where Omar and Waj misfire a surface-to-air missile while attending a Pakistani Jihad camp – the humour of such moments can be understood as more than simply a series of comic encounters and events that befall would-be suicide bombers. Rather, through the comic terrorism of Omar, Waj, Faisal, Hass and Barry the politically-saturated notion of the terrorist is brought into confrontation with the materiality of its participants that appears as necessary and inevitable.

The distinction between *Four Lions*'s politicised representations of terrorists-as-idiots and Stewart's mockery of Trump and Palin can be best understood in relation to Alenka Zupančič's treatment of humour as "incarnation," whereby abstract ideas are given material form (37-40). Both Stewart's mockery and *Four Lions*'s farce can both be understood as instances of incarnation, yet their comic resonances take up the question of incarnation in different ways. On the one hand, Stewart draws attention to the all-too-human flaws of figures such as Trump and Palin: as humans these figures do indeed have flaws, and these can be the subject of humour. Trump and Palin are thus cast as conservative political figures who are *also* human. On the other hand, *Four Lions* not only notes that its central characters have flaws as people, but they also have flaws as terrorists. This is not simply to say that they are bad at being terrorists, though this is no doubt the case, but to make the more significant point that the politicised humour of *Four Lions* dwells on the extent to which their being terrorists is predicated on them being human. That is say, in Zupančič's terms, that the terrorists of *Four Lions* mark the point "where the human coincides with the inhuman; where the inhuman 'falls' into the human (into man), where the infinite falls into the finite," where the politicised discourse of terrorism is understood as that which is inhuman and the infinite (49-50).

This is made most clear in a scene where the clumsy Faisal falls while carrying explosives and vanishes in a deadly explosion. It is the explosion, which kills Faisal (and a sheep), that distinguishes Faisal's fall as a different and more serious matter than the usual slapstick of farce. The explosion acts to remind the audience of the deadly serious stakes that underpin this comedy of errors and thereby undercuts any reading of Faisal as

simply a comic fool: rather, he is a comic fool who is committed to terroristic violence. Faisal's accident therefore does not simply occur because he fails to live up to the abstract category of menacing terrorist, but rather reveals the way in which that highly politicised category of terrorist must always manifest in particular concrete bodies that cannot ever fully materialise the infinite threat of terrorist violence. In this comic accident, we thus have a abstract category – here, terrorism – rendered concrete through its particular human manifestation – the fatally clumsy Faisal – which thereby reveals the how the humour of *Four Lions* is not simply a consequence of terrorists who happen to be idiots, but rather represents a politicised humour wherein abstract narratives of terrorism and terroristic violence are rendered comic through representation in particular, material forms. In this manner, *Four Lions* begins to dismantle the otherworldly nature of the terrorist: not as simply enemies or fools, but as the comingling of discursive regimes and everyday folk.

Moreover, Faisal's fall can also be read as more widely indicative of the conflict between the threatening discursive spectre of terrorism and the material reality of contemporary England that structures the wider incongruity of *Four Lions*. Without the epic tone of the action narrative on display in shows like *24* or *Spooks*, terrorism begins to seem out of place amongst mundane rituals and popular cultural touchstones; subsequently, ideas that in other circumstances could very easily be the subject of a real media panic, appear incongruous and ludicrous. For example, when the group make use of an online children's game, Puffin Party, for covert communication, the mechanics inherent to such a system almost immediately render any terrorist activities incongruously

out of place. Thus, following a dispute with the other members, Omar tries to make amends via Puffin Party, the visuals of which involve two cartoon puffins, one wearing a top hat and a monocle, conversing through speech bubbles. When Omar's wife asks what he is doing, the gag reaches its climax as Omar describes how the others' puffins won't speak to him, and "Barry's puffin's turned all red and is hiding under the pirate hat." Forced to exist in the real world, to actually use a children's game to communicate, rather than simply lurk metaphorically in the shadows, these terrorists are rendered ludicrous through the restrictions and expressions of the child's play they have co-opted. Nothing menacing could occur via Puffin Party without simultaneously being rendered ludicrous. This comic structure recurs constantly throughout *Four Lions*, from Waj's poignant belief that the afterlife will be like the English theme park Alton Towers, to the recurring use of Toploader's chart-topping 1999 cover of "Dancing in the Moonlight," (most notably playing in the van while the group are on their way to conduct their attacks on the London Marathon), the film demonstrates the ridiculousness that arises when the hypothetical actions of would-be terrorists are situated within those moments of quotidian, explicitly British mundanity, which are usually absent from news media and serious fictional accounts of terrorism.⁵⁴ Thus, *Four Lions* carries the logic of politicised humour apparent in the performance of Colbert and *TDS*'s correspondents, by not only working to re-entrench and illuminate incongruities, hypocrisies, and discrepancies within political discourses through absurd performance, but, in this instance, by revealing how apparently

⁵⁴ This point can be further demonstrated when one considers the humour that accompanied the revelation that pornography was discovered in Osama bin Laden's compound following his death. Both Stewart and Colbert made much comic hay out of this revelation, which suggested that Bin Laden existed as regular man, rather than the super villain figure of most media reports.

serious political discourses operate through the excision of the inevitable comedy of material incarnation.

There is still, however, one more step to the politicised humour of *Four Lions*; one which is endemic to the film itself and arises out of the lack of fit between the subject of Islamic terrorism – possibly the perfect mix of state politics, death and religion in the current moment to ensure straight faces all round – and the narrative and aesthetic priorities of humour. Thus the ultimate politicised humour of *Four Lions* is borne of the misfit between the subject matter and the logic of the contemporary comedy film. This is most evident in moments that adhere diligently to the demands of the generic comedy text, such as when Omar’s family provides him the emotional strength to carry on in his moment of doubt: the saccharine nature of this scene is uncomfortably compromised by the fact that his son is encouraging his father to go through with his plan as a suicide bomber. Though this powerful conflict between the ostensible seriousness of subject and the non-seriousness of humour is evident throughout the film in every gag and one-liner, it emerges most strongly at moments when the film jokes knowingly and directly about loss of life. Near the film’s climax, the group, who are on their way to attend the London Marathon disguised as wildly costumed runners for charity, are stopped by a policeman, who tells them “you’re going to die in that gear lads.” Barely missing a beat, Omar replies, “Yeah, quite likely. It’s all for a good cause though.” Finding humour in the double meaning of this quip, the audience is confronted with the implication of mass death within this one-liner: in order to appreciate the humour, one must accept that these characters plan to detonate themselves in a crowd. The comic logic of this humour is

pushed further and further as we approach the end of the film and it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid the realisation that these characters intend to kill themselves and dozens of others: a happy ending is all but impossible, because if the characters succeed in their madcap underdog scheme they will perpetrate a terrorist act that most viewers of the film would have a very difficult time countenancing. This is politicised humour that not only takes up a charged issue as the fodder for laughs, but that in doing so acts to cast the stability of that issue's co-ordinates and one's relation to them severely into doubt.

Morris's *Four Lions* thus renders terrorism new by moving it clear of the standard tropes and narratives by which it is understood and thereby renewing the points, terms and rules of debate. Through humour, one of the most over-determined of contemporary political categories, terrorism, is rendered subject to interrogation and thereby it becomes necessary to explain, define, defend and understand that category anew.

Four Lions therefore demonstrates the ways in which the inculcation of humour into the narratives and discourses of the state political world can act to upset and destabilise those narratives and discourses, such that they may even need to be thought through again. Such destabilising humour is not restricted to fictional texts, however, and may be considered a guiding aspiration for a text like *TDS*. For example, on June 2, 2011, Stewart delivered a comic monologue addressing Republican House of Congress majority leader Eric Cantor's suggestion that tornado relief be offered to Missouri towns, only if cuts are made elsewhere so as to balance the budget. In a strident and extended critique, Stewart ridicules Cantor's argument, suggesting that actual circus elephants are doing more to assist storm-struck communities than the Republican Party, and declares that

Cantor's rationale "sounds like good common sense until you think about it for two seconds." Building on an analogy between America and a family offered by Cantor, Stewart equates the request for funds to rebuild Missouri towns with an impoverished and unsupported American family seeking assistance from relatives who are equally impoverished due to government policy. In contrast to the ridicule of Trump, the humour of this segment arises out of the hyperbolic excesses heaped upon this hypothetical family, which in turn works to illustrate Stewart's critique of government policy and priorities: by combining absurdist statements about elephants with dismissive quips about the logic of the plan, Stewart builds a critique through humour that draws a connection between the lack of sense in his analogies and an implied lack of sense at the actual state political level. Hence, the butt of this joke is not peripheral to the politics itself, but rather the central thrust of the politicised humour of this segment. Thus, Stewart's humour here works to unsettle the logic at the heart of this politicised discourse.

Yet, as was noted above in relation to Stewart's media critique and apolitical politicised humour, the full politicised thrust of his humour is always partially compromised by his self-positioning as outside of the political process looking in. In contrast, a figure like Colbert has the potential to directly intervene in the political process as an active and pseudo-official participant: examples include his 2008 presidential bid, where he petitioned to be included on both the Democratic and Republican ballots in South Carolina; the 2010 Washington D.C. rally discussed in the first chapter; his 2010 testimony before the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and Border Security; and his 2011 attempt to form a Political

Action Committee, “Colbert SuperPAC Making a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow,” to influence the 2012 presidential election. Such stunts serve as fodder for the perpetuation of the Colbert character, creating opportunities for humour as a consequence of his egomaniacal and ill-informed attempts to intercede in complicated bureaucratic systems, and in doing so, such interventions act to implicate actual state political and legal institutions into his manic performance: blurring the line between comic fiction and serious reality.

Colbert’s SuperPAC serves as his boldest state political intervention of this type to date, where he not only legally registered his entity, but used it to raise money and run state political advertising, all the while televising his filing of forms and discussions with his lawyer regarding the legal rules and implications of the process. Not only did this process illustrate the incongruous difficulty encountered by any member of the American general public – not just Colbert – who attempts to navigate the legal frameworks of her own government, it more importantly served to illuminate the poorly understood role of SuperPAC organisations as conduits of corporate finance in the electoral process. Thus, in all these instances, Colbert not only exploits bureaucratic confusion and legalese as comic material, but also works to explain how those forms actually affect the workings of government. By approaching the formation of the PAC through comedy, rather than direct critique, *TCR* provides not only a platform from which to ironically critique the ability of corporations to funnel money to preferred candidates and the difficulties presented to citizens who wish to participate in that process, but also a concrete lesson in the actual mechanics of state political administration and participation. Moreover,

Colbert's actions have the potential to actually alter the landscape he intrudes upon, by forcing the FEC to clarify loopholes and make explicit whether on-air endorsements are to be understood as in-kind donations, with ramifications for other networks and PACs, in particular those associated with the Fox News channel (Vogel). Therefore, beyond simply offering a critique, Colbert actively intervenes in and even alters the political process: in doing so he provides a how-to guide that addresses the basic realities of state politics rather than the more familiar ungrounded world of ideologies and talking points that is usually presented. Thus, by taking up normally dry and opaque applications and petitions in terms of humour, *TCR* works to potentially demystify and transform the way in which the political process is perceived and thereby offer a form of politicised humour that works through both education (of a sort) and critique.

What is therefore the most salient point regarding politicised humour is the role such texts play in promoting and familiarising humour as a means of not only addressing, but also intervening in, morally and politically charged situations. Politicised humour treads a very fine line in this regard: if a topic is widely thought to be an inappropriate subject for humour then this can undercut the entire aesthetic strategy. This is most apparent in the case of Morris, who spends much time addressing taboo topics, but not altogether alien to Stewart and Colbert, who have both come under criticism for rendering the political process a joking matter and therefore promoting cynicism or apathy (Day *Satire* 83-4). Hence, while the controversial nature of Morris's politicised humour is more directly apparent, Stewart and Colbert have also come under fire for making light of topics and issues that some believe are not the proper subjects of comedy. This is not a

secondary concern, though; it is not as if humour is produced and then it is judged to be provocative or not. Rather, this tension is at the heart of politicised humour which takes materials previously thought to be, to some extent, off limits to humour, and turns them into the raw material for the comic process. This is, itself, the production of humour through the re-contextualisation of apparently serious, but also proper and fully understood and well-defined, debates and discourses, unsettled by their placement within the context-less context of the incongruous. This can take many forms, from the relatively apolitical mockery dished out to many of Stewart's butts, through the complicated identification process at work in Colbert, and finally in its most extreme form in Morris's deadpan intoning of monstrously ludicrous statements.

It is by virtue of this potential to re-articulate the familiar that humour has come to function as a widely accepted means to address state political and social concerns. As addressed in the first chapter, humour often functions in contemporary Anglophone society as a permitted and privileged site of critique: an aesthetic strategy that permits the saying of the normally unsayable and the challenging of what for all intents and purposes most often appears as an unassailable orthodoxy regarding media scandal, petropolitics, financial discipline, partisan politics, administrative bureaucracy, paedophilia or terrorism. This is not to suggest that to phrase these things in terms of the aesthetic of humour is to immediately unsettle and dethrone existing interpretations, but it can work to reveal the contingency of previously apparently airtight worldviews. Accompanying such challenges to existing knowledge, there is always the possibility, and in many instances the certainty, that a large segment of the potential audience will reject any attempt to

disturb dominant discourses regarding topics flagged as sensitive. Consequently, a resistant reading of this kind will also likely deny the ‘funniness,’ though not the humour: for in offering an assessment as to whether a text is funny or not, the interpreter must first understand it as an attempt to elicit positive assessments of funniness and therefore as humour. Politicised humour forces its hypothetical audience to come to a decision regarding not only the possible meaning of a topic, but also whether it is right and proper to even interrogate that topic and in doing so opens a space for extended debate and discussion regarding the presentation and representation of particular social issues. Thus, politicised humour of this sort increasingly has the ability to take up almost any issue and not only render it comic, but also to render it political, which is to say the subject of renewed public attention and debate, as is perhaps most apparent in the case of Morris’s comic assault on orthodox understandings of terrorism, or Colbert’s injection of humour into the heart of the American electoral process.

Chapter Three - The Critical Smile: The Political Aesthetics of Postmodern Humour

What, then, does *Jackass* tell us about the world we live in?⁵⁵ How does *Family Guy* reflect current thinking about globalisation and neoliberalism, or *The Colbert Report* address shifts in the critical possibility of avant-garde art? Contemporary humour can be considered a wondrous and many-splendored thing – operating in and across registers of discomfort, absurdity, unreasonableness – but its immediate connection to the more pressing political and cultural questions of the day may sometimes seem remote to those not already pre-inclined to perceive the world in such a way. At moments ironically meta-textual and at others alarmingly and immediately visceral, the political and cultural status of these emergent forms of postmodern humour can seem uncertain: even as they ostensibly upset existing hierarchies and structures of knowledge, they also come to define hugely successful and influential media franchises closely bound to the priorities of transnational corporations. Thus, having spent considerable time and energy mapping out the particular aesthetic means by which this range of contemporary texts mark themselves in terms of humour and convey humorous meanings, the most pressing task at this stage is to address whether and how the prevalence and prominence of such humour acts to shape the mediasphere and how contemporary Anglophone nations can be considered a ‘society of humour.’ Given the prevalence of humour and the esteem in which it is so often held, what does the emergence of this postmodern manifestation say

⁵⁵ Beyond, of course, the laments of a certain school of critics who hold forth *Jackass* as further evidence of the decline of morals, the intellectual poverty of modern youth and the inevitable collapse of contemporary civilisation into a maelstrom of fat suits, vomit, skate-boarding and occasional full-frontal male nudity.

about the manner in which we imagine our social and cultural world, and in particular its political possibilities and problems?

In attempting to draw together the multiple threads of postmodern humour, especially in light of the contemporary conception of humour as a site of liberty and dissent considered in the first chapter, I will here be addressing the politics of humour primarily in terms of its aesthetic characteristics.⁵⁶ In the instance of a category like popular humour, its aesthetic existence is bound up with textual and formal operations by which we identify a text or event as belonging to the category of humour. To consider the politics of humour in such a way is to take it up in terms of what I refer to as “political aesthetics”: an approach to cultural texts that treats them first and foremost as aesthetic objects possessed of particular forms, shapes, arrangements, narratives and logics, but which, in contrast to traditional aesthetic theories, understands those aesthetic qualities to be embedded in political structures of meaning and power.

Humour is a prime example of how an aesthetic category might engage political notions of the world: acting to complicate and inflect textual meanings, social interactions and the world they produce. Yet the theoretical tools we have for making sense of humour are limited at best, and for the most part premised upon social and philosophical precepts with limited relevance to the postmodern, globalised, neoliberal culture of the twenty-first century. Thus, while humour, and with it the cultural politics of humour, is increasingly recognised as a viable and important area of study, the political consideration of humour

⁵⁶ There exist long-standing connections between the study of aesthetics and that of humour: many of the prominent historic philosophers of humour investigated humour from an aesthetic perspective, or as an addendum to the work on aesthetics. For example, both the Earl of Shaftesbury and Frances Hutcheson, not to mention Immanuel Kant, wrote on aesthetics as well as humour.

tends to be overwhelmingly concerned with overarching theories of what humour *qua* humour *is* or *does*, such as were considered in the first chapter in light of theorists such as Simon Critchley and John Morreall, and attendant debates concerned with identifying, debating and sometimes policing the correct boundaries of the comic, such as in the work of Michael Billig or Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering. Concordantly, the potential politics of humour considered first and foremost as an aesthetic phenomenon have received relatively little focus, with more attention paid to the ‘what’ or ‘why’ of humour than to any consideration of the ways in which the often over-looked ‘how’ of humour can also be understood as a site of a potential politics. Considering humour through such an analytic lens opens up the possibility of drawing general conclusions about the operation of specific forms of humour while still grounding those conclusions in particular textual details, thereby articulating a connection between the details of particular texts, wider sets of aesthetic operations held in common by a set of texts and broader ideological observations regarding the relation between the mass culture and political imagination in the current moment.

I am, therefore, seeking to characterise the politics of humour in terms of form and aesthetics, rather than context and subjects. Hence, rather than assessing humour in terms of the choice of butt, construction of comic characters and characteristics, or as a statement of indirect political allegories, I will approach humour as an aesthetic operation or set of aesthetic operations. More precisely, I will address the aesthetics of the postmodern humour considered in depth in the previous chapter: that recently emergent form of humour that is quickly assuming a dominant role in the contemporary Anglo-

mediascape. The rise of this particular iteration of humour – more experimental, more reflexive, more prepared to shock, and offend, and confuse – marks a transformation of commonly held notions of the bounds and roles of humour, and a mutation in the aesthetic logic by which humour is produced, consumed and recognised as such. Moreover, this transformation in humour is not simply a side-effect or secondary consequence of wider socio-cultural shifts, but rather humour can be considered to be intimately intertwined with the on-going perpetuation and mutation of Fredric Jameson's temporal category of "postmodernism," which he characterised as the manifestation of "the cultural logic of late capitalism" (1). No longer simply a popular and ephemeral cultural category, humour can instead be taken up as one of the purest and most influential manifestations of cultural postmodernism – the exact meaning of which will be developed in due course – which has played a key role in shaping the cultural landscapes of the contemporary Anglophone world. A critical focus on the political aesthetics of humour thus attempts to redress the lowly estimation of humour, in contrast with "seriousness," in the Western canon, and consider how the postmodern world can be considered a society shaped, stamped and shot through with humour. Given the prominence of humour in our contemporary cultural milieu, a critical understanding of humour is an imperative, yet often overlooked, aspect of any meaningful engagement with the world we inhabit.

The purpose of the current analysis is therefore to consider what the ideological and epistemological consequences might be when humour in general, and postmodern humour in particular, become culturally ascendant: what shifts in a society when one of

its main cultural concerns becomes the cultivation and appreciation of laughter? How might the logic of humour impinge upon other spheres and ways of thought? And how might this tie into contemporary political notions of liberality, authority and dissent? Such questions lead us to consider how the formal operations and representational strategies of this emergent postmodern humour could be thought to shape our understanding of the world: to assume, implicate, prevent, privilege, and allow certain ways of thinking about the world and thereby recalibrate ways of perceiving the problems and possibilities of contemporary politics. In particular, I will suggest that humour can and should be understood as an aesthetic of doubt by which divisions, connections and identities of political and cultural norms are brought into question. In this I follow, John Bruns' assertion that "comedy is a way of understanding, not just something to be understood" (xi).⁵⁷ Humour can even be thought a contemporary form by which potentially disruptive aesthetic work – tasked with questioning, disrupting and destroying – becomes a ubiquitous aspect of postmodern society, albeit possibly in quieter, more mundane and thereby less effective and affective ways than more directly confrontational aesthetic forms. Understood in such a manner, postmodern humour is more than simply a passing trend or unimportant shift in what situations and ideas a society is prepared to find funny, but rather a potentially far-reaching transformation in how a society delineates and polices the boundaries of social acceptability, legitimate debate, seriousness and sense itself.

⁵⁷ However, though both Bruns and I seek to understanding comedy and/or humour as a way of understanding the world, we arrive at radically different conclusions as to what that way of thinking entails – not least because Bruns strongly resists the idea of comedy and humour as potentially political.

The Politics of Aesthetics, the End of Art and the Distribution of the Sensible

Before the validity of specific claims regarding the political possibilities of the aesthetic of humour can be assessed, however, there is the matter of the broader question of what exactly it means to think in terms of the politics of aesthetics, or political aesthetics. At the heart of political aesthetics is the argument that it is not simply what texts and artefacts show us about the world, but also the way in which they show us – as well as the priorities and categories of interpretation that we bring to bear – that determine our relation to that world, and the social, cultural and political struggles we encounter there. Aesthetic concerns, such as the way we see, hear and feel the world, determine how we interact with it and the particular sites of potential, tension and trouble we see within it: an aesthetic quality such as humour thus needs to be not simply as a site of dominance or resistance whose function is determined in advance, but as a cultural terrain whose aesthetic contours determine its possible political trajectories. What I am calling ‘political aesthetics’ thereby provides a means of approaching cultural texts and artefacts which is alert to the ways in which the formal and sensual features can inflect and possibly even determine the politics of a given text: it is an aesthetic theory that seeks to situate art and aesthetics within the gamut of wider social forces, as both subject and object of economic, technological, social and political forces. This approach builds on the legacy of a number of art and cultural theorists, most notably Theodor Adorno and Jacques Rancière, as a way to articulate the possible political and social role of art and culture. In tracing the boundaries, assumptions and implications of this theoretical position I will be seeking to address two questions: how is it that the form of art can be

thought to be political? And is this political work restricted only to art, or can it be conceived in terms of other cultural artefacts?

Central to this stance is an argument that aesthetics can do political work, which can be considered at some level a variation on an old, somewhat naïve and somewhat clichéd, belief: that art can change the world. The viability of this belief, of course, depends not only on what you mean by ‘art,’ but also on what you mean by ‘change’ and ‘world,’ and many may be primed for scepticism with regards to the claim that objects of the cultural sphere can have anything more than a fleeting and superficial bearing on the serious ways of the serious world. Depending on one’s schooling and social position, this may be even more true with regards to popular culture vis-à-vis the storied accomplishments of the great works of whatever canon in which one finds solace and meaning. In support of this view, the political and the aesthetic are customarily considered to be clearly distinct entities: the first concerned with the distribution, contestation and negotiation of power, and the second with the sensual properties of objects and the appreciation thereof. In the context of the contemporary humanities, especially cultural studies, the importance of “politics” has been taken as self-evident and tied to a progressive programme of social equality, while, in contrast, concerns with “aesthetics,” especially in the post-*Distinction* era, have been frequently dismissed as misguided and mystifying at best, suspicious and potentially oppressive at worst. Pierre Bourdieu’s opus on the sociology of art and culture proved instrumental in articulating the relation between how not simply art, but an “aesthetic disposition” towards the world, acts to naturalise social hierarchies, and thereby serves as a proxy and justification for the

social power of the dominant classes (28-58). Such a warning should not be discounted by those who seek to turn an aesthetic gaze on the world, especially when this is done in the pursuit of political investigation.

When considering the political aesthetics of a text one thus enters into long-standing debates and discussions within cultural studies and art theory, whether one wishes to or not – not least arguments as to what aesthetics and art even mean, and whether they can or should be thought to be political. The idea of politically engaged art itself stands in contrast to the dominant notion of ‘mere art’ or ‘mere aesthetics,’ where art is thought to operate as a kind of ornamentation upon life: a detached mode of being that can offer beauty, fulfillment and even transcendence, but which does not have any real bearing upon the struggles of day-to-day existence. A variation of this tradition also informs conceptions of humour as a simple source of pleasure and nothing more, as in the phrase ‘just a joke.’ This assumption about the world is perhaps most influentially formulated in the work of Immanuel Kant, who conceived of aesthetics as a site of “disinterestedness,” whereby the aesthetic judgement of taste is deemed to be that act of judgement in which the subject has no emotional or rational investment (95-6). In the Kantian scheme, the aesthetic is a thing apart from practical or emotional concerns: the site of the subjective perception of beauty through “the pure power of judgement” (167-8), without recourse to rule or external influence (165-6). This does not mean the aesthetic is irrelevant, far from it: indeed in this tradition the aesthetic is one of the highest spheres of human existence and attainment, exactly because it does not sully its hands with the mud and mire of everyday life. This is the notion of the aesthetic that

informs many contemporary common-sensical approaches to art and literature, as well as scholarly methods such as New Criticism where art and aesthetics are hallowed, even as they are portioned off from the compromises of lived history. It is this notion that informs assumptions that art is simply art, culture simply culture, and perhaps humour simply humour, unless directly and intentionally involved in the propagation of direct political ends by means such as propaganda.

However, imagining the role of the aesthetic as a possible shaper of social and political worlds is not without precedent: political aesthetics by other names was a shared dream of both the twentieth-century avant-garde and the cultural critics of Western Marxism, who took the ability of art to transform the world as a starting assumption, an aspiration or a philosophical conundrum, with varying results. Art is, in this understanding, a form of politics, and aesthetics a site to be taken up in the name of political struggles and the revelation of exploitative reality. The particular development of a politically-minded aesthetic theory within Marxist thought no doubt owes some debt to the Marxist hermeneutical practice, which was sensitive to the existence of political meaning where it was not immediately apparent (what Jacques Rancière refers to as a “meta-politics” [*Disagreement* 82-5]), as well as post-Gramscian attempts to explain the failure of revolution whose inevitable success was predicted by the economically-deterministic model of history. In the wake of the failure to mobilise working-class support for the Marxist Revolution in Europe in the interwar period, Marxist thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci came to understand culture as both a means by which power is legitimated, and the grounds on which the struggle for that legitimation is waged, a

conception which has had a wide-ranging impact in Marxism and the study of culture more generally. Building on this tradition, attempts to make sense of art and culture as political and social sites remain indebted to this Marxist history, and especially those thinkers who worked at the interface of Marxist theory and the avant-garde, even if the relevance of class struggle and capitalism is not immediately apparent to many contemporary conversations about the interrelation of culture and social power. Debates about the ability of art to shape world views and the correct aesthetic strategies by which to foster revolutionary consciousness were central to the work of earlier thinkers, such as György Lukács, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, through Raymond Williams's notion of the "structure of feeling," Jameson's work on cultural logics and more recent scholarship by theorists such as Rancière and his work on the politics of aesthetics. Writing in different moments and places, these philosophers and theorists shared a common conception that art and culture are central to how the world is imagined and engaged, and that any meaningful conception of politics will seek to account for the political potential of aesthetics.

From such a perspective, the form and presentation of art are as important to its politics as its represented content. Thus conceived, art doesn't have to directly address political content in order to have political effects and consequences, but rather is always political in its existence as art. Examples of this alternate revolutionary art might include Futurism's call for an art of "courage, boldness and rebellion" that glorified aggression, war and movement in its very forms (Marinetti 4-5), Bertolt Brecht's notion of Epic theatre, Dada's call to abolish and destroy the logic of a sick world through art (Tzara

136-144), the dialectic montage of early Soviet film and all the other political impulses of the avant-garde that find their expressions in manifesto-writing and affiliated activities in an attempt to instil revolutionary consciousness not simply through the repetition of political slogans but through aesthetic means: harnessing the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere to create the conditions for a new political and social world. Brecht, for instance, used theatrical techniques, such as direct-audience address, or incongruous musical numbers and stage settings to prevent the audience from becoming passively embroiled in the fictional action by “turning the object of which [they were] to be made aware ... from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected” (*Theatre* 143). Through such techniques, Brecht sought to produce a theatrical alienation effect, or *Verfremdungseffekt*, in order to produce a conscious and critical audience through the use of direct address, interruptions and contradictions (*Theatre* 91-2). Similarly, Sergei Eisenstein regarded the aesthetic technique of dialectical montage – the editing together of conflicting visual and ideological filmic elements – as a means to reveal the “contradictions of being” (161) and thereby “express ideologically critical theses” (180). It is not, therefore, the represented content of the film that conveys the political message, but rather the formal arrangement of visual elements in space and time which works to replicate the intellectual and critical work of dialectic thinking: an impulse to provoke critical political sentiment perhaps best expressed in Eisenstein’s declaration that “all of us summon you through art to the Revolution!” (245).

However, the aesthetic was not considered to be simply a progressive or revolutionary sphere. While for artists such as Brecht and Eisenstein art functioned as a

means for ideological clarification, in the work of more pessimistic Marxists writing under capitalism, such as Herbert Marcuse or Guy Debord, the aesthetic realm could become a tool of domination and obfuscation.⁵⁸ The complicated political promise of aesthetics as a site of both oppression and liberation finds one of its most developed and nuanced treatments in the work of the Marxist cultural critic, Theodor Adorno, who can be considered one of the foremost theorists of this politically engaged conception of art. While commonly understood in cultural studies to represent the notion of popular aesthetics as a site of inevitable damnation, Adorno is distinct among his Marxist peers in his advocacy for the political power of an autonomous art, rather than calling for an aesthetic in the service of politics. Indeed, at times it seems as if Adorno has more faith in art as a site of revolutionary praxis than in any political action of the proletariat. In opposition to the didactic Marxist criticism of art for art's sake as bourgeois decadence, Adorno rejects such concerns as irrelevant, arguing in his *Aesthetic Theory* that art, by its very inalienable nature, is an artificial construction, and therefore is a break from the world that gives rise to it (5). Whether the artist seeks to comment upon the world or not, by virtue of its being 'made,' art is not just another part of the world, but a part that has been shaped in a way to differentiate it from its surroundings: the work of art draws its content from the world but also rejects the world through the process of its fashioning. Moreover, in being differentiated from the world, the work of art cannot remain neutral in relation to it: by virtue of its distinction from the world, art necessarily takes a position in

⁵⁸ In contrast to such accounts, Brecht and Eisenstein have a relatively optimistic take on the political potential of the aesthetic, a fact most likely related to their positions as feted (at their time of writing) and practicing artists under actually existing Communism.

relation to it, and thereby can be thought to inescapably and often inadvertently comment on the conditions of its own production. Art for Adorno is therefore fundamentally incapable of offering any direct representation of reality, and attempts to directly represent reality within art can be considered akin to the state of confusion between art and the real (“Schema” 64). What we find here is a model that, though offered by a man who seemed to be by nature opposed to humour – in their foundational essay, “The Culture Industry,” Adorno and Max Horkheimer notoriously assert that “there is laughter because there is nothing to laugh at ... laughter is a disease which has attacked happiness” (140-1) – would seem to speak quite clearly to my earlier discussions of humour, which, likewise, must also always take up a position in relation to the world by virtue of its aesthetic nature.

The corollary of such an understanding of art (or humour) is that it leads to a refusal to circumscribe the exact nature of art’s political contribution in advance. Thus, although Adorno suggests that “artworks tend a priori towards affirmation” by virtue of their detachment and inherent opposition to the empirical, he also cautions that “art can no more be reduced to a general formula of consolation than to its opposite” (*Aesthetic* 2). What we have in Adorno then – in stark contrast to a Kantian and commonsensical model of disinterested art – is the argument that art is *always* political and these politics are always up for grabs due to the changing historical nature of art. This too speaks clearly to our earlier considerations of humour, whose nature many see as static and fixed, but which seems to shift in relation to different examples and at different moments. As with Adorno’s art, humour has also been taken by many philosophers and theorists to tend a

priori towards affirmation, here understood on multiple levels, and likewise, as with Adorno's art, it seems increasingly clear that humour is not necessarily always an act of affirmation, however much some may wish it to be, and even mistake it for. Integrating these two insights – that, first, art (alongside which or perhaps within we can possibly place humour) always contains some form of comment on the world and, second, that the comment of art can never be ascertained automatically in advance as either affirmative or critical – we can thus build up an idea of art as that category of objects which always do some political work, either confirming or rejecting the conditions of the empirical world, by virtue of their non-arbitrary artefactual status, by which art is set apart from regular objects of mundane life. Hence, in Adorno's conception we have two broad structuring conceptions of the role of art: either art works to sublimate the problems of society and thereby facilitates repressive integration, or it refuses society's demands, rejects the conditions of its creation and through its negativity works to illuminate the gap between happiness and praxis (*Aesthetic* 13-15).

However, it is not simply a matter of determining which category any given example of culture fits into and ticking the appropriate box for repression or opposition. Writing with regards to mass culture, Adorno derides any attempt to understand art as simply the realisation of any crudely or directly political intention, the imposition of which robs art of its transcendence and thereby reduces it to expedient pseudo-poetry ("Schema" 61-2). From Adorno's perspective, we can therefore not simply read off the politics of a text through a consideration of what it declares its politics to be, because such a method overlooks the complicating interactions that arise out of the work's

specific relation to its own materiality and mediated existence, which is to say, its form. Even the most purportedly “sublime” and autonomous work of art constitutes some form of comment on the material conditions from which it arises: the way in which the work of art grapples with questions of form is an expression of the “sedimentations or imprintings” of historical and political content (*Aesthetic* 6). From this perspective, an analytical privileging of content over form is inherently misguided because “the unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of *form*. This, not the insertion of objective elements, defines the relation of art to society” (my italics, *Aesthetic* 7). Thus, what Adorno offers us is a way of thinking through the politics of a work of art as a direct question of form; we have here an argument for the primacy of form as the site at which that which remains unthought and unresolved begins to emerge within a text. Adorno’s concentration on form, as opposed to content or ideological thematics, thereby gives rise to an investigation of aesthetics as a key site of the political in-and-of-itself. In contrast to a didactic concern with art as a site of expedient politics, where form exists only to realise direct and correct political content, Adorno instead proffers a model where form is instead understood as the site of potential political liberation (or repression) through its radical and formal rejection of existing conditions of existence. We therefore find in Adorno a model of aesthetics that directs our attention beyond any immediate representation of content, and instead asks us to consider the nature of the artwork as a formal construction operating in terms of a particular historical and political space. And though such a perspective may arguably overplay the irrelevance of content to the analysis of the cultural politics of a work of art, I nonetheless locate in Adorno a set of

conceptual tools whose utility lies in their ability to allow us to think in useful and critical ways about how aesthetics might be considered an important site of politics.

The engagement with Adorno also presents a second problem that hovers over his oeuvre like a worrying haze: the much-raised question of Adorno's aesthetic elitism. Though I have neither desire nor stomach to revisit the debates surrounding the relation between Adorno's biography and taste-profile with his cultural critique, I nonetheless recognise that it may be necessary to consider the objections that might arise in the application of his theories to popular humour. After all, it is highly unlikely that Adorno, or many of his critical ancestors, would approve of such a move: not simply because popular culture was thought to be bound entirely by the standardising logic of mass capitalism, but also because for Adorno, and indeed many other thinkers in this area, art was and remains the privileged site of autonomous aesthetics. Adorno's faith in art as a correct site of immanent and aesthetic radical politics must be understood as arising from the larger social and cultural context in which he operated, for while distinctive within the Marxist tradition, his faith in the autonomous power of art is not unique within the wider scope of post-Kantian aesthetic thought. An assumption that the power of art could change the world and a desire to collapse the distinction between art and life were central tenets of the Manifesto-writing avant-garde, from Futurists to Expressionists to Surrealists, although all approached this endeavour in their own idiosyncratic manner. Echoes of this valorisation of art – where a variant on Kantian transcendence intertwines with a more pragmatic streak – can be perceived throughout the twentieth century and even before: they arise in in the work of early century social reformers, who “pinned their

hopes for an ethical citizenry on beauty” (Castronovo 32) and hoped to build democratic communities through aesthetically-perfect public works, and in the aspiration of W.E.B. Du Bois to “reconstruct social and political categories” through a reformulation of aesthetics (Castronovo 113). This faith in art appears in the desperate struggles of the factions of the Soviet avant-garde to determine whose aesthetic philosophy might emerge triumphant and guide the fulfillment of the revolution (Groys *Power* 24-9) and in the work of American modernist critics such as Clement Greenberg, who celebrates the output of the avant-garde as if the inherent progressivism of colour planes were self-evident (102-5). A belief in the transformative nature of art was also a central aspect of the mass cultural critique of the mid-twentieth century, in which the power of art to enact and inspire progressive change in the world was held up as an aesthetic aspect that distinguished it from the degrading and oppressive functions of mass culture. Art, in its narrow definition, was thus hailed as one of the great hopes for the political redemption and deliverance of humanity, against the corruptions and depredations of capitalism, industrialism, racism and mass stultification.

However, in contrast to these early hopes, the history of the late twentieth century has not been particularly kind to the project of the artistic avant-garde and those who would seek to change the world through art. With increasing regularity in the latter half of the twentieth century, the avant-garde project has been called into question by those who begin to doubt its validity or desirability: not simply because of any failures, but also because of its successes. Even a champion of the avant-garde like Greenberg worried in 1939 that the increasing internalisation and specialisation of the avant-garde would lead

to the alienation of patronage from the bourgeoisie, forcing the commercialisation and academicisation of their artistic practice (101). Conversely, in 1974, Peter Bürger suggests that the avant-garde project to bring together life and art failed and fell into corruption, with the integration of art into everyday life giving rise to consumerist subjugation to commodity aesthetics, rather than liberation, and the avant-garde's protest against autonomous art has been reduced to art itself (52-3). In these conceptions, not only is art neither transcendent nor natural, but its avant-gardist logic has, arguably, become, at worst, self-defeating and socially repressive. By 1996, Hal Foster despairs that any attempt to make sense of value in the contemporary art community leads to "different interpretive communities shout[ing] past each other," thereby allowing reactionaries to seize control of the public forums on art (xii). Negative assessments such as these begin to suggest that in our post-Warhol moment, the collision of critically motivated art with international markets has led to a major transformation and possibly even a terminal decline resulting in confusion as to what art actually does. This is the world of what Jean-Francois Lyotard described as "trans-avant-gardism," which substitutes cynical eclecticism for a heritage of formal experimentation, what Baudrillard characterised as an uncritical, mystified and mediocre "conspiracy of art (127-9) and as a community "that frantically stares at itself" (91). Even those who still attest to the critical power of art, argue that the "equalizing of art practices has become progressively more pronounced in the course of the twentieth century, as the images of mass culture, entertainment and kitsch have been accorded equal status within the traditional high art context": a new context where high art alone can no longer mobilise claims to political efficacy (Groys

Total 14). Certainly, there are still artists, and there are still galleries, but insofar as art is thought to operate as a central site of critical thought and a potential politics, the project of the avant-garde appears to be foundering, if not over. And with avant-garde art – that art which was held up and understood as the art directly committed to the political project of building a better world – so goes the hope of a relevant and political aesthetics?

I'd like to suggest that this is not necessarily the case and that the institutionalisation or even the 'end of art' does not necessarily mean the end of a political aesthetics, but simply the end of the belief that art is the only proper subject thereof. Indeed, in many ways the end of art opens up the possibility of imagining a new, more extensive politics of the aesthetic, where, in the absence of traditional markers of aesthetic importance and value, it now becomes possible to posit new sites of political aesthetic engagement. This is the moment of cultural studies, where having lost the notion of art as the sole point of enlightenment, the political aesthetic must now 'dirty its hands' and contend with an ironic, expedient, hugely complicated and apparently always already co-opted media culture. Faced with such a task, it is imperative, however, to not reject outright the models of Cultural Marxism and the Modernist avant-garde, but rather to build on them, while addressing the queries and concerns they raise when set in conversation with the difficulties of contemporary cultural conditions. While figures such as Adorno and Greenberg, Brecht and Eisenstein, as well as the manifesto-writers of the various avant-gardes, understood the critical and political project of art as often operating in direct opposition to mass-produced forms of culture, this should not be taken to rule out the possibility that such forms are capable of giving rise to politics in aesthetic form.

Writing in their own specific historical and cultural contexts, earlier authors conceived of mass culture as an inevitable site of depredation, because this was the dominant interpretation open to them given the cultural hierarchies and structures in which they existed.

However, in our current moment, when the critical promise of art seems all but squandered by its implication within the institutions and markets of contemporary capitalist patronage and logics of performance, it seems increasingly necessary to seek out critical potential in overlooked sites. Once, it may have made sense to stand against mass culture as completely full of capitalism: back when it was believed that there were still pure sites outside the reach of capitalism, lurking in the unconscious or a problematically conceived “third world” (c.f. Jameson “Periodizing”). Now that such sites are gone or critically compromised, it seems essential to go back and reassess the situation, and return to those areas once over-looked in periods of apparently radical political abundance. At the heart of this is an argument that the non-art texts of everyday cultural consumption can be considered as aesthetic and therefore political sites, regardless of origin or intended application. Thus, while the origins of these texts as cultural artefacts, produced and circulated within a market of culture fueled largely by advertising, should not be forgotten, the relative autonomy of the aesthetic allows for a consideration of their cultural meaning in a manner not always over-determined by capitalism. What this approach demands, then, is an engagement with everyday popular and media forms through the lens of avant-garde conceptions of political aesthetics previously reserved for the more refined spheres of ‘art.’ In proposing this mode of

analysis I seek to follow Fredric Jameson, and in particular his assertion that one of the overlooked consequences of complete commodification is that “everything in consumer society has taken on an aesthetic dimension” (“Reification” 132). Jameson thereby asserts that critical theory must abandon Modernism’s search for an ultimate pure aesthetic dimension as manifest in the more Kantian moments of the avant-garde, and instead approach the politics of aesthetics as those of a historical, social and thus always compromised phenomenon (“Reification” 133-4). Following Jameson then, aesthetics can be considered a vital, yet compromised site of politics: one which constructs a worldview in a given time and space, rather than aspiring towards complete scientific or transcendent truth. Here we return to Adorno’s assertion that art always comments on the conditions of its production, but expand this understanding beyond art to encompass all aesthetic objects, which is to say any object that can be considered in an aesthetic manner, which is to say anything produced by a human.⁵⁹ After all, it is the moment of the artefact’s production, its shaping and separation from the natural world, that imbues it with form and meaning. Hence, despite its origin or intended application, the aesthetic aspect of any cultural artefact can work to inflect, influence, disrupt, confirm and transform existing knowledges of the world.

While this statement might be true broadly, in the current context I am particularly concerned with the aesthetic aspects of artefacts designed and circulated as primarily aesthetic artifacts – that is to say texts – and in particular comic texts. In addressing such

⁵⁹ The aesthetics of art are, for Adorno, dialectically opposed to those of nature: art is both a rejection and an imitation of nature (*Aesthetic* 81-7). This means that nature cannot be represented in art, but only an image of nature, which inevitably fails to do any justice to that which it represents (89-90).

objects of study, I am therefore seeking to attend to the manner in which aesthetic elements qualify and complicate any ideological interpretation of a text, and the extent to which those elements are rooted in a particular historical moment. It is in such a spirit that I now turn to the recent work of Jacques Rancière, who offers a contemporary reinterpretation of aesthetic theory based on the notion of the “distribution of the sensible,” wherein he argues that the aesthetic constitutes a “system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience” (*Politics* 13) or, in other words, “the way in which the practices and forms of the visibility of art ... distribute spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular” (*Discontents* 25). Aesthetics is thereby thought of as a delimitation of the possibilities of what and who can be heard, seen and understood. This aesthetic distribution of the sensible not only determines what is perceived as art, and how it is thereby understood, but also gives rise to the very possibility of politics, in that it traces the boundaries of the community and its membership (*Politics* 13-4). Rancière goes so far as to declare that “man is a political animal because he is a literary animal” (*Politics* 39). Thus, contrary to understandings of aesthetics and politics as fundamentally opposed, here they are fundamentally conjoined, with the very possibility of politics argued to arise out of the particular distribution of the aesthetic (*Discontents* 30). Aesthetics are therefore defined as the fiction that allows the real to be thought through, a proposition which opens up the possibility that aesthetic interventions might recalibrate and fracture existing political sensibilities (*Politics* 38-9). This is not a directly didactic or pedagogic cultural politics, and even less a search for ‘beauty,’ but rather a conception of aesthetics as an indirect politics of epistemologies

and form, concerned with the relations between shapes on the page and the shaping of the mind, the priorities of the text and the priorities of change in the social, and the manner in which value is attributed and awarded as a function of political power.

In Rancière's political aesthetics, then, aesthetics is considered to do political work when it disrupts the existing distribution of the sensible: when it functions as an intervention into the sensory coordinates of the status quo which effect a redistribution and reapportioning of identities, subjects, spaces and times. He even goes so far as to declare that "Aesthetics is the thought of the new disorder" (*Discontents*, 13). The politics of aesthetics are thus tied to the potential of art to disrupt stable forms of sensory community experience, a potential that Rancière theorises in terms of "free appearance" and "free play" (*Discontents* 27). Understood in such terms, the aesthetic promises the possibility of a sensory revolution – more profound than any political revolution – which "appears as the germ of a new humanity, of a new form of individual and collective life" (*Discontents* 32). This focus on disruption can be considered a consequence of Rancière's idiosyncratic definition of the political, which, in his system, is concerned only with disruption and never, as Oliver Davis points out, with the maintenance of power: an "almost exclusive emphasis on the moment [that comes] at the expense of the process by which that interruptive political moment is reabsorbed into the police order and reconfigures it" (Davis 94). As has been noted by critics of Rancière, in particular Slavoj Žižek, this emphasis on political aesthetic disruption means that the aesthetic is sheltered from the shock of ever having "to endure the conversion of the subversive undermining of the existing System into the principle of a new positive Order" (*Ticklish* 238). What this

means is that the aesthetic proper gets to remain, within Rancière's schema, entirely a site of disruption and opposition, and art, or proper aesthetic art at least, is spared the indignity of working in the service of power and the existing order. Concordantly, power is thought never to make use of aesthetics in the maintenance and legitimation of its own existence.

However, as suggested above, this particular approach will not do if we wish to discuss mass media humour in terms of aesthetics: to do so in the current terms would be to presume the oppositional and radical function of such texts in advance, and the beginning of an analysis is no place to assume the innate potential of, say, *The Sarah Silverman Programme* to bring about the revolution. Given Rancière's broad, and oddly sociological, definition of art as those cultural objects which disjoin themselves from the practical regimes of that which is not art (Rancière, *Future* 72-5), if art did indeed lead directly to aesthetics and hence to dissensus, then citizens of the postmodern consumerist world, in which culture is now everywhere, would be subject to constant destabilising dissensus.⁶⁰ Gallery patrons, literature devotees and film festival attendees at the very least, and potentially video-gamers, television viewers and magazine subscribers would have to constantly adapt to an ever-shifting, profoundly Protean and probably deeply unnerving way of being in the world. Thus, the political aesthetic strategy advocated here

⁶⁰ Rancière avoids the wider ramifications of this position by restricting, in practice if not in theory, his definition of art to sanctified works of the art establishment. Thus though, unlike Adorno, Rancière never offers a rationale for distinguishing between art and mass culture, he consistently adheres to this distinction in his use of examples from art and respectable film and historical literature. This may in part be a difference in temperament: for a French-Algerian philosopher born in 1940, *Cold Mountain* and *Dogville* may indeed appear as concessions to the middling tastes of the masses, but for this writer-- a New Zealander born in the 1980s--such texts still fail to represent the breadth of cultural consumption out here in the trenches.

needs to be understood as a modified version of Rancière’s system, one which is equally attentive to the ways in which the aesthetic can buttress rather than simply disrupt existing understandings of the world. In this account, it becomes necessary to privilege the Rancière of *The Politics of Aesthetics* – where the narrative form of Virginia Woolf “makes it possible to think through the forms of political dissensuality” in ways that Emile Zola’s work does not” (65) – over the more radical claims advanced by the Rancière of *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, where all art is declared to contain political dissensus by virtue of the free play central to aesthetics (98-9). If this framework is to be useful then it has to have the room and the ability to distinguish between the ways in which different works of art can be political to greater or lesser extents, rather than operating in a binary system of either, on the one hand, entirely aesthetic and therefore entirely political or, other hand, neither aesthetic nor political. It is in terms of this second understanding of the political possibilities of aesthetics – wherein cultural works do different political work dependent upon the relation of their aesthetic features to the existing distribution of the sensible – that the current discussion takes place. The notion of the distribution of the sensible thus offers a means to think of art as neither an oppressive bourgeois fancy, nor an always already political, critical and effective strategy, but as a terrain of potential politics which must be approached and assessed in and of itself in terms of its *capacity* for sensible dissensus. It is with this interpretation in mind that I seek to take up Rancière’s theoretical framework as a means to assess the political role of humour as a particular aesthetic aspect.⁶¹

⁶¹ Rancière himself is directly sceptical of the ability of humour, or, at the very least, “the joke” to do

Hence, while drawing on Rancière's notion of the distribution of the sensible, and the disruption of that distribution as a meaningful political act, the current analysis rejects the notion that the aesthetic always and only constitutes a decisive blow against the epistemological powers that be. Instead, I am defining politics more broadly than Rancière, as not simply the production of dissensus, but also the maintenance of consensus, and all points in between. Thus, the goal here is to consider that the aesthetic aspects of the text can contribute to freedom and free-thinking, affirmation of the status quo, or something else entirely. The political aesthetic task here then is to attend to the way in which the precise aesthetic manifestation of humour – as a feature of form that emerges when a cultural artefact is made and therefore separated from the world – enables particular interactions with the cultural conditions of its production, opening up and closing down possible interpretations of the content they portray, and thereby articulating and interrogating how the political function of humour is thus a factor of its aesthetic configuration. The guiding notion of this analysis is therefore that aesthetics in general, and humour in particular, are central sites of meaning creation and propagation that inflect their subject material with a certain politics, but that, following Adorno, the politics of a particular aesthetic object, whether repressive or liberatory, cannot be determined in advance. It is therefore not necessary that a cultural artefact be first

political aesthetic work. Writing with regard to the joke, he argues that the conflict of different understandings of the world fails to have political consequences in the joke, because, in this context, “the dialectical tension is brought back as a game, played on the very indiscernibility between procedures that unveil secrets of power, on the one hand, and the ordinary procedures of delegitimization that are parts of the new forms of domination, on the other: the procedures of deligitimization produced by power itself, by the media, commercial entertainment, or advertising” (“Contemporary Art” 46). This position speaks again to Rancière's commitment to aesthetics as political insofar as it is entirely disruptive, which I am attempting to nuance within the context of mass cultural forms.

considered art in order to be thought to have a politics and to be considered political. Rather, I am here arguing that popular media humour is political as an aspect of everyday, media aesthetics, wherein it suggests new calibrations, perceptions and interpretations of the world. We thus move beyond the assumption of Brecht, Eisenstein and the avant-garde that the aesthetic was under the complete guidance of the artist to use for whatever political purpose they saw fit, and instead adopt a post-intentional understanding of aesthetics as an aspect of the text that is produced by a multiplicity of cultural, social, economic and political factors. The goal here is then to assess how humour, conceived of as a political aesthetic, can be thought to perpetuate the long project of political art, and the kinds of social and cultural worlds to which an aesthetic of humour might give rise. Thus, drawing on the analyses of the second section, I will consider how humour reflects and produces the dominant liberal democratic (broadly construed) interpretation of the political order, while also potentially offering the possibility of new forms of politics that exceed the current limitations of apathy and disengagement. By way of political aesthetics, we can therefore come to understand and appreciate how an apparently innocuous cultural category, such as humour, can in itself have meaningful political and social consequences that bear on our ideological assumptions regarding our political, economic, social, cultural, spiritual and everyday existence.

All That is Solid Collapses into Giggles: The Humour of Postmodernity

As noted in the previous chapter, a central thread running through the current analysis has been the designation of the forms of humour under investigation as ‘postmodern,’ as a means to distinguish them from earlier, more traditional modes of

media humour. This label is partly justified by the fact that the historical era of the texts under analysis roughly corresponds to that period of history beginning in the late 1980s or early 1990s sometimes referred to as postmodernity. However, this connection is not merely one of concurrency, but also of a deeper structural connection between postmodernism, postmodernity and what I have been referring to as postmodern humour. The ascendancy of these forms of humour are tied up with the aesthetic, political and cultural priorities of the postmodern to the extent that this particular iteration of the comic can be considered both a reflection and potentially also a more deeply embedded and constructive element of the postmodern nature of the 1990s and 2000s. Postmodern humour is therefore postmodern not simply because it exists in postmodern times, but because the aesthetic of postmodern humour works to articulate a postmodern point of view.

But how, then, am I constructing postmodernism, an often ill-defined and almost always overburdened theoretical term? Here I draw upon the classic theoretical accounts offered by commentators such as Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Fredric Jameson, where postmodernism emerges as an attitude marked by a constant awareness and suspicion of boundaries and structure, and which is articulated in different contexts as a situation of “hyperreality” wherein the distinction between reality and appearance collapses (Baudrillard 1-3) or as an “incredulity towards metanarratives,” produced by the flight of “metaphysical, religious and political certainties” (Lyotard xxiv, 77). Though largely out of favour following the ‘important-isation’ of cultural studies and other humanities disciplines following the 2001 New York attacks and the subsequent shifts in

the global state political landscape, the cultural situation described by postmodernism, in terms of surface and simulation, eclecticism and confusion, remains and, indeed, underpins much of the contemporary debates about politics, media and ideology. We have not done away with what Jean Baudrillard refers to as the “panic stricken production of real and referent” (Baudrillard 6), nor have we reversed those perceptual and social mutations that make it increasingly difficult to account for the complicated network of global power, or even space itself, (Jameson *Postmodernism* 39-44, 50-3).⁶²

Moreover, despite increased attention to the apparent ‘real’ of global state politics, our world remains increasingly articulated and understood in terms previously reserved for aesthetics, where logics which once shaped the world of art and culture come to bear on the rest of lived existence; what Jameson refers to as a “prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm” (*Postmodernism* 48). This explosion of culture into everything can be understood in terms of Baudrillard’s semiotic turn in the structure of society, Lyotard’s conception of the collapse of the real which ends in a collage life, where anything goes and “eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture” (75-6), or, most directly in Jameson’s nod to Walter Benjamin in his declaration of “a quantum leap in ... the ‘aestheticization’ of reality” (*Postmodernism* x). Tied to the increased epistemological flexibility of the everyday, and the loss of existential

⁶² Indeed, under contemporary cultural conditions, the central political question is not so much whether we are still postmodern, but rather in what ways are we postmodern? Do we inhabit a cultural situation where pre-given structures of order and normality collapse into a fragmented and fragmenting mess, as Jameson would seem to suggest (*Postmodernism* 16-8) or do such structures simply recede into the background to give rise to a “metastable” world consisting of systems of pre-realised codes, where events occur only as simulations and where anything is admitted because nothing has any meaning (Baudrillard 38)?

confidence this seems to inflict, is an increased sense that no clear line now exists between the world as it is and how it is imagined, and that as such both systems and subjects of power are increasingly mobile and fluid. However, in contrast to the frequent conceptualisation of this ‘aestheticisation’ as a negative political development – in particular, Jameson’s nod to Benjamin indirectly raises the threat of fascism⁶³ – I would like to take a different tack here and instead consider what could be considered a form of feedback within postmodernity, as an increasing sense of aesthetic consciousness comes back around to inflect change at the level of aesthetics, and thus also at the level of political aesthetics.

Encountering the world as one might encounter a text, and encountering a text as if one might encounter the world, need not only lead to confusion, anxiety, and reactionary politics. It can also lead, and indeed often does lead, to humour. The political aesthetics of contemporary humour are tightly bound up within the transformations of postmodernism, where a world conceived, at least in part, in aesthetic terms creates increased conditions for the construction and perception of humour. The contemporary forms of humour under discussion both draw upon and perpetuate this postmodern aestheticisation of the world by drawing upon the diminishing gap between virtual and actual as a set-up for incongruity, and in the process further complicates and obscures any clear sense of that distinction. Once the world can be understood at the same level as a

⁶³ Though Jameson’s reference to Benjamin and aestheticisation raises the spectre of fascism (which he ambiguously half-defuses, half-emphasises with the aside that “he thought it meant fascism, we know it’s only fun” [x]), subsequent discussions have sought to complicate the politics of everyday aestheticisation and suggest that the Benjamin’s “sound-bite” has been theoretically overburdened and misunderstood and that, in contrast, it is possible to consider a “democratic aesthetics” (Simons 1-5).

text, it becomes possible to deviate and play with the rules and systems of the everyday and their possibly incongruous relations to fictional worlds in a number of ways, including, but not limited to: the interpretation of the actual world as if it were a fictional world, with the sense of emotional distance such an interpretation might allow; the interpretation of the fictional world as if it were the actual world, with the acute sense of boundaries such an interpretation might allow; and the accompanying sense that anything is now ‘up for grabs’ – that is, anything now is fair game for the de-familiarising and unstable aesthetic logics of humour.

To explore this affinity between postmodernism and humour further, I will now address these aesthetic and interpretive possibilities in turn, and explain how they contribute to the social and political processes of postmodernism. Perhaps the best example of the first category – wherein the real becomes subject to the aesthetic logic of fiction – can be seen in *Jackass*, though *The Daily Show* and *TCR* certainly also contribute. As noted in the previous discussion of *Jackass*, the humour of the show relies upon a complicated relation between the audience and the documentary existence of the performers. Though the show goes to great pains through the use of extensive behind-the-scenes footage of set-ups and consequences, as well as the show’s opening disclaimer, to encode the on-screen action as real, there is also a sense in which the televisual and cinematic logics at work act to undercut the lived and visceral reality of the on-screen action. Thus, the humour of *Jackass* is postmodern because it plays upon this grey area between reality and aesthetic space: the text encodes the on-screen action so as to emphasise the real documentary nature of the social breaches on display, while also

providing on-screen permission for the audience to interpret this as humour, through the distancing role of filmic logics of representation, as well as the laughter of on-screen participants. The very fact that this text is recognisable as humour at all – that a troupe of young men engaging in masochistic events could be regarded as unproblematically comic by large portions of the population – speaks to the ways in which the cultural conditions of postmodernism make it possible to interpret the blatantly and resolutely true as fictional, or at least *as if* fictional, and therefore as the correct space of socially permissible, non-antisocial humour.⁶⁴ It is this aesthetic-epistemological complexity that critics of *Jackass*, who read the show as symptomatic of the decline of civilisation, overlook, or more likely choose to ignore, when branding the show as a sign of sociopathic deviancy: they see only a mindless revelry in pain, and not a complicating and contrasting movement between the intertwined logic of mediated distance and documentary realism.

A similar process is at work in *TDS* and *TCR*, whose humour draws upon an interpretation of the actual world as if it were a fictional world, with the sense of emotional distance such an interpretation might afford. Both shows tread a fine and complicated path between detachment and investment that is central to the operation of postmodern humour and in doing so “blur the line between parodic and serious political discourse” (Day *Satire* 70). As with *Jackass*, the unstable nature of this particular aesthetic has led to criticism; in this instance, emphasising the other aspect of the

⁶⁴ I do not want to suggest that this situation is necessarily historically unique – we could speculate that gladiatorial combat or public executions were also understood in this manner in a pre-media age – but only argue that the interpretation of documentary reality as if it were fiction is symptomatic of postmodern humour.

aesthetic: whereas *Jackass* critics gnashed their teeth at the thought that there was no humour here, simply a celebration of real broken bodies and broken sociality, critiques of Stewart and Colbert see nothing but humour, which detaches viewers from the real of state politics, leaving them apathetic and cynical. Thus, in contrast to *Jackass*, it is the *supporters* of Stewart and Colbert who more often attempt to position the show solely in terms of revealed reality and points to the educated nature of the audiences to contest claims that the shows leads to disengagement and disrespect towards state politics (Michels and Ventimiglia 90-1). What all these perspectives hold in common, though, is a refusal to countenance the unstable nature of this postmodern humour that takes the real on aesthetic terms in order to produce humour. Instead, all sides seek to solve once and for all whether such texts require understanding or disengagement with a sanctified space of reality, and in doing so miss the humour's movement from real to virtual. Thus, *TDS* and *TCR* are not about state politics as a proper and sanctified space, but neither do they condemn state politics entirely. Rather, the texts engage with American state politics as a site overwhelmingly transformed by the postmodern process whereby aesthetic and real distinctions collapse: state politics (and cultural politics) are partly determined by aesthetic logics, but this is not presented as a failing or flaw, but rather simply as a reality that needs to be addressed. This does not simply mean that politicians now function as celebrities, but that the very priorities and practices of state politics are altered to better match the demands and expectations of mediated citizens. Stewart and Colbert operate beyond any conception of state politics as a sanctified space apart from the apparent corruption of the news media. They instead address the current state of postmodern

politics through a distinctly postmodern mode of humour that approaches its subject as a hybrid of reality and fiction, where neither aspect is given final privilege. In this manner that allows the text to treat state politics in a rigorous and indeed almost ‘loving’ manner that not only does not prohibit, but indeed, necessitates acknowledging its lived dual reality as a media and aesthetic saturated space.

On the other end of the comic spectrum the inverse operation applies to the second category of those texts where, rather than the transformation of the real into the virtual, the logic of aesthetic and fictional worlds instead become caught up with the pre-existing structures of the real. In some sense this is not a radical shift: all fiction is bound up with the real to some extent; otherwise it would be utterly indecipherable. However, in the instance of postmodern humour, this role of the real becomes even more caught up in the aesthetic logic of these humour texts than in relation to other fictive texts. In cases such as *The Sarah Silverman Program*, *The Chappelle Show* and *Four Lions*, the text not only draws on wider social meaning for its humour (as indeed does all humour, including more traditional humour texts such as *Friends*), but also works to highlight controversial and unsettled social topics in such a manner that unsettles them even further for the purposes of additional levels of humour. Thus, these texts do not just rely on prior audience knowledge for audience interpretation, or interpellate the audience into the unsettling of codes and conventions situated within the fictional world or at the formal level of the text, but instead address the audience on two levels simultaneously: as a fictional world, and as an intervention into non-fictional conversations. The humour of these texts thus comments on the non-textual world in order to generate humour. Moreover, this is not

just the use of a text as a vehicle for a social or political message, but rather texts whose characters interact with and offend the sanctified behaviours of the real for the sake of humour. This is fictional character and actions engaging with the non-fictional world as if they were themselves real. They are not exemplars or allegories; they are instead elevated to the position of quasi-real interlocutors through their challenging of real or really-felt social distinctions and boundaries. Characters speak not just as characters, but as real-life interlocutors and the comic consequences of incongruities expand beyond the safe bounds of the text. As such, this form of humour packs its punch because it speaks to us not through the mouths of characters, nor even as a text really, but through as the sheer ‘gall’ of articulating such thoughts. The joke is that nobody could or should say such things, and as such it does not matter whether the mouthpieces of such humour are real or not.

This is perhaps most clear in texts such as *Silverman* and *Chappelle*, which constantly challenge the bounds of their textual frame through the over-stepping of some of the most cherished and sanctified social frames of contemporary society: such as respect for the historical memory of the Holocaust and racism. To return to “Wowschwitz,” as the character of Sarah prepares her “unconventional” Holocaust memorial, the audience is witness to a number of incongruous set-ups within the diegetic world that speak to a complete lack of sensitivity on the character’s part. This is not the end of the humour though, which also arises out of the wider misfit between the Holocaust and the genre of the situation comedy. The film *Life is Beautiful* was criticised for daring to address the Holocaust in the context of an Oscar-winning historical comedy: how much more controversial, more intentionally provocative, then, is it to address the

same subject in the context of a low-budget situation comedy? Unlike *Life is Beautiful*, *Silverman* does not shrink from this controversy: it does not placate it, but rather seeks to actively address and even stoke it. I would suggest that the particular episode, “Wowshwitz,” is permitted this opportunity because it occupies a very different political economic space, sheltered both by the lack of capital tied up in its production and its status as the final episode of a cancelled series. What this political economic situation allows, then, is that *Silverman* can operate at a second level, where the humour arises out of the non-comic sanctity of the subject matter and its comic treatment, which can be understood as a second-order incongruity that generates further humour (or controversy).

Such a dual address is even more explicit in *Chappelle*, where the actor’s gratuitous, diegesis-breaking shout of “Niggers!” in “The Nigger Family” sketch, renders starkly explicit an awareness that it is not just the presence of internal puns, punchlines and incongruities that are generating humour, but the entire provocative conceit of the sketch, which reaches beyond any single gag and instead situates the very production, indeed the very fact of the text’s existence, as a joke that overflows the bounds of the text and situates itself directly in wider social controversies for the purpose of humour.

Similarly, in the context of a film such as *Four Lions*, this form of humour arises from what I have identified as the series of escalating incongruities between the characters’ identities as terrorists and everyday people, and between the film’s explicit formal coding as humour and its subject matter of terrorism. *Four Lions* prides open a gap between the fictional world and the audience’s world: on the one hand, the familiar formal structures of the buddy comedy (such as *Some Like it Hot*, *Dumb and Dumber* or *Ocean’s Eleven*)

encourage the audience to root for the protagonists as they recognise narrative signposts of conflict, overcoming and triumph, whereas the ever-present subject matter of terrorism complicates this aesthetically-motivated reaction for what I imagine would be a majority of the audience. As such *Four Lions*, like *Silverman* and *Chappelle*, works both as a text that contains humour, and a text whose very existence also operates as a challenge to existing boundaries of taste and decency and which frames this intervention as humorous. In doing so, this second category of postmodern humour reaches beyond the bounds of its own fictional worlds to speak directly to the audience – to shock them not on behalf of a character or with respect to the rules of that fictional world, but through the mobilisation of ethical or political humour that is calculated to breach the fictional-real distinction.

What these different comic operations speak to then, is how postmodern humour operates freely across any dividing line between the actual lived and aesthetic realms of everyday life: dragging them into one another, confusing them for one another, grabbing from either realm in order to subject any aspect of either to the unsettling logic of humour that increasingly transcends any attempted barrier to its function. I am not so much interested here in whether this distinction was actual or imaginary, as I am in the way in which such humour undermines its apparent sanctity and correctness. As it scrambles this material-aesthetic distinction, humour thus contributes to the sense that the world exists in an increasingly malleable state, where things aren't always where they should be or related to one another as they are expected to in conventional structures of understanding and order. This displacement of elements across and between different aesthetic and material registers gives rise to unstructured, disrupted and potentially disruptive

expressions of the comic. In texts such as the *Simpsons*, *South Park* and *Family Guy*, we see the further emergence of this comic (il)logic of eclecticism, which is brought to bear not only on represented content and ideology, but also in terms of narrative and formal structures. These absurdist animated texts share this sense in common with those previously discussed texts that cross from aesthetic to the real, or vice versa – this is a difference of degree rather than kind – as the more absurdist forms of humour extend the aesthetic logics of humour to call into doubt not just the distinction between the actual and the aesthetic, but any potential for the stable register of meaning in either the aesthetic or material realms. Like the logic of the postmodern, this extended logic of humour stands opposed to any sense of purity, which it almost always seeks to compromise and undercut: purity is not usually considered amenable to humour, except as a butt or an inevitably compromised aspect of an incongruous juxtaposition. Instead, humour acts as a vector by which codes of behaviour and being may traverse the gap between aesthetics and actual living. Under the aesthetic conditions of humour, then, pure and singular sets of meaning are abandoned in favour of a plurality of interacting and contradicting systems of knowledge and reference, which undercut and contradict one another. In short, everything becomes eclectic and all meaning becomes postmodern.

Moreover, in one final turn of the screw, this disruptive, eclectic manifestation of humour is not static. Rather, it operates according to an internal aesthetic logic of expansion that is given impetus by a constant process of obsolescence, whereby humour constantly invalidates its own previous expression: or, in short, most instances of humour aren't as funny the second time around. This is because once an absurdist incongruity or

breach of the actual-aesthetic distinction has been produced, then it becomes increasingly predictable: the particular incongruity or disruption at play becomes, if not an aesthetic trope or rule, then at least an example that has existed before. Thus, it is not experienced as a disruption if it is re-encountered, but instead as simply the repetition of the previous disruption: this is what drives the earlier noted push to ever increasing absurdity, which can also be applied to expansion of postmodern humour more broadly. The first time, then, an example is the breach of a frame of reference or rule, the second time it is the codification of that breach into a new aesthetic code in a process analogous to modernism's search for the new, now re-situated in the context of the rapid production of contemporary broadcast and electronic media. The consequence of this aesthetic transformation of material subject to the logic of humour from unexpected to anticipated is a constant movement outwards – what is scandalous or unexpected in the first moment is old-hat in the second. In a show like *Silverman* this manifests in the 'progression' of comic treatments of homeless through disability to the Holocaust, while Colbert increasingly intervenes directly in the political process, *Jackass* graduates from backyard stunts to elaborate set-ups involving industrial equipment and exotic animals, and *South Park* become ever more precise and directly confrontational in its portrayal of real life celebrities and political conflicts. Thus, when humour functions as a relatively dominant aesthetic mode, it enters into a process of constant expansion, which engenders a need to colonise new ground as a function of its internal logic. In this manner, this category of humour texts extends its reach, bringing with it a fractious relation to any coherent separation of actual and aesthetic, or indeed any pure frame of epistemic reference, which

can be considered both a consequence of the wider postmodern shift, but which also works itself to confirm and extend the cultural logic of postmodernism. In this sense, humour works as an ever expanding avant-garde of the postmodern coalface, constantly driven by its own self-compromising aesthetic logic to re-infect existing systems and relations of sense and proper order in order to generate sufficiently new and unexpected incongruities.

Doubt and Dissent: The Politics of Postmodern Humour Aesthetics

While the particular tendencies of humour here under investigation can thus be productively aligned with the wider cultural and epistemic logics of postmodernism at work, what is still left in question, though, is the political ramifications of the expression of postmodern aesthetics in the particular form of humour. In their earlier moment, the initial theorists of postmodernity despaired of this cultural dominant's political potential: Jameson describes the politics of postmodernism in terms of disengagement and superficiality (*Postmodernism* 9, 27), Baudrillard declares those politics to be concerned with static models of deterrence (31-40), and Lyotard announces an end to determining master narratives now to be replaced by more immediate and local interventions (though it should be noted that Lyotard is more optimistic about this development than Jameson or Baudrillard). With the benefit of a certain measure of hindsight, however, it becomes possible to offer a slightly more measured assessment and to suggest that the primacy of aesthetic logics that emerges in this moment do not signal the inevitable end of a desirable political practice, the late-in-life laments of a figure like Guy Debord to one side. What I wish to suggest, then, is that the collection of texts I have here addressed –

and by this I refer not just to those texts subject to close analysis, but to all of those mentioned or even implied in passing which can be thought to exhibit the aspects of postmodern humour here discussed – between them articulate a particular way of understanding and being in the world, and that this implies particular forms of political possibilities and presuppositions, which can and should not be summarily dismissed as simply stasis or surface. Instead, the mode of postmodern humour should be understood as a political aesthetic category that manifests certain assumptions about the world and articulates a way of being in and engaging with that world.

At the heart of this political aesthetic of humour is the fundamental operation of humour: contemporary manifestations of humour do not depart from the historically dominant textual and formal strategies of humour in ways that would fundamentally invalidate their interpretability as humour. However, they do take up the aesthetic logics of humour in new directions and into rapidly expanding new contexts and applications. Before turning in more depth to those contexts and applications, though, it will be useful to review the aesthetic operation of humour as it has operated throughout this analysis. As it emerges in the preceding analyses and discussions, the central aesthetic logic of humour involves the simultaneous operation of multiple frames of social, cultural or epistemological reference. I am using the idea of the frame very broadly here: it refers to the unspoken and explicit social conventions and assumptions of behaviour, physical logic, narrative logic, genre, political speech and serious practice that form the background of all humour, from *Friends* through *Jackass*, *Family Guy* and *Four Lions*. In addition, frames also refer to the particular deviations from those conventions and

assumptions that arise in comic texts – frames thus also refer to the images, ideas, tableaux and worldviews that arise out of and are implied by trivial yet masochistic behaviour, foul-mouthed children, a coyote running in thin air, a squirrel wearing a hat and a political pundit grilling the cookie monster over his eating habits. These multiple frames can relate in a number of ways: frames may appear as rules, norms, conventions or laws; often there may be only two frames, but there can also be more; one may be understood as normal, and the other as deviation; both may be understood as conceits; the disjunction between them may be subtle or blatant. However, what is constant is that in humour there exists a plurality of frames that share points of common understanding while also conflicting at other points. Thus, humour is an aesthetic mode that calls upon the audience to entertain at least two conflicting frames simultaneously.⁶⁵

Humour, then, operates through the presentation of two or more ways of seeing the world, both of which seem to have some form of legitimacy, but which also seem to be mutually exclusive. And postmodern humour expands its range beyond traditionally sanctioned spaces to encompass and exploit multiple frames of reference operating in the registers of both the aesthetic and actual. In doing so, humour, and in particular postmodern humour, can be considered to operate in a manner akin to “doubt,” which is also premised in the co-existence of multiple frames of reference. As with humour,

⁶⁵ Conceived in terms of multiple, conflicting points of view, postmodern humour might appear similar to either parody or irony, especially as theorised by Hutcheon (*Parody* 26-8, *Irony* 63-4). However, as Hutcheon herself is at pains to point out, humour, parody and irony are distinct categories (*Parody* 51-2, *Irony* 26). Humour has a different (though often over-lapping) set of affective and aesthetic co-ordinates, perhaps most clearly seen in the examples of *Jackass* and *Family Guy*, which are examples of postmodern humour, but certainly not of irony or parody in any simple sense, at least as I have been discussing them. Irony and parody are certainly important to postmodern humour, but postmodern humour cannot be reduced to those categories (or vice versa).

“doubt requires at least two coexisting and complementary perspectives. In German, for instance, the number 2 is contained within *doubt (Zweifel)*” (Finger et al. 31). Perhaps the foremost contemporary theorist of doubt, Vilém Flusser, argues that this necessary engagement with two or more perspectives, means that doubt is a “polyvalent state of thought” (Finger et al. 31) that always entertains the search for more possibilities and in doing so destroys or replaces existing faith. What I suggest, then, is that humour can be thought to operate in similar ways to the notion of doubt presented by Flusser, and can thus be thought to both reflect and give rise to a tacit experience of doubt when it brings together two or more frames of reference.

This critical logic can be seen in a text like *Seinfeld*, where doubt not only emerges in the overlapping and competing frames of reference, but is pre-emptively assimilated into the individual frames of reference: even before they encounter opposite interpretations that produce instances of humour, the rule-based frames of reference that structure the world of *Seinfeld* seem unstable and contingent. Just as for Flusser, doubt served as a means to un-settle the world – one of the ways in which to cast off the “cotton blanket” of habit that dulls perception (collected writings 101) – humour can also be thought to have a common origin in the comparison of two perspectives that are similar, but not equivalent, and, as such, can be thought to have a similar epistemological function in the unsettling of certainty. The difference, though, is that in the case of humour, this undermining of certainty occurs indirectly, almost absent-mindedly, in the service of an aesthetic category coded as innately and inherently desirable. Hence, whereas the direct articulation of doubt can be threatening or upsetting, humour offers a much quieter form

of epistemological instability. Humour sneaks in doubt: it is doubtful almost as an afterthought, though the conflict of multiple perspectives is central to its aesthetic logic. Beyond any sense of ridicule, humiliation or liberation, it is this unsettling of categories that emerges as the political meaning of the aesthetic logic of postmodern humour, and which thereby renders it a political aesthetic form, regardless of what occurs at the level of content. The foremost political consequence of this aesthetic process is thus that it produces an epistemology of uncertainty – a suggestion that will be developed through the consideration of the different political aesthetic modes of uncomfortable, absurd and politicised humour. Indeed, it is in the context of these specific domains that the political aesthetic ramifications of humour become most readily apparent as manifestations of doubt that should not be understood as limited to any particular text, but which instead have consequences that go beyond any short-lived amusement or laughter. The dominance of humour within contemporary mass media in tandem with the intensification of this internal aesthetic logic of instability in postmodern humour contributes to a wider sense of instability in these three key domains of social behaviour and boundaries, structural logics of narrative and the accepted grounds and subjects of political debate.

Uncomfortable Humour and the Aesthetic Implication of the Audience

As previously noted, uncomfortable humour is closely tied up with the negotiation and contestation of social norms of taste, decency and decorum: it is a form of humour that charts the boundaries of what can be said and done in polite middle-class society, and then says and does what it should not. Sometimes this is done quietly, as in the case of *The Office*, but more often this breach of etiquette is loud and obvious, as with *Jackass* or

The Chappelle Show. Thus, uncomfortable humour is a mode of humour where alternate forms of conduct are displayed in contrast to the standard reference frame of desirable middle-class social conduct, which here encompasses a range of behaviours including respect of the integrity of the body, awareness of the feeling and thoughts of others, and not being an (explicit and open) racist, homophobe, misogynist, etc. The representation of behaviour that contravenes social expectations becomes interpretable as humour when the audience both recognises represented behaviour as aberrant, but can also understand that behaviour in terms of particular motivations and characters. However, described in this sense, uncomfortable humour is not particularly distinctive – the above descriptions could be easily applied to *Friends* or even *The Big Bang Theory*. Indeed, like those more traditional forms of humour, uncomfortable humour is fundamentally premised upon the simple thwarting of social codes. However, what makes uncomfortable humour distinctive is the way in which not only the characters, but also the text itself, thwart social and textual norms. On the one hand, in a text like *Friends*, social deviations are clearly marked as comic through the use of blatant formal devices such as a laugh soundtrack and more subtle techniques such as the rhythm of joke delivery and inter-character reaction, and the text thereby resolves the incongruity of the humour: the deviation from norms was indeed an incorrect breach, which is noted and resolved in favour of dominant sociality. On the other hand, in the case of the examples of uncomfortable humour discussed here, the text does not or cannot so easily resolve the incongruous contrast between the accepted norm and the alternate behaviour on display. Thus, unlike more traditional forms of humour, uncomfortable humour repeatedly refuses

to permit either of the frames of reference – not the accepted norm nor its breach – to emerge as a dominant and correct frame of reference: uncomfortable humour does not allow the conflict between multiple frames of reference to collapse into the dominance of one particular frame, and thereby find resolution. Instead, unconformable humour sets up conflicts between different registers and frames of reference which prove extremely difficult to reconcile for a variety of reasons premised largely upon an emphasis of the potentially non-comic aspects of the gag. In contrast to more traditional forms of humour, which present and then almost immediately resolve incongruity, uncomfortable forms work to hold competing frames of reference in tension, prolonging the conflict by allowing no single interpretation to emerge as immediately correct and dominant. It is therefore not simply the breaching of social rules that renders this humour uncomfortable, but rather the prevention of easy or rapid closure following these breaches which also acts to intensify the political operation of doubt.

In the case of *The Office*, one of the central difficulty of reconciliation arises from the tension between docu-soap and comic modes frames of reference: as noted earlier, characters' flaws and gaffes are not broad enough, and the camera too lingering and sympathetic to allow detachment sufficient to easily take the side of an abstract code of social behaviour over that of the characters. Likewise, while Brent is constructed as a despicable character, his despicableness is slight enough to almost prohibit its identification as significantly deviant. There is a conflict here, then, between an easy interpretation of Brent's broad breaches of social decorum and respect as comic, and an acute awareness of the social damage done by Brent, as well as his own foibles and

vulnerabilities. The show's feigned documentary format hence provides an aesthetic excuse to hold off the employment of the customary techniques by which an instance of humour is noted and a clear interpretation permitted. In doing so, *The Office* places the burden of final judgement onto the audience: never signing off once and for all on the idea that Brent is a comic fool who both deserves to be ridiculed and can easily and quickly recover from such ridicule (as, for example, the characters of *Friends* can: their sense of self-worth must be unflappable). What this means in terms of frames of reference is that the show's production of sympathy in conjunction with the implication of the audience in the passing of comic judgement interrupts an easy collapse into comic resolution, where comic resolution would mean the final privileging of one frame over another and therefore the closure of the disjunction that generates the humour. In this way, then, *The Office* renders its own status as humour open to doubt by placing aesthetic and affective obstacles in the way of a quick interpretation. And while this doubt is resolved by means of extra-textual coding and through the inclusion of more obviously comic moments, such as Tim's pranks, Brent's dance and Gareth's general gormlessness, the text nonetheless remains defined by the manner in which it holds open possibilities of humour by refusing to permit any easy and final interpretation of its comedy. *The Office* thus prolongs and intensifies the role of doubt in its humour, by refusing to provide sufficient formal cues by which a straightforward comic interpretation might be made possible and thereby engenders an uncomfortable doubt as to the expected relation of audience and text.

A similar process can be mapped across the other texts discussed in terms of discomfort. *Jackass*'s representations of stunt and pranks gone awry bears a strong family resemblance to slapstick, but this is complicated and rendered more difficult to interpret in any final manner by the accompanying emphasis on the fear and bodily damage that accompanies these failures. Here, it is the constantly-referenced reality of the text that directly maintains the lack of closure, intensifying the stakes of social deviance on display by assuring the audience that these are not merely hypothetical or fictional breaches, but actually occurring deviations, while also undercutting any easy sense of detachment that one might feel watching slap-stick or a cartoon. *Jackass* promises that what it represents actually happened, which makes it both potentially more comic and more difficult to easily interpret as comic, due to the weight of reality and the accompanying sight of real bodies in peril and pain. The real also intrudes upon the humour of *Silverman* and *Chappelle* in ways that – it was earlier noted – interpellate the viewer as the subject who directly experiences discomfort, rather than relying upon empathy for represented figures. By directly referring to social taboos such as the Holocaust and racism in a frivolous and flippant manner, the humour of these texts directly intercedes in the expected, and indeed the desired, social order of decorum and respect. What is of interest here is not those statements in themselves, but how the provocative discomfort of those statements rises beyond the bounds of the containing texts. The discomfort of these particular forms of uncomfortable humour arises out of the fraught interpretive space provided by these texts, where the extreme breach of social taboo is presented in the context of comedy, but also knowingly cued as a breach that marks itself as beyond the social pale: a tendency made

only more apparent by the ways in which the texts on occasion break, or at least nearly break, the fourth wall to deliver these quips. Rather than containing the potential social fallout of the improper remarks by attributing them to a particular character, these shows emphasise their awareness of their social breaches and thus claim uncomfortable ownership over them.

We can see then, that in these examples, the production of discomfort is premised upon an intentional failure to resolve the humorous incongruity within the bounds of the text and thereby provide immediate interpretive closure, which results in a direct appeal to the audience and the extra-textual world as the final arbiters of interpretation. By abandoning the conventions and contrivances of the fictional world in favour of either an indexical assurance that the representation exists beyond the text in the case of *Jackass*, or a direct appeal to social taboos in *Silverman* and *Chappelle*, uncomfortable humour shifts the resolution of humour beyond the relatively clearly defined conventions of the aesthetic space and into the messy social codes of reality, where it is not as easy to determine whether a given instance of social breach can be so easily understood or excused. In its own peculiar way, uncomfortable humour hereby restages what Rancière refers to as the “antinomy of modernism” (*Discontents* 87-8), wherein art is political by virtue of its “self-sufficiency” and separation from the everyday, which it must overcome in order to have any political bearing on the world (*Discontents* 40-2). Art so-conceived is thus both autonomous, insofar as it transcends or transgresses the world to propose new unsullied alternatives, and heteronomous, insofar as it is bound to everyday life by its desire to intrude upon and influence a world beyond itself. Rancière suggests that this

contradiction encapsulates the political promise of modernist (conceptions of) art, which produces a state of tense agitation and “dissensual common sense” through the simultaneous mobilisation of sensory appeal and its discrete autonomous separation (*Discontents* 98). The politics of such an aesthetic move is thus not a product of “the purity of art, but instead [of] the purity of the gap that aesthetic experience establishes with respect to games of power and forms of domination” (*Discontents* 101): the antinomy of modernity suggests the possibility of a break with existing regimes of sense and experience.

Similarly, with uncomfortable humour there is a distinction between the internal, autonomous aesthetic logic of the aesthetics – in this instance, the unresolved comic logic of the text – and the lived political and ethical logics of everyday life. Moreover, uncomfortable humour pushes this tension further through the presentation of an internal aesthetic logic of humour which it then fails to resolve internally, instead placing the burden of aesthetic resolution upon the viewer. Hence, not only does uncomfortable humour make evident the tension between the autonomous and heteronomous nature of the cultural work, it also goes a step further by calling upon the audience to recognise their own implication within the aesthetic logics. Texts like *Jackass* and *Chappelle* achieve the effect of audience implication in uncomfortable aesthetic logic by leaving their incongruities unresolved and unfinished. Consequently, if viewers wish to complete the comic aesthetic operation of these texts, they must recognise their own capacity to enact those comic logics: they must implicate themselves within the aesthetic of humour and thereby tacitly acknowledge how those aspects of the text expand beyond any

singular manifestation to shape the viewer's wider capacity to interpret and act in the world. The discomfort of such humour and the humour of the discomfort thus arises from the tension between the unresolved text and the possibility for external interpretative resolution. This tension demands that the audience affectively implicate themselves within the aesthetic operation of humour and recognise the continuity between the text's breach of social decorum and their own ability to interpret and understand the same: the audience must suffer the discomfort of the text in order to successfully interpret it as humour. This process can be seen at work in *The Office*, where, though the text is always easily interpreted as fictional in the last instance, it nonetheless makes use of the aesthetic cues of the docu-soap format in order to introduce elements that undercut and complicate any final and easy comic resolution of social deviations.⁶⁶ In doing so, these texts of uncomfortable humour perpetuate the experience of doubt on multiple levels: an experience of doubt that is here directly tied to the question of whether it is right and correct to interpret these texts as humour at all. In order to address this intellectual, aesthetic doubt the viewer must implicate themselves within the affective experience of social and bodily discomfort. Thus in the example of uncomfortable humour we find a proliferation of doubt – doubt as to the obligation of the viewer to police social boundaries by providing or withholding laughter, doubt as to the final borders between the real and the aesthetic, and doubt regarding the lines between the comic and non-comic

⁶⁶ This can be understood as a key distinction between the BBC and ABC iterations of *The Office*, where the American version, and related shows such as *Parks and Rec* and *Modern Family* adopt the formal filming conventions of the docusoap or reality format, but do so largely without taking on the narrative structures or emotional pathos associated with earlier British versions of those formats, such as *Airport*, *Clampers* and *The Cruise*'s.

and the correct and proper spaces and subjects of humour. Uncomfortable humour multiplies doubt and it is the encounter with such doubt that produces simultaneously experiences of humour and discomfort in an engagement with such texts.

The political consequences of this form of uncomfortable doubt can be understood in light of the way these texts unsettle existing social codes and conventions. Unlike traditional forms of humour, where the breach of social convention could be easily and quickly understood as the proposition of a specifically motivated frame of reference that conflicted with the status quo, the humour of discomfort resists (though never entirely or indefinitely) interpretation as a breach of social expectation. In comfortable humour, the discrepancy is quickly recognised and resolved, through the determination of the extent and the grounds of the discrepancy, followed by the resolution of gag through determination of the motivating reason for the discrepancy's existence. The doubt of the gag is thereby 'solved.' Instead, in instances of uncomfortable humour the process of resolution is delayed, and pain and shame exist simultaneously in the two registers of amusement and horror (or at least discomfort), so that in addition to the humour of non-normative behaviour there is also a more socially-charged and therefore more intense conflict between those frames of reference. Uncomfortable humour thus brings into doubt clear distinctions between normally clearly delineated aesthetic and affective categories and in this manner unsettles both the social norms it takes as its reference points, and any sense of correct subjects of such disrespectful treatment. Moreover, by integrating non-aesthetic frames of reference – such as forms of disgust or embarrassment that are tied up with codes of everyday behaviour as well as by compromising textual boundaries in their

discussion of controversial topics – into the very aesthetic formulation of humour, uncomfortable forms of humour further blur boundaries between aesthetic and actual epistemologies: calling up the viewer to recognise their own implication in these uncomfortable aesthetic logics. This awareness carries the possibility, and perhaps even the threat, of further erosion between fundamental cognitive categories, which in turn inflect how social codes of decorum are respected and represented. Thus by preventing the simple closure of mismatched frames of comic reference, and thereby holding open the potential movement between humour and non-humour in relation to social-charged affects and issues, uncomfortable humour operates as an affective and epistemological acid, one which wears away at certainty in social arrangements, by compelling the audience to experience the discomfort that comes with either enforcing or breaching those social cues and conventions.

Absurd Humour and the Aesthetic Limits of Interpretation and Understanding

Absurdist humour works in different manner from uncomfortable humour, operating at the level of that which is most normative – not codes of behaviour, but base assumptions about the physical nature of the world and structural conditions of cultural meaning – and challenging preconditions as they exist at this fundamental level. Absurd humour does this by positing alternate frames of reference that are profoundly alien to everyday encounters with the world or to the predicted form and function of a text, in which inherent expectations of causality or given structure are thwarted, and chaos rules

at the most basic levels of probability and causality.⁶⁷ Thus, absurd humour is the humour of that which is not expected to happen, indeed *should* not happen (in a metaphysical rather than ethical sense) but does so regardless. As a result, such texts involve much greater demands upon the audience to commit to the text's particular internal comic-aesthetic logics, which operate with their own fluid sense of causality, and which are the key means by which the text operates at the level of absurdity rather than nonsense. On the other hand, absurdist humour also has to ensure at the same time that it does not completely undercut the profoundly unexpected and unlikely nature of its deviations by too successfully accustoming the audience to its diegetic logics: this would involve either predictable humour that is logically unlikely but aesthetically obvious (yesterday's absurdity is today's banality), or humourless fantasy. The internal (il)logic of absurdist humour must therefore seek to strike a balance between alternate reference frames that are absurd but obvious, and un-interpretable nonsense. Faced with these dual demands absurdist humour texts must work to cultivate comic doubt by presenting outlandish and counterintuitive alternatives to the regular order of things, while also demanding of their audience a high level of trust that these radical departures from expectation will be

⁶⁷ Unlike social cues and codes of behaviour, such systems are not normally considered up for debate outside of their respective domains of physical science and artistic experimentation. This does not mean, however, that the positing of alternatives to such frames of reference is a scandalous and socially charged comic move. More often, absurd humour is received as much less controversial than uncomfortable humour, because although the frames of reference being challenged are more fundamental to basic understandings of the world and of cultural communication, these epistemological codes and structures are more tied to intellectual, rather than affective, meanings. Very few are outraged when a character defies gravity (though more are when they survive an explosion).

resolvable within the framework of a text's constantly mutating order of absurd understanding.⁶⁸

Family Guy furnishes perhaps the clearest example of the extreme gaps between accepted convention and comic deviation offered by absurd humour, though all three texts – *Family Guy*, *South Park*, *The Simpsons* – provide examples of the absurdist manipulation of frames of reference. *Family Guy* pushes this tendency to the limits, though, due to the intensity of its absurdist logic and its self-referential nature. Whereas the absurdity of *The Simpsons* and *South Park* draws upon the fragile realism of those shows as the stable frame of reference from which it deviates – and therefore these texts peddle absurdity in relation to the basic expectations of everyday life – *Family Guy* instead constantly builds its absurdity in reaction to itself, or at least its own prior self. On the one hand, then, we have *The Simpsons*, which offers absurd deviations from a world very much like our own, hence the highly improbable incapacitation of a team of softball players in separate instances, or a town meeting spontaneously conducted through song, both of which are highly unlikely and unpredictable deviations from everyday expectations. Similarly, *South Park* offers a host of absurdities that are on one level actually quite likely within their diegetic world, such as a talking towel or a shopping centre as a cosmically evil force, but which are patently absurd in relation to the viewer's everyday world, and become even more so as any given episode of *South Park* pushes the

⁶⁸ In some instances the point of resolution is simply the tradition and reputation of a television show, character or franchise as a cultural site that doesn't always make sense. This can be understood as a reason why the most successful absurd humour often occurs within the context of long-running franchises like *The Muppets* and 'safe' media spaces like Adult Swim. Successful absurdity needs to get audiences onside and accustomed to their humour in order to really push the limits of sense and sensibleness.

internal (il)logic of a given situation to its extreme conclusion. On the other hand, we have *Family Guy*, where absurdity is constantly recalibrated in relation to what has come before: a process that results in a ‘ratcheting up’ of evolving absurdity.⁶⁹ This can be seen in the evolution of the cut-away gags, from pop culture pastiche to increasingly baroque and self-referential commentary on the show itself, or in macro-digressions such as the ‘chicken fight’ sequences, which expand in length and gratuity as a means to constantly defy adapting viewer expectation. *Family Guy* thus operates as a self-perpetuating absurdity machine, pushing the logic of absurd humour to its extreme through an accelerated articulation and defiance of new frames of reference.

This constantly shifting, autophagic movement of absurdity perhaps best illustrates how humour operates as an ever-expanding and evolving aesthetic logic. And as the logic of humour shifts, so does a sense of doubt. In the case of absurd humour, it is often relatively clear which of the frames of reference might be understood as incorrect and therefore it is easy to collapse the gap between competing frames of reference and interpret this incongruity in terms of humour. As a consequence, the doubt of absurd humour may therefore seem fleeting and not potentially politically meaningful, because, despite the doubt and potential challenge to the metaphysical status quo posed in the first instance of humour, this uncertainty is quickly resolved by the interpretation of the text as humour. However, the constantly shifting nature of a text such as *Family Guy* upsets any apparent stability by revealing the extent to which absurd humour isn’t measured against

⁶⁹ No doubt, *The Simpsons* and *South Park* also evolve in this way, though they do so at a slower pace which can be explained in their more defined grounding in a conventional formal narrative structure and to a (however shaky) form of realism.

a static and unmoving normal frame of reference, but can instead start to exert an influence even on the frame of reference perceived to reflect a state of normality. As the aesthetic logic of absurd humour develops over the course of a text's existence, a text like *Family Guy* entertains increasingly extreme deviations from expectations, and in doing so demands interpretative acceptance of ever more unlikely and relatively improbably incongruities.

Moreover, not just *Family Guy*, but also *The Simpsons* and *South Park* produce absurdity through a defiance of an everyday frame of reference: a defiance which is resolved and defused through the comic recognition of deviance and the imposition of the correct frame of interpretation. However, absurd forms of humour resist this restorative process to some extent due to the extremity and consistency of their challenges to metaphysical normality. Hence, in opposing the frame of normality in an unrelenting manner, and by doing so at the level of the text rather than of any represented content or character (i.e. it is the text and the textual world that is absurd, not simply a given situation or the behaviour of a character within that world), absurd humour slowly transforms the epistemological status of the metaphysical status quo from a norm to a rule. This occurs because the deviation from the norm occurs at the level of the text, rather than the level of character: consequently, there is no space from which the text can reprehend this deviation, without breaking the fourth wall – a formal device that *The Simpsons* and *South Park* have largely resisted. Thus, as this absurd deviation from the norm goes un-noted and un-punished, it has the effect of altering the apparent epistemological sanctity of the general frame of reference, which seems increasingly open

to manipulation and defiance without censure: thus, any sense of fundamental normality comes to be increasingly flexible and ductile. By building humour around deviation from such systems, this group of absurdist texts drags usually inviolate frames of reference into aesthetic spaces of contingency. Absurd humour thus makes the stability and certainty of metaphysical normality appear fragile and through force of sheer repetition, absurdity introduces doubt into the dominant metaphysics. This process works to stretch the foreseeable limits of comic doubt, such that audiences become more able and willing to interpret more and more extreme deviations from epistemological norms as possible sites of humour rather than nonsense: as incongruities that are potentially, some-how interpretable, rather than automatically beyond the limits of possible meaningful explanation. Absurdist humour thus works to constantly expand the audience's capacity and desire to make sense of scenarios and narratives that push existing limits of sense: it pushes their ability to entertain doubt.

There are three major consequences of this expansion of absurd doubt. The first relates to the means by which an absurdist text works to secure a meaningful comic interpretation, rather than simply silliness or nonsense. As suggested earlier, it is necessary that an absurd text secure the acquiescence of the audience to its comic (il)logics, otherwise it will appear as completely meaningless. What this process involves is the text cultivating a trusting relationship with the audience, such that they will regard a text's extreme deviations from epistemological normality as somehow motivated and

comic, rather than as nonsense.⁷⁰ Under the conditions of such a relationship, the audience is in fact placing more trust in the explanatory power of the aesthetic of humour than they are placing in the stable existence of logics of causality and probability. In this instance, trust in the text allows doubt in the conditions of reality, reversing what might be thought the typical arrangement where an audience assesses a text based on their knowledge of reality, and which often requires what is referred to as the ‘suspension of disbelief.’ This suspension differs from that associated with other texts, such as science fiction or the superhuman exploits of action heroes, however, because in the instance of absurd humour, the audience is not just withholding judgement, but instead actively anticipating deviation from the expected. Typically suspension of disbelief involves the establishment of a hermetically-sealed alternate set of narrative beliefs, but with absurdity the audience are instead encouraged to read deviation from the norm as contravention of the expected. In effect, the audience are not so much anticipating an alternate set of social and physical rules as the unmotivated disruption of existing rules. As such, they are called upon to place their faith in the aesthetic logic of humour above their faith in their experience of reality and thereby cultivate what can be understood as a ‘desire for disbelief’.

This is not to say that the audience completely abandons their desire for stable reality on the advice of a cartoon, but it does mean that the utmost sanctity of the metaphysical real may develop some hairline cracks under a constant barrage of

⁷⁰ It needs to be noted that this cultivation of trust and a taste for absurdity in the audience is not some objective process engaged with a featureless and neutral audience. The audience for absurdist texts skews towards a young, white, male audience. The reasons for this demographic tilt and the consequences thereof are not the central concern of analysis here, but should be addressed in the future.

absurdity, a possibility that ties into the second consequence of the expansion of absurd doubt, whereby the shifting (il)logic of epistemological uncertainty makes it increasingly easy to perceive and entertain the possibility of unforeseen dangers and risk. In this manner, absurd humour has the potential to make an intervention into the popular “risk imaginary,” by which fears and narratives of risks are interpreted and judged to be credible or not (Salter 235-6, 243-4). The introduction of absurd doubt into epistemological uncertainty does not mean the end of a common metaphysical frame of reference, but it can work to foster an attitude that sees the potential for gaps and slippages all around. In one sense this can lead to skepticism as regards the sanctity and obviousness of political and ethical discourses, which come under heavy critique in *South Park*. Moreover, it is not that *South Park* simply ridicules claims to justice or narratives of freedom, exploitation or duty, but that it pushes and warps those narratives until they appear absurd by virtue of their own internal inconsistencies and assumptions. In doing so, the text hereby undercuts those explanations of the world which would seek to construct themselves as complete and inviolate, and instead raises the possibility that absurd and unforeseen outcomes may lurk deep within their assumptions. However, this consequence of absurdity can also be understood to work on a wider register, beyond particular explanations of the world, to undercut any sense of certainty at all. To this extent, absurdity can be regarded as part of a larger sociocultural shift, characterised by Ulrich Beck among many others, as a “risk society,” which self-reflexively assesses the potential for unforeseen elements to emerge out of metaphorical blue skies (27-29). Humour is not therefore simply a disruption of existing risk imaginaries, as suggested by

Mark Salter, but instead can also potentially produce an aesthetic mode more conducive to the perception and perhaps acceptance of ever-greater and “unlikely” sources and motivations of the unexpected (244-6). To think absurdly is to conceive of the notion that that which is unforeseen, which openly and blatantly contravenes the most fundamental rules one accepts for one’s physical world and society, may still happen and that events, programs, projects and texts might not unfold as predicted.

A third consequence of absurdity follows on from the second, and acts as something of a corrective to the suggestion that absurd humour might propagate some form of existentialist and overarching feeling of uncertainty. After all, absurd humour requires more than simply the intrusion of an utterly unexpected occurrence that implies a radically different frame of reference than the epistemological status quo – the other essential ingredient is a means to make sense of the deviation and to read it as more than simply nonsense. Simply put, absurd *humour* is more than just the unexpected; it is the unexpected that can be understood through indirect and un-immediate logics of explanation. Of course, for the most part, when encountering stark deviations from expected scenarios in everyday and political situations, we actually already have an interpretive logic at hand: the mere fact that a thing is seen to have *really* occurred provides a form of explanation couched in the brute positivism of sensory experience. Yet, absurd (il)logic also has a role to play here, for it posits another way in which to interpret deviation from expectation that is not mutually exclusive with reality-based explanations. Rather, absurdity provides an aesthetic means by which to interpret actual occurrences in another example of the interpenetration of the actual and the aesthetic

discussed earlier, whereby such deviations are encountered as absurdities. This interpretive strategy does not focus on the need to recalibrate one's expectation of the world in order to achieve correct understanding, but instead fixates on the moment of deviation as the proposition of two contradictory frames of reference. This focus on the contradiction – rather than on the desire to achieve a correct perspective – is symptomatic of an absurd perspective that regards the world through multiple lenses of contradictory explanatory frameworks, rather than seeking to establish one correct and final worldview. This does not mean seeing the world as any less a site of risk and the unexpected, or 'correct' the perception of risk: in fact, the absurd view is arguably even more motivated to see the world in terms of deviations from the expected and slippages between systems of rules. However, rather than being seen as threatening, these deviations and slippages are seen as comic. The absurd perspective is not after a universally correct way of seeing the world, but rather acknowledges multiple unresolvable viewpoints, whose differences are a site of pleasure, rather than anxiety. The aesthetic logic of absurd humour can thus be thought to cultivate a way of being in the world that is prepared to locate common logics of explanation across widely diverse frames of reference, that is more open to the possibility of unexpected breakdowns in the expected metaphysical, social and political order, and that is able to interpret those breakdowns in a manner that does not try to resolve them away.

Political Humour and the Aesthetics of Disruption

In contrast to the categories of uncomfortable and absurd humour, the final category of politicised humour – a form of humour which seeks to intercede in larger

debates about the correct way of organising and administrating society – cannot be so easily charted with reference to a central structuring aesthetic logic. Politicised humour marks a much more diverse definition of the comic, one that draws upon a variety of reference frames that are disrupted and challenged across a number of different registers. As such there is no central aesthetic logic per se at work in politicised humour. This distinction between ‘politicised humour’ and the afore-considered categories is captured in the designation of *politicised* humour, rather than the more familiar notion of ‘political humour’: a distinction that I make in order to emphasise the ongoing assertion that all humour has the potential to work politically, and that therefore what is customarily referred to as political humour is better understood as humour whose relation to political questions and narratives is over-determined through the representation of content that is directly and obviously linked to the state political sphere of governance, administration of populations, and contestation of questions and concerns aligned with the state . By linking humour to the state political sphere in this direct manner, what is here referred to as ‘politicised humour’ introduces humour into the authoritative, closed and tightly-defined spaces of state political narratives, and, in doing so, gives rise to otherwise unthinkable or unsayable interventions couched in terms that would normally be considered inappropriate or incommensurate to such discussions. Politicised humour gets in amongst serious conversations in such a way that (as discussed at length in the first chapter) its very existence – as an amalgamation of the ostensibly serious and non-serious – is considered by many practitioners and scholars to be a political intervention in itself, regardless of what in particular it has to say (c.f. Critchley, Kaplan, Stephen Kercher,

Mindess, Stott, Zwart). What holds this category together then is a common sense that the humour being offered operates in a manner that can be distinguished as ‘political’: a much more broadly defined category than the metaphysical or affective (both of which can be, but are certainly not always, interpreted as political). Hence, although politicised humour cannot be as easily grasped as the execution of a particular logic with respect to a given frame of reference, it still operates as a useful analytic and aesthetic category that is bound together by the perception of a relationship between humour and politics that thinks through this connection by way of a particular understanding of political aesthetics.

Politicised humour can thus be characterised as the introduction of humour into pre-existing state political discourses. However, as discussed earlier, not all examples of politicised humour function in the same way: earlier I distinguished between Jon Stewart’s ridicule of Palin and Trump (or indeed any number of politicians’ non-political faux pas), and a routine such as Colbert’s recreation of Palin’s account of Paul Revere’s Midnight Ride. While these examples might appear superficially similar, the actual aesthetic operations of the different manifestations of humour in question here need to be understood in different political terms. The key point here is that Stewart’s critique of Trump does not address any distinctly political content, rather it draws upon a different set of ideas about correct liberal bourgeois social behaviour: Trump cannot identify authentic food, he is a narcissist, he does not perform correct local rituals. Given the hegemony of liberal bourgeois modes of conduct, Stewart is not therefore offering any challenge to prevailing social norms of behaviour, let alone politics. Instead, he is simply reasserting a dominant code of social conduct by noting its breach. There is thus no

challenge here: there is not even a real presentation of challenge, only the reassertion of a regime of etiquette and authenticity. In contrast, Colbert's Revere recreation does intervene in existing political narratives, or at the very least, presents itself as doing such. This is because not only does Colbert ridicule Palin's ignorance, and implicitly critique the sanctity of political pundits (neither a particularly radical gesture), but in his excessive performance he also works to introduce a sense of the ridiculously unexpected or unexpectedly ridiculous into the heart of the ostensibly serious political conversation. Hence, whereas Stewart's humour of ridicule simply reasserts the power of a dominant understanding of social norms, Colbert's conceit allows him the comic space to wildly depart from social convention while retaining the assertion that he does so in the service of a serious and sober state politics.

Paul Lewis has suggested that such forms of humour are, at best, entirely divorced from the realm of the state political because they does not offer a clear state political message, and at worse, they are anti-political because they deny the serious importance of state political matters (*Cracking* 189-195). However, such an interpretation only holds if we assume that the broad category of 'seriousness' is a mark of virtue in itself, and that humour is somehow inherently opposed to the proper conduct of state politics. In contrast to these assumptions, though, I suggest that the main consequence of the argument for political seriousness works to reify and stabilise current iterations of political narrative and debate as sacrosanct and reinforce the idea that any challenge to the stability of those current forms is a challenge to all state politics as such. This position mistakes the current form of state politics for the only form of politics. In contrast, I suggest that the

introduction of humour into state politics renders politics-as-usual open to challenge and debate, because by occurring alongside the consideration of what is ordinarily regarded as political, such humour scrambles or at the very least momentarily upsets the immediate and obvious interpretations of those scenarios. Hence, in instances like Colbert's *Midnight Ride*, but also Stewart's dissection of Erin Cantor's response to proposed disaster relief, Cenac's report of the Alberta Tar Sands and Morris's duping of celebrities for false public causes, the forms of humour at work call into question the apparent naturalness and sanctified authority of the state political narratives being presented. Hence, while these examples of politicised humour might not mount a coherent or sustained critique, politicised humour here thus works to momentarily derail the doxa of politics-as-usual: not in any single, clear way, but instead through the use of a number of aesthetic tactics that operate through the enjoining of the comic to the state political.

This unsettling work of politicised humour marks a clear instance wherein the aesthetic of humour retains the potential to intervene directly in the understanding of the world. In particular, politicised humour illustrates Rancière's assertion that politics itself is, like art, a distribution of the sensible (*Discontents* 25-6). Rancière's use of 'politics,' here operates in a third way between the categories of state politics and politics I have been using so far, which speaks to the slippage between the two categories. Rancière's definition refers to politics as a particular way of understanding and addressing the distribution, contestation and negotiation of power. What this means is that both politics (in Rancière's sense) and art are different ways of giving form and shape to the world: the idea of politics is not a pre-given "separate reality," but rather politics is, like aesthetics, a

particular way of understanding and engaging with the world which therefore has its sense of categories, organisation and what is proper and what is not. What Rancière is therefore arguing is that “the relationship between art and politics is a relationship between two communities of sense. This means that art and politics are not two permanent realities about which we would have to discuss whether they must be interconnected or not. Art and politics, in fact, are contingent configurations of the common that may or may not exist” (“Contemporary Art” 32). This ‘aesthetics of politics’ – a way of organising and understanding the world that cleaves off a distinct epistemological space for the discussion of (state) politics – proposes that politics not only exists as a separate sphere, but also that there are particular rules and regulations proper to that sphere, which is imagined to be a serious space of discussion, negotiation and ideological contestation that finds its purest manifestation in the Habermasian notion of the bourgeois public sphere. When politics is understood in this manner, politicised humour can then be recognised as an intervention into that ‘political’ distribution of the sensible that has the potential to disrupt that apparently inviolate space, insofar as humour is regarded as not proper to the particular political understanding and operation of the world.

Understood in such terms, it becomes possible to more clearly distinguish between the aesthetic operations and potential disruptions posed by the different iterations of politicised humour discussed above: on the one hand, Stewart’s ridicule of Trump and, on the other, Colbert’s *Midnight Ride*. While both involve the interaction of the aesthetics of politics and the aesthetics of humour, this interaction plays out in different ways in the

two forms. In the first instance, while humour is certainly present, it does not work to disrupt ideas of the correctly (state) political. This is because not only does Stewart's ridicule not address directly state political concerns, but also because here the aesthetic of humour becomes subject to the existing political distribution of the sensible. The humour of ridicule works alongside the logics of state politics – whereby one seeks to discredit one's political opponents – rather than in conflict with them. Hence, while such apolitical forms of humour may appear to intrude upon and disrupt the political sphere through the introduction of humour into serious spaces, when considered more closely, such humour operates in the service of state politics as usual and thereby leave the idea and practice of state politics untouched. The apparent disruption and aesthetic confusion of Stewart's ridicule in fact operates to reiterate and reinforce existing political understandings of the world. In contrast, a performance such as Colbert's *Midnight Ride* introduces an aesthetic of humour into the very core of the aesthetics of politics, in a way that does challenge its sanctity as a serious space. Such humour enacts a form of aesthetic dissensus insofar as it intervenes in the practice of state politics in what appears to be an improper manner that does not adhere to the accepted expectations of state political discussion and debate. In such instance, humour is where it should not be, because it is not only employed for the purpose of ridicule, but is also present in the heart of the communication of the political message and the construction of political argument: it is not just the butt who is ridiculous, but the entire exchange of political perspectives that is now reconfigured in a ludicrous light.

A similar process can also be seen at work in *Four Lions*, which can be understood as an extended comic meditation on the current narratives surrounding terrorism and Islam in the UK. As with *TDS* and *TCR*'s comic disruption of US political discourse, *Four Lions* intercedes in ongoing conversations about terrorism and its relationship to Islam. The main difference here is that Morris's humour, much more than that of Stewart or Colbert, addresses highly controversial and socially charged subject matter, and does so both with greater tenacity and at much greater length. The extended nature of Morris's comic 'critique' is arguably not only warranted but, in fact, made necessary by the contentious nature of his subject matter, which often means that the narratives surrounding such topics are much more politically entrenched and much more likely to be regarded as beyond criticism. Therefore, in order to unpick and unsettle such narratives, it becomes incumbent on Morris to provide greater amounts of comic evidence in order to disturb dominant accounts of subjects such as paedophilia or terrorism. Thus, we here see how politicised humour can move beyond the properly state political and be more widely understood as a category of humour that addresses and upsets any social frames of reference considered to be socially 'important.'

Understood in this manner, the central function of politicised humour can thus be regarded as the introduction of doubt into frames of reference in a manner that is often regarded as partisan, controversial or contentious. While doubt may be central to the operation of all manifestations of humour, in the case of politicised humour doubt becomes much more immediately central to the understanding of humour – politicised humour involves the active and explicit injection of doubt into both socially sacrosanct

narratives and the media forms by which those narratives are communicated and propagated. The disruption of the narratives themselves involves the positing of political counter-narratives, which by no means need to be plausible; indeed the potential of their success as humour is arguably greater when they are not. What these counter-narratives achieve is the introduction of alternatives to the prevailing political consensus, which in turn makes it possible to entertain the existence of alternatives and thereby doubt the singular obviousness of existing political narratives. Hence, even though the alternatives are often (comically) implausible, they nonetheless achieve cognitive traction by aesthetic means and thereby weaken the hegemonic obviousness of what is taken to be real through the introduction of the possibility of doubt. In addition, politicised humour also works to disrupt the communication of those narratives when it attends to the media processes of political communication, as can be seen in Stewart's direct critiques of political reporting, or the parodic excesses of *Brass Eye* and *TCR*. Giving the lie to the notion of political communication as consistent and correct, politicised humour that takes up the forms and media of politics highlights the internal inconsistencies and contradictions of political communication. This pertains to both the articulation of a specific state political argument or narrative – such as Stewart's critique of Cantor's disaster relief budgeting – and of the overall inconsistency between the ideal practice of state politics and media coverage thereof, such as lies at the heart of most of Colbert's humour. By emphasising the fundamental inability of media coverage to achieve the (unattainable) standard of absolute transparency, clarity and "reasonableness" promised by state political discourse, politicised humour casts disruptive doubt on the transparency of state political narratives.

Politicised humour thus targets both the content of state politics (through the disruption of political narratives) and the media forms that shape those state politics, and, in doing so, injects doubt into some of the most pervasive structuring narratives of contemporary culture.

The major political consequence of the form of humour discussed here, then, is that through the introduction of doubt into the content and form of state politics, these categories of humour act to render state politics political, by which I mean open to discussion and debate, rather than as the set conflict of questions always solved and understood in advance in accordance with established positions on taxation, welfare, education, health and other recurring topics. Through the introduction of doubt into the state political discussion, politicised humour emerges as one of the few methods by which to challenge and thereby re-open discussion around dominant state political and social discourses: a wide-ranging category that includes not only Sarah Palin and the threat of terrorism, but also the very sense by which issues are judged sufficiently meaningful to warrant public attention. Understood in such a manner, humour becomes a rare site of not only permitted, but actually celebrated, popular critique, whereby under the guise of flippancy, the obviousness of current interpretations and hierarchies are called in question. Hence, while in many instances sustained consideration of the failure of the media or inconsistency of politicians is likely to be deemed too banal to command sustained public attention, when such concerns are taken up through the lens of humour, and reconfigured in terms of entertainment, their appeal increases significantly. While there is certainly some concern that an enjoyment of the failure of state politics can lead

to undirected apathy, it also works to demand critical accounts of state political events and narratives, and thereby challenge the apparent naturalness of the existing aesthetics of state politics. The politics of politicised humour thus emerges as a consequence of the manner in which it deploys humour as a means of permitted critique. Moreover, this applies to not only to the directly state political, but also to social categories, as can be seen in Morris's interrogation of the discourses surrounding paedophilia. By inserting itself into the sanctioned distribution of state political attention, politicised humour casts doubt on the accepted practice of state politics-as-usual and other affiliated social practices, questions the sanctity of existing state political narratives and conventions, and thereby raises the possibility of debate and disagreement. In this manner, politicised humour brings the submerged narratives of the everyday closer to the surface of understanding, and it does so by introducing doubt via the proposition of alternatives so unlikely as to appear comic.

Laugh Like No One's Watching: Liberal Drives in the Society of Humour

The various manifestations of postmodern humour thus all act in different ways to enact a politics of doubt. Uncomfortable humour can be understood as an aesthetic strategy that affectively dismantles clear social distinctions: absurd humour undermines faith in the predictability and continuity of textual forms and lived experience: and politicised humour prises open apparently finalised narratives. In their way, all these political aesthetic operations could therefore be seen to support the belief, interrogated in the first chapter, that humour operates as an inevitably liberating and dissenting force that undermines given and oppressive structures of understanding and order. However, the

difference here is that rather than understanding humour tout court as possessed of inalienable political drive, the current conclusions are based upon a close consideration of the aesthetic and textual strategies at work in particular representative texts. It is not all humour that is freedom, but only particular forms and iterations: the traditional humour of texts such as *Friends* continues to reinforce norms and ridicule their deviations, through easily resolved social incongruities. Nor can postmodern forms of humour be seen as simple liberating: my characterisation of postmodern humour in terms of a politics of doubt should not be understood as a return to the model where humour invariably equals liberal dissent. Rather, I am arguing for a conception of humour as a complex aesthetic field possessed of its own political priorities, assumptions and consequences. Humour can be implicated within the wider narratives of liberal politics, but it cannot be entirely defined or captured by that particular political logic. For humour does not so much tear down boundaries and borders, as build them up, so that it may breach them, unsettle them, and upset them for all the world to see. Thus, humour is not just the manifestation of an impulse towards equality, freedom, tolerance and reasoned dissent, which seeks to define and celebrate proper reasoning and critical subjects. Humour is also an attack: it is not just an opening up, it is also an unraveling: it is not just dissent, it is also doubt.

Postmodern humour's politics of doubt therefore overlap, but also exceed, the political practices and desires of the liberal projects outlined according to that term in the first chapter. This is because postmodern humour not only engages in an aesthetic logic of question and disruption, but also consistently expands this logic ever outwards: constantly pushing at existing limits of meaningful and stable interpretation. In a sense, then, the

political aesthetic logics of postmodern humour can even be considered more liberal than liberalism itself as they consistently and doggedly pursue the internal logic and priorities of liberalism – freedom, dissent, and hostility to determining structures – past the limits of existing liberal institutions and discussions themselves. Beyond particular iterations of the liberal impulse in terms of Left or Right politics, postmodern humour enacts an opposition to all stable social, cultural, economic and epistemological structures. This is not a secondary feature of this humour or an attribute of a particular manifestation; as has been argued, such disruptive work is fundamental to the operation of this aesthetic. Postmodern humour thus subverts, undercuts or challenges the social, political and cultural structures it encounters as the basis for its central aesthetic logic. It is on these grounds that humour, and postmodern forms in particular, come to serve as the dominant aesthetic mode of liberal society insofar as they enact logics of incessant question and challenge, while also working to exceed and unsettle the boundaries of liberal politics.

At the heart of this disruption of liberal politics is the aesthetic nature of the politics of comic doubt, which permits the almost unencumbered pursuit of its central driving logic. This is a consequence of the contemporary dominance of what Rancière refers to as the “aesthetic regime of the arts” (*Politics* 22), under which art and aesthetic practice comes to be understood as a distinct sphere of creative play that is free from the rules of everyday life and social interaction. Under such conditions, cultural production is not expected simply to serve a social function, such as the conveying of meaning, generation of profit or assistance in the accomplishment of a defined task, but is instead permitted, indeed required, to provide affective and intellectual experiences by virtue of

its aesthetic form. Thus, postmodern humour texts are able to carry the logics and priorities of liberalism further than liberal politics itself, because as an aesthetic category humour is not usually expected to be bound by *social* rules and demands. Rather, the imperative for the aesthetic of postmodern humour is to follow an internal logic of aesthetic development and experimentation: the aesthetic of humour therefore constantly shifts to encompass new unfamiliar frames of reference once older joke forms and references have become predictable. Postmodern humour is thus a self-repeating and self-informing logic of constant interrogation and disputation that proceeds unimpeded due to its aesthetic nature. The tendency of the humour aesthetic is therefore to constantly push towards more unlikely and unexpected comic forms, the upshot of which is that humour is sometimes permitted to breach the bounds of social rules and expectations in ways that other aesthetic forms might not, because its internal logic is tied directly to the breach of those social rules and expectations. Moreover, the other consequence of humour's aesthetic logic is a predilection towards constant expansion into new areas to avoid the ossification and stagnation that defines a static comic routine, or one which challenges frames of reference which lack social power or resonance, and which therefore is unlikely to find an appreciative audience.

Borne along by its own internal aesthetic logic, humour thus comes to occupy a distinctive space within the contemporary mediascape, where it simultaneously enacts an aesthetic form of liberal dissent, while also challenging the constraints that liberal society places upon itself. Another way of understanding this is that humour operates as both the art of the liberal community – in that it draws upon shared assumptions of how the world

is and enacts the political and cultural assumptions of that community in aesthetic forms – and also the breach of that community, because its internal aesthetic logic means that it will never be satisfied with any state of stability. Accordingly, postmodern humour can be considered an aesthetics of dissent, wherein dissent remains almost invariably undefined, and as such can be understood as dissent from anything and everything. In this manner, humour reveals the uncomfortable consequences of an (aesthetic) politics grounded in dissent: the aesthetic of dissent humour is, in effect, content-less, and therefore lacks defined goals. This is not dissent for the purpose of establishing a new, better (more equitable, more fair) order, but dissent for the sake of dissent, which can be considered analogous to Boltanski’s “alienated critique,” that form which “seek[s] satisfaction in the critical gesture itself, and not in what it makes possible to attain” (*Critique* 114). In its purest forms, where the production of humour is shaped less by obvious external priorities than by the desire to generate laughter through the prerequisite aesthetic means, postmodern humour corresponds to a powerful and socially resonant political aesthetic tactic that is not going anywhere in particular. Humour can thus be understood as an extremely powerful political tactic that operates through an aesthetic form. By this I mean that, rather than having a defined endpoint in sight, the politics of postmodern humour are instead driven by an opposition to stability or stasis: they are committed to ever-questioning change. However, this is a political tactic that operates in the absence of any particularly defined political programme – which is to say that the politics of these politics are not defined in advance – and insofar as those politics of humour are not decided in advance, they are always up for grabs. To this extent, the politics of

postmodern humour are profoundly liberal – concerned only with a dissentful opposition to any existing structures that are thought to determine or restrict the actions of the individual.

From a sympathetic perspective, then, the politics of humour might therefore seem to be unquestionably desirable in their consistent opposition to any form of potentially oppressive structure. And indeed this is true to an extent, and can perhaps be cited as one reason that humour is so often celebrated as a form of aesthetically-realised resistance, especially under authoritarian state political conditions (c.f Herzog, B. Lewis) or by those who regard the cultural possibilities for dissent to be increasingly limited in “post-9/11” state politics of the USA (Gournelos *Tao* 206). Yet the difficulty with such a position emerges when considered in light of particular instances of the postmodern aesthetic of humour: in terms of politicised humour, challenging restrictive narratives and automatic debate positions can certainly be argued to be doing some good, but also has the potential to lead to confusion and disconnection. This becomes even more apparent when considered in terms of uncomfortable humour and especially absurd humour – it is certainly true that standards of behaviour, comportment and correct speech have been and continue to be used as repressive political instruments that oppress groups who do not correspond to narrow ideas of correct subjecthood, or whose opinions depart from orthodoxy. However, it is also arguable that such structures can also serve valuable social roles and act to protect as well as oppress marginal or vulnerable groups, or serve as the basis to enact desirable social change (Boltanski *Critique* 157). To oppose all ordered structures as part of the same monolith is to ignore the broad details of political structures

that make everyday life different under the conditions of, say, American neoliberalism or historical Australasian social democracy, not to mention Western capitalism or Soviet communism. Hence, in terms of absurdity for example, while a sense of epistemological uncertainty may lend itself to the establishment of radical political positions, undermining a sense of everyday stability can also lead to fear, confusion, anxiety and a nihilistic rejection of all common grounds of debate and understanding. Thus, when the political work of humour is directed against oppressive cultural and social structures, the politics of humour can be seen as inherently beneficial; however, very few social and political structures simply oppress. Rather, political and social structures do just what it says on the box – they provide structure, in that that they give rise to sets of categories and logics by which it becomes possible to lead a meaningful life. These structural categories and logics can certainly be oppressive and always invariably will be to some extent, but they can also provide useful and even necessary ways to engage with the world. Humour is the aesthetic that will act against these existing structures, for better or worse.

Moreover, in slightly different, but by no means divergent, terms, we can also understand humour as both the breach and proposed new beginnings of “distributions of the sensible” to take up the Rancièrian terminology. This language better conveys the extent to which the aesthetic logic of humour does not just work in some autonomous aesthetic realm, but can have ramifications for the way in which the world and society are lived and encountered. As a political aesthetic practice, the central mobilisation of doubt and dissent within humour acts to not simply generate amusement, but also to confound existing structural understandings of the world. Operating in this manner, the rise of

postmodern humour can be interpreted as more than simply a reflection or symptom of the broad expansion of the liberal political mindset in the 1990s and 2000s, but can instead be understood as a determining factor within the formation and perpetuation of that ideology. Postmodern humour does not just rise out of that political and cultural milieu: it also helps to give form to it, as part of an aesthetic feedback loop that exaggerates and perpetuates political logics in aesthetic form. In this manner, then, *Jackass*, *Family Guy* and *TCR* can tell us much about the world we live in. In particular, these texts both speak and give rise to the cultural and political priorities of the moment. Within the forms of postmodern humour exists a drive towards the disruption of shared frames of cultural reference, an internal aesthetic logic that resonates with wider political idea of relationships to authority and to other contemporary subjects. More specifically, humour is the aesthetic form that seeks to be constantly contrary with respect to its central posited distribution of the sensible: sometimes gently, sometimes less so, as in the case of postmodern humour which most frequently operates in a harsh, aggressive, intentionally bewildering manner. In a manner that is central to its functioning, then, postmodern humour contrasts alternate distributions of the sensible, by presenting two or more ways of seeing the world next to one another and drawing attention to the gaps and similarities that define their relations to one another. As such, postmodern humour is that aesthetic mode which always contains the promise of defamiliarising the ideological status quo if it is interpreted in a sympathetic and attendant manner by its audience.

In its commitment to the constant interrogation of the culturally and politically given, postmodern humour can thus be interpreted as a dialectically aesthetic expression

of both the chaotic and constructive aspects of liberalism. Indeed, postmodern humour is the art of dissensual liberalism, which both retrenches liberalism and pushes it into and past its own limits by virtue of its internal autonomous aesthetic logic. In its chaotic motion, humour acts as an aesthetic agent of potentially endless disturbance premised in an utter devotion to freedom. In practice both humour and liberalism have the potential to over-emphasise disruption, leading to a fetishisation of the process of change and challenge as somehow desirable in itself. In the instance of liberalism, this can form the common bond between the apparently opposed discourses of certain aspects of radical anti-capitalism and neoliberalism, both of which celebrate the endless possibility of dynamic change and mutability as a means to better living. In the instance of humour, this can give rise to texts where the impulse to diverge from expectations is an increasingly dominant aspect of the comic logic, which in turn produces the postmodern excesses of *Jackass*, *Family Guy* and *The Colbert Report*. Postmodern humour thus reflects both the liberating promise and the threatening nihilism of a political project built around critique without the promise of any stable end point or aspiration for a better life. From one angle, postmodern humour is symptomatic of a desirable political tendency to question the world around us: to understand the lack of distinctions between apparently separate spheres of reference and thereby perceive the role of the self as an essential and implicated element of wider structures, to exist within unpredictable and utterly incongruous multiple frames of reference and to question the self-contained validity of apparently proper and complete political and social narratives. However, at its most provocative or absurd extremes, humour models a fundamental disregard for the ways in

which structures of understanding and interpretation might enrich life, as well as oppress. In this sense, postmodern humour both contributes to the aesthetic underpinning of current political life, and provides a widely available form of training on how to make sense of that life, because while it is the aesthetic of dissent, humour nonetheless always requires a way for that dissent to be understood and executed. Postmodern humour is the cultural form of the liberal dissensual moment. However, this does not mean that humour is entirely captured by that moment: as an aesthetic category, postmodern humour maintains a level of autonomy from prevailing political mores and, as such, postmodern humour thereby retains the potential to continue to shape and reshape cultural conversations and narratives in ways that aggressively imagine new ridiculous worlds, where we might all live together in funny uncomfortable, absurd and unsure ways.

Conclusion - The Last Laugh

Humour is more than just a joke. It is a complex and complicated aesthetic mode that plays a central role in the mediated cultural life of contemporary subjects. This is especially true of those subjects who inhabit the rich group of Anglophone nations whose historic orientation towards freedom as a determining political category plays a central role in the circulation and interpretation of humour. Humour, then, is also more than just an aesthetic mode: it is an expression of political assumptions and priorities through a structuring aesthetic logic built around doubt, difference and dissent.

I have had two goals in articulating humour in this manner. First, I have sought to use humour as a particular example of how a popular aesthetic mode may be conceived in political terms and to thereby account for how cultural politics is not simply a politics of representation, but also of epistemological formation and negotiation. When we watch a television show or a film (or indeed when we read a novel or play a video game), we do not simply encounter images of social groups, identities, institutions and events, we also encounter systems of interpretation and meaning borne out through the formal properties of those texts. Therefore, the politics of popular culture, and indeed all culture, necessarily involves more than cataloguing and critiquing how identities and events are constructed through popular media, but also needs to consider how engagement with logics of interpretation and relation are produced and amended through textual production and consumption. I have turned to the politics of the avant-garde, where such understandings of cultural artefacts have been more developed, in order to furnish a model for thinking culture in this way (though other disciplines, most notably the

interaction of popular music studies and musicology, have also developed critical aesthetic methodologies of this sort in the work of scholars such as Theodor Gracyk and Simon Frith). Understood in such a way, the politics of popular culture are therefore as much about *how* we are shown and told as *what* we are shown and told. Through reference to my specific set of comic examples, I have thus argued that the aesthetic logics of interpretation and meaning that structure our encounters with popular texts have important ramifications for how we understand our wider world as a political and cultural space. Aesthetics cannot therefore be reduced to ornamentation or bourgeois mystification, but instead constitutes a central aspect of any cultural artefact through which epistemology and politics are communicated and negotiated.

My second goal has been to attend to the role of humour specifically, as more than just a convenient example, but as a cultural category that demands further study due to the massive economic, affective, psychological and aesthetic role it plays in contemporary Anglophone society. One cannot understand and account for our world, particularly its mediated existence, without accounting for humour. Yet, while scholarly attention to humour texts has increased exponentially over the last ten years – and I have sought to engage and account for that scholarship as widely as possible – so much of that work continues to approach those texts without first theorising humour. Instead, it is common to find critics and commentators privileging overly-simplistic models of how humour operates as a social and cultural force or adopting a wealth of other interpretive frameworks, from irony to parody to the politics of representation, with only a cursory nod to the overarching aesthetic that frames those works. No doubt irony and parody are

related to humour, but they do not replace it, or even account for it. I have therefore here sought to offer a necessarily narrow account of what I have argued are central strands of the contemporary manifestation of humour, as it exists between and across popular texts, as a way to bring the study of humour texts back to the humour aesthetic itself. Though it may sound absurdly redundant, humour is a central aspect of humour texts, and when we overlook that tautological fact we are liable to miss the complexities of meaning those texts contain. In the preceding analyses, I have thus sought to articulate exactly what it is about those texts that makes them recognisable and interpretable in terms of humour, and to thereby suggest how humour manifests as a definable cultural category.

However, I acknowledge that to some extent such an interpretive analysis is always haunted by the inevitability of its own failure to completely account for the interpretation of those texts. This is especially true in the case of a complicated and contentious cultural category like humour where it is not always immediately evident whether any given text should even be interpreted in those terms. By couching my analyses in terms of aesthetics, I have located the burden of meaning almost entirely within the texts, and in doing so largely occluded my own role as a subject in creating and determining those meanings. I believe this is a permissible reading practice to the extent that the comic nature of these texts is massively over-determined by their circulation within cultural spaces where they are marked time and time again as belonging to the broad category of humour. Therefore, while humour is not an ontological category, it is a very strongly determined and widely understood cultural category. In the instance of particular humour texts, one is informed by advertising, television listings, reviews and

word-of-mouth in addition to the internal formal aesthetic coding of the text's themselves – through markers ranging from on-screen laughter to the medium of animation to the recognisable internal logics of humour that I have considered at some length – that these are comic texts, and as such there is likely to be little doubt that this is a viable and socially-sanctioned reading strategy. However, despite all this, there is also the inescapable fact of my own social position as a (relatively) young, white, middle-class male, which structures my own reading practices and preferences in terms of my tendency to condone and seek out certain forms of humour, to understand and interpret certain texts, and my overall assessment of the importance of humour as a cultural trope.

The relevance of this viewing position is brought home by a 2012 study commissioned by Comedy Central – the cable channel behind the original production and US distribution of *South Park*, *The Sarah Silverman Programme*, *The Chappelle Show*, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* – that identified their target audience as the coveted and difficult-to-reach demographic of young men aged between eighteen and thirty-four. In the context of the study, representatives of Comedy Central's parent corporation, MTV Networks (responsible for *Jackass*) refer to such viewers, including myself, in slightly worrying postcolonial terms as “Comedy Natives” who are “comfortable with uncomfortable truths” and for whom “irony has been replaced with absurdity” (Carter): all of which both confirms the categories of my preceding analyses and worries me that I have too easily fallen back into industrially determined categories. Moreover, as the specifically targeted demographic of these texts, my interpretation is no doubt more likely to reflect the intended ideological message of its producers: in the

terminology of Stuart Hall, there is a strong correlation between my “decoding” of these contemporary humour texts, and the “encoding” of those texts at the moment of production, such that I am more likely to produce a “dominant-hegemonic,” rather than resistant or negotiated, reading therein (131-7). As such, I am perhaps then the equivalent of those cultural studies strawmen who celebrated the subversive potential of Madonna in the 1980s, and who Thomas Frank decries as “gaping academics [who] uncritically [reaffirm] the mass media’s favorite myths about itself” (“Alternative” 153-4). Yet, in contrast to such a dismissive, biographising interpretation I would note that I have not sought to celebrate postmodern humour as a site of incipient revolutionary politics. Rather, my goal in this study has been to articulate how postmodern humour aesthetic can be considered both reflective and productive of current epistemological trends in politics and culture more broadly. In its celebration of dissent and doubt, postmodern humour is the aesthetic of the (neo)liberal moment, and as such represents both the problems and promises of that worldview. Furthermore, my goal here has not been to read these texts against the grain, but rather to read very carefully with the grain – charting out the particular assumptions and evasions that structure the contemporary mode of humour – in order to thereby determine the particular political contours manifest at the level of the aesthetic. In doing so, I have not therefore sought to directly challenge the dominant through the production of alternative readings, but instead to carefully map out how the dominant understands the world and to thereby draw connections between the cultural aesthetic and political social levels of our textually-informed everyday lives.

This is not to suggest, though, that the aesthetic always operates in the service of dominant ideologies in any direct or obvious way. Instead I have tried to demonstrate that while texts are always bound by the limitations of understanding imposed by social and cultural norms and conventions, there is also space within those norms to emphasise, exaggerate, stretch, defy, poke and prod, and the category of the aesthetic is central to this. Indeed, as I have tried to tease out, the political nature of the aesthetic can never be entirely determined in advance through reference to the economic or ideological conditions of production. The final form of a text is more than simply the manifestation of a desired politics at a different level, but instead arises out of the confluence of multiple factors, including industry conventions and codes of professionalism, the economic and technologies of development and production and the limitations of the medium, as well as the influence of the socially-shared aesthetic tendencies which I have been mapping here (not to mention the particular locations and desires of associated producer-director-author-editor subjects, otherwise known as “authorial intention”). In fact, a large part of the reason I have focussed on the aesthetic aspects of a text is because of their ability to transcend the conditions of their own circulation through their self-fulfilling figuration and construction as autonomous. The aesthetic matters as a political space because it is both bound to and separate from the everyday: bound to, because it necessarily arises from everyday conditions, but separate because in its existence as an artefact; a cultural text always manifests a meaningful break with what was before by virtue of its being a cultural, and therefore artificial, object. That break – the gap from what came before – is the aesthetic. Thus, through an analysis of the politics of aesthetics, I have sought to show

how the aesthetic – while always bound to conditions of production through materiality and the broad contours of ideology – can be understood as a space of political possibility that can be taken up in the service of consensus or dissent, socialism or capitalism, justice or freedom, and any combination of the above.

Thus, to be ‘aesthetic,’ whatever that might mean, is not to be automatically on the side of freedom, dissensus, socialism or radical political change, but rather different aesthetic organisations can be linked to different epistemological and political modes of thought in relation to their cultural contexts. As I have noted, this definition contradicts that of Rancière, who defines the aesthetic as a space of free play that is seemingly intractably linked to a progressive politics of dissensus. Instead, I have suggested that the aesthetic can also work in the service of power through the repetition and re-entrenchment of existing cultural, social and political logics, which in the instance of humour most obviously manifests as the ridicule of those who clearly and cleanly depart from everyday norms of behaviour. The burden of illustrating this form of humour has fallen unfairly on *Friends*, which, though its humour may be overwhelmingly aggressive and normative, is a more complex text than I have given it space to demonstrate. A necessary future study will involve a much more thorough, careful and sympathetic engagement with not just *Friends*, but the other sitcoms I have also identified as part of this traditional form of humour: from *Everybody Loves Raymond* through *Two and a Half Men* and *Frasier* to *The Big Bang Theory* and beyond. However, it is also essential to note that the postmodern humour of discomfort, absurdity and politicisation also often works to buttress existing logics of power, which are just as often concerned with the

upsetting of certain aspects of the status quo as they are with preserving it. In seeking to account for humour and to articulate how it operates in terms of politics, we must therefore carefully attend to the specificities of its textual manifestation and the aesthetic logic that inform its manifestations in relation to their wider cultural contexts.

Humour's apparent freedom to stand for, against, or most often somewhere confusingly in-between, the political demands of our contemporary society speaks to the ability of the aesthetic to overcome and transform the conditions of its own circulation. In comparison to many of the rules and regulations which hang heavy upon our everyday life and which always already structure our inclinations, dispositions, and behaviours, the realm of the aesthetic offers what is perhaps the most potentially fruitful space for the development of different ways of thinking that might form the basis of future politics. This is why aesthetic logics and tendencies, such as humour, matter; because they shape the way we encounter the rest of the world. Rancière asserts that "man is a political animal because he is a literary animal" (*Politics* 39), and while I agree, I would want to add that man is also a political animal insofar as he is a televisual and cinematic animal. Perhaps, he is political insofar as he is a laughing animal: a claim which can be traced back to Aristotle. However, contra Aristotle, laughter and humour cannot be considered one thing with one meaning now and forever. Like all aesthetic categories, humour shifts over time. This does not mean that humour or the aesthetic is unimportant; rather, it is central, and in its shifting and transforming nature we can begin to understand how it is the rest of the world also shifts and transforms over time and across space. Humour, aesthetics and indeed culture in general cannot be left aside when accounting for the

world, no matter how much some may want to get beyond these ideas into what is apparently self-evidently serious and important. This is the point of cultural studies and cultural critique more generally, to point towards those aspects of our world which are absolutely crucial and often overlooked but which, through the expression of telling absurdity or glib one-liner, have the potential to shape and change our world, for ill or for good.

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